

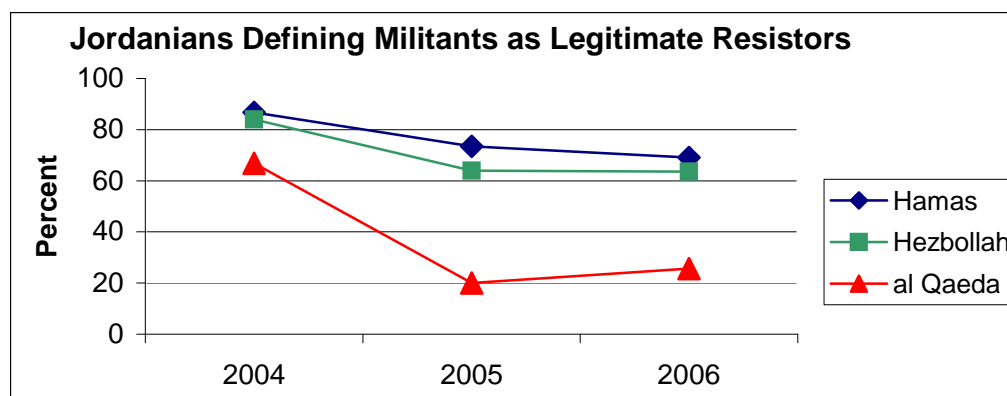


Arab Public Opinion and Perceptions of Violence What is Changing?

“Overall support for violent tactics has waned in the Middle East over the past few years,” Fares Braizat told a CSIS seminar on October 10. Braizat is a visiting fellow in the CSIS Middle East Program and a researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan in Amman.

Braizat examined trends in Arab public opinion on violent tactics employed by militant Islamist movements such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and al Qaeda. He contended that Arabs are questioning the effectiveness of violence, which has done little to stem U.S. and Israeli actions in the Middle East. This has led to what he sees as a “gradual delegitimization” of militant groups in the region, especially among the populations these groups purport to represent.

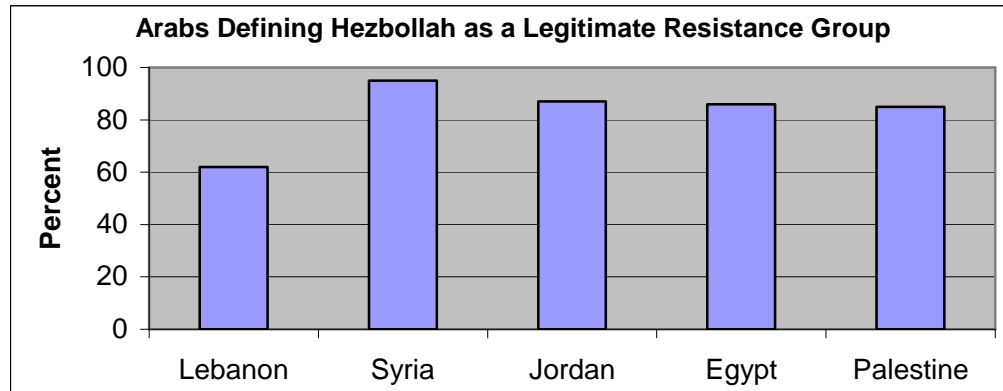
Braizat pointed to public opinion polls from the Arab world that show a general downward trends in support for militant groups. For example, the percentage of Jordanians approving of violence against Israeli civilians dropped significantly between 2000 and 2005. In addition, a growing percentage—but still a minority—of Arabs define Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations. In Jordan, an increasing number view al Qaeda as a terrorist organization, and similarly view attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq, Israeli civilians, and the World Trade Center as such. Braizat concluded that these numbers, while subject to short-term fluctuations, indicate a long-term trend of diminishing support for violence.



Jordanians are less likely to view Hamas, Hezbollah, and al Qaeda as legitimate resistance groups today than they were in 2004

Braizat then pointed out an evolving paradox in the opinion polls. While U.S. and Israeli foreign policies continue to draw Arab contempt (and send them looking for ways to resist foreign interference), populations are increasingly displeased with militants

operating within their own borders. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, local militant movements are losing popularity. This is especially true for Hezbollah, whose approval ratings are universally stronger outside Lebanon than they are inside. Braizat explained that when a population feels the consequences of having an active militant group operating in its country, the movements lose some of their appeal. “People will support militants as long as they do not have to pay for it,” said Braizat. “As long as they are in the neighbor’s backyard, they are fine with it. But when it is in their own back yard, they will reconsider.”



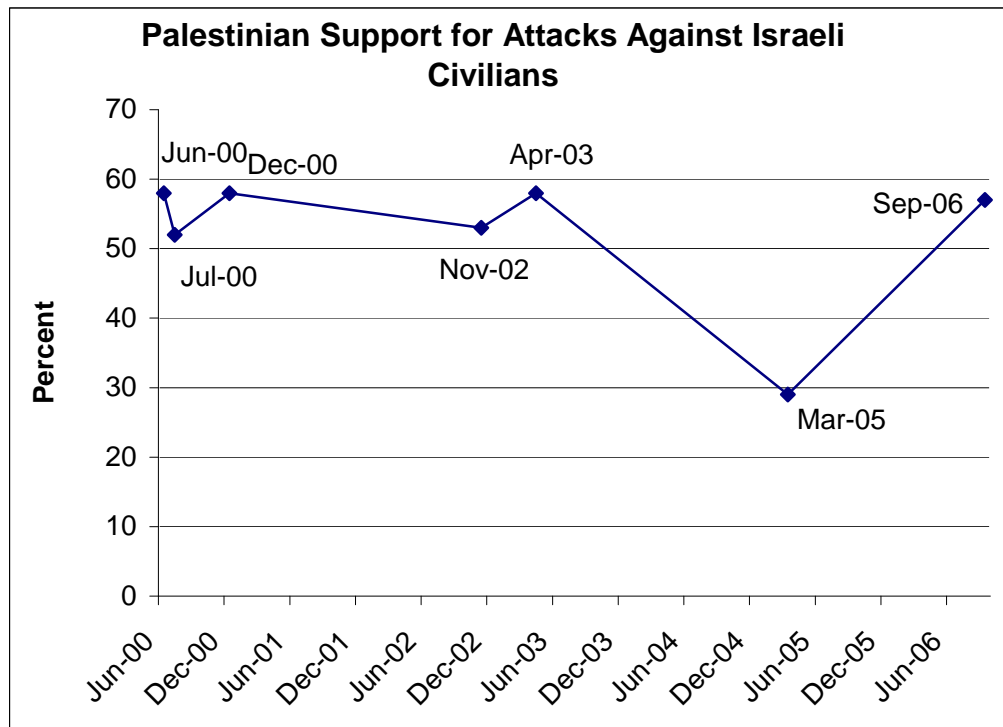
The Lebanese support Hezbollah less than any other polled country.

During the discussion Braizat was challenged on the importance of Arab public opinion, which many view as inconsequential to domestic or regional decision-making. Braizat countered that while many states lack effective institutional channels for public opinion, it is becoming a more important factor as Islamist groups gain a foothold in politics. In recent elections, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front won seats in the Egyptian and Jordanian parliaments, and Hamas took control of the Palestinian Authority.

There were also several questions about the limited scope of the polls, which centered on Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Kuwait, Algeria, and Palestine. Braizat acknowledged the narrow focus of the numbers and explained that it is difficult to conduct polling in countries with more restrictive governments, including many of the states in the Persian Gulf and North Africa. He expressed optimism though that some of these governments were slowly opening to polling, and that additional data would be available shortly from Morocco and Yemen.

Braizat was also asked what the implications of the polls should be for U.S. foreign policy. One audience member argued that a withdrawal from Iraq might be seen as a victory for the insurgents, and thus increase support for violent tactics. Braizat agreed it was possible, but countered that it could also give credibility to U.S. allies. “If the United States withdraws, it will boost the camp of political realism in the region.” He argued moderate regimes that have consistently claimed the United States as a friend will have something tangible to show to their public.

Braizat concluded by emphasizing that Arab anger was not derived from a cultural clash with the United States. Instead, Arab resentment is stirred by political policies such as U.S. support for Israel, authoritarian regimes, and the Iraq war, all of which are linked to Western colonial legacies. Thus, he suggested that there was nothing especially inevitable or durable about Arab anger at the United States, which could change based on U.S. policy.



Polling suggests that Arab public opinion is tied to U.S. and Israeli foreign policy. The spikes in December 2000, April 2003, and September 2006 mark the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the U.S invasion of Iraq, and Israel's invasion of Lebanon. The dip in March 2005 correlates to the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit and the Knesset's final approval of Unilateral Disengagement.