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Uniting the Public around the Programs of the Mohammad Mustafa's Government and its Stated Priorities: Is It Possible?



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Critical Policy Brief

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Walid Ladadweh

After nearly five years since its formation in March 2019, President Mahmoud Abbas accepted on February 26, 2024 the resignation of the government of Muhammad Shtayyeh, the Eighteenth Government, replacing it with a government led by Muhammad Mustafa. The new government assumed its duties on March 31, 2024. There is no doubt that the formation of Mustafa government came in the midst of the most critical circumstances experienced by the Palestinians since the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA): the ongoing war on the Gaza Strip, the deterioration of the security conditions in the West Bank, the financial crisis of the PA, the deterioration of the economic conditions, the significant rise in unemployment rates, the dispute with Hamas and the Palestinian factions that rejected the formation of this government¹, and the widespread popular discontent with the performance of the PA and the government in all fields. The previous government witnessed a continuous decline in public confidence in it, from the day of its formation until its resignation, in terms of achieving the priorities it sat for itself or in meeting the expectations of the public. Could Mustafa's government succeed in gaining or improving people's trust in it? And what should it do to gain this trust?

This policy Brief sheds light on the priorities of the government and on the extent to which they are consistent with the priorities of the Palestinian public. It defines the issues that the government should focus on in order to achieve the aspirations and meet the priorities of the public so that it can gain their trust and support. Finally, it discusses the extent to which the government is able to meet public expectations.

Uniting the public around the government or its program requires an analysis of public priorities

In his speech at the beginning of the first cabinet session, Prime Minister Mustafa said "Our message is not to rally around the government, but around its work program as a comprehensive national program, and therefore we must all be on the same side, and with the same inclusive national effort, in one front, coherent and solid, so that we can implement it, and for our people to cross from the most difficult and darkest conditions to the light of freedom and independence." He demanded that "all Palestinians must work to help empower the government and facilitate its work."² It is clear however that the public's rallying around the government's programs, empowering it and facilitating its work must be preceded by

¹ [aljazeera.net](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/2/26/18-govt-resigns) | أخبار | الجزيرة نت | "دون توافق وطني" حماس وفصائل فلسطينية ترفض تشكيل حكومة

² [aawsat.com](https://www.aawsat.com/News/3-اولويات-على-راسها-تخفيف-معاناة-الغزيرين) | « حكومة مصطفى: 3 أولويات على رأسها «تخفيف معاناة الغزيرين»

gaining the confidence of the public in the government. It goes without saying that there will be no rallying around the government and supporting it in the absence of this trust.

But the Prime minister's statement indicates his interest in strengthening public confidence in his government. To achieve this goal, there must be full knowledge of what the Palestinians want, how they define their needs, and what their attitudes towards the previous government were and why.

Palestinian perception of the previous government:

In addition to its formation under extremely difficult conditions, as mentioned above, the Mustafa government came at a time when popular discontent and dissatisfaction with the performance of the entire PA was extremely high. The political system was suffering from a huge loss of popular confidence and trust. Findings from two PSR opinion polls conducted on the eve of October 7 showed that almost three quarters of the Palestinians (73%, 75% in the West Bank and 71% in the Gaza Strip) did not trust the president, 74% did not trust the Palestinian government, and 58% did not trust the Palestinian police and national security forces. Two thirds of Palestinians expressed distrust in the courts and the judiciary. The results also indicated that confidence in the ability of the previous government, from the day of its formation until the day it was dismissed, to achieve its declared goals has decreased dramatically. The belief in its ability to achieve reconciliation decreased from 33% in June 2020 to 15% in June 2023; the belief in its ability to hold legislative and presidential elections decreased from 34% to 16%; and the belief in its ability to improve the economic conditions decreased from 34% to 16%. Finally, the findings showed that 62% of the public evaluated as bad the PA's performance in providing security; 85% evaluated as bad its ability to keep prices low; and 81% evaluated as bad its ability to reduce the gap between rich and poor.³

On top of that, large majorities expressed dissatisfaction with the government's performance in the provision of basic services, with 64% saying they are dissatisfied with this performance in general; 51% were dissatisfied with the educational system; 52% were dissatisfied with the health system; 57% were dissatisfied with the quality of the streets; and 53% were dissatisfied with garbage collection. Worse yet, 79% believed that the government was not responsive to what the people want. Additionally, an overwhelming majority (85%) believed that corruption existed in PA institutions while the majority also believed that the government was not fighting that corruption.⁴

Assuming that the Mustafa government is indeed serious in its desire to rally the public around it and around its program, it must be aware of these negative public trends. It must realize that its credibility and ability to bring about meaningful positive changes will not be possible if it does not take into account the current priorities of the public. It must show seriousness in working to prioritize public needs and to do so in a manner that convinces the public of its serious intent.

The priorities of the Palestinian public

PSR's September 2023 poll, on the eve of October 7, indicated that the most important challenges facing Palestinian society were those related to their daily life, the living conditions and security. Among the list of challenges, the biggest was the economic conditions, as was seen by 29%, followed by instability and internal security, financial and administrative corruption (18%) and finally settler terrorism (13%). All previous governments failed to convince the public of their seriousness in addressing these

³ [AB8 Palestine Report 3 English version 22April 2024.pdf](#)

⁴ Ibid.

challenges. The public gradually grew distrustful of the governments' seriousness in working to change the status quo.⁵ October 7 and the war on Gaza changed the priorities, as the concern of all Palestinians now is focused on (1) ending the war and providing relief to the Gaza Strip, and (2) on settler terrorism that has dramatically increased, thereby greatly changing the public's hierarchy of priorities.⁶

Mustafa's government came to deal with the new challenges created by the war on the Gaza Strip and the suffering of the Gazans. There is no doubt that the first priority of all Palestinians at the present time is to end the war, the killing and the starvation in the Gaza Strip. The deteriorating economic situation, the lack of security, the increase in settler terrorism, and the widespread perception of financial and administrative corruption are also among these priorities. PSR's September 2024 poll indicated that the public has its own view of the most important measures that the government and the political system must take to address the impact of this war. The largest percentage (42%) believes in the urgent need to form a national unity government to negotiate with Israel and the international community; 38% believe that the PA should embark on reconciliation and reunification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; and 16% believe that the priority should go to leading the provision of humanitarian services to the residents of the Gaza Strip in cooperation with Egypt and the international community.⁷

The priorities of the Mustafa's government

Mohamed Mustafa stated that because of the urgent and critical needs that cannot be delayed, his government will focus on three priorities⁸, namely:

- (1) Alleviating the suffering of the people in the Gaza Strip, starting with emergency needs for humanitarian relief and ending with reconstruction.
- (2) Stabilizing the financial situation in order to achieve economic and social security and maintain the strength of the financial and economic institutions.
- (3) Implement an ambitious work plan to reform and improve the performance of the PA public institutions, aiming at achieving greater productivity, transparency and accountability; the plan calls for reviewing and correcting the various measures that affect the performance of these public institutions.

These priorities, as set by the government, contain a large part of the priorities that Palestinians want, especially with regard to saving the Gaza Strip and improving economic conditions, and combating the financial and administrative corruption. On the other hand, the list ignored two important priorities demanded by the public: settler terrorism and internal instability and security. These two priorities should have been on the list set by the government because of their importance to the public at a time when the government, as Mustafa said, seeks to win public support.

Moreover, these governmental priorities remain rhetorical, and the public hardly pays any attention to these plans and programs announced by the government. Instead, the public will probably judge the performance based on what it sees on the ground. In theory, the programs of all previous governments were viewed positively, but they were empty promises arousing public discontent. It goes without saying

⁵ [Ibid.](#)

⁶ [Poll 93 English press release 17_Sept2024.pdf](#)

⁷ [Ibid.](#)

⁸ [حكومة مصطفى: 3 أولويات على رأسها «تخفيف معاناة الغزيين» \(aawsat.com\)](#)

that the confidence of the masses, as well as the political elites, in government promises is low. Public opinion polls, for example, indicated that about 60% of the public believed that the PLO's Executive Committee would not implement decisions it had taken regarding the relationship with the Israeli occupation. According to Essam Haj Hassan, director of the Aman Coalition, "The government's program, like previous governments, sounds good in theory, but in practice it is a failure, as all previous governments failed to implement their programs."⁹

A PSR poll¹⁰ conducted six months after the formation of Mustafa's government indicated that only 15% of the Palestinians were satisfied with the role played by that government regarding the war in Gaza, a role the government was created to engage in and address. It also indicated that the overwhelming majority of Palestinians believe that the Mustafa government will not succeed in achieving any of the priorities it said it intended to focus on: 71% believed it will not succeed in providing relief and reconstruction for the Gaza Strip in the future. A similar majority (69%) believed it will not succeed in carrying out reforms that the previous government headed by Mohammad Shtayyeh was unable to carry out. Three quarters said the government will not succeed in pushing ahead for reconciliation and unification; 72% believed it will not succeed in improving economic conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; and 73% believed it will not succeed in holding legislative and presidential elections.

Although the government says it has drawn up plans for relief and reconstruction in Gaza, the unification of institutions in the West Bank and Gaza, and a comprehensive institutional reform, it acknowledges that until this moment it is still unable to accomplish much that can be felt by the public. In an interview on November 19, 2024 with *Al-Quds* newspaper¹¹, after more than six months of assuming office, the Minister of Planning, addressing the top priority of the government, said: "In Gaza, the humanitarian situation is very complex, with the main challenges being the restrictions on movement and the repeated destruction of the infrastructure. The most important thing we can do is to make the voice of our children heard, to demand that countries with strong influence in the international community use its influence on the Israeli occupation to stop the aggression and stop the ongoing destruction in Gaza. We also call for increased humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of the affected population."

As for the institutional reform program, the second priority set by the government, the minister said: "We have also developed a reform plan and already started implementing part of it, but the bulk of the comprehensive plan has not yet begun. "We are about to start implementing the rest of the plan after completing internal discussions about it in the government."¹²

So far, there is no indication that this government is different from previous governments. There is no tangible progress in improving the economic conditions, in providing full salaries for the public sector employees, or in addressing the financial and administrative corruption. There are no concrete indicators of progress regarding the provision of relief to the Gaza Strip. The government has not shown any tangible progress with regard to meeting other public priorities, neither in providing security against settlers' attacks, nor in stability and internal security. Until proven otherwise, the public will remain unconvinced that the government's plans and programs will be seen as nothing but slogans and wishful thinking.

⁹ Personal interview, 1 July 2024

¹⁰ [Poll 93 English press release 17_Sept2024.pdf](#)

¹¹ [Al Quds](#)

¹² Ibid

Recommendations

How can the government change this perception so that it is possible for the public to rally around it? If the government really wants to change people's perceptions about it, and rally the masses around its program, it must consider the following measures:

1) Ending the war and providing relief for Gaza: The government has made it one of its most important priorities to address the suffering of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and has developed an emergency plan for that. But it does not seem that the public or the political elites see an effective implementation on the ground that suggests that the government is serious about this, and therefore the government must take some practical measures that can be felt by the public, such as:

- As mentioned above, the formation of a national unity government to negotiate with Israel and the international community is the top priority of the public, seen as able to bring about an end to the ongoing suffering. The government must strive to reach a consensus with Hamas and other Palestinian forces and consult with them on the formation of unified positions regarding relations with Israel and the provision of aid and services to Gaza.
- Reconciliation and reunification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is the second public priority. Such step is vital in any plan for to alleviate the burden imposed on Gazans. This may go beyond the government's powers and capacity, but the government must demonstrate to the public its willingness to move in this direction.
- The government should form a high-level and permanent committee based in Egypt to supervise, organize and lobby to provide food, medical and other assistance to the residents of the Gaza Strip. This committee should lead international and public pressure at all levels through international and local institutions and civil society and mobilize what is possible in an organized, systematic and continuous manner.
- The Prime Minister should visit the Gaza Strip and take a temporary headquarter there for the purpose of supervising the work of this committee directly for a period of time, even if short, in accordance with a declared or undeclared agreement with Hamas, Egypt, and the relevant international institutions.

2) Confronting settlers' attacks: Although the government did not place this priority anywhere on its agenda, it is a vital need for the Palestinian public and it must address it as it is within its own jurisdiction and it is responsible for law enforcement in all areas under that jurisdiction. It should address it for another reason. Failure by the security services to deliver safety and security affects public perception of these services: state builders or collaborators? The issue is also related to how the public perceives the entire PA in its relation with the Israeli occupation, is the PA an asset or a burden on the Palestinian people?

Settler attacks pose a serious threat to *all* Palestinians, as they are not limited to Area C, which is not under the security or law enforcement jurisdiction of the PA, but also include all areas, including Area B and even Area A, both of which are nominally under the legal, administrative, and law enforcement control of the PA. The years 2023 and 2024 witnessed a significant increase in the frequency of settler attacks on all Palestinian areas, with 1,300 attacks in 2023 alone, an increase of 40% over the previous year. In a poll conducted by PSR between the end of September and 12 October 2023, 80% of the residents of Area C, 73% of the residents of Area B, and 61% of the residents of Area A said they feared

attacks by settlers. The survey also found that 56% of the residents of Area C, 21% in Area B and 7% of Area A have actually been attacked by settlers.¹³

Therefore, the government must show seriousness in dealing with this matter, especially since the public, the political elites and the various factions expect it to act in accordance with its jurisdiction. Researcher Jihad Harb says: "The government can and must act to protect the public against the settlers, whether by deploying national security forces or otherwise."¹⁴ Issam Haj Hassan says: "Although the PA is limited in its powers and jurisdiction by agreements with Israel, the government can deploy members of the security forces in their areas of residence by forming defense committees against the settlers."¹⁵

The government can demonstrate its seriousness in protecting the public, particularly in those areas vulnerable to settler attacks by taking measures such as the following:

- Identify and publicize the areas most vulnerable to settler attacks
- Deploy contingents of police and national security forces permanently in these areas. Members of the force should come from the residents of these area. One PSR poll indicated that 27% of the public are in favor of deploying such force as a means of protection for the vulnerable areas.¹⁶
- This police deployment will most likely place pressure on the Israeli army to act more effectively to put an end to settler attacks while such confrontation of the settlers might grant the PA, particularly the security services, the legitimacy they need to be able to act more forcefully against those Palestinians who carry unauthorized arms.
- The government should join forces with political parties and civil society to create permanent defense committees in other areas that are less vulnerable to settler attacks. These committees, which will most likely be unarmed, might add a deterrent element helping to reduce the incidence of settler violence.

If these steps prove effective in preventing settler attacks, a majority of Palestinians may abandon the demand for the formation of armed groups in these areas vulnerable to settler attacks. By contrast, the formation of these groups may increase the chances of clashes between the public and the Israeli army and may increase the chances of clashes between these armed groups and the PA security services when the PA attempts to arrest or disarm those who carry arms.

3) Improving economic conditions: The worsening economic conditions can be seen in the diminished ability of the PA to pay the full salaries of its public sector, the disruption of work inside Israel, and the diminished capacity for local production due to Israeli restrictions on movement. It is true that the PA is suffering from a stifling financial crisis, and there is little or no chance of financial stability in the near future under the current Israeli government and in light of the reluctance of many Arab and European countries to support the PA in its current form. Despite these constrained, the government should take measures that the public can see. Here are few examples:

- Reducing governmental expenditures, particularly those associated with the high paid staff, in a manner that can be seen and appreciated by the public.
- Paying the full salary to employees with salaries of 3000 shekels and less. This is the largest group in the public sector and the most severely affected by the current economic difficulties.

¹³https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/WB%20Security%20Poll_on%20settlers%20violence_12%20Nov%202023_ENGLISH.pdf

¹⁴ Jihad Harb is the Executive Director of Thabat for Research, personal interview, 4 July 2024.

¹⁵ Issam Haj Hasan, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ [Poll 92 English full text July2024.pdf](#)

- In cooperation with the banks, loans should not be made a burden on the public sector at a time when salaries are not paid in full. Similarly, in cooperation with service providers, such as the electricity, water, and telecommunication companies as, well as universities, the government should find ways to assist in postponing payment without incurring interest.

4) Reforming PA institutions and combating corruption: It goes without saying that reforming PA institutions and combating corruption is one of the most important priorities for any Palestinian government. All previous governments claimed full commitment to the goal of reform and clean government. In reality however, the actual performance of successive governments on the ground has been less than satisfactory to the Palestinians. The vast majority still believes that there is corruption in the PA institutions, and the majority also still believes that the PA is a burden on the Palestinian people. The problem is not in the government's plan, but, as many researchers and politicians believe, lies in the government's ability to implement its own plan. As Essam Haj Hassan said: "a real reform process is a process that is bigger than the government's capabilities because the PLO must be part of the reform process, the security services must be part of the reform process, the private sector must be part of the reform process, and the political parties too. Therefore, the reform process can only succeed if it is a comprehensive process."¹⁷

Jihad Harb believes that "the reform process needs surgical steps that are not limited to the government only."¹⁸ In a paper published after the formation of the Mustafa government, Alaa Lahlouh pointed out the challenges facing the reform process, in which he explained the magnitude of the challenges facing this process and the limited achievements of the government in that regard. Lahlouh concluded that the government, in its current state and given the lack of public trust, is incapable of carrying out a real reform process: "This government does not have a supportive popular base, nor meaningful public trust, or parliamentary confidence, or a factional mandate. Rather, the facts on the ground so far show that this government does not have the vision, the boldness or the capabilities to face these challenges."¹⁹

However, the government should be able and willing to take the following steps in order to demonstrate to the public its serious intent to reform and combat corruption:

- Promote the formation of a national committee comprising influential Palestinian actors capable of taking practical steps on the ground to implement a real reform process that includes the government, the PLO, political parties, civil society, the private sector and the security services. The committee should consist of people known for their credibility, patriotism and experience; it should operate professionally without succumbing to any pressure from any party.
- Activate the Corruption Crimes Court in earnest and show the public that officials accused of corruption are indeed being tried before that court.

5) Improving communication with the public: The government needs to improve its communication capacity with the public. The process should be made direct and extensive. It must focus on detailing the government performance regarding the four areas mentioned above. It must be transparent; the government must clarify its own jurisdiction and specify the limitations imposed on it. In addition to what it promises to do, the government should also specify what it cannot deliver and why. In a recently published paper²⁰ Jihad Harb demonstrates how weak the government's communication and community

¹⁷ Issam Haj Ali, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Jihad Harb, *ibid.*

¹⁹ [Brief 2 2024 Lahluh on the prospects for reform English \(003\).pdf](#)

²⁰ Jihad Harb, "Communication and Community Outreach: A Necessity to Reshape the Government," *Watan*, https://www.wattan.net/ar/news/446140.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawGAZPpleHRuA2FibQlxMQABHVhcXP_ctJal27FHQFZnXxWvuP2anQHYACKlkFwmil2Kuu_sILqpRKRSQA_aem_mEXM7ORr2JVMghx83_Ko1g

outreach is and how this affects the government's image in front of the public. Harb thinks that news and interactive media outlets are essential in the government's effort to clarify and project its image for the public and equally important for it to assess its own shortcomings and influence the behavior of the society and motivate the public. This is particularly true since the public understands the difficult circumstances under which the government operates, given the prevailing financial crisis and the deterioration of the security conditions due to the various practices of the Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

Conclusion:

There is then a possibility of restoring people's trust in the government and rallying around its programs. But can the government, in its current state, act, or does the government have the capacity to act, according to the priorities of the public? Given the prevailing public opinion and what it would take for the government to gain its confidence, the answer to this question seems to depend on its ability first and foremost to form a national unity government to negotiate with Israel and the international community. However, this does not seem to be the current goal of the government or the PA leadership. Indeed, the current government seems to have been formed against the prevailing public consensus, and certainly without the consent of Hamas and other factions. Moreover, the second priority of the public, the implementation of an immediate reconciliation and reunification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is also outside the priorities of the Mustafa government. There is thus a gap between the government's aspirations to gain public trust and its actual ability to gain such trust. Although the recommendations made in this Brief may reduce this gap, bridging the gap completely will be difficult to achieve in the foreseeable future.

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