

In Box: The Battle for Hearts and Minds

When Israeli troops killed 17 Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip in January, Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar reacted by saying, "All [the Israelis] are doing . . . is intensifying hatred against them." His message— that Palestinian deaths at the hands of Israelis only radicalize Palestinians further— is conventional wisdom of the decades-long conflict. Israeli actions, many think, foster Palestinian hatred and a thirst for revenge.

New research, however, challenges this common refrain. By merging public opinion polls taken regularly in the West Bank and Gaza since the beginning of the second intifada in 2000 with data on Israeli-inflicted Palestinian fatalities, researchers in the United States and Israel have found that though greater Palestinian deaths do discourage people from supporting moderate political positions— such as favoring peace negotiations— their radicalization is fleeting. In fact, the shift in opinion toward more radical views rarely persists more than a few weeks and disappears completely after 90 days. And when Palestinians are slain by targeted Israeli strikes, the shift is even less pronounced. "Counterterrorism measures that are very focused on a particular target do not have a radicalization effect," says Esteban Klor, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the study's coauthor. When Israeli actions are less targeted, the short-term radicalization is more likely, but even then "the effect disappears," says Klor. "It [becomes] another fact of life."

If that sounds fatalistic, it also confirms another key finding of the study: Palestinian fatigue regarding their political situation. More deaths do not lead to greater support for Hamas, but they do lead to greater disaffection from the existing political factions. "Almost all observers of the West Bank and Gaza have noted an increase in cynicism and even despair," says Nathan Brown, director of Middle East studies at George Washington University. And that suggests Palestinians "need deep and tangible changes on the ground rather than diplomatic breakthroughs to dispel the growing sense of hopelessness." One can only hope those changes will be far from fleeting.