

Firm on 'Right of Return'

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Articles & Testimony

Just as the self-proclaimed new historians burst onto the scene in the late 1980s, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research's (PSR) July 2003 poll purported to upend the conventional understanding of the Palestinian refugee problem. The PSR poll, widely covered in the international media, surveyed 4,506 refugees living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, and Lebanon regarding their attitudes toward the so-called right of return.

According to Dr. Khalil Shikaki, the renowned director of this Ramallah-based institute, while almost all Palestinian refugees (95 percent) want the "right of return," only a small minority (10 percent) wishes to actually "exercise" this option by moving to Israel.

Since "granting the right of return would in no way, shape, or form affect the demographic balance in Israel," Shikaki reasoned, "Israel can recognize the right [of return]."

From The Wall Street Journal to the International Herald Tribune, the political Right and Left gave his claims copious hearings and even accepted them as fact.

Shikaki's optimistic assertion that the Palestinian demand to relocate to Israel was largely a figment of the imagination dovetailed perfectly with the false euphoria surrounding the halcyon days of the road map.

If the right of return has an easy fix, then perhaps so too do the other "final-status issues," which can be held peacefully in abeyance, or better yet, resolved instantaneously through a single pollster's magical wand of enlightenment.

Yet Shikaki's provocative claims wilt upon closer inspection. The problem begins with the pollsters' methodology. Specifically, the framing of the poll makes relocating to Israel an unattractive prospect for the refugees since it stipulates a priori that only a "small number" of them will be allowed to "return," and that the fortunate few may have to wait "several years."

In another variation of the poll, Shikaki finds that only 1 percent of the respondents want to "return" to Israel. The catch is that the question stipulates that they would have to become "Israeli citizens." Clearly, these preconditions are anathema to the refugee population, helping to account for why such a small percentage of the respondents chose to exercise the right of return by moving to pre-1967 Israeli borders.

Conversely, the respondents who chose to settle outside the Green Line believed that in exchange they would receive unrealistically generous amounts of financial compensation. Of those who opted for financial compensation over relocating to Israel, two-thirds of the respondents assumed they were entitled to anywhere between \$100,000 and half a million dollars a wildly inflated sum.

Other data from Shikaki's poll are even more damaging to his thesis that "the Israelis can comfortably recognize the right of return without taking many risks."

When asked if there are circumstances in which "you would live with Israeli Jews in peace, security, and reconciliation," only 20% of the respondents from the West Bank and Gaza said "yes," while more than 79% said

"no."

Furthermore, less than half of the respondents said that they would "live in peace in the Jewish state and respect Israeli law," upon "exercising" the "right of return."

Interestingly, these two questions have been entirely omitted from the translated copy of the poll posted on his organization's official Web site.

These figures are particularly worrisome since it is unlikely that the 95% of the respondents who agreed with the statement that the "right of return is a sacred right that can never be given up" are disinterested in exercising this demand as Shikaki claims. In fact, the term "sacred right" is code for Palestinian opposition to setting limits on relocating to Israel.

At Taba, Yasser Arafat said that his people could not accept compensation over relocation precisely because the "right of return" is "a sacred right." Similarly, Arafat's senior advisor, Nabil Shaath, told reporters after Taba broke down that the Palestinian negotiators could not restrict the refugees from moving to Israel because the refugee issue is a "sacred right."

Hence, while Shikaki may say that the 95% of the respondents who believe the right of return is a "sacred right" only want it to be recognized in principle, the Palestinian negotiators evidently use the term quite differently.

One can only assume that the respondents interpreted the term "sacred right" in the same manner as their leaders, denoting a commitment to move to Israel.

As such, the poll fails to show that if the Palestinians obtain the right of return, they would not one day decide to use it. ❖

Jerusalem Post

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