

# The 'Right of Return' Debate Revisited

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Articles & Testimony

Not since Israeli historian Benny Morris' controversial 1989 book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, has a single study impacted the public discourse over the "right of return" like the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research's (PSR) July 2003 poll.[1] According to Dr. Khalil Shikaki, the well-known director of this Ramallah-based institute, the survey reveals that while most Palestinian refugees demand the "right of return" to land captured by Israel in 1948, the overwhelming majority do not wish to actually exercise this right by relocating to Israel.[2]

Scattered throughout the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, the survivors and descendents of the roughly 700,000 Palestinians who fled their homes during Israel's War of Independence are believed to number up to 4.5 million. Previous polls have shown that the vast majority of them are deeply committed to the "right of return." [3] Since a mass influx of Palestinians would threaten the Jewish character of the state, the Israeli government and public have consistently opposed making this concession.

Shikaki is quick to claim, however, that because his poll shows that Palestinians do not in fact want to move to Israel, granting the "right of return" would in no "way, shape, or form affect the demographic balance in Israel" [4] and "talk about the destruction of Israel through the right of return is nonsense." [5]

Influential media and policy venues have not only given his claims copious hearings, but have accepted them as fact. The Wall Street Journal first ran an opinion piece by Shikaki and then applied his interpretation of the polling data to its own editorial analysis the following day: "The silent majority of Palestinians seem ready for compromise, as demonstrated recently by a poll showing that most refugees are not interested in exercising a right of return to Israel." [6] Former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, writing with David Mack in the *International Herald Tribune*, declared that Shikaki's "encouraging" findings "offer a chance" for resolving this hitherto insoluble problem. [7] M.J. Rosenberg of the Israel Policy Forum maintained that Shikaki's findings prove that the Palestinians "recognize both the reality of Israel and the fact that the partition of Palestine is final and permanent." [8]

However, a closer examination of Shikaki's poll reveals that his optimistic assessment of Palestinian public opinion is misplaced.

## The Survey

Shikaki's data is based on a survey of 4,506 Palestinian refugees living in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, and Lebanon. [9] The respondents were presented with a hypothetical situation: The Palestinian leadership had accepted a compromise with Israel allowing for "the return of a small number of refugees to Israel in accordance with a timetable that extends for several years." [10] The respondents were then asked which of the five choices in the table below would constitute the most "acceptable" option.

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timetable that extends for several years." The respondents were then asked which of the five choices in the table below would constitute the most "acceptable" option.

Preferred Choice for Exercising the "Right of Return" (percentage of respondents, by location)				
Preferred Choice	West Bank/ Gaza Strip	Jordan	Lebanon	Total Population
1. Return to Israel in accordance with an annual quota	12	5	23	10
2. Stay in the Palestinian state that will be established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and receive a fair compensation for the property taken over by Israel and for other losses and suffering	38	27	19	31
3. Receive Palestinian citizenship and return to designated areas inside Israel that would be swapped later on with Palestinian areas as part of a territorial exchange and receive any deserved compensation	37	10	21	23
4. Receive fair compensation for the property, losses, and suffering and stay in host country receiving its citizenship or Palestinian citizenship	NA	33	11	17
5. Receive fair compensation for the property, losses, and suffering and immigrate to a European country, the United States, Australia, or Canada and obtain citizenship of that country or Palestinian citizenship	1	2	9	2
Refuse all options	9	16	17	13
No opinion	2	8	0	5

Source: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research

At first glance, this data set seems to suggest that Palestinians are not -- contrary to common opinion and past polling data -- committed to relocating to Israel. Only 10% of the respondents said that they wanted to move to within Israel's pre-1967 borders. In contrast, 71% chose to remain in their host country or reside in a future Palestinian state comprising Gaza, the West Bank, and other areas "swapped later on with Palestinian areas as part of a territorial exchange."<sup>[11]</sup>

The problem is that the poll makes relocating to Israel an unappealing option for most Palestinians since it stipulates a priori that "only a small number" of refugees will be allowed to "return," and that the fortunate few may have to wait "several years." Clearly, the framing of the question discourages respondents from choosing Option 1, relocating to Israel.

Conversely, the respondents who opted to settle outside of pre-1967 Israeli land were led to believe that they would receive unrealistically generous amounts of financial compensation. Options 2 through 5 promise respondents that by not choosing to relocate to Israel, they will receive either "fair compensation" or "deserved compensation." These subjective terms allow the respondents to believe that they will receive whatever they consider to be just compensation for their suffering. However, of those who opted for financial compensation over relocating to Israel, two-thirds of the respondents believed they were entitled to anywhere between \$100,000 and half a million dollars. In the text of his press release, Shikaki does acknowledge, "The estimates for a fair compensation were much higher than the estimates of what would actually be paid."<sup>[12]</sup> Yet in publicizing his findings in the American and Arab media, he avoids mentioning this fact.<sup>[13]</sup> Nowhere does he allow that the admittedly misleading options may have artificially inflated the number of respondents choosing compensation over "returning" to Israel.

The poll also encouraged the respondents to forgo exercising their "right of return" because, as one Palestinian analyst observed, "Shikaki's options . . . deny compensation to those Palestinians choosing to return to Israel . . ."<sup>[14]</sup> The exception is Option 3, which a disproportionate percentage of the respondents chose. Option 3 not only states that refugees could "return to designated areas inside Israel that would be swapped later on with Palestinian areas," but that they would "receive any deserved compensation."<sup>[15]</sup> The question leaves unsaid that the swapped area

would be tiny - no more than three percent of the total land "returned" to the Palestinians, and therefore an unlikely home for such a relatively large percentage of the returnees. That over a third of the refugees (37%) polled in the West Bank and Gaza chose this option suggests that they misunderstood this fact.

More importantly, while Shikaki claims his poll demonstrates that "the Israelis can comfortably recognize the right of return without taking much risks,"[16] other data from his poll contradict this conclusion. First, Shikaki's contention that most Palestinian refugees would abandon "returning" to Israel is not easily reconciled with the fact that 95% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the "right of return" is a "sacred right that can never be given up." [17] Second, 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." Third, 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." [18] Shikaki does emphasize the first point in his analysis in the Arab media, but he has carefully avoided mentioning points two and three and has even expunged them from the translated copy of the poll posted on his organization's official website. [19]

Shikaki has defended his poll by attempting to justify its methodology since this has been the greatest point of contention for his critics. To show that the Palestinians do not actually plan on using the "sacred right of return," he has said that the options presented to the respondents over whether they would ever forgo this demand are legitimate in his poll because they are based on the final status negotiations with Israel in January 2001 at Taba, Egypt. [20]

Yet it is remiss not to point out that the Palestinian leader in charge of the Taba delegation -- Yasser Arafat -- rejected placing limits on Palestinians relocating to Israel by saying that the "right of return" is a "sacred right." [21] In the same way, Arafat's senior advisor, Nabil Shaath, told reporters after Taba that the Palestinian negotiators could not restrict the Palestinians from moving to Israel because the refugee issue is a "sacred right." [22] Thus, while Shikaki may claim that the 95% of the respondents who said that the "right of return" is a "sacred right" meant only that it had to be recognized by Israel, in effect, in principle, Palestinian negotiators use the term "sacred right" to indicate that the Palestinians are committed to, in fact, exercising it. Since the negotiators use the term "sacred right" synonymously with "uncompromising," there is no reason to believe that the respondents interpreted the term in the polling question any differently.

In fact, when pressed like he was during a question and answer session at the Brookings Institution, Shikaki admitted that his poll does not demonstrate that if the overwhelming majority of Palestinians (95 percent) were granted the "sacred right of return" they would not use it. Shikaki confessed, "There was no direct question that dealt with thatS(I can't say it with certainty because I did not have a direct question there." [23] Such admissions have been of little consolation to Shikaki's fiercest critics -- the refugees themselves -- who have been apoplectic over the pollster's claims purporting to show that Palestinians have abandoned their designs on Israel. In fact, when he first announced his findings to the Arab press in mid-July, an estimated 200 Palestinian rioters attacked him and his staff in their Ramallah office. "We don't believe that [the poll] reflects the reality and the position of the refugees," they stated. [24] Shikaki dismissed the rioters as unrepresentative of the Palestinian population, but it bears noting that they were not members of extremist Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The rioters distributed leaflets with the letterhead of the mainstream Palestine Liberation Organization, stating, "We are here to announce that our right of return is a sacred right," [25] evidently using the term "sacred right" in the same manner as the negotiators, to denote the Palestinian commitment to moving to Israel. Shikaki's claims have also ignited an intellectual skirmish by Palestinian intellectuals who have blanketed the Arab world's most prestigious papers by arguing that the "right of return" is not just important to their people in principle -- they fully demand on one-day using it. [26]

In sum, Shikaki's polling is methodologically problematic not only because it is "rigged in such a way as to produce a result where most Palestinians choose not to return,"[27] as one Palestinian bluntly put it, but because Shikaki never shows that the 95% of the Palestinian public committed to the "right of return" do not plan on exercising it in the future.

To his credit, the poll does highlight an unforeseen discrepancy, leading to a potentially useful conclusion. If Shikaki's results are accepted at face value, less than half of the respondents from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon said that "they themselves" would willingly consent to accepting compensation over relocating to Israel in comparison to the 72% who said they would if the Palestinian leadership first approved of the compromise.[28] This divergence suggests that the Palestinian public might moderate its positions toward Israel if its leaders showed a willingness to compromise on the "right of return." Unfortunately, Shikaki ducks this inference by instead asserting that the burden is on Israel to make more concessions.

Based on Shikaki's past statements, his reluctance to call Palestinian negotiators to account derives from his own proximity to them. "We consulted very heavily with Palestinian negotiators as we planned the instrument, that is, the questionnaire," he acknowledged in a recent lecture at the Brookings Institution. "We worked with them, we asked them what questions they wanted asked, and we proposed questions to them, and the eventual final product was one that essentially tried to include as much as possible the questions that negotiators were interested in answers to." [29] In light of such close involvement by PA officials in the formulation of the survey, the pollster's interpretation of the data requires scrutiny.

#### Notes

- [1] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [2] Khalil Shikaki, "Right of Return," The Wall Street Journal, 30 July 2003; Khalil Shikaki, Palestinian Refugees: Preferences in a Final Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, The Brookings Institution, 16 July 2003 (<http://brookings.org/fp/saban/events/20030716.htm> (<http://brookings.org/fp/saban/events/20030716.htm>)).
- [3] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), 18 July 2003; Palestinian-Israeli Attitudes towards Palestinian Refugees, Part One and Part Two Public Opinion Poll No. 34, Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JCMM), December 1999; On Palestinian and Israeli Attitudes towards the Future of the Peace Process, Public Opinion Poll No.35, JMCC, December 1999; On Palestinian Attitudes towards Final Status Negotiations and the Declaration of the State, Public Opinion Poll No.37, JCMM, June 2000. [4] Shikaki, Palestinian Refugees: Preferences in a Final Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, 16 July 2003. [5] Interview, "Morning Edition," National Public Radio, 21 July 2003. [6] Shikaki, "Right of Return," Wall Street Journal, 30 July 2003; "Mideast Peace Process," The Wall Street Journal, 31 July 2003. [7] Richard W. Murphy and David Mack, "Proposal to Solve the Settler and Refugee Problems," International Herald Tribune, 21 July 2003. [8] Ali Abunimah, "Who Said the Palestinians Gave Up the Right of Return," The Electronic Intifada, 23 July 2003. [9] The survey did not include the refugees residing in Syria because, as Shikaki put it, "the information we would be getting would not be reliable." See Shikaki, Palestinian Refugees: Preferences in a Final Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, 16 July 2003. [10] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [11] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [12] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [13] Shikaki, "Right of Return," Wall Street Journal, 30 July 2003; Shikaki, "Misrepresenting the Palestinian Refugee Poll," The Daily Star, 16 August 2003; Shikaki, The Right to Choose, Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 653, 28 August - 3 September 2003; Shikaki, Palestinian Refugees: Preferences in a Final Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, The Brookings Institution, 16 July 2003; Interview, "Morning Edition," National Public Radio, 21 July 2003. [14] Ali Abunimah, "Who Said Palestinians Gave Up the Right of Return?" The Daily Star (Beirut), 23 July 2003.

[15] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [16] Interview, CNN International, 18 July 2003. [17] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [18] PSR Arabic version at <http://www.pcpsr.org/arabic/survey/polls/2003/refugeesjune03.html> (special thanks to Dr. Aaron Lerner of Independent Media Review and Analysis for calling my attention to the original Arabic version of the poll). Shikaki's poll suggests that these numbers might even err on the low side since the Palestinians' "estimates for a fair compensation were much higher than the estimates of what would actually be paid." The assumption is that unrealized economic expectations among "returning" Palestinians could further enflame resentment toward Israelis and Israeli society more generally. [19] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [20] Khalil Shikaki, "Misrepresenting the Palestinian Refugee Poll," The Daily Star (Beirut), 16 August 2003. Shikaki, The Right to Choose, Al-Ahram Weekly, No. 653, 28 August - 3 September 2003 [21] David Makovsky, "Taba Mythchief," The National Interest, Spring 2003, pp. 119-129; Jacob Tov, "No Compromise on Refugees," Middle East Quarterly, Spring 2003, pp. 39-50. [22] Nabil Shaath, Al-Quds, 26 January 2001. [23] Shikaki, Palestinian Refugees: Preferences in a Final Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, 16 July 2003. [24] "'Return' Survey Riles Palestinians," CBSNEWS.com, 14 July 2003. [25] "'Return' Survey Riles Palestinians," CBSNEWS.com, 14 July 2003; Poll: Few Palestinians Would Return to Israel, WCBS NEWSRADIO 880, 14 July 2003. [26] Ali Abunimah, "Who Said the Palestinians Gave Up the Right of Return," Daily Star, 23 July 2003. Issam Nashashibi, "Efforts to Negate Right of Return Have Long, Ignoble History," The Electronic Intifada, 29 August 2003. [27] Ali Abunimah, "Who Said the Palestinians Gave Up the Right of Return," Daily Star, 23 July 2003. [28] Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan and Lebanon, PSR, 18 July 2003. [29] Shikaki, Palestinian Refugees: Preferences in a Final Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, 16 July 2003. ❖

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