

Right of Return Revisited

Aug 13, 2003



Articles & Testimony

Rarely do pollsters make waves like the Ramallah-based political scientist, Khalil Shikaki, who announced last month that the greatest obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace -- the so-called Palestinian "right of return" to Israel -- has been lifted. Shikaki claimed that based on his polling data, "It is now clear that an Israeli recognition of the refugees' right of return does not carry with it the kind of risks that Israelis have always feared." Israel can now evidently open up its borders without worrying that unfettered Palestinian emigration will overrun the Jewish state. Not surprisingly, the international media from the International Herald Tribune to the Wall Street Journal publicized his remarkable declaration.

Unfortunately, a closer look at Shikaki's polling data shows just the opposite: Palestinians in the disputed territories, Jordan, and Lebanon (not to mention Syria, which the polling agency wisely bypassed because free speech is nonexistent there) remain fiercely committed to relocating to Israel.

In the poll, Palestinian respondents were presented with a hypothetical situation: The Palestinian leadership had accepted a solution to the refugee problem whereby only "a small number of refugees" would be allowed to "return" to Israel. Those who opted against relocating to Israel were promised "fair [economic] compensation."

When informed of these facts, only ten percent of the respondents said that they wanted to "return to Israel and become an Israeli citizen." In contrast, the strong majority of Palestinians (71 percent) chose to reside in a future Palestinian state in Gaza or the West Bank, remain in their host country or move to "designated areas inside Israel that would be swapped later on with Palestinian areas as part of a territorial exchange."

Shikaki interpreted this data to mean that Palestinians are uninterested in overrunning Israel demographically with unregulated emigration.

Yet Shikaki fails to consider that Palestinians generally do not want to become "Israeli citizens" or move to Israel if only a "small number" of Palestinians will be living there. For this reason, the shallow support for "becoming an Israeli citizen" and "returning" to Israel in "small numbers" may indicate nothing more than a broad-based desire to relocate to Israel under more propitious circumstances. Indeed, Shikaki downplays a more noteworthy finding: According to his own data, 95 percent of Palestinian respondents agree with the statement that the "right of return" is a "sacred right that can never be given up." And "When asked how the respondents feel about the proposal," half said that they are presently opposed to compromising with Israel on the refugee problem.

Shikaki's polling data may highlight an unforeseen discrepancy between what Palestinians might accept from their leadership and their own private political preferences. But Shikaki ducks the obvious conclusion: The Palestinian public might moderate its positions toward Israel if its leaders demonstrated more leadership on the refugee problem.

Shikaki's poll is also deceptive because it deceives the respondents themselves. True, an unexpectedly large percentage of Palestinian respondents were willing to accept "fair compensation" if they relinquished their dream of emigrating to Israel. But the respondents were apparently unaware that their expected compensation was wildly

unrealistic. According to Shikaki's own data, 65 percent of the respondents believed that "a fair compensation should be between \$100,000 and \$500,000" for each refugee family. In the poll (which relatively few people have evidently probed), Shikaki himself admits, "The estimates for a fair compensation were much higher than the estimates of what would actually be paid."

Shikaki thus presented the respondents with a false choice and has since broadcast his admittedly skewed results.

There may well be signs that the roadmap is gaining traction, but Shikaki's poll, in fact, says little to suggest that the Palestinian public has moderated its position on the "right of return." ❖

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