

## 'Right of Return' Reality

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Articles & Testimony

**A**s the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process" plods along, both proponents and critics of the "road map" are eagerly seizing on evidence to serve their own ends.

This month the eminent Palestinian pollster, Khalil Shikaki, made waves by releasing new data on the Palestinian "right of return," the perennial Palestinian demand to resettle in land lost to Israel in the 1948 War.

According to Shikaki, only 10 percent of Palestinians want to rebuild their homes "under Israeli rule," whereas more than half (54 percent) would be content to resettle in an "independent Palestinian state."

The findings appear to suggest that a primary stumbling block to Israeli-Palestinian peace has abated. If Palestinians are prepared to live in the disputed territories and not strangle Israel demographically, then perhaps they are serious about accepting a two-state solution after all.

This, at least, was the pollster's interpretation of the data. And it garnered widespread international coverage.

Unfortunately, Shikaki's conclusion may be more politics than fact. For starters, the widely cited poll did not specify where an "independent Palestinian state" would be established. The 54 percent agreeing to relocate there consequently says less than meets the eye. For all we know, the Palestinian respondents were agreeing to reside in an "independent Palestinian state" with its capital in greater Jerusalem. This would be a non-starter for Israel.

Conveniently downplayed was another critical fact: The overwhelming majority of Palestinian respondents (95 percent) said that the "right of return" is "a sacred right" that must never be given up. This finding is not surprising; past Shikaki polls consistently show that unbridled emigration into Israel has massive support among Palestinians, even if it leads to the destruction of the Jewish state.

One might resolve this paradox in the following way: The Palestinians, at least in the near-term, may be willing to resettle alongside Israel. But they are still unwilling to foreswear forever their "right" to Israeli land. In this sense, the Palestinian position on the "right of return" is regrettably no different than their cease-fire with Israel -- an expedient maneuver to be reversed when times are propitious.

Palestinian public opinion polls reveal other subtle paradoxes as well:

An unprecedented 73 percent of Palestinians support the temporary cease-fire with Israel. But sadly, only 34 percent believe that their prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, "will overcome opposition to the road map from Hamas," and an even smaller percentage believe the Palestinian Authority should pressure the terrorists to give up violence.

A strong majority of Palestinians (65 percent) still believe that "armed confrontations have so far helped achieve Palestinian national rights in ways that negotiations could not." But a majority (56 percent) also claims to support the road map, which demands a cessation of terror.

The unsaid assumption is that the best way to pursue talks with Israel is to supplement -- not supplant -- them with suicide attacks. This is a recipe for stagnation, not progress. ❖

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