

(31/03/2010)

## **CONCEPT NOTE: PEACE POLLING IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE**

### **BACKGROUND**

Public opinion research in support of a peace process, or ‘Peace Polling’ as it has become more commonly known, is an aid to public diplomacy and a tool for conflict resolution. It was most notably employed in Northern Ireland from 1996-2003, where nine surveys were conducted in support of the peace negotiations. Importantly, the surveys, or peace polls were not an end in themselves. Rather it was the process by which the polls were organised and agreed to by opposing parties which was of such benefit – successfully improving cross party communication and involving parties in a collective enterprise<sup>1</sup>.

The polls also proved valuable in increasing manoeuvrability for parties finding themselves in an entrenched political position. For example in 1997 the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was wary of peace talks with Sinn Fein present. However following a peace poll which demonstrated public support for the peace process and unionist participation, they were able to stay in the talks.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover peace polling can increase the overall transparency of negotiations, with all poll results being made publicly available<sup>3</sup>, proactively test public opinion with a focus on problems and solutions, and give all sections of society a voice in the peace process.

### **OBJECTIVE**

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of peace polling and how public opinion research, conducted in Palestine and Israel can be used as an aid to public diplomacy and conflict resolution supporting the peace process.

### **CURRENT CONTEXT**

There is much evidence to suggest that peace polling could be of considerable benefit to the Israel/Palestine peace process. Though public opinion research in Israel and Palestine suggest support for an agreement around security and a two state solution, this research has not been done as a collaborative enterprise with party negotiators. Subsequently, the parties are not brought along in and with negotiations in a pro-active public way and when deals are attempted they tend to fail for lack of public preparation.

For example following the election of President Obama and the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy to the Middle East, Irwin recently conducted Peace Polls in Israel and Palestine with One Voice<sup>4</sup>. These polls clearly demonstrated Palestinian and Israeli support for the two-state solution over other options put forward

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<sup>1</sup> Critically the questions for eight of these polls were drafted and agreed with the co-operation of party negotiators to enhance party inclusiveness, developing issues and language, testing party policies and helping set deadlines.

<sup>2</sup> Peace polls are now ‘mainstream’ in the Northern Ireland peace process with 5 polls helping to provide political cover for the DUP to support the devolution of policing and justice this year (2010)  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/8556510.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8556510.stm)

<sup>3</sup> Specifically through the publication of technical analysis and media reports.

<sup>4</sup> An international movement with 650,00 members in Palestine and Israel; [www.onevoicemovement.org](http://www.onevoicemovement.org)

by the new Netanyahu Government.

Furthermore, the poll results added to the international pressure on Israel to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state and they subsequently acquiesced on this point.

Regrettably, a failure of public diplomacy then led to a breakdown of negotiations on the question of settlements with Israel actively using ‘partisan polling’ to polarise their population against a settlement freeze.<sup>5</sup>

If new negotiations are to be successful then partisan polling needs to be replaced with constructive peace polling and public diplomacy at each stage of the peace process. If this is not done proactively then the field will be left to ‘spoilers’ to use public opinion against the peace process at all available opportunities and negotiation efforts presently undertaken by the US and Quartet<sup>6</sup> will continue to be vulnerable to public derailment.

## METHODOLOGY

Effective conflict resolution requires an honest discourse between the parties at the heart of the conflict. To promote this vis-à-vis the Middle East peace process we recommend a peace polling project in Israel and Palestine, which will focus on issues important to peace negotiations<sup>7</sup>.

Last year (2009) Irwin met with relevant parties and senior politicians during peace-polling in the Middle East and he has good working relationships with relevant researchers and institutions. Building on this work, four polls (2 in Palestine and 2 in Israel) will be completed in consultation with the stakeholders and negotiators in Israel and Palestine. They will duplicate the methodology used there last year but with larger samples to allow for a more detailed social and political analysis.

From the methodological perspective, parties should draft and agree all questions, every community and peoples to the conflict should be asked each question, and all results should be made public. Moreover, the timing and publication of polls should be managed to coincide with critical events.

Specific activities will vary, but generally will include; poll design/review; drafting/finalising questions; poll administration; facilitation between parties on methods, topics, and timing; and the publication of poll results.

## PARTNERS

**Albany Associates** – specialises in using Strategic Communications in support of peace processes. It has significant experience working in countries emerging from violent conflict including Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, and Iraq and for international donors including the United Nations, the European Commission, the African Union, the UK government as well as several national governments in transitional countries. The company also has specific experience working in the Middle East North Africa Region (MENA), including in Lebanon where it

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<sup>5</sup> For a critical review see ‘*Israel and Palestine Peace Polls: Public Opinion and Peace Making in Comparative Perspective*’ available at [www.peacepolls.org](http://www.peacepolls.org).

<sup>6</sup> UN, US, EU, Russian - the foursome of international and supranational bodies involved in mediating the peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

<sup>7</sup> It is envisaged that this initial project will be the starting point for a wider, 2 year peace polling project in the Middle East taking in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, subject to further funding.

provided strategic communication support to the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC)<sup>8</sup>; and in Jordan on a media strengthening programme<sup>9</sup> and a capacity building project with Jordan's Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.

**Colin Irwin** – Colin Irwin received his Doctoral degree in Social Science from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in the US in 1985 with a study of the Inuit and how they developed a society without war. Then, through a series of appointments at Dalhousie University in Canada, Queen's University of Belfast and the University of Liverpool developed 'peace polls' to bring the views of 'the people' into the negotiations of the Nunavut settlement in Canada in the 1980s and the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland in the 1990s<sup>10</sup>. He has since extended his work to include the Balkans, the Middle East, Kashmir and Sri Lanka<sup>11</sup>.

On Dr Irwin, Senator George J Mitchell said; *"He worked closely with the Northern Ireland political parties during the final critical years of the Stormont Talks and my Review and I am persuaded that the unique approach he developed of running public opinion polls in cooperation with party negotiators contributed significantly to the successful outcome of our efforts"*.

**BUDGET:** Euro 250,000 to cover 2 polls in Israel and 2 polls in Palestine (detailed breakdown on request).

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<sup>8</sup> Clients: UK Global Opportunities Fund; September 2008 - January 2010; Lebanon; project to provide technical assistance to the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC). The project developed a strategic communications plan to support the Lebanon's Government's work with the Palestinian refugee community living in Lebanon.

<sup>9</sup> Client: United States Agency for International Development; July 2006 to 2009. Albany advised on Jordan's legal framework to create an enabling environment for independent media.

<sup>10</sup> This was reviewed in his 2002 monograph 'The People's Peace Process in Northern Ireland'.

<sup>11</sup> Analysis, questionnaires and reports are available at [www.peacepolls.org](http://www.peacepolls.org).