

**CONCEPT NOTE: PEACE POLLING IN THE MIDDLE EAST****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 stay in the talks.

Moreover peace polling can increase the overall transparency of negotiations, with all poll results being made publicly available<sup>2</sup>, proactively test public opinion with a focus on problems and solutions, and give all sections of society a voice in the peace process - including the general public.

**OBJECTIVE**

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

**CURRENT CONTEXT**

There is much evidence to suggest that peace polling could be of considerable benefit to the Middle East peace process. Though public opinion research in Israel and Palestine suggests 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 his Special Envoy to the Middle East, Irwin recently conducted peace polls in Israel and Palestine with One Voice<sup>3</sup>.

These polls clearly demonstrated Palestinian and Israeli support for the two-state solution

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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 and increase the overall transparency of negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically through the publication of technical analysis, and media reports.

<sup>3</sup> An international movement with 650,000 members in Israel and Palestine <http://www.onevoicemovement.org/>

over other options put forward by the new Netanyahu Government. Moreover, 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.

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>4</sup> will continue to be vulnerable to public derailment.

Above all other considerations Israel seeks security. An agreed peace with the Palestinians is key to this objective but it must necessarily include Israelis immediate neighbours with whom she shares borders. Relations with and the domestic context of these states (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt) are all very different but they all seek regional stability and a just settlement of the Palestinian question so they too need to be active partners in the peace process<sup>5</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY

Effective conflict resolution requires an honest discourse between the parties at the heart of the conflict. To promote this process vis-à-vis the Middle East, we recommend a 2-year, multi-state,<sup>6</sup> peace polling project utilizing multiple poles which focus on issues important to Middle East peace negotiations.

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 poles should be managed to coincide with critical events<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 relationship with relevant researchers and institutions. Building on this work, the first in this series of polls will be completed in consultation with the stakeholders and negotiators in Israel and Palestine. This will be followed by Lebanon where all the groundwork for a peace poll has already been completed<sup>8</sup>. The Lebanon poll will be followed by polls in Jordan and Egypt. Syria is more problematic but it would be hoped, following polling of the Palestinian community in Lebanon that Syria will cooperate.

While these ‘neighbourhood’ polls are being conducted contact will be maintained with the parties and negotiators in Israel and Palestine with a view to completing a follow-up

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<sup>4</sup> UN, US, EU, Russian - the foursome of international and supranational bodies involved in mediating the peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

<sup>5</sup> In public diplomacy terms, this must necessarily include the ‘Arab Street’. Critically, Israel needs to be reassured that a just settlement of the Palestinian question can bring peace and that a significant majority of the population in these states will accept Israel as a regional neighbour providing the Palestinians, both in Palestine and in these states, accept the terms of a comprehensive agreement to end the conflict.

<sup>6</sup> Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, and Egypt.

<sup>7</sup> It may not be possible to always meet this ideal a complex multi-state multi-party conflict, but it should be aimed for.

<sup>8</sup> It should also be noted that Lebanon is potentially the greatest source of renewed conflict in the region.

poll to the first poll done in this series for a total of 2 polls each in Israel and Palestine and 1 poll each in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and possibly Syria. In Israel and Palestine the polls will duplicate the methodology used there last year but with larger samples (between 1000 and 1600) to allow for a more detailed social and political analysis. The Lebanon poll will include the general population and a booster poll in the Palestinian refugee camps. The polls in each of the states will necessarily be a little different to reflect local demographics but a core of common questions will be run in all states.

## **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 (DFID, FCO, MOD) 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 provided strategic communication support and advice on human security to the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC)<sup>9</sup>; and in Jordan on a media strengthening programme<sup>10</sup> and on a capacity building project with Jordan’s Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC).

**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>11</sup>. He has since extended his work to include the Balkans, Middle East, Kashmir and Sri Lanka<sup>12</sup>.

Referring to 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”*

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<sup>9</sup> Clients: UK Global Opportunities Fund; Dates: September 2008 - January 2010; Lebanon - Project to provide technical assistance to the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC). The project developed a comprehensive strategic communications plan aimed at supporting and improving the Government of Lebanon’s work with the Palestinian refugee community living in Lebanon, in the context of future conflict prevention.

<sup>10</sup> Jordan: Media Strengthening Program; Client: United States Agency for International Development Dates: July 2006 to July 2009. Albany management worked with IREX and the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania on a project funded by USAID to provide comprehensive advice on Jordan’s legal framework applicable to the media, and broadcasting in particular, with the ultimate goal of creating an enabling environment for free and independent media in the country.

<sup>11</sup> This was reviewed in his 2002 monograph ‘The People’s Peace Process in Northern Ireland’.

<sup>12</sup> Analysis, questionnaires and reports are available at [www.peacepolls.org](http://www.peacepolls.org).

## **SPECIFIC WORK REQUIRED**

We recommend that Albany Associates and Colin Irwin undertake the following programme of specific work<sup>13</sup>;

- Issue a letter to all the parties inviting them to participate in the design and running of a public opinion poll in support of the peace process.
- At an initial meeting with party officers, a party negotiator will be assigned to the task; issues relating to methods, topics, timing, and publication to be discussed.
- A “first draft” questionnaire will be sent to party contacts for discussion purposes with a covering letter summarizing the party’s views on methods, topics, timing, and publication. This letter will contain a list of party contacts, enabling them to discuss matters freely with each other.
- The second meeting with party representatives will review the draft questionnaire, to register party requests for changes and additions.
- The third letter and draft questionnaire will note all requests for changes and additions. For the sake of clarity, footnotes would be removed relating to previous drafts so that all notes refer only to current alterations.
- When the questionnaire “stabilizes” it will be sent out for pre-testing to identify fieldwork difficulties relating to problems of comprehension and length. The parties will be notified that this stage in the work had been reached and that they should identify any final changes<sup>14</sup>.
- Final changes will be made by those running the poll on the evidence of objective fieldwork tests. These changes will be noted in the final draft which will be sent to all the parties with a covering letter detailing the survey research schedule and publication date.
- From this point onward, parties will not be permitted to interfere in any way with the program of research, analysis of data, and publication. However, they will receive full statistical reports and will be free to make criticisms of the findings if they so wish.

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<sup>13</sup>To be read in conjunction with methodology. Please also note specific work required is based on the work programme implemented in Northern Ireland. However in Lebanon, and other states where negotiations may be less formal, a different mode of engagement may be required.

<sup>14</sup> As well as indicating which questions could possibly be left out to be dealt with in a later poll if required.