



Albany Associates Limited
Fox House
10 Whimble Street
Plymouth
Devon
PL1 2DH

Tel Leb: +961 (0) 304 274
Tel UK: +44 (0) 1752 604 211
Email: john@albanyassociates.com
Web: www.albanyassociates.com

Project Proposal

Palestinian Refugees, the Lebanese and a Poll

Objective

Albany Associates proposes a public opinion survey of the Palestinian refugee and Lebanese populations of Lebanon. The survey aims to explore margins of acceptability on issues related to Palestinian refugees, thereby creating room to manoeuvre for both Lebanese and Palestinian political leaders.

Duration

Six months

Cost

\$231,000

Context

"How can Palestinians work toward some 'right of return' while at the same time ensuring that those Palestinians wishing to remain in Lebanon are able to do so under tolerable economic and political conditions? Addressing this issue requires several elements: first, an effort to constructively engage Lebanese public opinion..." - Rex Brynen, 1997

Western colonization of the Arab world brought with it the collection of social statistics in the nineteenth and early half of the twentieth century. Following independence, indigenous scholars and bureaucrats continued to employ quantitative research methods for both policymaking and educational needs. Yet quantitative methodologies are laden with certain inherent problems. In a revealing exploration of survey research in Palestinian society, Elia Zureik identifies several of these problems (2003). Quoting the work of Hammami and Tamari (1997), Zureik points out "...applied social science in the study of Palestinians, particularly in the post-Oslo period, have resulted in uncritical acceptance of empiricist social science tailored to meet the needs of funding agencies and careers of individual researchers."

The interest-laden qualities of quantitative research are not just restricted to the study of Palestinians and have long been acknowledged by social scientists. Earlier work by the respected methodologist Donald Campbell claimed objective social science is nearly impossible where matters of policy are concerned (1984). He expounded saying, applied social science risks "extraneous, non-descriptive interests and biases entering through the inevitable discriminatory judgmental components that exist in all science at the levels of data collection, instrument design and selection, data interpretation, and choice of theory" (Campbell, 1984).

As applied social science, all survey work on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has had to grapple with these risks. Not all studies have met the challenge. Examples prompt respondents with: "If resettlement [of Palestinian refugees] were imposed, I would: (a) resist violently (b) resist peacefully (c) acquiesce". It is clear how this study arrived at the conclusion that mere "talk of permanently settling Palestinian refugees in Lebanon triggers wide public opposition and may pose a threat to the country's security and political stability" (Haddad, 2003).

Fortunately, Campbell has offered the social scientist tools with which to confront these risks. In addition to the usual recommendations for open, transparent, multi-method, multi-team research, he suggested all stakeholders be involved in the design of the research instruments (in this case a questionnaire) and the interpretation of the results (Campbell, 1984). It is presumed that had these recommendations been followed, the survey instrument mentioned above would have taken a different shape.

Colin Irwin (a student of Campbell) has applied these methodological principles to public opinion research and peace making with considerable success (Irwin, 2008). Nine surveys of public opinion were conducted in support of the Northern Ireland peace process between April 1996 and February 2003. Critically the questions for eight of these polls were drafted and agreed with party negotiators. This activity helped to build support for the Belfast Agreement that led to a 71 per cent 'yes' vote in the 1998 referendum and a subsequent period of increasing stability and peace (Irwin 2001, 2002, 2004, 2009). The peace polling methodology has since successfully been expanded to

Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, India and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Israel and Palestine and Darfur in the Sudan.

By building on this experience we hope to avoid some of the public diplomacy traps that other researchers have fallen into. For example Shikaki's (2003) work on the right of return might not have met with quite so much criticism (Nashashibi, 2003; Sitta, 2003) if he had more closely followed the methodological principles reviewed. Furthermore, he would have been well served by publishing results that might be difficult for Palestinians along with results seen as being to their benefit. 'Bad news' needs to be complemented with 'good news' in a broadly based piece of research. Our research will aim to do this.

Methodology

Dr. Colin Irwin, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Liverpool, will lead the survey. As mentioned above, Irwin's methods have been used successfully in Northern Ireland, Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Sudan, Kashmir and Sri Lanka. His recent work on Israeli-Palestinian crisis is especially relevant (see peacepolls.org for full reports and other references).

Effective conflict resolution requires the establishment of an honest discourse between the antagonists on the critical problems at the heart of the conflict. Irwin's approach involves these stakeholders in the identification of both the problems and their perceived solutions. He then tests these perceptions within the community and the society of the reported adversary. In fact, the process of creating the poll is just as important as the more visible poll results. The polls are drafted and agreed with the co-operation of the conflicting parties' negotiators to enhance the political processes by increasing inclusiveness, developing issues and language, testing party policies, helping to set deadlines and increasing the overall transparency of negotiations through the publication of technical analysis and media reports. The value and success of the polls are totally dependent on the value and success of this collective, qualitative dimension of the research.

Preliminary discussions with key stakeholders indicate the poll will likely revolve around the broad themes of: definitions of legal and political relationships, security, discrimination, reconciliation and the disappeared. It is important to note that these themes will be reviewed in consultation with all the parties as the project progresses.

Some fundamental requirements of Irwin's survey methodology include:

- All the parties to a conflict should draft and agree to all the questions.
- All the communities and peoples to the conflict should be asked all the questions.
- All the results should be made public.
- Timing and publication of the polls should be managed to coincide with critical events.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, among other countries, public opinion polls have been commissioned in order to gain an understanding of political allegiances, mainly for the purposes of learning how to "win the hearts and minds" of those citizens in newly occupied territory and newly democratized societies. In contrast, Irwin's questionnaires 1) emphasize practical, implementable solutions, in many cases formatting the questions into negotiating terminology by asking respondents whether a certain compromise is

“acceptable” rather than only asking whether they agree with a certain interpretation of the situation, and 2) use input from those stakeholders who are the most important in securing lasting peace.

As an example, Irwin's polls in Northern Ireland revealed that, while disbanding the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was “unacceptable” to 82% of Protestants, only 59% were equally unwilling to re-create the group under a different name. This is the solution that negotiators ultimately incorporated into the Belfast Agreement. In Israel and Palestine, a recent poll revealed that, while most Israelis are not in favour of a total unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank they would accept negotiated exchanges of equivalent lands, and only 23% found the freezing of new settlements “unacceptable”, implying that there was an important place for compromise.

Irwin's methodology has found success in many different countries and societies around the world. At present he is working with Albany Associates on our project in Darfur, the Sudan, and we believe this type of inclusive, discourse oriented opinion polling will also serve as a useful tool in resolving the difficulties between the Palestinian refugees and the Lebanese.

Timeframe and Stakeholders

The entire process will last approximately six months. Initial consultations could take place beginning in late April, which would mean a closing date near the end of October.

As mentioned in the literature review and methodology sections above, this project seeks to involve all stakeholders to the conflict. Negotiators from all political parties concerned with the Palestinian refugee issue will be encouraged to participate in the process. Preliminary conversations have already been held with the Government of Lebanon's Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC). Albany Associates is well placed to work with this committee as it has recently completed a communications consultancy to the LPDC in the form of a Technical Assistance Office. Discussions have also been held with MP Bahia Hariri, the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut, the Embassy of Palestine in Lebanon, as represented by the PLO, and various analysts and experts.

Albany Associates' office in the UK will serve as project administrator. Albany Associates' office in Beirut will facilitate the entire polling process by assisting Dr. Colin Irwin and the polling team with their logistical and communication needs. An entire communications strategy will be mapped from the outset, utilizing the full quiver of tools available to ensure that the key findings of the study reach the target audience at the appropriate time. In consultation with stakeholders this will include, for example:

- Reviewing reports prior to publication
- Agreeing publication and public diplomacy strategies
- Private consultations and seminars
- Public lectures and press events
- Newspaper, magazine and broadcast media reports
- Academic reports and papers

Appendices

Annex I – Budget

Annex II – Methods Paper

Annex III - Polling Bid

Annex IV – Colin Irwin Resume

Annex V – John Redwine Resume

Annex VI – Albany Associates Background Note

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