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NEW POLL REVEALS THAT MAJORITY OF PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS SHARE A DESIRE FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

By Courtney Radsch, Special to *The Daily Star* (Saturday, June 21, 2003)

Beirut: As world leaders converge on Jordan for the World Economic Forum this weekend to discuss Middle East peace in the wake of escalated violence, a new poll revealed that a majority of Palestinians and Israelis share a desire for peace and security.

The survey found that the majority of Palestinians and Israelis support joint economic cooperation and the resumption of negotiations within the framework of the Middle East 'road map' to peace.

The specially commissioned Gallup International poll, conducted to coincide with the extraordinary session of the Davos forum's Global Summit of Peace and Reconciliation and released Friday, highlighted the agreement between the majority of Palestinians and Israelis concerning the peace process, mutual economic cooperation and joint projects in areas such as water, health, environment and tourism.

But while those polled were optimistic about future cooperation, they were skeptical about the likelihood of the creation of an independent Palestinian state by 2005, a key element of the road map.

Only 51 percent of Israelis and 50 percent of Palestinians believe there will be a viable Palestinian state living side by side with Israel five years from now, while slightly more than 45 percent in both societies do not believe this will occur.

Israel has increasingly clamped down on Palestinian movement between the Occupied Territories and Israel as violence has escalated, restricting Palestinians' ability to work. Seventy-seven percent of Palestinians felt that free movement of workers between the two sides is crucial, but only 57 percent of Israelis agreed in light of the potential for militants to enter Israel.

A clear majority of both Israelis (75 percent) and Palestinians (68 percent) believe the nations have a right to live in peace and security. Over 1,000 Israelis and Palestinians have died in a 32-month-old uprising for Palestinian statehood.

Five hundred Israeli citizens and 430 Palestinians residing in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem were asked 20 questions about the current peace process and their vision of the future. Seventy-six percent of the Israelis and 69 percent of the Palestinians polled agreed with the statement that there can be 'no real economic growth without a peace settlement,' with a majority of both opining that, while ideally economic cooperation should come as soon as possible, this is

more easily achieved within the context of a peace settlement.

US President George W. Bush has said he is committed to bringing the road map to fruition, and is sending Secretary of State Colin Powell to the WEF. Both sides see the United States as 'by far the most influential actor in bringing peace to the region,' even though the American public seems more pessimistic than ever about an achievable peace, according to another Gallup poll conducted June 12-16.

Skepticism about the possibility of a resolution to the conflict prevailed in the US with just 38 percent of those polled envisioning that Arab-Israeli peace was possible. Six in 10 Americans now doubt a resolution to the conflict will ever be worked out, up from 51 percent in May, before the most recent spate of violence.

The WEF poll did not address the Palestinian right of return, a key point of contention between Israelis and Palestinians. Israel's refusal to consider the idea under the proposed road map is one of the primary obstacles to a peace deal. Yet initial results from an ongoing study by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that relatively few Palestinian refugees would seek to return to Israel if they received the right to do so as part of an overall Middle East peace agreement.

The results are potentially significant, since Palestinians have long demanded the right of return for the four million refugees and their descendants who fled or were forced to flee when the Jewish state was created in 1948 and after the 1967 war.

"Within the context of a negotiated outcome, the number of refugees who would want to go back would be small," the center's director Khalil Shikaki told Reuters on Wednesday. "A small number of refugees would go to Israel based on the (results of the) survey. The idea that million of refugees would be knocking at Israel's door is fantasy," he said. The center is polling refugees in the Occupied Territories, Jordan and Lebanon. The results are due out next month.