

1. <http://www.christiansciencemonitor.com/2004/1214/p01s03-wome.html>

2. Israelis, Palestinians Retreating From Hardline Stances

3. Discussion in 'Israel and Palestine' started by NATO AIR, Dec 13, 2004.

Israelis and Palestinians each indicate retreat from hard-liners

By Ben Lynfield | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

JERUSALEM □ One month after Yasser Arafat's death, realignments on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide are raising fragile hopes for a mutual retreat from four years of fighting.

The changes, which are being shadowed by renewed violence, include efforts by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to forge a coalition with the Labor Party in Israel for pushing through his Gaza disengagement plan, and, in the occupied territories, the likely ascendancy of moderate Palestinian Liberation Organization chairman Mahmoud Abbas and a drop in support for militant Hamas.

"Sharon wants to take a breather and the Palestinians want to take a breather so they will head to negotiations," says Khader Abu Abarra, an analyst based in Beit Jala in the West Bank. "The two sides have exhaustion in common."

He says the fatigue and leadership changes will be enough for a resumption of talks and a period of calm of up to two years, although the two sides, he predicts, will prove unable to tackle the core issues of the conflict.

Mr. Sharon refused to negotiate with Mr. Arafat, alleging he was involved in terrorism. But Sharon's approach toward the Palestinians can be expected to largely resemble that of the moderate Labor Party, with which he is currently trying to form a coalition, says Hebrew University political scientist Menachem Hofnung. "If the Palestinian side comes forward, I believe Sharon can be a partner in a revised peace process, though how fast and how far it will go, I am not sure."

"Sharon understands there will be a Palestinian state and that Israel cannot hold the territories forever. His considerations include preserving Israel's Jewish majority and good relations with the US," he adds.

The hope that peace talks will resume soon is widely shared by public opinion on both sides. A joint poll released last week by the Hebrew University's Truman Institute and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research showed 76 percent of Israelis and 83 percent of Palestinians expect negotiations to resume compared with 63 percent of Israelis and 72 percent of Palestinians surveyed in June.

But hope for change comes against the backdrop of a fresh escalation in the Gaza Strip, which is taking a toll on civilians and fueling doubts about whether a reconciliation can get off the ground.

Monday, Israeli helicopters fired missiles at targets in Gaza City, without causing casualties, in an initial response to the killing of five soldiers and wounding of five others at a Gaza-Egypt border position Sunday night when Hamas and the Fatah Hawks blew up 1.5 tons of explosives. It was the deadliest attack since Arafat's death in November. In Israel's first assassination attempt since Arafat's passing, Israeli helicopters last week wounded a senior Gaza militia commander, Jamal Abu Samhadana.

Israel wants to advance towards peace, but "at the moment we do not see any change on the Palestinian side," Sharon said Monday, in his first public criticism of the new Palestinian leadership, according to the Y-net news agency.

But surveys released last week point toward ferment in Palestinian public opinion after Arafat's death.

About 52 percent of Palestinians oppose bombings against Israeli targets and consider them harmful to Palestinian interests, compared with 26.9 percent in June, according to a poll by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center. The same poll showed that 40 percent of Palestinians consider Mr. Abbas's Fatah movement to be the most trusted faction, up from 26.4 percent in June.

Hamas was trusted by 18.6 percent, compared to 21.7 percent in June. With the withdrawal from the presidential race Sunday of jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouthi, an advocate of the armed intifada, there will be no real political expression for militancy in the election.

In Mr. Abu Abarra's view: "The people on the ground need a change and feel that Abbas will make a change and be helped by the Americans, Israelis, and Arab countries. And Hamas's attitude of boycotting the elections has cost it popularity."

While Palestinians want change and tranquility, the fighting has, if anything, hardened their opinions on the core issues that need to be negotiated with Israel such as Jerusalem and refugees, according to Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Bir Zeit University. "People do not want all the losses to be in vain."

Since the start of fighting in September 2000, 3,361 people have died on the Palestinian side, and 1,013 on the Israeli side, according to the Associated Press.

Mr. Ahmed does not view the surveys, which point to a weakening of Hamas, as indications that it faces a sustained decline in popularity and says the movement could profit from Barghouthi's withdrawal from the election race. "There are verbal overtures on both sides, but in practice we've seen no change on the ground," he says. "The occupation, the checkpoints, the killings, and the clashes are still there."

On the Israeli side, Labor Party leaders say they want the Gaza withdrawal followed up by a return to the international peace blueprint known as "the road map," which calls for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

But a senior adviser to Sharon, Dov Weisglass, said two months ago that the withdrawal was aimed at "freezing" the peace process, thereby enabling Israel to expand its presence in the West Bank.

Mr. Hofnung, the Hebrew University professor, cautions that the path toward renewed negotiations remains perilous.

"If there are one, two, or three more successful attacks like [the one in Gaza Sunday night] it could make a difference. Israel will have to retaliate and we may go back to square one," he says.

