

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY PEACE INDEX: 70% OF ISRAELIS OPTIMISTIC ON PEACE AFTER ARAFAT/75% NOW SUPPORT NEGOTIATIONS WITH PALESTINIANS (INCREASE FROM 66%)/75% OF LIKUD VOTERS FAVOR NEGOTIATIONS December 19, 2004

Hoping for the best

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New survey shows Israelis are optimistic - 70% - on the chances for peace following death of Yasser Arafat

In the wake of Yasser Arafat's death, a definite majority of the Israeli Jewish public tends to be more optimistic about the chances of peace with the Palestinians, and also favors conducting negotiations with them. The prevailing view is that even from the Palestinian standpoint, Arafat's leadership was generally negative, as was his role in key areas such as advancing the Palestinian people's struggle for political independence, creating a democratic system of government, and promoting the peace process.

The general optimism in the public about the chances for peace is accompanied by a positive impression - among most of those who have an opinion on the matter - of the way in which the current Palestinian leadership is managing the affairs of the Palestinian Authority. At the same time, only a minority believe the upcoming elections will produce a Palestinian leadership that can take charge in the field and wield clear authority over all the Palestinian organizations.

Against this background, there seems to be a majority who believe Israel should help the Palestinian leadership stabilize its rule by means of certain gestures to ease the lives of the Palestinian population in the territories, such as ending closures and removing checkpoints.

It seems, however, that the sense of Israeli-Palestinian relations being on the verge of a positive change has not carried over to the Syrian issue. An overwhelming majority rejects the initiative by Syrian President Bashar Assad to renew negotiations with Israel without preconditions, while accepting the government's position that first Syria must end its support for the terror organizations. Likewise, the majority currently rejects, as in the past, the formula of signing a peace agreement with Syria in return for full withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

As for which Israeli leader the public regards as capable of advancing the peace process with the Arabs while safeguarding the vital interests of the state, most of the public opts for Ariel Sharon by a wide margin. In second place is Benjamin Netanyahu. Other personalities, both from the Right (Effie Eitam and Silvan Shalom) and the Left (Shimon Peres, Ami Ayalon, Ehud Barak, and Yossi Beilin), received only a few percentage points each.

These were the main findings of the Peace Index survey which was conducted on November 29-30.

About 70% of the Israeli public is more optimistic, after Arafat's death, about the chances of reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians, with 9% saying they were more pessimistic, 20% saying Arafat's death does not affect the chances, and 1% do not know. This appears to explain the increase in the number of those who support holding negotiations, from around two-thirds in recent months to the current 75%.

A segmentation of the respondents by Knesset voting reveals, as one would expect, that support for negotiations is overwhelming among Meretz, Labor, and Shinui voters, while among Shas and National Religious Party voters only a minority favors such talks.

However, the interesting finding is that in Likud, too, a pronounced majority of three-fourths now supports such talks, compared to about 60% who favored them in recent months. That is, Arafat's death has clearly increased the Likud voters' readiness to support peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

The growing optimism can be explained in terms of the widespread assessment that Arafat personally harmed the peace process even from the standpoint of the Palestinians' interests - 86% take that view, compared with 8% who say he did more good than harm.

The negative evaluation of Arafat's leadership concerns not only relations with Israel but other issues as well, aside from the question of putting the Palestinian issue on the international agenda, on which the public is divided: 50% believing he did more good while 43% think he did more harm.

Thus, regarding the struggle to achieve political independence, 67% thought he did more harm than good, while 27% thought the benefit was greater than the harm he caused. Some 83% said he did more harm in terms of building a democratic system of government, and 87% thought so regarding the development of the Palestinian economy. Overall, two-thirds of the Jewish public view Arafat as a quite bad or very bad leader from the Palestinian standpoint, compared with 26% who think he was a quite good or very good leader for them.

The Israeli Arab public views Arafat's leadership differently. Seventy-five percent say he did more good than harm in getting the Palestinian issue on the international stage, 65% in the struggle for political independence, 61% in building a democratic system of government, and 59% in advancing the peace process. In the economic domain, a small majority - 45% - believe he did more harm compared with 39% who credit him with more good than harm.

As for the general assessment of Arafat as a leader of the Palestinian people, the contrast with the Jewish public is even more stark: 92% think he was a quite good or very good leader, and only 6% see him as a bad or very bad leader.

Yet notwithstanding the Israeli Arab public's positive view of Arafat's contribution to advancing the peace process with Israel, a majority - 58% - is more optimistic today about the chances of reaching an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, with 21% more pessimistic, 14% who think Arafat's death has brought no change in the chances, and 7% who

do not know.

It appears that the Israeli Jewish public still has trouble assessing the Palestinian leadership's handling of the Authority's affairs since Arafat's death: 38% responded that they cannot evaluate its actions. Among those who do take a position, however, the tendency is to view the leadership so far as functioning positively - 34% - compared with 28% who have the impression that it is functioning poorly or very poorly.

Nevertheless, regarding the decision to hold elections for the leadership of the Palestinian Authority next month, this question: "What, in your opinion, are the chances that the elections will produce a Palestinian leadership that has clear authority over all the Palestinian organizations, and is able to run the Authority and take charge in the field?" - it turned out that the Israeli Jewish public does not see much chance of a leadership emerging that wields authority.

The majority - 62% - thought the chances of this are quite low or very low, compared with 26% who believe the chances are quite high or very high, and 12% who said they did not know. Perhaps because of this fear that no Palestinian leadership is emerging with the authority to take charge, or for some other reason, a majority - 53% - supported the view that Israel should help the new Palestinian leadership stabilize its rule with certain gestures to ease the lives of the Palestinian population, such as ending closures and removing checkpoints in the West Bank. Some 42% oppose Israel making such gestures, and 5% said they do not know.

Among the Israeli Arab public, 58% evaluate the functioning of the current leadership as quite good or very good, compared with 25% who see it as quite poor or very poor, and 17% declaring they do not know. Regarding the results of the upcoming elections, the views are divided with a slight tendency in the negative direction: 51% believe the chances of a Palestinian leadership emerging that wields authority and control are low, while 45% say the chances of this are high.

The overwhelming support for holding peace negotiations with the Palestinians does not carry over to the question of relations with Syria. When asked whether Israel - in light of President Bashar Assad's expression of readiness for negotiations without preconditions - should respond positively to the Syrian initiative, or if, in the words of Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, Syria must first prove its peaceful intentions by ending its support for Hezbollah and the terror organizations active in Damascus, 71% of the Jewish interviewees agreed that renewing the negotiations must be conditional on Syria ending its support for the terror organizations, with only 22% saying Israel should respond positively to the Syrian initiative and return to the negotiating table immediately, and 7% saying they did not know.

The clear tendency to reject the Syrian initiative is apparently related to the public's views on the familiar formula of signing a full peace agreement with Syria in return for a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights: whereas only 24% support that formula, 57% oppose it, 17% are in between, and 3% do not know. This segmentation is basically similar to

findings obtained on this question in Peace Index surveys over the past decade.

In view of the current situation and the decisions facing Israel in the near future, we asked: "Who among the following leaders could, in your opinion, as prime minister, advance the peace process between Israel and the Arabs while safeguarding the vital interests of the state?" Among the leaders we presented - the list of candidates being read to the interviewees in random order - the serving prime minister, Ariel Sharon, had a clear lead with 35% of the interviewees seeing him as the right person.

In second place was nobody on the list, with 17% of the interviewees opting for none of the candidates mentioned or choosing someone else, indicating the current lack of a clear candidate to replace Sharon. In third place came Benjamin Netanyahu with 14%, while all the other candidates received less than 10% each: Shimon Peres, 8%; Ami Ayalon, 6%; Ehud Barak, 4%; Effie Eitam, 3%; Silvan Shalom, 2.5%; and Yossi Beilin, 2%.

A segmentation of these preferences for prime minister by voting in the most recent Knesset elections shows that support for Sharon among Likud voters is high - 53%, followed by Netanyahu with 18%; no one or someone else, 13%; and Silvan Shalom, 5%.

Among Labor voters, the leader - although with a much smaller percentage - is also Prime Minister Sharon at 25%, and after him Peres with 18.5%; Ami Ayalon, 17.5%; and Ehud Barak, 15%.

Among Shas voters, the majority - 56% - chose the option of none of the candidates or someone else; Netanyahu came in second with 25%; and Sharon and Silvan Shalom each got 6%.

Among Shinui voters, the leading candidate is Sharon with 47%, and after him Peres with 16%, and someone else/none of the candidates with 10.5%.

In Meretz, quite surprisingly, the leading candidate is Ami Ayalon at 57%.

The Peace indexes for this month were:

Oslo Index - overall sample: 36.7; the Jewish sample: 33.9.

Negotiation Index - overall sample: 56.7; for the Jewish sample: 54.9.

Syria Index - overall sample: 40.8; the Jewish sample: 37.4.

The Peace Index project is conducted at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research of Tel Aviv University, headed by Prof. Ephraim Yaar and Prof. Tamar Hermann. The telephone interviews were conducted by the B. I. Cohen Institute of Tel Aviv University, November 29-30, 2004, and included 581 interviewees who represent the adult Jewish and Arab population of Israel, including the territories and the kibbutzim.

The margin of error for a sample of this size is plus/minus about 4.5%.

