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Season of Anger

Sounds of gunfire and prayer mix in the West Bank

By Masha Hamilton

Jerusalem -- The golden hills of the West Bank are filled with families working in the shade of silver-leafed trees, their arms moving with the rhythm of a conductor's baton. Sometimes they sing or trade jokes, cheerful with thoughts of the money their labor will bring. But often they are quiet, the sway of branches the only sound. It is the season of olive picking in ancient Judea and Samaria.

It is also the season of deepening anger and aggression, when talk has become like razor wire and guns as common as bread.

I returned to Israel this week to find two peoples who may look, on paper, closer to peace than a decade ago, but on the ground are much closer to war.

Even if a cease-fire is achieved, real peace that moves off official documents and settles into the souls of children seems like a dream of a land of milk and honey.

From an Israeli: "The only compromise they will agree to is Israelis in the sea."

From a Palestinian: "The peace they offer is not real. In truth, they want us dead."

Passionate rhetoric has been part of the landscape here for millennia, as dependable as the hot desert winds and the grainy Turkish coffee. It is undeniable, however, that this time the talk has boosted tensions to new heights. "It's never been this bad," said Israeli Ilana Balaban, who has lived through many crises in her 59 years here. And in the West Bank and Gaza, the air is redolent of saffron, citrus and tear gas. The sounds are of prayer and gunfire, a combustible combination.

Some images from this week seared my experience here. In Ramallah I went to a rally and a funeral. The anger in that city is intense and unfocused, like sprayed automatic weapon fire. Palestinians even take their frustration out on each other, and those with guns and masked anonymity are the most aggressive. I saw a man in a black ski mask, only the slits of his eyes visible, jab his pistol sharply in the back of one of his own, a fellow Palestinian, simply to speed him up during a protest march.

In Bethlehem, I watched hundreds of Moslems kneel and chant "Allah Akhbar" in Manger's Square and then head toward the Israeli border checkpoint for a dangerous dance with troops, hurling stones, broken glass and obscenities at two Israeli soldiers. As hours passed the Israelis fired with growing frequency at their tormentors, until one finally, incredibly, dashed from behind his barricade into the street to hurl a grenade, as

though to say "Enough. Go home. Leave me alone!" His efforts were unsuccessful. The rock-throwing abated only with nightfall and began again the next day.

These daily street battles are startling in their accessibility. And cell phones are the new tools that bring the struggle into many homes of Palestinians and Israelis. Dozens of times this week I witnessed Palestinian fighters shoot their rifles into the air or set an Israeli flag aflame, then pause to answer their phones. Many calls are from home. A horrifying recent case involved the Israeli woman who had a sudden premonition. She called her husband on his cell phone. It was answered by a Palestinian in Ramallah who said, "I've just killed him," and hung up. Her husband, Yosef Avrahami, 38, was one of two reserve soldiers lynched Oct. 12 in that West Bank city.

Perhaps the most frightening development is the freefall of moderates from both the Israeli and the Palestinian camps. A Palestinian boy who was hospitalized this week after being injured in a clash with Israeli soldiers told reporters that when he grew up, he wanted to marry a Jewish woman so that he could kill her, and marry another Jewish woman and kill her, and so on. Such virulent rhetoric could be heard before the successes of the peace process, but now it is expressed more openly and is more widespread.

"I'm a moderate, I look at people as individuals," Yigal Ohana, an Israeli who lives in the Jerusalem suburb of Gilo, told me. "My parents have also been moderate, but they have changed. Today my mother saw out our window an Israeli border policeman shot in the chest by Arabs on the other side of the hill. He was doing nothing, this policeman, and now he may die. I hope in the future, when I want to have Arab friends again to our home, she will allow it. But I'm not sure."

"We were all wrong," Nahum Barnea, a longtime eloquent supporter of peace with the Palestinians, wrote in the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot this week.

"There remains a great thirst for blood and tears between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean, and there are those who are willing to continue to supply the goods."

And what of the olive pickers, bent on their traditional livelihood despite the daily clashes? One, 28-year-old Farid Nasara, was shot to death this week by a Jewish settler as he worked in the groves, bystander and victim of a hatred whose reach is growing.

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