

The urgent need of peace in the Holy Land

Another round of direct peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians after a 20-month pause is both welcome and urgent. We need to pray it won't be yet another false dawn. A great deal is stacked against it but there is an urgency about achieving success.

There is a serious danger of greater instability in the Middle East:

- Iran is increasingly aggressive and, despite sanctions, could develop nuclear weapons.
- If Israel (alone or with others) were to attack Iran, the Iranian regime has threatened "to burn Tel Aviv."
- Syria's President has stated that the chances of a regional war have increased.
- The prospect of a US withdrawal from Iraq has created anxieties in some Middle Eastern states.
- The Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas axis is a highly dangerous one.
- Antagonism towards Israel has grown because of the situation in Gaza.
- The rift between Israel and Turkey following the Gaza flotilla incident has increased instability in the region.

It follows that for Christians to focus only on support for Israel or on antagonism towards Israel is irresponsible. If we care about the people of the Holy Land, Israeli or Palestinian, Jewish or Arab, we will pray earnestly for the success of the Peace Talks.

To many of us in Britain, it once seemed impossible that we would have a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. George Mitchell, who was instrumental in that peace being achieved, visited the Middle East recently. Afterwards he said: "In Ireland we had about 700 days of failure and one day of success." (The "one day of success" was the day the peace agreement was signed). So we must never give up hope, especially as we are praying to the Prince of Peace. That is why cynicism about the new Peace Talks is out of place. God could give success.

Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu told the Israeli cabinet recently: "I am convinced that if the Palestinian leadership takes the negotiations as seriously as we do, we can reach a stable agreement - not just a deal for a tactical ceasefire between wars. We can reach a peace based on stability for us and for our children and that is my goal."

But is he sincere? In a recent poll less than 50% of Americans believed the Israeli government is serious about wanting peace. We need to pray that it will be serious. Politics has been called "enlightened self-interest" and both sides need to see it really is in their interest to seek peace.

There are still various hindrances:

1. THE SETTLEMENT ISSUE

The settlers tend to be caricatured as ultra-right wing racists. In fact, when we were in Israel I had friends who lived in settlements. They were decent, caring people who needed an inexpensive home. Some of them were committed believers in Jesus (Messianic Believers). They were not racists. I fully understand the theology of many of the settlers. They believe God gave the Jewish people the land and it is therefore theirs by divine right. They firmly hold that God has brought them (or their parents) back to the land – the whole of it. Some of them actually think it would be disobeying and dishonouring God to give up the "settlements."

Many pro-Palestinian Christians don't understand all this. It has to be addressed, carefully and reasonably. And I think the points that need to be discussed include:

- a. Possession of the land was linked to obedience to the Lord. How can anyone seriously claim that modern Israel is fully obedient to the Lord?
- Most Israelis are secular. Israel suffers from all the faults and problems of modern western democracy.
 - Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is not fully in accord with the commands of the Torah (OT Law).
 - Israel rejects its Messiah and the atonement he made for the Jewish people (and the rest of the world) on the cross.

In these circumstances it is not possible theologically to expect that Israel must have the whole of the historic land.

- b. The Torah demands justice for the non-Jew living amongst the Israelis. Justice demands that the Palestinians have full human rights and citizenship. If Israel does not want them to be citizens of Israel (which, in a democracy, would eventually mean the country losing its protective Jewish majority) then there is an obligation on Israel to provide those rights in another way. The two-state solution seems the only way.

We need to pray that biblical Zionist Israelis will take these points seriously and to see the settlements as an unnecessary obstacle to peace (although some compromise of boundaries would be necessary, as well as proper provision for displaced settlers).

Israel's temporary freeze on settlements is about to run out on September 26th and its renewal is a major issue in the peace talks. If it is renewed, Netanyahu would face a damaging revolt by the extreme right wingers. Already, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is calling for resumption of settlement expansion. Settlers have said they will begin building in 80 settlements when the freeze ends.

A recent poll indicated that 73% of Palestinians support the peace talks but on the condition that the settlement freeze is renewed.

2. THE EXTREMISTS ON BOTH SIDES

One extremist on the Israeli side is Rabbi Ovadia Yosef of the influential right wing Shas party. He denounced the peace talks and said: "Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] and all these evil people should perish from this world. God should strike them with a plague, them and these Palestinians." In 2001 he said of the Arabs: "It is forbidden to be merciful to them. You must send missiles to them and annihilate them. They are evil and damnable." What appalling views!

On the other said, Hamas has launched a terrorist attack on innocent Israelis to try to derail the peace talks. Earlier five rockets had been launched from Gaza against Eilat. Sadly, a Jordanian taxi driver was killed in nearby Aqaba. By contrast, the above-mentioned poll found that 61% of Palestinians favoured halting the rocket attacks (up from 53% in 2009).

We need to pray that this extremism on both sides will be marginalised and disapproved of.

OTHER NEWS

a. The Gaza Flotilla

The aftermath of the Gaza flotilla incident continues. The Turkish activists involved boarded the ship separately from the other passengers. Israel is conducting a post mortem on the inadequate intelligence and forward planning which contributed greatly to the incident. The Israeli Foreign Ministry advised the IDF to wait until the ship entered Gazan waters. But legal experts said, even in international waters, it was legal to stop a ship controlled by people who had announced an intention to break a blockade.

Arab Israeli MK [Member of Knesset] Hanin Zuabi who was on board the ship claimed she had seen no armed men. But a film showed her standing near men holding heavy sticks.

b. The Gaza situation

Following the Flotilla incident, Israel relaxed some of the restrictions of imports into Gaza (they claimed it was nothing to do with the incident). Now imports can include all food items, stationery, kitchen utensils, mattresses, towels, stationery and toys. Building materials are still restricted lest they are used for military purposes, but this also prevents necessary peaceful use in rebuilding Gaza after the war.

c. Equal rights for Israeli Arabs

Israeli Arabs form one fifth of the Israeli population, yet there is some de facto inequality between Jewish and Arab Israelis. President Obama has updated America's vision of the future of Israel as: "a Jewish state of Israel, with true security, acceptance, and rights for all Israelis." However there are calls in Israel for the removal of Arab members of the Knesset (Parliament).

d. Iran

The threat of Iran gaining nuclear weapons continues to create deep concern in Israel. The Israelis now have an agreement with the Americans to create the Arrow III ballistic shield which will enable Israel to shoot down missiles at a much higher altitude, outside the atmosphere.

e. Lebanon

A tragic and worrying incident took place on the border between Israel and Lebanon recently. The Israelis, liaising with the UNIFIL peacekeepers, regularly cut back the undergrowth on the border because it could conceal infiltrators. On this occasion a soldier was suspended from a crane over the border and the Lebanese, who claimed they shouted at him to stop and fired warning shots, opened fire. The Israelis responded and two Lebanese soldiers and a Lebanese journalist were killed.

In addition to this it is also a cause of concern that Hezbollah and the Syrian army have formed a joint headquarters so that they can co-operate against any Israeli attack.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Give thanks for the resumption of the direct peace talks after almost two years.
2. Pray for success for the talks and willingness to compromise on both sides.
3. Pray that the Israelis will continue the freeze on West Bank settlements.
4. Pray against extremists on both sides who seek to wreck the peace talks.
5. Pray for the citizens of Gaza facing serious hardships.
6. Pray for security for Israelis, including from rocket attacks.
7. Pray that Israeli Arabs will experience full equality as citizens.
8. Pray for peace between Israel and Lebanon.
9. Pray for peace between Israel and Syria.
10. Pray that Iran will not be able to develop nuclear weapons.