

## What hope for peace in the Holy Land?

There is growing pessimism about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The talks have been on hold since September. The prospects of progress as opposed to endless talking seem remote. The Quartet (the EU, Russia, the UN and the US) currently hold out little hope. Each side is blaming the other.

However most people blame the Israelis with their continuing support for the West Bank settlements. 300,000 Israelis live in 120 settlements.

### **GROWING CONDEMNATION OF THE WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS**

Ever since the 10-month settlement freeze ended there has been an immense amount of building in the settlements, some of it without legal backing under Israeli law (although the government vowed to remove these by the end of 2011, if they were on private Palestinian land, but not if they are on government land). Some settlers have been involved in violent reactions to demolition of unauthorised outposts. They also held a Day of Rage in Jerusalem, blocking the main Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway for a time and burning tyres.

The Palestinian Authority took the issue to the UN in February, using moderate language as opposed to the anti-Israel rhetoric used on previous occasions. Although the US condemned the settlements, it opposed the Palestinian move, saying that the issue could only be settled by the two parties concerned, and, at the last minute, used its veto in the Security Council. All the other Council members supported the Palestinian motion. UN Secretary General said: "The occupation that started in 1967 is morally and politically unsustainable, and must end. The Palestinians have a legitimate right to the establishment of an independent and viable State of their own."

The Palestinians felt they had achieved something, despite the veto, because they drew attention to Israel's growing isolation and showed the US administration as hypocritical over the issue. However the US ambassador to the UN condemned the settlements as illegitimate but said that the resolution was opposed for political reasons.

Some Israelis, including in the government, think Israel should consider withdrawing from the West Bank, perhaps leaving a military presence for security purposes. Prime Minister Netanyahu is now talking of withdrawing the military from the West Bank but leaving the settlers. He is worried about a unilateral declaration of a state by the Palestinians which could have international support. Predictably the settlers immediately condemned these ideas.

Netanyahu acknowledged Israel could not ignore the growing international pressure over the settlements but undertook to maintain present settlement activity. Recently approval was given for 942 new houses in Gilo, which is on the Palestinian side of the Green Line in Jerusalem. A further 1608 new houses in other neighbourhoods are being considered

Netanyahu has to consider the settlers and all those (including many Christians) who believe the West Bank is Judea and Samaria, part of the Promised Land. (For my theological position on this see <http://www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/theologicalposition.html>). He also has to bear in mind security considerations. Experience of having a Hamas 'state' adjacent to Israel does not encourage a positive Israeli attitude towards a Palestinian state on the West Bank, not least because rocket attacks from Gaza have resumed. Israel does not think Hamas was behind Jerusalem bombing which killed one Christian woman and injured 30 others. It was condemned by the Palestinian leadership. However many rockets were fired into Israel recently although Israel is now employing the Iron Dome anti-missile system which is proving effective. There now appears to be a dispute between the political and military wings of Hamas, with the former wanting a ceasefire.

However, quite apart from moral considerations (justice for the Palestinians) Israel has committed itself to the two-state solution, but seems not to be facilitating that.

The right wing Netanyahu government has been strengthened by the fact that Ehud Barak and four Knesset members have left the Israeli Labor Party and formed the centrist Atzmaut party. This moves the overall political situation somewhat to the right.

If the Wikileaks papers, released to Al-Jazeera, are to be believed, the Palestinians have been willing to compromise. They offered to accept all but one of the Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem in exchange for some Israel land; to accept international control of the Temple Mount sites in Jerusalem and for Israel to take in only 10,000 Palestinian refugees for 10 years. All of these, if true, would be controversial amongst the Palestinians.

Netanyahu has spoken of offering the Palestinians a state with temporary borders, as part of an interim peace agreement but Abbas has ruled this out. More recently he has spoken of an interim plan of handing over parts of the West Bank to the Palestinians without affecting the settlements. This is likely to be rejected also.

### **ISRAEL'S GROWING ISOLATION**

Because of this Israel is facing increasing international isolation. Israel very easily reverts to claiming all criticism is a result of anti-Semitism or rejection of her right to exist. There is no doubt that some criticism stems from historical hatred or political prejudice and this stirs up Israeli fears, hindering the peace process. But the Israelis cannot ignore the fact that many of her friends believe she is wrong to act as she does over the settlements and to appear not to be serious over the peace process. The fact is that world leaders are increasingly wondering if Netanyahu is serious about peace or simply wants to keep talking, criticising the Palestinians and giving the appearance of wanting peace. Were he to renew the settlement freeze that could lead to a breakthrough and the Palestinians would have to show they are serious about peace too.

It is difficult to understand some actions by Netanyahu. For example, last October, after many months of negotiations, he was invited to China, but decided to attend the General Assembly of Jewish Federations of North America instead. The Chinese were furious. Israel has to understand that it cannot ignore world opinion. Things are changing and the Palestinian situation might develop radically without them in the near future.

### **UNILATERAL ESTABLISHMENT OF A PALESTINIAN STATE?**

European states are beginning to upgrade the Palestinian Authorities diplomatic status. Britain, France and Spain have already done this and Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Sweden, and possibly others are likely to follow suit. Norway has also done so.

Various countries have gone further and recognised a Palestinian state. They are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Uruguay. The French Foreign Minister has spoken of the real possibility of the EU recognising a Palestinian state.

The Palestinians are working hard to encourage the UN to recognise a Palestinian state at the General Assembly in September. Last September President Obama said he wanted to see a Palestinian state become a member of the UN within a year. Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad says he will have completed establishment of institutions for a state by September. A UN report "Palestinian State-building: A Decisive Period" says the split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas is a real obstacle.

Mahmoud Abbas has said there would be no more negotiations with Israel after September. However he would delay efforts to gain UN recognition of a Palestinian state if negotiations happened before September and made progress. Israel is taking action to prevent this recognition and threatens unspecified unilateral steps if it happens.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST TURMOIL**

All of this is happening in the midst of the unrest in various parts of the Middle East. What will happen in the countries facing regime change? What will the effect be on Israel and the peace process? Will extremists take over? Iran is seeking to take advantage of the changes, claiming they are an Iran-style Islamic revolution and

seeing them as a major defeat for the US. Two Iranian battleships sailed through the Suez Canal recently, which would not have been allowed under Mubarak's regime. Israeli President Shimon Peres told the Europeans that this was a warning sign.

Israel is, of course, deeply concerned that the "cold peace" agreement with Egypt should remain in place and has urged Obama and other leaders to encourage the new regime to preserve it. If Egypt discontinued the agreement Israel would have no friends in the region now that the alliance with Turkey has gone. Dr. Ayman Nur, leader of the Tomorrow Party in Egypt and a potential presidential candidate has said the agreement with Israel is over and must at least be renegotiated. However, Egypt has benefited from the treaty, including receiving an annual military aid grant of \$1.5 billion from the US which it will not want to lose. There is concern lest the Muslim Brotherhood take over in Egypt, a concern shared by Egyptian Christians. However the Brotherhood was humiliated in the November 2010 elections when none of their representatives gained a seat. A recent poll showed that 60% of Egyptians favoured maintaining the peace treaty with Israel, 38% supported the Muslim Brotherhood and nearly 50% supported the secular Wafd Party.

Syrian President Bashar Assad is open to making a peace deal with Israel whereby the Israelis withdraw to the Sea of Galilee. Other matters to do with the Golan Heights would be discussed afterwards. It is a cause of concern to Israel that Turkey will no longer be an intermediary and Iran now has more influence over Syria. U.S. Senator John Kerry is seeking to further a peace agreement.

The EU has told Israel that it is vital to restart the peace talks with the Palestinians in the light of the instability in the Middle East.

Another effect of the Middle East uprisings and particularly of the Western action over Libya is that it will make it more difficult for Obama to support Israel over against the Palestinians. Now he and others have taken military action to prevent an Arab leader oppressing his people he will be under much greater pressure to prevent Israel oppressing the Palestinians.

The turmoil will also make it more difficult for Mahmoud Abbas to make any compromises with Israel, if the peace talks are resumed. With the Arab peoples rising up against oppression the Palestinians are less likely to tolerate such compromises.

Hamas is concerned about any popular uprising amongst their own people. Abbas made a gesture of political reform by getting the Palestinian cabinet in the West Bank to resign.

## **PRAYER TOPICS**

1. Pray for political stability and justice throughout the Middle East, and for an end to violence.
2. Pray for Israel to be willing to freeze the settlements and for the Palestinians to control extremists.
3. Pray for a resumption of peace talks before any unilateral action complicates the situation.
4. Pray for a real and practical desire for peace on both sides, and a willingness for wise compromise.
5. Pray against extremists on both sides who seek to wreck any peace talks.
6. Pray against racism on both sides including extremist politicians and rabbis in Israel and anti-Semitism amongst Palestinians and in other countries.
7. Pray for an end to rocket attacks from Gaza and for the citizens of Gaza facing serious hardships.
8. Pray for peace between Israel and Syria.
9. Pray that Iran will not be able to develop nuclear weapons and to encourage extremism in other Middle East countries.
10. Above all, pray that more Jewish and Arab people will come to know Jesus Christ crucified and risen this Easter.