

Paradox: A Commentary on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

A personal statement by Tony Higton

Why "Paradox"? Because it will seek to hold together two truths that are apparently contradictory, namely the needs, fears and pain of both sides in the dispute.

Although this is a personal newsletter, and the views expressed are my own, I am the Director of CMJ (*in Israel*: Christ Church Ministries, Jerusalem^{LI}; *in the UK*: Church's Ministry among Jewish People), most of which is located in Israel. I myself live in the Old City of Jerusalem at the interface of the Jewish and Arab communities. It is the calling of my ministry to stand with the Jewish people, after almost two millennia of shameful Christian anti-Semitism, which has created enormous barriers between Jewish people and the church.

However, I cannot do this in a way which ignores the needs, fears and pain of my Palestinian and Israeli Arab neighbours and colleagues. Half of my local staff at Christ Church Jerusalem are Jewish and half are Arab. Living here in the land, amidst the two people groups, has a profound effect. I started from a position which largely ignored the needs of the Palestinians, and focusing only on the terrorists among them. I can no longer do that. I am deeply involved with Jewish Believers in Jesus but many of my immediate Christian neighbours are Arab. Both groups have been badly treated at times, even by neighbours.

More important, I am obliged to aim at a godly approach and God clearly loves each side equally.

Here are some of the main considerations in my approach:

1. My primary aim is to stimulate prayer, which is perhaps the only thing most readers can do to change the Middle East situation for better. However I also aim to remove prejudice (anti-Semitism and anti-Palestinianism) judgementalism and lack of compassion for either side. The church is far too polarised on this issue, hindering rather than helping.
2. I am seeking to convey the truth in a balanced way, which is very difficult, and I shall not do it perfectly. If any reader can send me documented clarification or correction on any matter, I shall be glad to read it. "Paradox" is a search for balanced truth.
3. "Paradox" will take seriously the fact that, underlying the political conflict is a clash of theologies. Many Jewish people believe God has given them the land forever. Many Muslims believe that a land which was once under Muslim rule remains perpetually Islamic. On the one hand, Jewish fundamentalists believe that no land, including the West Bank, should be given away. The most extreme believe that Arabs should be removed from all of the land. On the other hand, Muslim fundamentalists are working, not for peace, but for the destruction of Israel.
4. I hope to encourage prayer for peace with justice and dignity for both sides in the conflict. There are different political opinions, even amongst Palestinians, about what that means for the Palestinian people – a two state solution or a single-state solution. It is clear however that the Jewish people need a safe homeland, especially in the light of resurgent anti-Semitism in many parts of the world. I firmly believe what the Society of which I am Director states: "We see the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel as a sign of God's faithfulness as revealed in Scripture." Many Christians believe this is a fulfilment of predictions by the great biblical prophets. But those same prophets clearly called for justice and compassion to be shown equally to both Jewish and non-Jewish people. I cannot ignore the fact that the return of the Jewish people to the land was accompanied by great suffering on the part of the Arab inhabitants, including some of my colleagues and friends.
5. God is certainly faithful to his promises (although some of them are conditional on obedience). This includes his promises to Israel. As Paul makes clear in Romans 11, he has not given up on the Jewish people, or replaced them with the church. But there are promises of blessing to the Arab world, as well (Isaiah 19).
6. To love someone will, at times, require constructive criticism of that person. To love people groups will require the same. Condemnation of either side by Christians does little, if any, good. If it is biased – as much Christian comment is – it can do harm. It also raises the possibility of hypocrisy. Our own nations are far from perfect. Any criticism can exacerbate historic hurts. The Christian Church has little credibility in criticising because of anti-Semitism. Also Arabs and Palestinians feel misunderstood and let down by the West. So any constructive criticism in "Paradox" is intended to help Christians to pray in an informed way, not to condemn. Those who claim to love Israel must pray about her faults and the same is true for those who claim to support the Palestinians.
7. Both the Holocaust and the Crusades are well-remembered in the Holy Land, but we must resist any pressure, based on those terrible events, to keep silent in our prayers over the ethical issues involved in the present conflict.
8. However it is wrong to be anti-Israel or anti-Palestinian, because God is pro-Jewish, pro-Israeli and pro-Arab, pro-Palestinian. Rather we should be anti-violence, anti-oppression, anti-corruption, anti-prejudice and pro-reconciliation. That does not mean that we should not be discriminating. For example, there is a moral difference between terrorism, the deliberate mass murder of innocent civilians, and "collateral damage" the unintentional killing of innocent people as a result of responsible military action.
9. "Paradox" will, of course, take political issues seriously. Some people think Christians should keep away from politics. But politics is an important part of life and the old saying seems relevant: "If Jesus is not Lord of all, he's not Lord at all."

10. In the end, the only real hope for total peace in the Middle East is the return of The Prince of Peace. But our eschatological hope should not cause us to ignore the prophetic call to promote justice and peace now. It must also be remembered that God's sovereign purposes are worked out in complex ways, through both the good and bad actions of human beings. Therefore some events which seem to contradict God's purposes might, in reality, be serving those purposes. We must not be simplistic in applying eschatological beliefs to the current political situation. It would be arrogant to think our application of biblical eschatology to current events is infallible. Rather we should approach current events in humility and prayer.

Paradox

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Life In Israel

Issue 1 November 2004

This email newsletter seeks to help Christians look at the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict through the eyes of both people groups involved. This may lead to paradox: truth which appears contradictory but is actually two sides of the story. It is written by Rev Tony Higton, Rector of Christ Church, Old City, Jerusalem and is available free on request to those who send their name, email address and country to: thigton@netvision.net.il Please encourage others to join the mailing list.

© Tony Higton

After Arafat

"Everyone here fully supports you," said the American Bishop, standing next to Yasser Arafat in a huge hall at the Muqata (Arafat's compound in Ramallah). He was not speaking for me, or for some others with me towards the back of the room. I was visiting the Muqata with a conference organised by the Sabeel Palestinian Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem in April 2004. I attended to learn more about the Palestinian point of view, as I had already had ample opportunity to learn about the Israeli point of view.

Arafat spoke in a kind and reasonable way, though critical of Israel, stressing his desire for the "peace of the brave." He said: "We are still completely committed to the Peace Treaty post Oslo and continue relationships with all peace groups in Israel." Hanan Ashrawi spoke briefly afterwards, saying that the President had been too kind, so she would speak of the situation more bluntly.

Little did we realise that, eight months later, Arafat would be dead. One thing is certain, his death will make a significant change. But will it be for the better?

To say that Arafat dominated the Palestinian situation is an understatement. His rule was autocratic, and it is generally accepted, including amongst Palestinians, that it was very corrupt. The International Monetary Fund estimates that Arafat is the ninth richest world leader, holding about \$4.2 billion, much of which was intended for the real needs of the Palestinian people. We need to pray that their needs will now be met.

There was growing dissatisfaction and criticism of the PA amongst Palestinians, but one must seek to understand that Arafat was a respected symbol of Palestinian aspirations. He was a father figure. Despite the criticisms, there was strong loyalty to him personally.

This newsletter is not the place to look in detail at his life, but rather at his legacy and the situation now facing the Palestinians, and therefore the Israelis. That is what we must be praying about. Nor is the newsletter a place to express opinions on political issues such as whether there should be a separate Palestinian state or a one-state solution. Rather we need to pray with understanding and sympathy about the people involved, about the problems they are facing and for God to work out his purposes through their efforts and decisions, and even through their mistakes or wrongdoing.

THE ELECTION

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) has, in accordance with the law, announced that a presidential election will take place within 60 days, namely by January 9th 2005. Candidates will campaign for the presidency between December 27 and January 8. Some politicians think the 60-day period does not give enough time though. Apparently, the rules allow a two-month extension, if required.

In the meantime, following the PA's basic law, Rouhi Fattouh, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC or Parliament) Speaker succeeded Arafat as chairman of the PA in lieu of an appointed successor. He will remain in office until the elections. Since Qurei controls the military and intelligence units and Mahmoud Abbas controls the PLO, Fattouh has more of a ceremonial role. On appointment, he said: "I swear by God to protect

the nation, the homeland and its sacred places and respect the law and take care of the interests of the people." Pray that he will.

We really need to pray about this crucial election and the candidates, who, at the time of writing, are as follows:

Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), 69, ex-Prime Minister who was elected to be Head of the PLO soon after Arafat's death, is the favourite candidate amongst Fatah, the main PLO faction. But this is mainly because he seems the only choice, rather than a popular choice, not least because he fell out with Arafat, who never forgave him. Mohammad Dahlan, one-time security minister in the Abbas government and head of the Gaza Preventive Security said that he would not run in the January 9 elections but would back Abbas.

However, it is not yet clear whether current **Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala)**, 67, will run against him.

Farouk Kaddoumi (Abu Lutuf), 73, may also stand to succeed Arafat. He is PLO Foreign Minister, but lives in Tunis and is a political hardliner who supports terrorism and opposes the Oslo Peace Accords. He is popular with the younger PLO members and with Syria and Iran.

Another favourite is **Marwan Barghouti**, the Fatah leader serving five life sentences in Israel for killing Israelis. A former Israeli Foreign Ministry Director reports that Barghouti is passionate about peace, but believes Israel must leave the territories before it can happen. A poll conducted by Bir Zeit University in September discovered that Barghouti was the most popular leader among Palestinians after Yasser Arafat. However, Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, has said Barghouti will not be released even as a goodwill gesture to the new Palestinian leadership.

Other candidates, so far, are:

Abdel Sattar Qassem, 56, a political science professor from Nablus and a long-time critic of Arafat. He said his platform would emphasize two main points: the right of return for all refugees and the need to stamp out rampant corruption in the PA. He has strong Islamic links

Talal Sider al-Ayyoubi, a former Hamas official from Hebron.

Ghassan Barham, 52, a Christian lawyer from Jenin, who wants to exclude the US from the peace process and to reach an agreement with Israel based on the 1947 United Nations partition plan (UN Resolution 181).

Mustafa Barghouti, 50, cousin of Marwan Barghouti, a medical doctor. He is secretary-general of the Palestinian National Initiative (which seeks a just peace) and chairman of the Palestinian Medical Committee.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad officials have announced that they will not participate in the elections. However, surprisingly, Hamas is calling for parliamentary as well as presidential elections.

THREATS TO PEACE

There are numerous threats to the possibility of peace.

Firstly, the Palestinians are very divided politically and experience teaches that this division can easily lead to violence.

The Founding Fathers of the PLO include people like Kaddoumi, who believes Fatah should wage guerrilla warfare against the Israel Defense Forces. Somewhat marginalized, they can nevertheless be a hindrance to the leadership.

The Old Guard includes Mahmoud Abbas and Ahmed Qureia. They hold all the key PA posts but have little support among ordinary Palestinians. They are seen as corrupt and weak, especially concerning armed attacks on Israel.

The Younger Leadership is very divided and loyal to many commanders from the first Intifada, such as Mohammed Dahlan, 43, and Moussa Arafat in Gaza, Jibril Rajoub, 51 in the West Bank and Marwan

Barghouti. Many of them have been in Israeli prisons. They are expecting good jobs within the new government.

Secondly, chaos and lawlessness has been growing in the Palestinian areas. There are armed gangs, unruly security forces and rogue militias, some of them directed by Hezbollah and Iran. Arafat refused to deal with all this. Disruption at his funeral caused PA leaders to have to leave the coffin and flee.

Later there was the incident when Fatah gunmen stormed the mourning tent for Arafat in Gaza City and opened fire to protest against the presence of Abbas and Dahlan, killing two policemen. The gunmen shouted "Abbas, Dahlan, go away, you American agents." Abbas played down the incident, claiming it was not an assassination attempt. The fact that he reacted like that, rather than taking firm action against the culprits, was seen as evidence of his weakness.

Fatah's armed wing, the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades, which last week changed its name to the Brigades of Martyr Yasser Arafat, called for an investigation into the involvement of senior officials in financial corruption. They threatened to take the law into their own hands if these people were not brought to trial. Abbas is trying to combine the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigade with the security forces.

Thirdly, the threat of terrorism against Israel is still clear. Iran, Syria and Hezbollah are vehemently opposed to any Palestinian reconciliation with Israel, and are encouraging an increase of terrorism against her. There could also be attacks on Abbas and Dahlan because of their efforts to arrange a ceasefire. However Abbas is due to visit Damascus in order to gain legitimacy and to dialogue with Syrian based groups like Hamas. The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades receive most of their money and orders from the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. They could attack Abbas if he doesn't take a tough line with Israel. They also announced they have developed a new rocket called "Yasser 1" which is capable of reaching the Israeli city of Ashkelon

Fourthly, there is continuing inflammatory anti-Israel propaganda. One is the story that Israel had Yassir Arafat poisoned. The Palestinian leadership are investigating this, but it seems highly unlikely that Israel would have felt it would gain from doing such a thing. Nor is there any evidence. It is deeply distressing therefore that a Jerusalem Bishop is circulating this inflammatory story, which could so easily lead to violence.

The credence given to such stories within the Palestinian community is evidence of their fear that Israel intends to continue to expand at the expense of the Arabs.

TRENDS TOWARDS PEACE

There have been examples in the Middle East of peaceful transitions made by countries which lost very dominant leaders. Egypt did so over Nasser, Syria over Assad and Jordan over Hussein. Hopefully the Palestinians can do so too, but they are facing serious difficulties and challenges. There are trends towards peace, though.

Firstly, Polls of the Palestinians show that the majority want live in peace with Israel.

Secondly, there are moves towards reconciliation within the Palestinian community. Moussa Arafat met with Gaza Preventive Security chief Rashid Abu Shunak to solve their differences. Also Muhammad Dahlan met with Moussa Arafat for a reconciliation meeting facilitated by Abbas.

Thirdly, there are moves towards a ceasefire. Islamic Jihad and Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades leaders in the West Bank have decided they will unilaterally cease all attacks in Israel until the elections on January 9th. Hamas is being pressured by Egypt to accept a truce and it seems that they want to join the PLO and participate politically. Negotiations between Abbas, Qurei and Hamas continue.

Abbas and Qureia are seeking a long-term cease-fire under Egyptian and international auspices. This would also severely restrict Israeli military activity. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is keen to achieve this.

Fourthly, Israel is seeking to make careful concessions to the new Palestinian leadership. An Israeli Foreign Ministry document recommends other potential gestures such as prisoner release, limits on military action, co-operation with the Palestinians over the Gaza withdrawal, easing restrictions on movement by Palestinians in the territories and increasing the number of Palestinians permitted to work inside Israel.

Already concessions have been made. The IDF has begun decreasing its presence in Palestinian towns and cities. Israel allowed Palestinian security officers in Ramallah to carry arms during the period around Arafat's funeral. Israel also released Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a veteran Hamas activist, from prison. Ariel Sharon is also in favour of East Jerusalem Arabs being allowed to vote in the Palestinian elections, as they were in 1996. This is a controversial matter in Israel, because it could be taken to indicate that East Jerusalem is not part of Israel.

Fifthly, the United States has a second-term President who wants to help bring a solution to the conflict. He is no longer facing an election in a few years time so he can afford to take risks and to press Israel to make concessions. Also he naturally wishes to go down in history as the one who facilitated peace in the Middle East. He will be assisted by European leaders who are already calling on Israel to help the new Palestinian leadership. The EU will send a mission to observe the elections so they are deemed reliable.

However, the Palestinian leadership must deal effectively with terrorism if these trends towards peace are to succeed.

By the same token, Israel must seek to be reasonably restrained. Yitzak Rabin, former Israel Prime Minister, once stated: "We will negotiate for peace as if there is no terror, and we will fight terror as if there are no negotiations." Some senior IDF people feel this unique opportunity makes it worth Israel showing restraint even in the face of some serious terrorist attack by people who wish to wreck any moves towards peace.

Many Christians feel that peace will only really come to the Middle East when the Prince of Peace returns. However, as I outline in the attached General Page, we are obliged by scripture to seek for peace, justice, dignity and well-being for all people groups. The process won't be perfect. The results may be limited. But our solemn responsibility is to pray about the needs, fears, pain - and faults of both sides.

PRAYER

I suggest that you:

Give thanks:

- For this window of opportunity for moves towards peace.
- That most Israelis and Palestinians want peace.
- For the leaders on both sides who are committed to peace.

Pray:

- For those standing for election as PA President and for God's choice to be appointed.
- For a release of finances intended for the social welfare of the Palestinian people.
- For the present leadership on both sides to act with wisdom and, where necessary, restraint.
- For God to protect innocent people from harm and death.
- For God to curb extremists on both sides and to show ordinary Palestinians there is an alternative to terror.
- For God to bring unity between people of good will on both sides.
- For other countries to help, not hinder moves toward peace and justice.

Tony Higton

[In addition to being Rector of Christ Church, Jerusalem, Tony is Director of CMJ (in Israel: Christ Church Ministries, Jerusalem²); in the UK: Church's Ministry among Jewish People]

Abbreviations & Glossary

Fatah: main PLO faction

Hamas: Islamic Resistance Movement

Hezbollah: Islamic Resistance Movement based in Lebanon,⁵ backed by Syria.

IDF: Israel Defence Force (Army)

Intifada: Uprising of the Palestinians

Islamic Jihad: Radical Islamic Resistance Movement
PA: Palestinian Authority
PLC: Palestinian Legislative Council/Parliament
PLO: Palestinian Liberation Organisation

¹³¹ Formerly, the Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (ITAC)

¹³² Formerly, the Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (ITAC)