

The Paradox Newsletter

by The Rev. Tony Higton

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories

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Paradox Ministries encourages Christians to understand and pray about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, seeing it through the eyes of both people groups involved, and taking the needs, fear and pain of both sides seriously. Its director, the Rev Tony Higton, who was Rector of a church in the Old City of Jerusalem for a number of years, circulates this email newsletter, speaks at seminars and encourages support of indigenous reconciliation ministry in Jerusalem. The newsletter is available free on request to those who add their email address to our Newsletter update list, available on the top of the ['Newsletter' page](#). Alternatively, send your email address and name to us via our online [Contact Form](#). Please encourage others to join the mailing list.
Tony Higton

This year has been a very traumatic time for the Palestinian people.

Palestinian infighting

The days immediately after our December Paradox was circulated were dominated by thousands of Fatah activists and PA security officers taking to the streets, protesting at the murder of the three children of a leading PA Intelligence officer in Gaza City. They blocked roads and shot at Hamas institutions and buildings. Over 30 Hamas supporters were wounded by Fatah gunmen in Ramallah. There was an assassination attempt on Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Hanieyeh. His bodyguard was killed and various people wounded. In one four-day period in late January 21 Palestinians were killed, dozens injured and over 50 abducted. The violence spread from Gaza to the West Bank when Fatah forces kidnapped the mayor of Nablus and firebombed the shops of Hamas supporters there. Almost 100 Palestinians have been killed in the violence which has concentrated the minds of the rival Palestinian leadership on the need for compromise.

The suffering and frustration of the Palestinian people increased. One young mother working for the PA said: "Everyone here is disgusted by what's happening in the Gaza Strip. We are telling the world that we don't deserve a

state because we are murdering each other and destroying our universities, colleges, mosques and hospitals. Today I'm ashamed to say that I'm a Palestinian."

Hafez Barghouti, editor of a PA daily newspaper, said that Palestinian democracy has become a democracy of blood, in which "the rule of blood" has replaced the "rule of the people." He wrote: "Tens of millions of people now look at us as worthless gangsters with no values." Addressing both Hamas and Fatah, he added: "Your people no longer want a state. We no longer like our killers and executioners." Columnist Mahmoud Habbash said "The world is watching how the Palestinians are destroying their institutions and achievements with their own hands. They see how we are mercilessly slaughtering innocent people. We are losing the sympathy of the world. I'm afraid the world will now view us differently."

All this is against the background of the continuing poverty and deprivation of the Palestinians. They receive more aid per capita than any other people but 79% of the residents of the Gaza Strip live below the poverty line. Annual income in the Strip is less than \$800 a person, as opposed to nearly \$20,000 in Israel. They lack proper social infrastructure. Their economic and political outlook is bleak. In Gaza the streets have been half-deserted as militants fire at each other from behind barricades. Bleeding children are carried to hospitals that are swamped with needy patients.

Palestinian agreement

Various ceasefires, some brokered by Egypt, were agreed but soon broken. Then King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia invited Abbas and Khaled Meshal, (head of the Hamas political bureau, in Damascus) to Mecca to seek to reach agreement on a unity government and end the infighting. It was there that Fatah and Hamas reached an agreement on forming a new coalition government within five weeks that will respect previous peace deals signed by the PLO with Israel. In the new government Hamas will hold nine ministries in the cabinet (including prime minister), Fatah six (including foreign minister) and other factions four. Hamas will not have a majority in the cabinet and two ministers are quite acceptable to the US with a third being independent (though recommended by Hamas).

Under the agreement Hamas is not committed actually to keep the past agreements with Israel (which Abbas wanted) and it does not directly recognise Israel. But it does accept in theory those agreements dealing with the terms of achieving normal relations with Israel. The wording is sufficient for Saudi King Abdullah to discontinue his boycott of the Hamas Government and he promised them a billion dollars for routine maintenance with more to come. Russia also believes the boycott should be lifted.

The agreement will have the effect of keeping Iran out of the picture, which is a main concern for Saudi Arabia. Iran has been making overtures to Hamas and committed \$250 million to the Palestinian government. It seems that Iran wants the same sort of relationship with it as it has with Hezbollah, despite the fact that Hamas is a radical Sunni Muslim organisation and Iran is Shia. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh recently visited Tehran and stated: The Palestinian government will never recognize the Zionist entity, and its support for jihad and resistance will continue.

It is not clear whether the coalition government will work and whether it will be possible to merge the armed forces of Hamas and Fatah. Meshal promised that Hamas would keep the agreement and he urged all the armed groups to ceasefire. It remains to be seen if they do so. He had already said that Israel is a reality and that there will remain a state called Israel, this is a matter of fact. But he added that formal recognition of Israel could only be considered by Hamas after the establishment of a Palestinian state within the June 4th 1967 borders. This is a significant move on the part of Hamas, although it must be remembered that its primary purpose was to facilitate the agreement between Hamas and Fatah. In December Meshal had offered Israel a 10-year ceasefire.

The agreement, if it works, will not immediately turn Palestinian society into a Western democracy overnight. Without a very strong leader Palestinian society would tend to collapse because of tensions between clan loyalties and political factions. Very strong emotions have been raised by the recent violence.

After initially rejecting the Mecca agreement, Olmert said Israel neither accepted nor rejected it, but was studying it. He said this against the background of the Quartet (US, Europe, Russia and UN) foreign ministers reacting by withholding judgment as to whether the agreement fulfils their demands to recognise Israel, renounce violence, and ratify past agreements (however Russia, France and others welcomed the agreement and called for the boycott to be lifted. Hamas has certainly moved forward in agreeing to honour (though not implement) previous Palestinian-Israeli agreements and to accept in principle the Arab countries 2002 Beirut Agreement which agrees to live in peace with Israel if she withdraws to the 1967 borders and acts justly over Palestinian refugees.

Israeli failings

The Israeli Ministry of Justice has begun a criminal investigation against Ehud Olmert, the prime minister, for alleged financial impropriety when he was Minister of Finance. Olmert was already very unpopular in Israel (with a

recent approval rating of 14%) because of his handling of the Lebanon War. This follows the President being indicted on charges of sexual harassment or rape and the resignation of Chief of Staff Dan Halutz because of failures in the Lebanon War. Some question whether Olmert can really do his job when surrounded by all these pressures.

BTselem, an Israeli human rights group, says that the IDF killed 660 Palestinians in 2006 - three times more than in 2005 and that this included 141 children and 322 who had taken no part in hostilities. In the same period Palestinian fighters had killed 23 Israelis, compared with 50 in 2005.

Tragically an IDF soldier fatally shot a 14-year old Palestinian girl whilst she and others were trying to cross the security fence. Both the soldier and his commanding officer were suspended pending an investigation. To make matters worse, the girl's father, who is being held in Israel for illegally entering the country, was not allowed to attend her funeral.

Israel TV created a stir when it showed an Israeli settler roughly pushing and cursing her Palestinian neighbour whilst IDF soldiers stood nearby. The prime minister expressed his shame at this incident but when the settler was called in for an interrogation she did not even show up. Sadly, such behaviour is not isolated.

The Israeli press also reported disturbing scenes it had witnessed at what it called a fairly typical checkpoint. It accused soldiers of humiliating Palestinians in various ways. One soldier gave a number of people traffic violation tickets for not wearing seat belts, yet they had been wearing belts when they arrived half an hour earlier.

Earlier farmers had been forbidden to bring produce through this checkpoint, necessitating a 30 kilometer detour. When it was made clear to the soldiers that this was unauthorised, they required those transporting vegetables to unload all crates, for inspection, and then to reload them.

The report claimed that soldiers invent harassments and cause waiting times way beyond what is justified. Palestinians are expected to wait silently in line or else be "punished." At their meeting Olmert promised Abbas he would re-examine security at the Gaza crossing to facilitate the passage of up to 400 trucks a day. But apparently nothing was said about West Bank crossing points.

Israel has also been criticised for making promises it has not kept. Abbas and Olmert met in Jerusalem on December 24th and Olmert surprised everyone by kissing Abbas. Olmert promised to dismantle 27 out of 400 internal West Bank roadblocks so removing some disruptions to normal life for the Palestinians. However the IDF and Defence Minister expressed opposition to

this so no action was taken in the following weeks. In fact, Israeli peace group Peace Now reported that settlers have recently begun additional construction at four outposts scheduled for evacuation. Later it was claimed that the IDF was removing some barriers and easing security checks, but an Israeli press investigation found that they had made it only marginally easier for Palestinians to get through roadblocks in the West Bank, and in many cases, no changes had been made.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry also sought to toughen regulations against illegal Israeli developments on the West Bank but the Prime Minister responded that now is not the right time to act. Olmert also went back on an undertaking to Abbas to follow custom and release up to 30 Palestinian prisoners for the Muslim holiday of Id al-Adha. In so far as Israel does not act on its promises it undermines its credibility and weakens Abbas, the very person Israel was seeking to support against Hamas.

Israeli successes

On the other hand, as promised by Olmert, Israel transferred \$100 million directly to the Palestinian Authority, bypassing Hamas. This is part of the Palestinian tax revenues frozen by Israel since Hamas came to power.

More significant, Israel has been exemplary in maintaining the ceasefire with Gaza despite rockets being fired into Israel, usually by Islamic Jihad who reject the ceasefire. Even when a suicide bomber killed three Israelis in Eilat, Olmert still maintained the restraint. However, after two teenagers were wounded by a rocket in Sderot, he gave the IDF permission to attack rocket-launching cells in the Gaza Strip as long as they are identified shortly before the launching. The IDF was banned from operating near Palestinian population centers.

Another very positive development is the appointment of Raleb Majadele as science and technology minister Israels first Arab Minister. Majadele has been very critical of the Olmert government and particularly of the discrimination which Israeli Arabs face in every day life.

Syrian overtures & the Iranian threat

Syria has recently been inviting Israel to peace talks. Syrian President Assad challenged Olmert: Take a chance. Discover if we are bluffing or not. Israeli Military Intelligence thinks Assad is serious but Mossad (the secret service) disagrees. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said Israel should consider Assads approaches. But Olmert is against such a move, as is the US, unless Syria cuts its links with Hamas and Hezbollah. He also realises that Syria wants the Golan Heights (captured by Israel in 1967) back, which is a very

controversial matter for Israel. In a statement containing interesting logic, Olmert said: As long as I'm prime minister, the Golan Heights will remain in our hands for eternity. He also said peace with Syria would involve giving up the Golan Heights. The IDF believes there is a real danger of war on the Lebanon/Syria front during 2007. Many would argue that it is advisable for Israel to hold talks with Syria and to find out if Assad is sincere.

It has been revealed that a series of unofficial secret meetings between Syrians and Israelis have been held in Europe between September 2004 and July 2006 in order to draft a peace treaty. Olmert denied any government connection with the talks but those involved say that the prime ministers office was kept informed.

Assad, who is clearly seeking a regional role, has stated that if the US and EU want a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (and the Iraq conflict) they must talk to Syria and Iran. The US Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group recommended talks with Syria. The conditions are that Damascus must obey United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 and stop arming Hezbollah (including with Iranian weapons). It must encourage Hezbollah and Hamas to release kidnapped Israeli soldiers, stop supplying arms to Hamas and try to convince the organization to recognize Israel's right to exist.

Israel, understandably, feels very threatened by the prospect of a nuclear Iran. So do moderate Arab governments in the Middle East. Some Israelis hope for an American military attack on Iran. 2008 is seen as the deadline for such action and it has been pointed out that US presidents have a tendency to make dramatic moves vis a vis Israel in election years. However, an agreement with Syria would create a buffer between Israel and a nuclear Iran.

The US-inspired isolation of Hamas has had the unfortunate effect of strengthening the influence of Syria and Iran, as has the humiliation of Israel by Hezbollah in the Lebanon war. There has been a corresponding weakening of US credibility and influence and of Israel's deterrent power.

Peace prospects

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana believes now is the time for re-launching peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. He thinks there is enough "political will" on all sides. The Arab governments want an Israeli-Arab agreement in order to curb radical Islamism and to combat Iran's power.

There is however real doubt about the commitment of the US and Israeli governments to such a peace process. We do not yet know their reaction to

the new Fatah-Hamas Accord. Israeli Foreign Minister Livni has pointed out that the agreement falls short of recognising Israel and renouncing violence, but she added that peace with the Palestinians is possible. The meeting between Abbas, Olmert and Condoleezza Rice on February 19 will be important.

How do we pray?

1. For an end to Palestinian infighting and extremist attacks on Israel.
2. For a continuation of Israeli restraint and support of the ceasefire.
3. For the welfare of the Palestinian people not least through wise economic policies in using new government income which will alleviate poverty and build up infrastructure.
4. For the welfare of the Israeli people in all the problems and threats they are facing currently.
5. For the IDF to treat Palestinians with respect at checkpoints and for the removal of unnecessary checkpoints.
6. For effective peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, and, if Syrias approaches are sincere, between Israel and Syria, plus Lebanon.
7. For curbing of Irans power and prevention of its nuclear intentions.
8. For wise policies on the part of the US and EU towards the Middle East.
9. For peace and security with justice throughout Israel and the Palestinian areas.