

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

Are there signs of hope in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Apparently so, but we do, of course, need to examine them critically. One of the hopeful signs is:

The Arab Peace Initiative

On the initiative of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the Arab-Israeli Peace Initiative agreed by Arab leaders in 2002 was reaffirmed at the Arab League summit March 28-29 this year. It calls for Israel to withdraw from all land gained in 1967, including the Golan Heights, and for the setting up of an independent Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital (So Arab Al Quds would stand side by side with Jewish Jerusalem). In exchange, the Arab states agree to regard the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as over and to establish natural relations with Israel as part of an overall peace.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert responded fairly positively to the Initiative and said it is a subject we would be willing to treat seriously. He said later: If the Saudi king initiates a meeting of heads of moderate [Arab] states and invites me and the head of the Palestinian Authority, I will be glad to attend and express our opinion. Vice Premier Shimon Peres called the Saudi peace

plan a "historic declaration the first time a large Arab state has decided to move from a strategy of war to a strategy of peace." *In a remarkable new development, an Arab League delegation (comprising the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan) is about to visit Israel to discuss the Arab peace initiative.*

Nevertheless there are important sticking points for Israel in the Arab Initiative. One is the right of return to what is now Israel of some 4 million Palestinian refugees, in accordance with Resolution 194 of the UN General Assembly of December 1948 which states that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date. Most of them live in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf states. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recently reaffirmed this Resolution. For Israel to allow this would hasten the day when the country would have a majority of Arab citizens which would mean that, as a democracy, it would cease to be a Jewish state something the Israelis would never allow to happen.

In March Olmert stated: Israel will never accept Resolution 194, and this constitutes a red line for us. But anything over this red line, including creative solutions to the refugees [problem], which does not include their settlement in Israel, is open for discussion.

However, various Israeli commentators point out that agreeing to this point in the Arab Initiative is not as serious as it may appear. The word permitted in Resolution 194 indicates that return of refugees can only be granted by the Israeli government. Israel would have the power of veto and not be open to legal challenge.

On the other hand, had the Arab leaders sought to exclude this requirement, which was not in the original Saudi draft, they would have alienated hardliners such as Syria, which would have used its veto.

Another sticking point is the requirement of handing over East Jerusalem to the Palestinians which would mean moving half a million Jewish Israelis. The withdrawal from Gaza suggests this might be acceptable, but, unlike Gaza, Jerusalem has very deep religious significance. In fact Israel plans to build a new Jewish neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. But according to recent statistics, Jerusalem will lose its Jewish majority in 2035, in any case. The Mayor of Jerusalem says it will happen in less than a decade.

Does this peace initiative have any greater chance of success than previous attempts? Many people feel it has for a number of reasons. It was initiated by King Abdullah who, as guardian of Islam's holiest sites, has great influence. It is backed by the 22 countries of the Arab League. Such an

international Muslim backing would probably be able to curb Palestinian extremism.

There is another important factor which can encourage a successful peace agreement:

The Iran Factor

The driving force behind the Saudi Peace Initiative is the fear which moderate Arab regimes have of the spread of radical Islamism by Iran. They fear that radical Islam will, in the end, triumph over the present moderate and secular Arab rulers, whether by democratic or revolutionary means. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is stirring up discontent among the Arab populations and this is playing into the hands of Iran. Attacks by the IDF on Palestinians are beamed into many homes by Arab satellite TV and Iran is exploiting this discontent. So the threatened Arab leaders are seeking to bring Hamas, a Sunni organisation, under their control and to establish peace in the Holy Land. Attempts are also being made to bring Syria back into the fold.

The moderate Arab regimes hope to encourage Hamas to continue to distance itself from the global jihad of Al-Qaida, as it integrates into Palestinian politics. Similar integration is happening to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, the Renaissance Party in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco.

Another aspect is their fear of Iran's nuclear ambitions as well as the build up of arms by Syria. The main worry is that Iran could become a regional superpower. It is in this context that President Ahmadinejad of Iran visited Saudi Arabia recently for crucial talks

Then there are the various conflicts in the Arab world: Syria and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Fatah and Hamas, the Arab states and Iran, and, of course, Iraq itself. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has publicly admitted that his organization is secretly smuggling arms and ammunition to south Lebanon, in blatant violation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (which ended the second Lebanon war). All of these conflicts weaken the effectiveness of the Arab League.

In April a delegation of Knesset (Israeli Parliament) members visited King Abdullah II of Jordan. He urged them to accept the Arab Peace Initiative, saying repeatedly: We are in the same boat, we have the same problem. We have the same enemies. He was clearly referring to Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas and added Do you want Iran on the banks of the Jordan?

Some Israeli commentators believe that Israel needs to have internationally-

recognised borders, not only as essential to creating a Palestinian homeland, but as part of its defence against the growing influence of radical Islam, and that the Arab Peace Initiative affords the best opportunity of achieving this. It commits the Arab world to recognising the legitimate existence of Israel. Obviously it also achieves statehood for the Palestinians too. These commentators argue that Israel must achieve peace with the Arab peoples, not just with their pro-Western leaders.

Rabbi Melchior, chairman of the Knessets Education and Culture Committee, commented: Together with Israels uncompromising demand for the eradication of terror and for maintaining security, we must also broaden the existing channels of dialogue. Those who do not want the current leadership will tomorrow get Islamic Jihad and al-Qaida instead. If we bury all hope about the current alternative, we will find ourselves facing an Arab world united behind the Iranian intentions to annihilate Israel.

A recent survey (The Peace Index, conducted by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research and the Evens Program in Mediation and Conflict Resolution at Tel Aviv University) found that of the 62% of Israelis who had heard about the Saudi proposal, 56% support responding to the initiative, while 38% are opposed.

Other factors also encourage a constructive Israeli response to the Arab Initiative. The continuing failure of the United States to achieve peace in Iraq is undermining the credibility of the use of force to deal with radical states like Iran. The effectiveness of US mediation (e.g. linked with the Egyptians) is diminishing whilst that of Saudi Arabia is growing. Then there is the continuing strife in Palestinian areas.

The Syrian Factor

Syria has been making overtures about peace which have been rejected by Israel. However, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni is preparing for the possibility of a renewed peace process with Syria, and National Security Council (NSC) Chairman Ilan Mizrahi told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Syrias call for dialogue with Israel is authentic.

Nevertheless, Israeli Intelligence is concerned about the possibility of war with Syria. Recently the Syrian President was asked if Syria would be obliged to take military action to regain the Golan Heights. He replied: That claim is true and that is what I told senior, foreign officials. Timing is a critical element in the peace process. Delays heighten tension, and tension heightens extremism, and extremism forces quick solutions with high prices. We in Syria believe that peace is the easiest and fastest solution, the least costly and best way to ensure the future and stability of the region. Circumstances,

during the last two years, were not rosy, but we must prepare ourselves. It is possible that the next phase is one of peace. If there is a turn to war, that will be the general choice in the region.

Apparently the Syrians are concerned that the United States will carry out an attack against Iran's nuclear installations in the summer, and in parallel Israel would strike Syria and Lebanon. Ehud Olmert denied this.

The Mecca Agreement

As reported in the last edition of Paradox, on February 8th King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Khaled Meshal, (head of the Hamas political bureau in Damascus) to bring an end to Palestinian in-fighting. They agreed to form a new unity government that will respect previous peace deals signed by the PLO with Israel and authorised the PLO to negotiate with Israel over the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. 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 Mecca Agreement does press for a change in the position of Hamas. It has to drop its previous limited acceptance of prior agreements signed by the PLO and agree to honour them all. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas abstained in the vote because Hamas will not recognise the legitimacy of Israel.

On March 16th the unity government was set up. The agreement between Fatah and Hamas on which it is based accepts violent resistance as the Palestinians legitimate right, which will only be abandoned when all of the Palestinians demands have been met, including the right to return. No mention is made of the right of Israel to exist (not even within the 1967 borders) nor of the two-state solution. However the government undertakes to extend a ceasefire if Israel stops its acts of occupation. This includes not only the IDF no longer entering Palestinian cities, detaining Palestinians or carrying out targeted killings, but also removal of the Fence, of restrictions on Palestinian movement and release of Palestinian prisoners. The unity government would support a prisoner exchange.

Iran has welcomed the Mecca agreement, and has pledged \$240 million to the unity government. It is also providing military technology and training to Hamas militants.

Israel has expressed its opposition to the unity government until it fulfilled all the requirements of the international Quartet, including recognition of Israel,

and relinquishing violence. Olmert is now meeting with Abbas every two weeks to discuss matters such as prisoner release, terrorism, improving conditions for Palestinians, but not about Jerusalem, refugees and borders. But he accused Abbas of breaking agreements between the two of them that the unity government would be delayed until the release of kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and an agreed end to violence.

Hamas

Hamas has offered a complete ceasefire if the Israelis persuade the international community not to boycott the new Palestinian unity government.

However, Bin Ladens deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, strongly criticised Hamas for joining the unity government, accusing it of selling Palestine to the Jews in order to gain a place in the government. Perhaps in response to this, Hamas gave a TV interview stating: The government platform is not the platform of Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement. The fundamental principles of the unity government are the lowest common denominator agreed upon by the Palestinian factions. We are saying loud and clear that the Hamas movement still considers itself the spearhead in the conflict with the oppressive enemy. It will not relinquish its platform of resistance In the strongest of terms, we oppose such negotiations and everything that will come out of it. We, the Hamas movement, will not agree to it

Even after Hamas and Fatah agreed to the establishment of the unity government there have still been clashes between the Palestinian factions. At the end of February five Palestinians were killed and approximately 40 wounded in Khan Yunis by Hamas-Fatah violence. Also BBC Correspondent Alan Johnston has been kidnapped, though not by Hamas.

In addition, despite agreement between Fatah and Hamas to encourage the spread of a ceasefire from Gaza to the West Bank, there have been attacks on Israel. The Israelis uncovered a suicide bomb plot planned for Passover, which for some reason was aborted by the terrorists (the van concerned blowing up back in Qalqilya). Rocket attacks on Israel continued. Hamas admitted making a rocket attack on Southern Israel at the end of April and this raises the spectre of a major confrontation in Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority has agreed to an American plan giving benchmarks for an 8-month timetable to facilitate peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians but Hamas has rejected it Olmert also has said he cannot accept some of its demands or security reasons. Khaled Meshal, anticipating an attack by Israel, said: We in Hamas are also preparing ourselves for battle, and we expect hot months. Abbas threatened to resign in the near

future if the international community did not accept the unity government and call off the economic boycott.

Israeli attitudes

On the one hand, the economy is booming and there is action against corruption. The countrys military might is greater than ever before and, with the Arab Peace Initiative, Israel is not as isolated as it used to be.

However there are continuing threats against Israels legitimacy and existence, and a battle to keep Jerusalem has begun. More significant, the Olmert Government is very unpopular and 70% of Israelis believe it does not have the public support to negotiate over a final status agreement. The government-appointed Winograd Commission concluded that Ehud Olmerts conduct during the Lebanon War as a serious failure. He made rash decisions to go to war without proper consultation and process or in-depth analysis of the necessity for a military move, its timing and nature. The declared goals of the war were over-ambitious and not feasible. Over 120,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv, calling on Olmert and Defence Minister Peretz to resign.

How do we pray?

1. For Israel at this time of political turmoil and weakness.
2. 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.
3. For effective peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, and, if Syrias approaches are sincere, between Israel and Syria, plus Lebanon.
4. For curbing of Irans power and prevention of its nuclear intentions.

For peace and security with justice throughout Israel and the Palestinian areas.