

# 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

The hopeful signs of the Arab Peace Initiative and the Mecca Agreement on a unity government shared by Fatah and Gaza, now seem shattered by the very violent, meticulously-planned, lightning takeover of Gaza by Hamas. But, as always in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, it is unwise to jump to conclusions, whether negative or positive. Is the situation hopeless? I do not think so. But, either way, we need to pray earnestly for the 1.4 million people of Gaza.

## The Gaza Takeover

The alliance between Hamas and Fatah was, to say the least, always an uneasy affair. Unrest grew after the Mecca Agreement and one bad sign was the resulting mid-May resignation of Hani al-Kawasmeh, the Palestinian Authority's Interior Minister, an independent appointed after extensive negotiations between Fatah and Hamas.

The chaos was partly caused by the existence of rival armed militia: the official PA security forces, the militia of various political factions and the family or clan private armies. One new group is the well-funded, highly-armed Army of Islam. With high unemployment, young men readily join these militia to find a purpose in life.

The situation worsened. In mid-May, a columnist in Al-Ayyam, the PA daily paper, commented: "The situation in the Gaza Strip, and especially in the city of Gaza, is scary. Murders are committed by the dozen, using every [conceivable] weapon... The murder machine, fuelled by every conceivable type of hatred, is hurtling in every direction, all the time, everywhere... in the mosques... in the schools... [There are] executions... Leaders are attacked, and their families humiliated... Children and innocent civilians are being murdered... The influence of Al-Qaeda was recognised.

Another journalist commented: Palestinian society is eroding, and the values of national affiliation are disappearing, to be replaced by factional and tribal affiliation and by personal interests.

We need to hear, and respond to, the comments from various Palestinian journalists which became more despairing and heart-rending: You are murdering the [Palestinian] cause, [our] people and [our] future... Oh murderers, you have ruined our world, castrated our nationalism, prostituted our resistance... You have turned our lives into hell. [In fact,] hell is preferable... Take your government, your militias, and your gangs and go to hell.

Oh murderers in the streets of Gaza, we renounce you. You cannot have emerged from the womb of the Holy Land. You are despicable. You are chasing after [what is left] of our shattered government, [pursuing your own] interests... You are neither Muslims nor believers... Today, we are ashamed to speak out loud of our Palestinian [identity], when in the past we took pride in our Palestinian self-sacrifice, revolution and martyrdom. Oh you mercenaries, you have betrayed our dreams and murdered our promised state. [Our] enemies have used you as a Trojan horse. Oh murderers, you are the Satan of Palestine... Know that a bullet you fire in the Gaza street, no matter what your affiliation, will turn into a curse that will pursue you to your own graves. Oh murderers of Gaza... you have no place [among us] now that you have killed everything that is beautiful within us.

We are immersed in the worship of chaos, in the destruction of our national institutions and our home. Why are we angry with those who say that the Palestinians are incapable of managing their country's affairs?

Our only option is to [go out] on the streets and announce that we refuse to take leave of our senses, of our reason and of our determination to deal with the mother of all nakbas [catastrophes] before it is too late, and before history sweeps us all into the void of oblivion and death.

However, when 1000 Palestinians mounted a peace march in Gaza in mid-June under the banner "Stop the Killing" Hamas militants shot at them killing

two people. The next day they killed three women and a child. They also threw a Fatah activist from the 18th floor of a high-rise building. Some 80 people were killed in the takeover of Gaza by Hamas and over 170 in the whole internal conflict this year. The situation became so desperate that people in Gaza expressed a desire for Israel to take over the Strip once more, as the lesser of two evils.

## The Causes of the Takeover

The causes of the Hamas Gaza takeover are complex. They include:

1. Hamas wants an Islamic state probably with Sharia Law and linked with Iran.
2. The weakness of the PA (Fatah) leadership, particularly President Mahmoud Abbas, who refused to take definite action against Hamas.
3. The corruption in the PA.
4. The absence of Mohammad Dahlan, the PA head of security in Gaza. Khaled Meshal, Hamas head in Damascus said the people of Gaza were suffering from chaos and lack of security.
5. The unwillingness, partly through international pressure and partly through self-interest, of the elderly leadership of Fatah to transfer power to Hamas after Hamas won the 2006 election, Hence Hamas has now taken by force what it believed, as a democratically-elected party, was its right.
6. The attempt to combine secular PA with Islamic Hamas.
7. Lust for Power.
8. Tribalism and Factionalism, including divisions within Fatah itself.
9. The failure of Israel to achieve more in its relationship with Mahmoud Abbas, by way of
  - Benefits to the Palestinians and improving their difficult conditions. Growth in the Palestinian economy is way behind that of Israel and Jordan. Israel prevented the Palestinians from developing their own factories and port and humiliated them as cheap labour. For 40 years Gaza has been a poverty-stricken refugee camp with 60% unemployment, poor housing and overcrowding.
  - Meaningful moves towards peace, despite the Arab Peace Initiative. Israel is afraid that this initiative is to facilitate Israel, as a democracy, being destroyed by the inevitable growth towards a majority Arab population in the land, especially if it had to accept Palestinian refugees back. However Olmert invited 22 leaders of Arab countries to discuss peace with no preconditions.
  - Allowing sufficient arms to reach the PA to combat Hamas (Israel is afraid that such arms could be misused - against it).
  - Allowing sufficient funds, including frozen Palestinian taxes, to reach the PA to improve the lot of the Palestinians (despite being urged to do so by the US).

This has undermined Abbas. However, it should be pointed out that Israel has shown restraint in responding to the hundreds of Qassam rocket attacks issuing from Gaza, (140 in one week) many launched by Hamas.

## The Aftermath of the Takeover

Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the Fatah-Hamas Unity Government and declared a state of emergency. He replaced Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh by Finance Minister Salam Fayyad, an independent. Haniyeh refused to accept this. Fatah is refusing even to speak with Hamas. Mohammad Dahlan referred to Hamas as an occupation force, a term normally reserved for Israel.

Fatah is afraid, not least because of a warning by Mohammad Dahlan, that Hamas would take over the West Bank as well. The US has committed itself to work against this, by encouraging Israel to unfreeze some \$3-400 million worth of PA taxes (out of \$700 million) and transfer them to Abbas. It has also urged Israel to loosen its restrictions on the West Bank. If living conditions in the West Bank are clearly seen to be better than Hamas-dominated Gaza, this will weaken Hamas.

It is reported that Israel and the US favour deploying an international force in Gaza to maintain order but this would be very difficult to achieve. Another US aim is to block the flow of arms into Gaza. The fact that Israel supplies Gaza with water and electricity is a bargaining chip. There is likely to be a continuing freeze on exports from Gaza as well as on travel documents for Gazans, which would mean their being unable to go abroad.

Israel and some Palestinians think that the takeover will mean a division of the Palestinians into Fatahland (West Bank) and Hamastan (Gaza). Some think this was Ariel Sharons purpose in withdrawing from Gaza, i.e. divide and conquer. However such a division is by no means certain and many think it impossible. It may be that the Palestinians will reject this and work towards a unity government with a stronger Hamas influence.

There has been strong criticism of Hamas in the Arab press that it has destroyed the Palestinian cause, confirmed Israels view that it has no partner to speak to and acted as a servant of Iran. Egypt is very concerned about the Hamas takeover because Hamas is related to the Muslim Brotherhood who have perpetrated terrorist attacks in Egypt and made political gains in the last parliamentary elections. The Egyptians have also just moved their embassy from Gaza to Ramallah near Abbas HQ a clear snub to Hamas. President Mubarak of Egypt has invited Olmert and Abbas to talks in Sharm el-Sheikh next week.

Saudi Arabia, which is somewhat pro-Fatah, urged Fatah and Hamas to revive the Mecca Agreement on a unity government. Jordan expressed support for Abbas. The international community, particularly the EU, the Quartet (US, UK, Russia and the UN) has done likewise.

It is possible that the Hamas takeover will have some positive effects. It could give something of a kick-start to peace negotiations with Fatah in the West Bank, which would have a beneficial effect on the parties concerned, increasing Israel's security and improving the Palestinians' conditions on the West Bank. This could weaken Hamas in Gaza, especially if it suffers economic and political isolation. Egypt may now be precipitated into effectively preventing weapons entering Gaza. All this could have a strong adverse effect on Hamas but it has its dangers, particularly of causing even more suffering to the oppressed people of Gaza and encouraging further extreme Islamist support for Hamas.

There is already a humanitarian crisis in Gaza with Palestinians seeking to leave for Israel. The Israelis are being cautious partly for fear of terrorists slipping through and partly for fear of a massive influx of Palestinians threatening the Jewish majority in Israel. However, Olmert has promised to provide humanitarian assistance and said that refugees who are clearly not terrorists should be let through and wounded and sick Gazans should be given hospital treatment in Israel. The IDF has facilitated the passage of some Gazan refugees to Egypt.

## The Syrian Issue

Syria continues to make overtures about peace talks with Israel, whilst increasing its military preparedness, lest it be attacked by Israel. Some Israelis believe that, on the contrary, Syria is building up to a war with Israel this summer. However, there is a widespread feeling that neither country wants war. The danger is that a conflict could begin through misunderstanding. Israel also fears a limited Syrian attack on the Golan Heights which would provide Syria with a bargaining chip.

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz has stated publicly that Syria's peace overtures must not be ignored. Since the Syrian Foreign Minister took a moderate line at the recent Arab League summit in Riyadh, the US seems now to favour Israel having talks with the Syrians. Israeli Military Intelligence favour talks but Meir Dagan, the head of Mossad (Israeli secret service) doesn't. Ehud Olmert is cautious and is playing down the possibility of talks. However, he has hinted that Israel might consider withdrawing from the Golan Heights if Syria broke its connections with Iran, Hezbollah and Palestinian groups which reject Israel. Syria has not changed its policy over these relationships.

Syrian President, Bashar Assad, is facing real difficulties. The economy has been stagnant for seven years. He has lost control of Lebanon. Syria is likely to be convicted of complicity in the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The Syrian Opposition have exposed corrupt financial affairs on the part of the Assad family. Relations with other Arab nations have been very cool since Assad accused them of being half-men for not supporting Hezbollah against Israel. All of this can be an incentive for Assad to want to achieve something on the peace front with Israel.

## Iran and Lebanon

The Iranian threat continues but, on the positive side, the Iranian and US Ambassadors met recently in Baghdad after 27 years without proper negotiations. Israel has mixed feelings about this because Iran continues to call for Israel's destruction. Egypt and Iran may also re-establish full diplomatic relations after 28 years. Jaw-jaw is better than war-war.

## How should we pray?

1. Pray for the Palestinian people, particularly the 1.4 million in Gaza, suffering such hardships.
2. Pray for the Israelis, especially those suffering as a result of rocket attacks from Gaza (or Lebanon).
3. Pray for the Christians caught up in the conflicts, who are being persecuted, especially in Gaza.
4. Pray for a genuine movement towards peace with justice between Israel and Fatah in the West Bank.
5. Pray for courageous, wise and statesmanlike leadership by Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas and their colleagues.
6. Pray for wisdom on the part of the international community in relating to Fatah on the one hand and Hamas on the other, particular for a right balance in applying pressure to Hamas to become more moderate (even if only for reasons of self-interest) without causing a negative, extreme reaction or further harming the population of Gaza.
7. Pray for the frustration of people of violence, including in Hamas, Al Qaeda and other extreme Islamist groups.
8. Pray that Syria and Iran will and lose their negative influence over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Pray for peace with justice between Israel and Syria.**