

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

There are distinct signs of hope in the conflict in the Holy Land, with a great deal of talking going on and various positive actions being taken. However, moves towards peace are, as always, painfully slow, frustrating and fraught with danger.

The Palestinian situation

There is no love lost between the two main Palestinian factions: Fatah and Hamas. President Mahmoud Abbas has made scathing criticisms of Hamas, condemning their brutality in taking over Gaza and accusing them of planning to assassinate him. He refuses dialogue with these murderers. Unlike Hamas, he claims, he stands for a single, democratic homeland ruled by law and order, not violence, whereas Hamas serve Iran and aim at an Islamic religious state.

Fatah has detained many Hamas people in the West Bank. It has also gained control of militant Islamic organisations, hitherto controlled by Hamas. Abbas ordered all unarmed non-government groups to obtain new operating licences - within one week! However, he is up against the fact that some of these Hamas welfare organisations provide much-needed support for

increasingly poor Palestinians. The government has limited financial resources available. Abbas also outlawed all non-government armed groups. There are fears that Hamas might stage strategic assassinations in the West Bank. Fatah claims that Hamas was behind an assassination attempt on Abbas. Then Abbas sentenced the Hamas Security Executive in Gaza to up to seven years jail.

In reply, Hamas accused Fatah of corruption, collaboration with Israeli security and Western loose morality. Ismail Haniya, deposed as Prime Minister by Abbas, denied the assassination allegation and that Iran had any influence in their take over of Gaza.

Hamas has been improving its military strength with more Qassam rockets and it is thought that soon it will obtain Katyushas with 20 kilometers range, and larger warheads. It has some 13,000 armed and disciplined guerillas.

The Palestinian Christian situation

In his criticisms of Hamas, Abbas said it hadn't even respected Christian churches, having looted and burnt down one of the oldest churches. There are Christians among us, he said, and they are our brothers, and now we discover that [according to Hamas] they are enemies and must leave [Palestine]?!... This is a mark of shame on the Palestinian people.

On June 19, masked Hamas gunmen looted and burnt down the Rosary Sisters convent and school. "The torching of the convent," Abbas said, "is one of the rotten fruits of this black coup perpetrated by the Hamas militias. Blinded by fanaticism... they broke the law and desecrated the holy places and houses of worship of our Christian Palestinian [brothers]."

One Christian in Gaza said: "We are afraid of being attacked... If I get the chance to leave the country, I will not hesitate to do so. Someone from the [Hamas] Executive Force tore the crucifix from my neck, saying: 'That is forbidden.' Then he added: 'Islam is the solution.'"

Hamas official Nizar Rayyan announced that the secular era in Gaza had ended. Today heresy ends. Today the struggle is between Islam and the infidels, and it will end with the victory of the faith.... How can we not fight against those who desecrate the sanctity of Allah, execute clerics and sell out the Palestinian cause those who blasphemed in houses of worship, burned mosques, Korans and [Islamic] education facilities and executed jihad fighters? We will hold dialogue with these [people] only through the barrels of our guns."

However, Ismail Haniya, claimed that Hamas was not seeking to create an Islamic emirate in Gaza.

The Israeli-Palestinian dialogue

On June 25th Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, together with Egypt and Jordan, met at Sharm el-Sheikh in a summit aimed at strengthening Abbas politically. Ehud Olmert announced he would release 250 Palestinian prisoners unconditionally. The PA has also begun to co-operate with Israel on security matters in the West Bank. Abbas asked Olmert to allow the 15,000-strong, Jordan-based Palestinian Badr Brigade to enter the West Bank to aid security.

Subsequently, Olmert offered to negotiate with Abbas towards an Agreement of Principles which are likely to include:

- The establishment of a Palestinian state on 90% of the West Bank and Gaza.
- Exchange of territory from Israel to the Palestinians to cover the other 10% (key Jewish settlements).
- Building a tunnel (and/or bridge) to connect the West Bank and Gaza directly.
- The Palestinians declaring Jerusalem as their capital (with Israel withdrawing from Arab parts of East Jerusalem).

The very difficult matters of final borders, Jerusalem and the return of Palestinian refugees will be left until later.

Olmert and Abbas have arranged a series of meetings leading up to a conference in Washington later in the year. The moderate Arab states are rather sceptical about this conference succeeding and there is some doubt about Saudi Arabia's involvement. Israel is no longer demanding full recognition by these Arab states but rather a gradual rapprochement with the Arab League.

Meanwhile Israel is seeking further financial support for Abbas from the Quartet (the US, UK, UN and Russia).

Israel has also agreed to:

- Release the frozen Palestinian taxes (customs duties and VAT). \$118 million has already been returned.
- Continue humanitarian aid (water, food, medicine, electricity) to Gaza, which is still economically dependent on Israel.
- Allow greater access to Israel for Palestinians
- Allow rifles and armoured cars to be transferred to Fatah forces in the West Bank.
- Evacuate illegal settlement outposts this year.

- Return control of law and order in Area B (where the IDF controls security) to the Palestinians.

However Israel is not yet removing roadblocks in Palestinian areas because of opposition from the army. Also it is still the case that about a third of the areas controlled by settlements is on Palestinian land.

The Arab Initiatives

The moderate Arab nations are against the potential division of Palestine between Fatah and Hamas, and seek reconciliation between the two factions.

In a remarkable move, the Jordanian and Egyptian Foreign Ministers visited Jerusalem to promote the Arab Peace Initiative. The former said: "Israel has always said that it was to be accepted in this region and to be part of it. The Arab Peace Initiative grants precisely this," "This is a collective offer [from the 56 members of the Arab League]s ... this will be an important achievement for the region and a historic opportunity for Israel." The entire Islamic Organization Conference, barring Iran, are supporting this. The US has also expressed support for the Arab Peace Initiative.

The window of opportunity

It is encouraging to remember the various factors which favour the present window of opportunity:

- The moderate Arab nations are worried about Iran's bid to become a regional superpower and the effect of this (and of Hamas success) on their own extreme Islamist opposition groups. They fear the consequences of a US withdrawal from Iraq which could produce a dominant Shiite Islamist force in the region. This could threaten Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and perhaps also Egypt.
- Both Olmert and Abbas are in a weak position politically and need to be bolstered by achieving something in the peace process. (However, Israeli Defence Minister, Ehud Barak claims that Abbas is not a credible partner for peace talks).
- Both of them also realize that it is important to undermine Hamas popularity and success. It seems obvious to many that this will not be achieved by sanctions but by improving the lot of the Palestinians in the West Bank. They must be set free from the disastrous economic situation, unemployment and other traumatic problems. Abbas needs to build a good social welfare system in the West Bank.
- Israel realizes it cannot fully defend itself against Hamas and Hezbollah rocket attacks, even with the new Iron Dome anti-missile system it will have operational in 18 months time. An additional factor is that fighting against these groups is extremely expensive for Israel.

The hindrances to the peace process

There are still many obstacles to a really successful peace process:

- The ideological/religious opposition amongst the Palestinians and other Arabs to the Israeli state, which will remain, despite pragmatic and mutually-beneficial moves towards peace.
- The divisive tendencies (and corruption) within Palestinian society which militate against successful state-building.
- The extremism of Iran.
- The tensions between Israel and Syria. Each country is seeking to reassure the other that it does not intend to go to war. But each is quite paranoid and so is making many military preparations. The danger is of an unintentional war caused by misunderstanding of each others actions.

How should we pray?

This is crucial time in the relationship between Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states. We need to pray earnestly for all the parties concerned:

- For continuation of talks leading to positive action between the Israelis and the Palestinians
- For God to prosper the efforts of Olmert, Abbas and the moderate Arab leaders to make peace and to give them his wisdom.
- For God to prosper Palestinian state-building efforts.
- For God to frustrate the intentions and efforts of extremists on all sides: extreme right wing Jewish Israelis, Palestinian terrorists, Iranian and Syrian extremists, groups such as Al Qaeda, etc.
- For God to grant wisdom to all who influence the situation, including Western powers who sometimes lack understanding of the outlook of those in the Middle East.
- For God to transform Christians who hold extreme views: extreme Christian Zionists who neglect or are negative towards the Palestinians and extreme pro-Palestinian groups who are negative towards Israel.
- For a growth in contact and understanding between Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis and Palestinians.
- For a massive improvement in the economic conditions of Palestinians and for a clearing out of corruption in Fatah circles.
- For the welfare of the inhabitants of Gaza.
- For the welfare of Christians under pressure in Gaza.
- For a relaxation of the tension between Israel and Syria, and for talks between the two.

I hope to be in touch with you soon about new developments in Paradox, including a website full of valuable information and a somewhat new and improved approach to the ministry.

Best wishes

Tony Higton