

***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 send their name and email address to: tony@higton.info Please encourage others to join the mailing list.

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THE PEACE SUMMIT

The major item on the Israeli-Palestinian agenda is the proposed Peace Summit to be held in Annapolis, Maryland on November 26th (although it might be delayed a little). There is a great deal of cautious optimism amongst some people but a great deal of cynicism and pessimism on the part of others.

The optimists stress that:

1. Both Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas are serious about trying to succeed, not least because failure would play into the hands of extremists such as Hamas, and neither side wants that to happen. Could Hamas even take over the West Bank – it doesn't seem impossible. That would be very damaging to Fatah (Abbas faction) and really dangerous for Israel. Abbas and Olmert are meeting frequently. One meeting took place in Olmert's sukkah (the temporary shelters Jewish people build during Succot or the Feast of tabernacles). Olmert is quoted as saying: "There is no agreement between us, nothing has been given, taken or promised. But we've established an air of personal trust, a mutual willingness to listen to the plights, grievances, suspicions and needs that each side has been carrying as a nation for many generations."
2. The growing threat from Iran is an incentive to the Arab states to press for a peace settlement.
3. Israel has shown its seriousness by releasing many Palestinian prisoners from Israel jails. It has also removed 25 road blocks in the West Bank.
4. People who have talked with Olmert say he is determined to withdraw from the West Bank territories to facilitate the peace process.
5. Olmert has spoken of the possibility of Arab areas of East Jerusalem being considered not part of Israel's capital. His deputy, Haim Raimon, went further and suggested following Bill Clinton's plan of dividing Jerusalem, which would mean the Old City, including Temple Mount, would come under Arab control. It also would allow the Palestinians to declare those areas of Jerusalem as their capital. The dispute over Jerusalem is one of the major obstacles in the peace process.
6. The disastrous economic situation of the Palestinians certainly encourages them to pursue a peace agreement. Helen Ashrawi, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council said recently: "Palestinians are experiencing one of the most difficult phases in our history. Now we see not just a political and economic battle but a battle over the soul of Palestine. We find ourselves in the grip of ... the deconstruction of Palestine. Nearly 75 percent of Palestinians living in Gaza are dependent on welfare and the territory's unemployment rate has skyrocketed to 50 percent."
7. The Arab nations are very supportive of the current peace process, more so than before. They accept Israel's right to exist within the 1967 borders and are offering her a normalization of relations. They also accept that the refugee problem can only be achieved with Israel's agreement.
8. At the summit there will be representatives of the Quartet (UK, US, Russia, UN), the Arab League, the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and the G8 which could facilitate progress. There is some doubt as to whether Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon will attend, though.

9. Both sides are likely to agree to an international body overseeing the implementation of any agreements.

However, others point out that:

1. The Palestinians will not agree to the Clinton plan which gave them only 92% of the West Bank, but only a complete withdrawal by Israel to the 1967 borders, except for land exchanges amounting to no more than 2-3% of the West Bank. Abbas has recently insisted that the Palestinian State must include 6,205 square kilometers of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In Israel the security barrier (wall and fence) are, de facto, seen as defining the border and there would be strong resistance to allowing high ground on Palestinian land just to the West of the barrier to be in Palestine. This high ground would give the Palestinians effective military advantage and control of water sources.
2. Israel is planning to annex and build 3,500 houses on a large area of the West Bank on the outskirts of Jerusalem (Area E1) in order to connect the large settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim to Jerusalem. The Palestinians will be provided with a commercial centre in E1 which will provide employment. The IDF states that this annexation is necessary for military and security purposes, to prevent terrorist attacks. The Palestinians are demanding the dismantling of all West Bank settlements.
3. 59% of Israelis oppose the transfer of Arab areas of East Jerusalem to Palestinian control.
4. The Palestinians will insist on the right of return of all refugees to Israel, which is something Israel will never accept in practice. Saudi Arabia has stated that if it attends Annapolis, it will do the same. 87% of Israelis oppose the return of any refugees. (However the Arab Peace Plan seems to give Israel a get-out clause by saying that each return would have to be approved by Israel. Israel could well adopt a "conceded the principle and fail all the candidates" approach. Also the position of Abbas on this is unclear. Some say he is only insisting that Israel should compensate the Palestinian refugees).
5. Although terrorism has diminished, an agreement between Israel and Fatah in Annapolis would not stop Hamas firing rockets from Gaza into Israel. The agreement is likely to be rejected by Hamas.

However, Saeb Erekat, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization negotiating team: is quoted as saying: "If we have an agreement that includes an independent Palestinian state, with its capital Jerusalem, within less than 24 hours, without a single shot fired, Gaza will not be under Hamas control. Do you think that anyone is going to wait for Ismail Haniyeh to determine his position with respect to a comprehensive peace agreement? However, if the negotiations fail, the West Bank will also be in danger." It is interesting that Hamas has indicated it may hold talks with Abbas and, some claim it has hinted that it might be willing to relinquish its exclusive control of Gaza.

On the other hand, Khaled Mashaal, senior Hamas' leader in Damascus, said recently: "The enemy is knocking at our door to negotiate with us and we refuse, and are planning a new round of resistance." One of his colleagues called on the "resistance" organizations to carry out attacks in the West Bank. Another said: "The coming intifada, ... will be stronger and more violent than its predecessor..." Hamas is planning a meeting of various extreme groups in Damascus on November 7th, in order to galvanize opposition to negotiation.).

6. Israel believes that Fatah will not be able to control terrorism effectively in the West Bank.
7. Both Abbas and Olmert are rather weak politically and some think neither of them would be capable of delivering real peace. 77% of Israelis think Olmert is too weak to achieve it. However, since the announcement that Olmert has prostate cancer his popularity has increased higher than any time since the Lebanon war. 41% of Israelis think he is doing a good job.
8. The Palestinians are seeking a clear "Declaration of Principles" from Annapolis whereas the Israelis are looking for a general statement of interests which will facilitate further negotiations.
9. The Palestinians are demanding that setting a timetable for the establishment of a Palestinian state is a condition for their attending Annapolis but Israel does not want to set a timetable.
10. America has less power in the Middle East and so cannot exercise such strong influence over the peace process.

THE SITUATION IN GAZA

There is some evidence of development towards a more Islamic approach to life, e.g. men growing beards and women wearing veils out of fear of the authorities, restrictions on drinking alcohol, etc. More serious is the tragic killing of Rami Ayyad, a prominent Christian who ran the Bible Society book shop in Gaza City. He had been threatened by Islamic extremists

Hamas continues its strong opposition to Israel and is developing a highly organized and disciplined fighting force. Egypt recently allowed 85 Hamas men, including a number of experts in terrorism, to cross the border into Gaza. This co-operation between Egypt and Hamas, despite the former's earlier antagonism to Hamas is worrying the Israelis.

At the same time, Mohammad Awad, a Hamas leader, offered a ceasefire to Israel and there was a decrease in rocket attacks from Gaza in October.

Israel is reluctant to mount a major military incursion into Gaza because it would lead to many deaths amongst soldiers and Palestinian civilians. However it has begun sanctions against the Hamas regime. It planned to inflict short 15-minute power cuts on the people of Gaza (excluding hospitals, etc), but the Israeli Attorney General prohibited this. Israel has started to restrict supplies of petrol (gasoline). The EU has expressed opposition to this. Some Israeli commentators claim that sanctions are a cynical Israeli move to escalate Hamas attacks on Israel so that further action can be taken against Gaza.

In spite of all this, Israel is still allowing money to be transferred from the West Bank to Gaza in order to pay PA and Fatah workers there.

SYRIA

On September 6th Israeli jets bombed the Dir al-Zur research farm in Syria. Both the Israelis and the Syrians for a long time refused to say why this attack had taken place. There are claims that the target was a facility for developing nuclear weapons built by North Korea. President Assad implied that Syria would not retaliate (although some claim he might encourage Hezbollah to do so for him). The Syrians totally destroyed the bombed site, which some see as action to destroy all evidence of development of nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile Assad expressed doubts about Syria's involvement in the Annapolis summit unless it included discussion of Syrian territory it claims Israel is occupying.

Syria has 1000 Scud ballistic missiles capable of reaching any target in Israel. They have chemical warheads and it is thought that Syria has experimented with biological weapons. It also has thousands of shorter range missiles. Syria has been preparing itself for an expected Israeli attack and Israelis have been anticipating war with the Syrians.

HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah recently returned three dead Israelis and a seriously ill prisoner to Israel. The UN and Red Cross assisted this transaction. Israel reciprocated with releasing the bodies of two Hezbollah activists and a prisoner. The Israelis also received information about Ron Arad whose jet crashed in Lebanon in 1986 and who has long been a focus of attention for Israel.

A report by Human Rights Watch concluded that, during the Lebanon War, many civilians were killed, not because Hezbollah fired from civilian areas, but because the IDF "took insufficient care to distinguish civilians from combatants as required by the laws of war." They warned civilians to flee southern Lebanon. But many couldn't because they were too elderly or sick, or too poor to pay high taxi fares, or were simply too fearful to travel on frequently bombed roads.

IRAN

Iran continues its aggressive attitude towards Israel and President Ahmadinejad denies the Holocaust. Recently Iran has suggested that the Jewish state should move elsewhere in the world. There is a fear of a possible Israeli military attack on Iran and its consequences.

The US is concerned about Iran's long range ballistic missiles and their threat to its European friends. It claims that by 2015 Iran will have missiles capable of reaching the US. The Americans have also taken unilateral action against Iran in the form of economic sanctions and is encouraging other countries to do the same. They are finding support in France and the UK. Because of a lack of refineries, half the petrol (gasoline) consumed in Iran is imported mainly from India, The United Arab Emirates and Holland. This is a potentially powerful political tool.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Pray for the Annapolis Conference to further peace, security and justice for both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and so to prevent a massive boost to the extremists throughout the Middle East.
2. Pray for both sides to be willing to make wise concessions and compromises.
3. Pray for the moderate Arab states to exercise their influence in favour of the Peace Process.
4. Pray for the people of Gaza facing great difficulties.
5. Pray for an end to violent confrontation between Hamas and Israel which could lead to terrible consequences if Israel were to invade Gaza.
6. Pray for productive peace talks between Israel and Syria.
7. Pray for prevention of the development of nuclear weapons in both Syria and Iran and for Iran to move to a more moderate position.
8. Pray for Christian Arab clergy in Palestinian areas who wish to travel in and out of Gaza and the West Bank now Israel has withdrawn automatic re-entry visas for them. Gaining re-entry visas takes months, so this move effectively prevents clergy moving between their congregations within the territories.

Best wishes

Tony Higton