

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

Israel has celebrated its 60th anniversary and the Palestinians held Nakba (Catastrophe) Day marking the anniversary from a Palestinian viewpoint. However there does seem to be hope in the present situation. One aspect is:

THE PROSPECT OF A CEASEFIRE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND HAMAS

It seems that, through the good offices of the Egyptian Government and General Omar Suleiman (Head of Egyptian Security), that Israel and Hamas may be on the brink of a ceasefire. Egypt announced it had gained the agreement of 12 organisation on the Palestinian side, but is still working to get confirmation of the agreement of some smaller groups. It is also awaiting an Israeli response.

Israel has said it will accept the ceasefire but will not make an official commitment to it. Instead it will see if the violence subsides and if it does, will respond positively, not only by ceasing military operations in Gaza but also by lifting the blockade of Gaza by opening the crossing points and allowing necessary goods into the Strip.

Meanwhile hostilities have continued including a rocket attack on Ashkelon in which 90 Israelis were injured. Hamas has built up its weaponry in Gaza. It has 20,000 fighters and has held training sessions in Gaza as well as Syria and Iran. It now has more advanced rockets and anti-tank weapons and is highly organised and prepared. Hamas is also taking half of the fuel provided by Israel for military use.

A recent Israeli survey found that 64% of Palestinians support the rocket and suicide attacks. On the other hand, two thirds of Palestinians now support the Arab peace plan, whereas 57% of Israelis reject it.

There are, of course, fears in Israel that a temporary ceasefire will simply allow Hamas breathing space to strengthen its position in Gaza and its ability to attack Israel. However it is also clear that Hamas has managed to keep up a steady campaign against Israel without a ceasefire. There is also concern that such a ceasefire could strengthen Hamas at the expense of the (Fatah) Palestinian President and negotiator Mahmoud Abbas.

One advantage for Israel is that a ceasefire would allow the re-opening of the Gaza crossings. The very negative effects of the Israeli sanctions on Gaza on the population have been condemned around the world. The United Nations' Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that lack of fuel will prevent distribution of food to 650,000 refugees, disrupt 214 schools and 19 health clinics. Hospitals have only a few days worth of fuel. Inoculations for 55,000 babies are threatened. Council rubbish collection has ceased.

Israel claims that Hamas itself is preventing the limited amount of fuel coming out of Israel from reaching the Gaza population, so creating an economic crisis for propaganda purposes, but Israeli and Palestinian human rights groups call on Israel to stop restricting fuel supplies. Such a situation affecting one third of the Palestinian population militates against the Israel-Fatah peace negotiations. A ceasefire would also be very welcome in the constantly bombarded Israeli town of Sderot and now Ashkelon, and the western Negev region of Israel.

Contact between Israel and Arab states continues. Qatar urged Israel to end the crippling blockade of Gaza due to the difficult humanitarian situation and to speed up the peace talks with the Palestinians. Oman also has re-established relations with Israel. Meetings have taken place with Bahrein and United Arab Emirates too.

Suleiman warned Hamas that if the kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was not released as part of prisoner exchange Israel would mount a major offensive against the Gaza Strip. Hamas appear to be willing to release

Shalit but are not prepared to accept the list of 450 Palestinian prisoners Israel is willing to release.

However the fact is that many in Israel feel that such an attack on Gaza would not be effective, would be condemned by the international community and would lead to excessive bloodshed on both sides. A former head of Mossad (Israeli secret service) and former senior military chiefs have recently warned against it.

Also a major Israeli attack on Gaza could precipitate an attack from Hezbollah in the North. Furthermore, unless there is a ceasefire, Hamas could violently torpedo any agreement between Israel and Mahmoud Abbas.

Meanwhile Osama bin Laden called on Egyptian Muslim militants to seek to remove the Israeli blockade of Gaza, adding: We will continue, God permitting, the fight against the Israelis and their allies ... and will not give up a single inch of Palestine as long as there is one true Muslim on earth.

One factor causing concern in the Middle East is the prospect of regime-change in Egypt. President Mubarak is almost 80 so change must happen soon. Egypt has excluded the extreme Islamist Muslim Brotherhood from the political process but in 2005 many of their candidates stood as independents and won 88 out of 454 parliamentary seats. If Egypt changed its approach to issues like Hamas this could cause worrying changes in the region.

ISRAELI-SYRIAN PEACE TALKS

Israel and Syria are to hold peace talks which have been brought about by Turkish mediation. Secret meetings held between 2004 and 2006 are said to have produced (currently non-binding) political understandings that:

- Israel would withdraw from the Golan Heights to the 1967 lines (the Syrians want that over 5 years, the Israelis over 15).
- The border will be demilitarised.
- A buffer zone in the form of a park along the Sea of Galilee, to which both Israelis and Syrians would have free access.
- Israel will control use of water from the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee.
- Syria will cease supporting Hezbollah (but urge it to be only a political party) and Hamas (with Hamas Chief Khaled Meshal leaving Damascus) and distance itself from Iran.
- Syria would encourage peace in Iraq and a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Americans support the talks but if a full peace agreement is to be achieved they would need to be more positive towards Syria politically and diplomatically.

A recent survey discovered that only 32% of Israelis favour a full withdrawal from the Golan because they are afraid it will make them too vulnerable (amongst Jewish Israelis it is 25%). 74% don't believe Assad is serious about peace.

The Americans decided to reveal the reason for the mysterious Israeli air strike in Syria on September 6th. They say it was on a nuclear reactor being built to produce plutonium with the help of the North Koreans, though the Syrians have denied this, claiming it was an empty military building under construction. The Americans made this revelation to pressurize North Korea into an agreement over nuclear weapons and as a warning to the Iranians.

AGREEMENT IN LEBANON

Hezbollah continues to grow in strength and influence in Lebanon. The government decided to dismantle Hezbollah's telephone system etc., and, as a result, the organisation's leader Hassan Nasrallah accused them of effectively declaring war on Hezbollah. Consequently Hezbollah took over West Beirut for a time.

However, the two sides have just signed an agreement in Qatar which hopefully will end the 18-month crisis. Hezbollah gets 11 seats in a new government and the power of veto. The other side will have 16 with three being distributed by the new president.

This means that Hezbollah is effectively running Lebanon which hardly suits Israel.

OLMERT-ABBAS PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

The 20th Arab Summit took place in Damascus at the end of March and reaffirmed the Arab Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative. The peace negotiations continue between Olmert and Abbas and between Ahmed Qureia (chief Palestinian negotiator) and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. All the core issues, including Jerusalem, Israeli settlements and the return of refugees are being discussed and both sides claiming there has been progress but still a long way to go. They are not helped by the fact that Olmert has been subjected to yet another corruption investigation, which weakens him as a peace partner. Some progress has been made over Israel wanting to hand over 90% of the West Bank whilst the Palestinians are demanding 98%. Israel also wants to maintain the major settlement blocs

and the Jordan Valley. Also it is expanding the settlement of Ariel and is building homes for Jewish people in East Jerusalem, which hinders the peace process.

Another hindrance is Israeli road blocks on the West Bank. The Americans have pressed Israel to remove 50 roadblocks on the West Bank. A joint Israeli-Palestinian report claims that ten such roadblocks have little security value and are unnecessarily hindering Palestinian trade. The group behind the report included Palestinian officials, American experts and two IDF reserve officers who work in the West Bank Civil Administration.

Olmert urged the IDF to act sympathetically to Palestinians at roadblocks. Take all the Palestinians who were stripped at the roadblocks, only because there was concern that some of them were terrorists. Take all those who stand at the roadblocks where there is concern that a car bomb will pass through. This can become a boiling pot that can explode and cause terrible burns, and it can also be something else, which only depends on your understanding and abilities to conduct yourselves with wisdom and determination.

The IDF is investigating allegations that 46 Palestinians were detained for no reason for 16 hours at a check point and their car tyres were punctured. They were not allowed to sit down or use toilet facilities.

More recently Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni stated that the two sides were unlikely to reach agreement on the core issues by the end of 2008.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Give thanks for the agreements about peace talks between Syria and Israel, between the factions in Lebanon and for the Egyptian mediation which promises an imminent Israel-Hamas ceasefire.
2. However, also pray about the uncertainties, fears, suspicions, secret agendas which, together with the influence of extremists on all sides, could hinder success in these processes.
3. Pray for peace with justice and security for all parties in the region.
4. Pray for a breakthrough in the Israel-Palestinian peace talks.

BEIT NETANEL UPDATE - THANK YOU TO ALL WHO DONATED

We thank God that in 2007, in addition to the 141,200 sent to Israel towards the purchase of the Beit Netanel Ministry Center in Jerusalem, 8020 was also sent to support the ministry of Rachel Netanel. Bank charges have been 140 and other expenses (largely the cost of a display board for meetings and of printing leaflets) have been 462.21. (A fair amount of Gift Aid is still to be added to that figure).

However, 150,000 raised other than through Paradox was in the form of interest-free loans, which, of course, have to be repaid. So we shall be grateful to receive more gifts to offset those loans, or regular gifts for Rachel Netanel's on-going ministry.

Please send your gift by cheque made out to Paradox Ministries and sent to the Rev Tony Higton, The Rectory, 47 Castle Rising Road, South Wootton, Kings Lynn, Norfolk PE30 3JA. If you are a UK taxpayer please Gift Aid your donation using the form attached to this email OR take out a standing order to support the ministry regularly using the form attached to this email.

Any gift, however small or large, is most welcome. Each gift is an investment in extending the Kingdom of Jesus, Lord and Messiah, among Jewish and Arab people in Jerusalem and facilitates reconciliation.

Tony Higton