

# 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 END FOR OLMERT

So Ehud Olmert is going after only two and a half years as Prime Minister. It is hardly unexpected in Israel. He became very unpopular because of his mishandling of the recent Lebanon War. Many accused him of rushing into that conflict without proper preparation or a wise strategy. In the end it was the corruption charges which brought him down, although he claims to have answers to them. He admitted to making mistakes.

He will not contest the Kadima party leadership elections on September 17<sup>th</sup> but he may actually remain in post until February 2009. This is because the two favourites to succeed him: Tzipi Livni (Foreign Minister) and Shaul Moraz (Transportation Minister) may find it difficult to set up a new inter-party coalition and a general election would be required.

The important question is what this means for the peace process in the Holy Land. He has not succeeded in settling the border between Israel and the Palestinians.

Olmert is determined to press on with the peace process, even though he has been criticised in the past for focusing on them to increase his popularity. Now critics are saying he will try to achieve something merely in order to leave a more positive impression behind him, including over the Golan Heights with Syria and over dividing Jerusalem. Previous Israeli prime ministers have been similarly accused.

## **THE ISRAEL-HAMAS CEASEFIRE**

The ceasefire has been maintained in general although rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel and the Israelis have retaliated by temporarily closing the border. There have also been terrorist attacks in Jerusalem, two perpetrated by Palestinian drivers of construction vehicles.

In late July a series of explosions in Gaza killed four Hamas activists and injured 80 others. Hamas blamed Fatah and attacked Fatah establishments in Gaza with 11 people being killed. 180 Fatah people fled to Israel where some needed medical treatment. This all proved a humiliation for Hamas which claims to be in control of Gaza. The organisation has lost some popularity because it is seen as being oppressive and violent towards its opponents.

However, Hamas will, as expected, be building up its arsenal of weapons. It may well now have the capability to force Jewish communities near Gaza to move out which would be a major coup.

One interesting story has come to light. Masab, the son of Sheik Hassan Yousef, a Hamas leader in the West Bank has become a Christian. He assisted his father politically for many years. He is quoted as saying: "You Jews should be aware: You will never, but never have peace with Hamas. Islam, as the ideology that guides them, will not allow them to achieve a peace agreement with the Jews. They believe that tradition says that the Prophet Mohammed fought against the Jews and that therefore they must continue to fight them to the death .... An entire society sanctifies death and the suicide terrorists. In Palestinian culture a suicide terrorist becomes a hero, a martyr. Sheikhs tell their students about the 'heroism of the shaheeds [martyrs].'"

## **THE ISRAEL-FATAH PEACE TALKS**

On July 13<sup>th</sup> Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas met in Paris together with the French President. The question is whether Olmert will be able to achieve something lasting in negotiations before he leaves office. The history of such negotiations suggests that this could happen. Agreements which appear to be shelved when a prime minister leaves office have been revived by

subsequent negotiators. This happened in the case of Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak.

However, one thing which Olmert and his predecessors have failed to do is to take the Arab Peace Initiative seriously. The Israeli cabinet has not even considered it. Yet it was offering normal relations with the 22 members of the Arab League. One new positive sign is that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia held an interfaith conference in Madrid on July 17<sup>th</sup> and invited Jewish participation.

There is a sad history of Israel not taking such moderate Arab initiatives seriously. King Khaled of Saudi Arabia offered to recognise Israel in 1975 if a Palestinian state were established. The 1981 Arab summit offered the same (adding a requirement of compensation or repatriation of Palestinian refugees). Saudi Arabia repeated the offer in 2002 and again in 2007.

About a week ago Olmert offered a detailed peace plan to Abbas:

- That Israel would withdraw from 93% of the West Bank
- That Israel would exchange the extra 7% of land for 5% of what is now Israeli territory plus a corridor between the west Bank and Gaza (which would remain Israeli territory but allow free Palestinian access.

However Abbas has rejected this because it didnt offer a united Palestinian state with contiguous borders and with Jerusalem as its capital.

Israel has also agreed to release 200 Palestinian Fatah prisoners to bolster Abbas position and to indicate that his negotiating approach achieves results unlike the violent approach of Hamas. Abbas threatened to dismantle the Palestinian Authority if Israel released any Hamas prisoners.

## **JEWISH SETTLEMENTS**

Olmerts recent detailed peace plan would mean that about 220,000 Jewish settlers in 48 settlements would remain on the 7% of Palestinian land which would be transferred to Israel. A further 70,000 in 74 settlements east of the security fence/wall would have to move out. Most of the latter are hardliners who may well resort to violence.

It is important to distinguish between the majority of settlers who are law-abiding and non-violent from the minority many of them young who resort to violence. When we lived in Jerusalem some of my Jewish staff lived in settlements like Maaleh Adumim. These were sincere followers of Christ (Messianic Believers) who would reject violence (except in a proper military

context). But they did not see anything wrong in living in a settlement. They probably regarded what the world calls the West Bank as Judea and Samaria, legitimate parts of Israel. Such people should not be associated with the violence of the extreme minority of settlers. It should also be noted that soem settlements are large well-established towns.

However, the behaviour of the violent settlers, normally living in smaller settlements, is shameful. Settler attacks on Palestinians include:

- People, including children, being shot at, stoned, beaten and being injured by hit and run car drivers.
- Homes being stoned and damaged.
- Crops being uprooted, burned, destroyed by flocks of settlers animals being let loose on Palestinian land or by settlers tractor and bulldozers.
- Palestinian farmers being prevented from accessing their land including at harvest time.
- Assaults on mosques, including settlers playing loud music on the roof during times of prayer.

Israeli Police report 429 incidents of settler violence in the first half of 2008, compared with 587 incidents in all of 2006 and 551 in 2007. Sadly, the Israelis admit that some police, and soldiers turn a blind eye to this behaviour.

On a related issue the Israeli High Court criticised the government for ignoring the courts ruling of a year ago to change the route of the fence/wall running through lands belonging to Bilin villagers.

Similarly, an Israeli military court indicted Lt. Col. Omri Borberg because one of his soldiers fired a rubber bullet at point blank range at the legs of a shackled and blindfolded Palestinian

## **IRAN**

Iran now claims to have planes which could reach Israel without requiring refuelling. The American government is discouraging Israel from attacking Irans nuclear facilities and says that, in any case, they would not be able to achieve that mission without repeated strikes, unlike Israeli attacks on such facilities in Iraq and Syria.

## **PRAYER TOPICS**

1. For the Palestinian people who suffer at the hands of violent settlers.

2. For Israel at a time of political uncertainty and that God will use Ehud Olmerts remaining time in power to further peace and justice.
3. That a new prime minister will be elected who will also further peace and justice.
4. For the continuation of the Israeli-Hamas ceasefire.
5. For God to prosper those Palestinians working for peace with justice.
6. For those suffering from the effects of violence: fear, pain, bereavement.
7. For Gods purposes in the Middle East to be furthered even in these years of tortuous and fragile negotiation.

***Tony Higton***