

Paradox

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Life In Israel

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This email newsletter seeks to help Christians look at the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict through the eyes of both people groups involved. This may lead to paradox: truth which appears contradictory but is actually two sides of the story. It is written by Rev Tony Higton, Rector of Christ Church, Old City, Jerusalem and is available free on request to those who send their name, email address and country to: thigton@netvision.net.il Please encourage others to join the mailing list. © Tony Higton

Will there be peace?

58 days after the death of Yasser Arafat, the Palestinians elected a new President. Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) won a 62.3 percent majority, although there were accusations of voting irregularities. When the results were announced, gunmen fired in the air, motorists sounded their horns and Fatah members, wearing checkered black-and-white headbands, danced in the streets.

Despite the hope of a successful peace process with Israel engendered by the election, it was clear that the successful candidate would have an incredibly difficult job. What are the prospects for peace now? How is Abu Mazen doing? How should we Christians pray? These are issues I want to address in this newsletter.

WHO IS ABU MAZEN?

Abu Mazen was born in Safed in British Mandate Palestine in 1935, and moved to Syria with his family in 1948. After gaining a BA in law from Damascus University he received a Ph.D. in history from the Oriental College in Moscow. He went to Qatar in the late 1950's where he recruited future key members for the PLO. He followed Yasser Arafat through all his exiles, first to Jordan, and after what became known as 'Black September' to Lebanon, until being forced out in 1982 by Israel and settling briefly in Tunisia.

He is a founder member of Fatah, the main faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and has been Secretary-General of the PLO Central Committee since 1996. He is also considered one of the 'fathers of Oslo Peace Accords'. In May 2003, he was elected Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. He resigned four months later because of on-going power-struggle with Arafat. He is not a charismatic figure.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Israeli Encouragement: Shortly after the election, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called Mazen to congratulate him. It was expected that the two men would meet very soon. Israeli President Moshe Katsav also rang saying he too would like to meet for talks. Abbas replied that he wishes to renew the peace process. Israeli Vice Premier, Shimon Peres told Mazen: "Israel will do all it can to help the Palestinians establish a democratic government, so we can live in peace as two democracies side by side."

US Support: George Bush told Mazen. "The United States stands ready to help the Palestinian people realize their aspirations, The new Palestinian president and his Cabinet face critical tasks ahead, including fighting terrorism, combating corruption, building reformed and democratic institutions and reviving the Palestinian economy." The US pledged \$20 million as a rare direct donation to the Palestinian Authority, to show confidence in its abilities and to help the PA pay for the elections and other expenditures. It s considering raising US aid to the Palestinians to \$200 million.

The US together with Europe and Arab countries propose doubling aid to the PA if it succeeds in cracking down on the terrorists and reducing the conflict. The aid would amount to \$6 - 8 billion, over four years.

Arab Support: Jordan promised to help revive the Middle East peace process and Egypt offered to mediate between Israel and Syria. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak made the amazing statement that Ariel Sharon is the Palestinians' best chance for peace: "I think if they [Palestinians] can't achieve progress in the time of the current [Israeli] prime minister, it will be very difficult to make any progress in peace. He [Sharon] is capable of pursuing peace, and he is capable of reaching solutions, if he wants to."

A virtual Hudna by the Palestinians: There was a 70% reduction in terrorism in the territories since Arafat's death. Sheikh Hassan Yusef, head of the Hamas political bureau in Ramallah, said that Hamas is willing to declare a 10 year Hudna (a Hudna is an Islamic term meaning a tactical cease-fire that allows the Arabs to rebuild their forces for a more opportune time). Some senior IDF commanders concluded that the terror groups are observing a virtual hudna. In response, Israel showed real restraint, for example, allowing Arafat's burial in Ramallah, permitting East Jerusalem Arabs to vote in the Palestinian elections. Despite some criticisms it seems that Israel kept its promise to facilitate the elections. However, Palestinians expressed disappointment that Israel had released only 170 Palestinian prisoners. Israel said the other prisoners belonged to extremist groups.

Palestinian calls for peace: On December 26th 600 prominent Palestinians (top officials, cabinet ministers, legislators, intellectuals and poets) published an "Open Letter to Palestinian Public Opinion." calling for an end to armed attacks on Israel and urging the Palestinian Authority to push for democratic reforms.

The letter stated: "We want to see an end to the occupation that began in 1967. The only choice we have is the path of peace. The use of weapons is unacceptable because it has a negative impact on our image ... We reaffirm our legitimate right to confront the occupation, but call for restoring the popular character of our intifada and ceasing actions that reduce the range of (international) support for our cause and harm the credibility of our struggle."

Two weeks earlier a poll amongst Palestinians showed that 51.8 percent were opposed to "military operations" against Israeli targets and consider them harmful to Palestinian national interests (cp. 26.9% last June). Only 41.1% of the Palestinians believed terrorist attacks should continue (cp 65.4% last June).

These signs of hope seemed to make the prospect of peace much closer. If only this were the full story. One major query is about the reality of Abu Mazen's commitment to the peace process.

IS ABU MAZEN REALLY AGAINST PALESTINIAN VIOLENCE?

Mazen is regarded as the father of the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians. In 1995 with Yossi Beilin, Mazen drafted a controversial "framework for the Conclusion of a Final Status Agreement Between Israel and the PLO," better known as the Abu-Mazen-Beilin Plan.

Abu Mazen was interviewed by the Jordanian daily newspaper *Al-Rai* in October and stated: "I think now that the intifada in its entirety was a mistake and should not have continued - in particular what is called "the militarization of the Intifada." Mazen had been the only senior Palestinian to appeal to Arafat to stop the Intifada in 2000. Later he called for an end to terrorism.

However, he went on to explain the reason for his opposition, namely that the Intifada had not advanced the Palestinian cause. "If we were to sum up where we have ended up after four years of the intifada, [we would find that] there are three opinions: the first is that after the killing of 1,000 Israelis in the intifada, Israel would collapse, as would Sharon; the second is that the armed intifada would liberate the homeland; the third opinion is that the intifada would bring the settlements to a halt. An examination [of the matter] shows that Sharon did not fall. On the contrary, he has become the most popular [leader] in the history of Israel, after having been subjected to condemnations in Israel. On the same note, all the Palestinian lands are now occupied and vulnerable, and the settlements have nearly doubled. We damaged our relations with the Americans and with Israeli public opinion."

"We want a Palestinian state that will live in peace alongside Israel," Mazen told a group of businessmen in Ramallah. He also spoke of reining in various Palestinian organizations, saying the PA wants only its own security forces to be authorized to carry weapons. "We want only one legally armed Palestinian force," he said.

A day after his election, he told Palestinians "we are are ready for peace" with Israel. He said he is eager to resume peace talks, adding: "We extend our hands to our neighbors. We are ready for peace, peace based on justice. We hope that their response will be positive."

However, Abu Mazen has caused real confusion by remarks and action that can be understood as supporting violence.

On January 1st he lit a large torch in Gaza City to mark Fatah's 40th anniversary, which is dated from the group's first attack on an Israeli target, the bombing of a water tower. "The one who fired the first shot, the one who lit the first spark and the first torch 40 years ago, the martyr Yasser Arafat is alive and we will continue his path," said Mazen.

In Jenin, Abbas was borne on the shoulders of one of Israel's most-wanted fugitives, Al Aqsa Martyrs commander Zakaria Zubeidi. "We will not forget those wanted by Israel. These are the heroes that are fighting for freedom." "They are neither criminals nor murderers. Rather they are fighting for the honorable lives of their Palestinians brothers."

Despite saying he would rein in the terrorist groups he said in his acceptance speech after the election that he would not go after militant organizations. Later in Gaza he stated: "We say to our fighting brothers that are wanted by Israel, we will not rest until you can enjoy a life of security, peace, and dignity, so you can live in your country with total freedom." Mazen told supporters in Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip: "We came to you today while we are praying for the souls of the martyrs who were killed by the shells of the Zionist enemy in Beit Lahiya." The PLO stopped using the phrase "Zionist enemy" after signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Even Arafat stopped describing Israel as an enemy.

IS ABU MAZEN SERIOUS ABOUT A PEACE SETTLEMENT?

When he was selected as candidate by Fatah, Mazen outlined his policies. They included creation of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with its capital in Jerusalem, and a just solution of the refugee problem, in accordance with UN Resolution 194. In Gaza he stated: "We will never forget the rights of the refugees, and we will never forget their suffering. They will eventually gain their rights, and the day will come when the refugees return home." Many observers believe Israel will never compromise over Jerusalem and could not receive all the Palestinian refugees back without destroying the Jewish state.

It is understandable, therefore, that one Jewish writer stated: "He rejects the very legitimacy of a Jewish state, and will strive for its disappearance. But he differs from Arafat in being able to imagine more than one way of achieving this goal."

What should we make of Abu Mazen? Is he serious about ending Palestinian violence and achieving a peace settlement? Some of his statements recorded above seem to indicate he isn't. However, whereas Christians aren't called to be naïve - especially in the area of politics - nor are we called to judgmentalism.

Put yourself in Mazen's place. His statements are not just those of an electioneering politician earnestly seeking a political majority. He is surrounded not only by actual and potential critics, but by men of violence who might easily tire of him and arrange his assassination. Much as we may disapprove of some of his statements, we ought to give him a chance and to pray persistently for him, the Israeli leadership and the whole situation.

OBSTACLES TO PEACE

Tensions in the PA: These are illustrated by the fact that Marwan Barghouti, the popular, imprisoned leader of the younger PA faction, stood for election and faced a widespread campaign by many Palestinians against him, which finally forced him to withdraw.

On the other hand senior Palestinians speak of a "the campaign of incitement waged against [Abu Mazen] by Hamas and several other groups."

New Violence: Four days after the elections six Israelis died in a double suicide bomb attack at the Karni crossing in Gaza (the fourth attack in a month). Kassam rocket attacks continued. Abu Mazen condemned these actions, not least because the ensuing closure of the crossing by the Israelis predictably harmed the Gaza economy. Sharon broke off relations with Mazen and ordered the IDF to be ready to deal with the situation if the PA didn't. Mazen visited Gaza for urgent talks to curb the violence and ordered Palestinian security forces into the area to prevent further terrorism including Kassam attacks.

External forces: Iran, Syria and Lebanon-based Hezbollah are still encouraging Palestinian violence against Israel.

PRAYER

I suggest that you:

Give thanks:

- For the peaceful process leading to the Palestinian elections.
- For the restraint being shown by the Israelis.
- For the efforts being made by Abu Mazen to improve the situation.

Pray:

That the Palestinian leadership will:

- Be protected against people of violence
- succeed in the very difficult job of curbing violent extremists and establish not a mere Hudnah but a long-lasting peace
- cease stirring hatred towards Jewish people and Israel.
- establish a free, democratic society where people can express their views without fear, curbing abuses of the security forces.
- expand economic opportunities for millions of Palestinians, tackling unemployment, corruption and crime.

That the Israeli leadership will:

- successfully protect Israelis against terrorism
- act wisely to give appropriate support to the Palestinian leadership
- show wise restraint in responding to Palestinian violence
- act wisely in any peace talks

That the international community will:

- wisely encourage the Palestinian and Israeli leadership along the paths of justice and peace.

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Abbreviations & Glossary

Fatah: main PLO faction

Hamas: Islamic Resistance Movement

Hezbollah: Islamic Resistance Movement based in Lebanon, backed by Syria.

Hudna: an Islamic term meaning a tactical cease-fire that allows the Arabs to rebuild their forces for a more opportune time.

IAF: Israel Air Force

IDF: Israel Defence Force (Army)

Intifada: Uprising of the Palestinians

Islamic Jihad: Radical Islamic Resistance Movement

PA: Palestinian Authority

PLC: Palestinian Legislative Council/Parliament

PLO: Palestinian Liberation Organisation

ⁱⁱⁱ Formerly, the Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (ITAC)