

Paradox

by Tony Higton

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories Issue 21 January 7th 2009

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.

Tony is convinced that one cannot understand Israel without remembering the vivid and enduring memory of the Holocaust, in the context of centuries of anti-semitism which continues today, not least in the Arab world. They feel that long and bitter experience shows they cannot trust the world to protect them. Despite their military strength, they fear extinction as a nation. Tony feels that one cannot understand the Palestinians without remembering their humiliation at not having their own state and their sense of betrayal by the world powers, not least in the re-establishment of the State of Israel on what they regard as their land. They also feel humiliated and oppressed by Israel. Many of them believe that armed resistance is legitimate. Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, God loves both people groups, so should we.

*The newsletter is available free on request to those who send their name and email address to: tony@higton.info
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PARADOX WEBSITE www.prayerforpeace.org.uk includes history of the conflict of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Arabism, critique of Christian Zionism and Dispensationalism, teaching on reconciliation and justice, material for churches etc. Respond also to Tony Higton's blog www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/blog. Please tell others about the website and blog and it would help if you were to link your own website to it.

WAR IN GAZA

The violence between Israel and Hamas is, of course, the dominant factor in the current situation in the Holy Land. The temptation is to put the blame totally on one side or the other, which is unrealistic and unhelpful.

THE ISRAELI POSITION

It is obvious that no sovereign state can (or would) tolerate half a million of its citizens living in terror of rockets being fired deliberately at them and some being killed. I know people who live in Beersheva – including Messianic Believers who meet there. For the first time Palestinian rockets, which are increasing in range, have reached the town. This has led Israel to take very serious military action against Hamas in Gaza.

Israel claims the rocket attacks were what caused the ceasefire to break down. Before that they claim to have sealed off the Gaza border only in response to rocket attacks on Israel. They also repeatedly say that if the rocket attacks cease, Israel will discontinue its offensive. However, Hamas is dedicated to Israel's destruction and will not cease its attacks. So, in the view of the Israeli leadership, the only solution is to destroy Hamas.

The Israelis have reiterated that they are not deliberately aiming at civilians (unlike those who fire rockets from Gaza) and they are seeking, through precision targeting, to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible.

Hamas cynically places its rocket launchers and other military equipment amongst Palestinian civilians which endangers those civilians when Israel seeks to destroy the militants and their equipment. Israel has distributed leaflets warning Palestinian civilians to leave buildings which are about to be attacked. Israel therefore blames Hamas for the civilian deaths and injuries.

Hamas is an oppressive regime, especially towards Fatah members. It recently prevented Gazans from going on the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca - a religious duty. Unlike Fatah, led by Mahmoud Abbas, it is not seen as serious about the peace process.

The current American administration is outspoken in its condemnation of Hamas. George Bush and Condoleezza Rice blame Hamas for the breakdown of the ceasefire. White House spokesman Gordon Johnroe said of Hamas: "These people are nothing but thugs, so Israel is going to defend its people against terrorists like Hamas that indiscriminately kill their own people."

THE PALESTINIAN POSITION

1.5 million people are crammed into the Gaza Strip. Israel has often sealed off the border crossings. Palestinians (including children) suffer malnutrition. Restrictions enforced by Israel have led to the sewage system being ineffective which causes environmental and health hazards. Farmers cannot export their produce. Students cannot travel to places of education. Medical care is restricted. There are frequent power cuts and water doesn't reach top floors. Cooking gas runs out. Spare parts for cars, electrical appliances etc are prevented from entering Gaza as are construction materials. So key roads, including those to hospitals, remain unrepaired. Unemployment is high. Life in Gaza was miserable before the ceasefire broke down.

Israel is seen as taking every opportunity to prolong and intensify this misery by closing the border. The Israelis turned away Lybian and Israeli Arab ships which attempted to bring food and medical aid to Gaza (although they did allow earlier ships through).

Israel is seen as not limiting its attacks to militant targets, as, for example, in the recent attacks on two UN affiliated schools where Palestinian civilians were sheltering. In such a crowded, cramped place as the Gaza Strip there is nowhere for civilians to go even if they do receive warnings about forthcoming Israeli attacks.

At the same time Israel seems not to be serious about peace talks. Israeli Settlements on the West Bank remain and are even sometimes expanded, despite political decisions to the contrary.

The Palestinians blame Israel for breaking the ceasefire on November 4th by bombing a tunnel through which supplies were being smuggled. Some Israelis agree with this opinion.

It is clear then that both the Israelis and the people of Gaza have genuine and serious grievances, quite apart from what has been happening since the ceasefire broke down. There are serious faults on both sides.

IS THE ISRAELI RESPONSE DISPROPORTIONATE?

Obviously the two sides disagree over this. The Israelis believe they have to protect their citizens by attacking Hamas. Because of Hamas' policy of placing their military equipment amidst civilians Israel feels that a significant amount of "collateral damage" (civilian deaths and injuries) is necessary and justified. It is Hamas' fault. Certainly, many more Palestinians than Israelis are being killed and injured.

Israel is well aware that Hamas is increasingly a force to be reckoned with. It has 15,000 armed men supported by several thousand militants from other factions. With Iranian training they have become a disciplined paramilitary guerrilla group with more sophisticated weapons, including anti-tank missiles. There is a core military group of about 1000 men who are highly trained and disciplined. The organisation has a complex system of tunnels used to smuggle weapons and explosives. It also makes extensive use of booby traps.

However the legal adviser to the Israeli defence establishment said Israel should not use artillery fire against militants in populated areas. Such fire is only legitimate in more open areas. In 2006 the IDF established procedures only to use artillery fire in open spaces but when 18 Palestinian civilians were killed in Beit Hanun, Gaza they ceased using it altogether for a time. The legal adviser said that although the IDF can legally warn residents of impending artillery fire it should avoid carpet bombing which would destroy buildings which are not legitimate targets. It must also take bear in mind that some civilians will remain in an area even after a warning. The densely populated Gaza Strip makes this all very difficult.

A survey indicated that 52% of Israelis supported air attacks on Hamas but only 19% supported a ground assault.

However some Israelis are strongly critical of the IDF attacks on Gaza saying they are contrary to morality and international law. They even use the term "war crime." They add that it is also foolish as it will not achieve its purpose of neutralising militant violence (as the recent war against Hezbollah confirms). There is also a more moderate group of Jewish people who understand the reason for Israel's action but are very disturbed by the level of civilian deaths and destruction.

NEGOTIATION IS ESSENTIAL

Israel is not going to go away or capitulate to Palestinian violence. It is also clear that terrorists are not deflected from their purposes by being attacked. It is true that Hamas has suffered huge damage and great losses, including some of its senior leaders and a third of its rocket arsenal. It seems that some governments are willing to stand by for a limited time to see Hamas weakened. But to think the organisation will be destroyed and that casualties will not be replaced by new militants seems misguided. Rather Israel's attack will harden opposition from Palestinians and the Arab man in the street.

It is obvious that Hamas has not changed its conviction that Israel must be destroyed. Were they to do so the situation could change dramatically for the better, though to expect this is wishful thinking. However Hamas has shown some indication it is willing to negotiate. Ismail Haniyeh, the ousted prime minister of the Palestinian Authority has indicated that the Hamas government would be willing to offer Israel a long-term hudna (truce) if Israel accepted a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders. This does not mean they would give up their desire for what is now Israel to be included in a Palestinian State but it could mean a much better situation than the recent uneasy ceasefire and certainly than the current violence. Senior Hamas leaders Khaled Meshal has also stated that the organisation is willing to negotiate with the new US government. A few days ago Israel's Shin Bet Security Chief said that, after nine days of Israeli military action, Hamas had softened its demands with respect to a ceasefire.

Israel's position that it will not negotiate with Hamas is understandable. But it is, in fact, negotiating with Hamas via the Egyptians over the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. So there does not seem to be an absolute unwillingness to negotiate. The above-mentioned survey found that 19% of Israelis believed Israel should negotiate a ceasefire.

Israel's hard line over Gaza, which has caused such economic hardship and human suffering, strengthens Hamas. It's apparent lack of seriousness about the peace process and about making major concessions to Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority also strengthens Hamas. If Israel were to improve the economic and social conditions of the people of Gaza and to make serious but wise concessions in the peace process, this could bring about a situation where Hamas would establish a long-term hudna (which they have said they would consider) and would control extremists who might still seek to launch attacks on Israel.

The Israelis have a willing partner in negotiating with Hamas – the Egyptian government. Egypt has problems with Hamas after the latter torpedoed the Egyptian sponsored Hamas-Fatah dialogue. Also Egypt has imprisoned a number of Hamas officials in Sinai. A few days ago Egyptian President Mubarak told European leaders that Hamas must not be allowed to win its conflict with the IDF.

Unfortunately violence breeds violence and Israeli military action will have hardened the support of the Gazan population for the extremist government it has elected. Short of a softening in the Hamas leadership, the best hope for peace is to pray for a more moderate Palestinian leadership to govern Gaza.

STOP PRESS:

Israel has just agreed in principle with a French/Egyptian proposal for a ceasefire so long as it means Hamas rocket attacks will really cease. The Israelis have also allowed a three-hour lull today for lorries to bring essential supplies into Gaza. They plan to do the same each day of the conflict.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. For an enduring ceasefire in Gaza and southern Israel.
2. That the new government in Israel, soon to be elected, will be the one which will serve God's purposes.
3. That Israel will act with integrity and justice over West Bank settlements and that both sides will be willing to make appropriate compromises to achieve peace with justice.
4. For a curbing of settler violence against Palestinians and of Palestinian terrorism such as the recent vehicle attacks in Jerusalem.
5. For the alleviation of Palestinian poverty.
6. For the government of Gaza to become more moderate.