

Paradox

by Tony Higton

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories Issue 22 February 6th 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.

This edition is being sent out earlier than usual because of the Israeli Elections next week

**THE ISRAELI GENERAL ELECTION TAKES PLACE ON TUESDAY (FEBRUARY 10th). PRAY
THAT THE RESULT WILL BEST FURTHER JUSTICE AND PEACE**

DEVASTATION AND RECRIMINATION

The ceasefire is established but the damage has been done. Gaza has been devastated in certain areas and many people, including innocent civilians have died. Many more are injured or homeless. Israel is being accused of war crimes and the UN and the Human Rights Commission are calling for investigations.

The Red Cross claims Israel delayed ambulance access to Gaza. In one incident four starving children were found alongside their dead mothers. It claimed the IDF did nothing to assist. There are also claims that the IDF targeted medical crews.

The IDF admits that inaccurate fire (some 30 metres off-target) hit a UN school in Northern Gaza where residents were sheltering. Hamas alleges that 42 people were killed but the IDF claims this is an inflated figure.

The American Human Rights Group accused Israel of the firing of phosphorus shells at civilian areas, which is illegal. It may only be used as a smokescreen because in residential areas it causes severe burns. Israel admitted using phosphorus shells against Hezbollah in 2006.

For its part, Israel claims that Hamas deliberately used civilians as human shields. They showed footage of militants shooting from the UN school back in 2007. Hamas prisoners have also confirmed that the organisation used mosques to store arms and to carry out training exercises.

John Holmes, head of United Nations Humanitarian Affairs, told the UN Security Council that: "The reckless and cynical use of civilian installations by Hamas and indiscriminate firing of rockets against civilian populations are clear violations of international humanitarian law."

Some Israelis accept the criticisms of Israel but others stress that Israel was not deliberately targeting civilians and was obliged to react against rockets being fired indiscriminately at half a million of its innocent

civilians. Israelis also disagree over the effectiveness of the military operation. Some say that Israel failed to achieve its objectives of ending Qassam rocket attacks, preventing Hamas smuggling arms into Gaza and deterring Hamas from further violence.

However, others claim that Hamas softened its demands about conditions for a ceasefire as the IDF operation continued. It appears that Hamas has been seriously damaged with weapons factories and smuggling tunnels destroyed.

During hostilities international reaction seemed muted and there appeared to be a good deal of understanding that Israel was obliged to react against Hamas. However there is no doubt that Operation Cast Lead has caused deep anger against Israel on the Arab street and increased anti-Semitism in the West. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia warned Israel that the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative would not remain on the table forever.

THE HAMAS POSITION

Some reports say that there is reaction in private amongst Gazans against Hamas rule and strategy. It is also said that there is a struggle between hardliners and pragmatists in Hamas.

Hamas will use the war for political purposes. Through its use of rocket attacks against Israel and its survival of the war, Hamas has shown it is a force to be reckoned with in the region. It has already managed to cause division between Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Syria on the other.

Another effect seems to be a new desire by Mahmoud Abbas to bring about reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. He even hinted he might discontinue peace talks with Israel if they seemed to be achieving nothing.

Hamas is keen to achieve international recognition. Hamas leader Ghazi Hamad was reported in the press as saying: "We want to be part of the international community. I think Hamas has no interest now to increase the number of crises in Gaza or to challenge the world." It is well aware that President Obama is speaking of establishing respectful relations with the Muslim world. Some see an opportunity for Hamas to achieve some recognition. The group is listed by the US as a terrorist group, so, in itself, it would probably achieve nothing with Obama. But if Hamas achieves reconciliation with Fatah (and there are claims that it wishes to do so) then forms a Palestinian unity government, Obama may be willing to negotiate with it, even though it includes Hamas militants.

There are important obstacles. Hamas is funded and armed largely by Iran and may not be willing to sacrifice that support. Even more important, Hamas has not renounced violence or its basic aim of destroying Israel. The US would clearly require the group to cease rocket attacks on Israel and probably to end weapon smuggling. There have been attacks since the Israeli ceasefire: a Grad rocket hit Ashkelon and an IDF scout was killed on the Gaza border.

There has been division amongst the Hamas leadership over the Egyptian ceasefire proposals. The Gaza leadership was prepared to accept only a partial reopening of the crossings, restrictions on imports and the closing of the Rafah crossing until a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas is achieved. The Hamas leadership in Syria was demanding a complete opening of the borders. More recent reports say that Hamas agrees to a year's truce and has agreed to Fatah forces being deployed along the border crossings. This will enable the opening of the Rafah crossing into Egypt.

ISRAELI ELECTIONS

The Israeli elections take place on Tuesday February 10th. Israeli public opinion seems to have moved to the right and Binyamin Netanyahu who heads the right wing Likud party is the favourite to become Prime Minister. Tzipi Livni, who heads the centrist Kadima party hoped that the Gaza offensive would facilitate her victory but now the debate seems to be whether the offensive went far enough. The issues seem to be the defence of Israel and the protection of its Jewish character. Ehud Barak, Labour, is trailing third currently.

Livni:

- believes in working for a *peace agreement* with the Palestinians based on a two state solution.
- says she *could work well with Obama* towards a peace settlement and invites Israelis to "vote for change."

Barak:

- believes in working for a *peace agreement* with the Palestinians based on a two state solution.
- Favours *dismantling isolated settlements*.

Netanyahu

- has the campaign slogan: "Strong leadership for Israel's security and economy."
- believes Operation Cast Lead did not go far enough. When he visited the site of the rocket attack on Ashkelon he said: "We need to *topple the Hamas regime* in Gaza. The Likud led by me will act to bring down Hamas and remove the threat of missiles against the south."
- *does not believe in the two-state solution* but rather in economic development.
- is *promising a top job to Avigdor Lieberman* who is an ultra-nationalist, *accused of racism* in his hardline attitude towards Israeli Arabs.
- says he is against expanding any Jewish Settlements in the West Bank but he *will not expel any current settlers and will allow "natural growth."* "I will not keep Olmert's commitments to withdraw and I won't evacuate settlements. Those understandings are invalid and unimportant," he said. He added that giving up any occupied territory to the Palestinians, means it would be "grabbed by extremists".
- is *against returning the Golan Heights to Syria*.
- says that, if elected, his first mission will be to *remove the Iranian nuclear threat*. When asked on TV if this included a military strike, he replied: "It includes everything that is necessary to make this statement come true."
- *promises not to compromise Israel's security even if President Obama presses for a peace deal*. This is popular with Israelis who are uneasy about Obama's new policies. Obama wants a peace deal, not just talks and has appointed Senator George Mitchell, a very patient and experienced peacemaker as his envoy to facilitate this. Mitchell is strongly against Palestinian terror, but also is against expansion of Jewish settlements and closures being inflicted on the Palestinians. The Obama policies largely conflict with Netanyahu's views. They also have a different approach to Iran because Obama wants to negotiate with the Iranians (and the Iranians have said they are willing to co-operate if the US changes its policies in the Middle East).

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Pray for the Israeli elections next Tuesday that the result will best further justice and peace for both the Israelis and the Palestinians.
2. Pray for the Obama administration, and especially Senator George Mitchell, to be successful in furthering justice and peace for both the Israelis and the Palestinians.
3. Pray for the people of Gaza facing devastation, bereavement, injury and homelessness and that adequate aid will reach them quickly.
4. Pray against further rocket attacks on Israeli citizens.
5. Pray for frustration of extremism in Hamas.
6. Pray for frustration of extremism in Israel.
7. Pray for success for the Obama administration in reaching out to the Muslim world, including Iran.