

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 HORRORS OF WAR

The post-mortem on the Gaza war continues. Some Israelis regard it as a failure because it has strengthened the position of Hamas in Gaza and arms smuggling continues there (however Hamas did condemn a recent rocket attack on Israel by an extreme faction). In addition, world opinion has hardened against Israel because some IDF soldiers have revealed shocking details of bad, even criminal behaviour by Israeli forces. Israel claims the IDF is the most moral army in the world and, doubtless there are many IDF troops who behave morally and compassionately. However there is another side to the story

A Palestinian woman and her children mistakenly crossed a line they should not have done and were shot dead. Similarly an elderly Palestinian woman was shot dead on the orders of a company commander. Soldiers were ordered to kill anyone left in houses after a warning to leave, on the pretext that anyone who hadn't fled was, in effect, a terrorist. Yet, as some soldiers pointed out, the people had nowhere to flee in the densely populated Gaza Strip.

Soldiers wrote offensive graffiti on the walls of Palestinian homes, e.g. Death to the Arabs. They spat on family photos. They practised pointless destruction. They soiled clothes found in Palestinian homes with human faeces.

Numerous IDF soldiers wear t-shirts bearing offensive messages and pictures, for example:

- A pregnant Palestinian woman with a bulls eye superimposed on her stomach and the slogan 1 shot, 2 kills.
- A picture of a dead Palestinian baby beside a weeping mother with the slogan Better use Durex.
- We wont chill til we confirm the kill which refers to the practice of shooting a wounded enemy victim in the head, which the IDF denies happens.
- Let every Arab mother know that her sons fate is in my hands!
- An image of a child with the slogan Smaller harder (i.e. a small target is harder to hit).
- A soldier blowing up a mosque with the slogan Only God forgives.

An IDF colonel said that this sort of thing has gone on to his knowledge for 50 years. One Israeli Counter-terrorism expert said: These days the content on shirts is sometimes deplorable. It stems from the fact that profanity is very acceptable and normative in Israel, and that there is a lack of respect for human beings and their environment, which includes racism aimed in every direction. In response to these public revelations, the IDF chief education officer has called on commanders to eradicate such slogans.

Israel is also accused to excessive use of force in Gaza. The IDF is known to use huge fire power to protect its soldiers. Almost 5000 Palestinians were killed in Gaza. One Israeli commentator claims that half of them were innocent civilians and nearly 1000 children and teenagers. One cause may be that Israel gives its troops a great deal of autonomy.

I need to point out that all the above information is from Israeli sources.

There were also widespread accusations that IDF soldiers shot at Palestinian and Red Cross rescue workers with the result that some victims suffered or died unnecessarily. There are criticisms that Israel used white phosphorus shells illegally and that IDF soldiers shot at civilians waving white flags.

Of course, war brings out the worst in a minority of soldiers in any army. These evils are not limited to the IDF. Also soldiers are often in mortal danger and sometimes overreact. They are afraid of civilian suicide bombers and organisations like Hamas have to bear great responsibility for that. We also need to remember that Hamas and other Palestinian extremists deliberately target innocent civilians, as we have frequently recorded, so they have no

credibility in cynically criticising Israel. However none of this justifies the appalling behaviour which has been made public in Israel. Those who are concerned for Israel need to face up to and pray about the realities of the situation and not rely upon whitewashed propaganda accounts. The same can be said about those who are concerned for the Palestinians. Paradox stands firmly for the view that Christians should be concerned about and praying for both sides.

NETANYAHU AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu is now established as Israels new right wing prime minister and his foreign minister is Avigdor Lieberman who is an ultra-nationalist accused of being racist towards Israeli Arabs. Both seem to be trading on fear. Netanyahu is emphasising the threat from Iran and Lieberman the alleged threat from Israeli Arabs.

Netanyahu is seen as against a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and he believes the Jewish settlements on the West Bank should be allowed to expand naturally. He holds that Israel must retain 50% of the West Bank in the Jordan Valley and Judean Wilderness for security reasons (the previous government said Israel should retain only 6.5% and compensate the Palestinians with other land). Peace Now claims the Israeli government plans to build 73,300 new houses in the West Bank.

The prime minister said recently: We will carry out peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority with a view to reaching a final accord. Under the final accord, the Palestinians will have all the rights to govern themselves except those that can put in danger the security and existence of the state of Israel. The Palestinians were not encouraged by this statement.

Meanwhile the Arab states, meeting in Qatar warned Israel that their peace initiative will not remain on the table for much longer. Netanyahu could well respond positively to the initiative, especially as affording a united front against Iran and could keep the discussions going ad nauseam. However Lieberman called the initiative (with its call for a right of return for Palestinian refugees) a dangerous proposal, a recipe for the destruction of Israel.

At the same time, the idea of a single bi-national state (as opposed to the two state solution) is growing in popularity with some thinkers. This is because they think a real Palestinian state is not viable and they regard the present relationship between Israel and Fatah as an acceptable stalemate. They also think Israels new government wont proceed towards a two-state solution anyway.

THE OBAMA FACTOR

Netanyahu is due to meet President Obama on May 17th and is expected to press the American president to take action over Iran. Obama is expected to urge Netanyahu to cease expanding the settlements and to accept a two-state solution.

Obama is meeting Mahmoud Abbas in Washington on May 28th and is planning to visit Israel and the West Bank in June. He has promised to continue giving Israel military assistance and is refusing to talk with Hamas. However American sources have said Obama does not oppose the inclusion of Hamas in a Palestinian unity government, so long as the group stops the violence, recognises Israel and accepts previous peace agreements all of which is unlikely to be acceptable to Hamas.

It maybe that Netanyahus election does hold out some hope for Obamas Middle East policy. When he was prime minister from 1996-1999 Netanyahu was so unpopular in America that Clinton managed to exclude him from the White House with little reaction from the Washington pro-Israel lobby. So, if Netanyahu proves still to be unpopular, Obama may be able, without upsetting that lobby, to apply very strong pressure or even sanctions to the present Israeli government if they do not follow the two state peace process.

It is hoped therefore that Obama will move from facilitation of the peace process to active intervention. This would mean presenting a peace plan with international support and applying sanctions to both sides if they obstructed its implementation.

The question is, though, whether Netanyahu would yield to such pressure. Some Israelis believe that he wouldnt but that, as in the nineties, his government would not last long, but would be replaced by a centre-left government who would inherit the American plan.

Tony Blair has revealed that the Quartet (UN, EU, Russia and the US) led by Obama is working on a new peace plan. It is thought that this:

- Is based on the Arab Peace Initiative with some modifications to the requirement of a right of return for Palestinian refugees (which is a sticking point for Israel).
- Involves simultaneous bilateral talks between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and Syria (Netanyahu, Barak and Lieberman have all spoken in favour of peace talks with the Syrians and the Syrian President has said direct peace talks could happen if the US mediates).
- US military support for a demilitarised West Bank with a multinational force stationed there for some years.

Obama apparently does not accept Netanyahu's precondition for renewing peace talks of the Palestinians recognising Israel as the state of the Jewish people. Nor does he agree with Netanyahu that the Iranian threat must be dealt with before the peace process resumes.

THE PALESTINIAN SITUATION

Gaza is still devastated. A recent UN survey of 1200 young adult Palestinians found that 80% were depressed and this was worse in Gaza where the unemployment rate for that age group is 51% as opposed to 35% on the West Bank. However it is encouraging that 70% didn't believe violence helped to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Khaled Meshal, senior Hamas leader in Damascus, said recently that Hamas wanted a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders before the Six Day War. But he added that the group was only prepared to offer a 10-year ceasefire to Israel. He was also adamant that they would never recognise Israel's right to exist and criticised Fatah for appearing to do so.

Fatah leader Mohamed Dahlan responded that Fatah had not recognised Israel's right to exist. He added: We admit the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist, but that does not obligate us [Fatah] as a resistance movement.

This is a real sticking point. Hamas also holds that the Jewish people are seeking world domination. They work through secret organisations and control the media and the economy. They are responsible for the French and Communist Revolutions, for World War I (to destroy the Muslim Ottoman Empire). They even initiated the Second World War to profit financially by it! This is, of course, plain anti-Semitism such as found in the fictional Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

But whilst the Palestinians will not recognise Israel and dehumanise Jewish people and the Israelis simply waffle about a Palestinian state and dehumanise Palestinian people, the hope of peace with justice for both people groups is undermined.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Pray for the Obama administration, and especially Senator George Mitchell, to be successful in obliging both Israel and the Palestinians to move seriously beyond talks to a peace settlement.

2. Pray that the Arab states and the Quartet will successfully facilitate this.
3. Pray that the meetings between Obama and Netanyahu, Abbas and the Egyptians this month and Obamas visit to the Middle East in June will be successful.
4. Pray for the people of Gaza facing devastation, bereavement, injury and homelessness.
5. Pray that the IDF will clean up its act, discouraging wrong attitudes and preventing further wrong actions.
6. Pray for mutual recognition and respect between Israel and the Palestinians.
7. Pray for frustration of extremism in Hamas and in Israel.
8. Pray for success for the Obama administration in reaching out to the Muslim world, including Iran.

Tony Higton