

# 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

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PEACE TALKS?

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continued to express a willingness to talk with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. In fact, the two met for informal talks with President Obama during the UN General Assembly, the first talks since Netanyahu took office in March. Some commentators say Netanyahu is concerned about a possible need to fight Hezbollah and Iran and therefore wants peace with the Palestinians so he is not fighting on too many fronts. Other factors are concern about the possibility of the Labour Party withdrawing from the coalition and the effect of Israel becoming more isolated because of criticism of its actions in Gaza, and particularly the report on the war in Gaza by Judge Richard Goldstone (who is Jewish) which met with a very negative response in Israel. The UN Human Rights Council passed the report by 25 votes to six, 11 countries abstained, and five countries did not vote, among them Britain and France.

Goldstone put Operation Cast Lead, the IDF invasion of Gaza, in the context of the three-year closure of the Gaza Strip and the Israeli policy of razing homes, arrests, interrogations and torture, not only in the Gaza Strip but also in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Some Israelis asked why there hadnt been a report to condemn wrong actions and innocent civilian deaths in

Afghanistan or Iraq. Other Israelis pointed out that the military action in those countries had at least some international support. Israeli critics also said that Hamas, which had been firing rockets indiscriminately at civilian targets in Israel, got away almost scot free in the report, although Goldstone accused both sides of committing war crimes. Israel was accused of using disproportionate force and both sides were accused of deliberately causing civilian casualties (Hamas in its rocket attacks on Israel). Israel claimed that the Hamas policy of carrying out military activities from civilian centres schools and hospitals was not properly dealt with.

Abbas initially supported the report being sent to the UN Security Council which could have been the first step towards a war crimes trial. But then he changed his mind, under pressure from the US, much to the disgust of many Palestinians. The Americans told him such a trial could seriously delay the peace process. In the end, UN action on the report was delayed for six months. The US, China and Russia have declared themselves against a UN consideration of the Goldstone report. The UN General Assembly considered the report in November.

Mahmoud Abbas is demanding a complete freeze on Jewish West Bank settlements as a precondition of serious peace talks. Netanyahu has called for negotiations without pre-conditions but he refused to discuss the issue of Jerusalem and the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel in the early stages of any talks. He has also demanded that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a Jewish state, and he refuses to accept the Palestinian demand that the two states be divided by the 1967 border. Later he accused the Palestinians of deliberately delaying peace talks so that they do not have to face up to the compromises they need to make.

Israeli President Shimon Peres drew up a plan for a Palestinian state with temporary borders, but with a timetable for a permanent agreement. His intention was that this state should be set up in the near future. However the plan was not acceptable to Netanyahu.

At the end of 2009 the Egyptian Foreign Minister said that Netanyahu was serious about restarting peace talks. He added: I can't talk about details, but the prime minister was discussing positions that surpass in our estimate what we've heard from them in a long time. Saudi Arabia is backing an Egyptian plan to restart the peace process which is thought to include a commitment to a Palestinian state in two years time and a secret Israeli commitment to a settlement freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It is also thought to include an Israeli commitment to releasing some high-profile Palestinian prisoners and improving conditions on the West Bank. Arab news sources claim Obama is supporting the plan. Netanyahu said to a group of diplomats at foreign ministry: I hope we have reached the time to renew the peace process. The time for excuses is over. Now is the time for action.

One encouraging factor is that Netanyahu has shown courage over agreeing to freeze new building in West Bank settlements.

## **THE ISRAELI FREEZE**

The issue of Jewish settlements has come to the fore in the last few months. Such settlements are seen as a major hindrance to the peace process. Hilary Clinton, US Secretary of State, recently condemned all West Bank settlements as illegitimate and called for a permanent halt in their construction. On the other hand, the Central Bureau of Statistics revealed that in 2009 new home building in the West Bank settlements fell by one third, from 1015 to 672 compared with the same period in 2008.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has led Israel to adopt a 10-month freeze on all new Israeli housing development (but not new public buildings) in Palestinian areas, in order to re-start the Peace Process.

One influence on Netanyahu has been real concerns in Israel about the possibility of a new intifada. People are frustrated at the stalemate in the peace process and by the political crises in the Palestinian leadership including a stalemate in the negotiations between Fatah and Hamas.

The freeze is limited though. Netanyahu approved some 500 new homes before the beginning of the freeze. Also the freeze does not include East Jerusalem where, in November, much to the annoyance of the US, a plan was submitted for 900 new houses for Jewish people in Gilo, East Jerusalem. Gilo is on land captured in 1967 and subsequently annexed to Jerusalem. Hence the Palestinians rejected the freeze.

However Abbas said that if Israel completely halts construction in the settlements, peace negotiations on a final-status agreement could be completed within six months. The Americans have tried to soften Abbas position that there must be a total freeze.

The reaction to the freeze amongst settlers has, of course, been very negative. It is to be expected that some will take illegal action. A small but influential minority of West Bank settlers have a reputation for lawlessness and violent action, harassing Palestinians and stealing land. Unfortunately the Israeli government is seen as taking a lax line in response to such behaviour which deepens the controversy over the settlements.

It was partly because of Netanyahu's agreement to expansion in certain settlements that President Obama showed his disapproval when Netanyahu visited Washington.

Many Jewish settlers believe Netanyahu defeated Obama who originally called for a complete settlement freeze. The Palestinians feel Obama has let them down by accepting the partial freeze. Obama is not popular in Israel because they fear his determination to end the occupation of the West Bank. But Israel has to remember its continuing reliance on US support.

## **THE PALESTINIAN SITUATION**

Back in August the Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said that the Palestinians would establish a de-facto state within two years, whatever happened in the peace talks. However Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Israel would prevent that happening. Israel is worried that the UN could recognise such a state. Hamas has rejected the PA plan

because it accepts the existence of Israel, which Hamas does not. However, Hamas has been taking a tough line against any activists wanting to fire rockets into Israel.

In the Autumn Abbas announced he was going to step down at the next election, set for January 25<sup>th</sup>, although the Palestinian Authority has the power to postpone it. Hamas has already declared the election to be illegitimate. Abbas told Obama: If you cant halt the settlements why could I?

Meanwhile the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that 75% of Gaza inhabitants have nutritional deficiencies, 90% have power blackouts for four to eight hours daily, 40% of those who apply to leave for medical treatment are refused permission by Israel and 140,000 Gazans are unemployed.

## LEBANON, SYRIA AND IRAN

Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh has reiterated that Lebanon will never negotiate with Israel over the return of captured territory. Hezbollah still provides a threat to the Lebanese Government. It is also a real threat to Israel because it has chemical weapons and rocket capable of hitting Tel Aviv. The Israelis claim Syria has provided much of Hezbollah's weaponry.

However, Netanyahu has stated he is ready to renew peace negotiations with Syria. Syrian President Assad was positive about indirect talks with Israel through the Turks but seemed not to accept the idea of direct negotiations. Israel is well aware that Syria has a standing army (not reservists like Israel) and thousands of missiles which could hit any part of Israel. Also the Russians are reported to be supplying Assad with MiG fighters.

Syria has now announced it is prepared to renew peace talks with Israel without the pre-condition of Israel withdrawing from the Golan Heights. At the same time they accused Israel of not being serious about achieving peace.

Iran continues its warlike stance towards Israel and Israel is not ruling out an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. The discovery of the secret Iranian uranium enrichment facility near Qom has heightened the tension. The Israeli Military Intelligence chief has said Iran has accumulated enough materials to create a nuclear bomb. Obama has told Russia he cant indefinitely stop Israel attacking Iran. But many feel Israel will not attack without US support. It is too early to say whether the current unrest in Iran will lead to political change or not, but it does make Iran more vulnerable to sanctions.

### PRAYER TOPICS

1. Give thanks that Netanyahu has stated his willingness to resume peace talks.
2. Give thanks for the partial settlement freeze arranged by Netanyahu.
3. Give thanks that Hamas has been discouraging missile attacks on Israel.
4. Pray for a willingness to compromise in order to restart the Israel-Palestinian peace talks.

5. Pray that Mahmoud Abbas will stay on if he is the best person to further those talks.
6. Pray that playing politics and making insincere statements will not hinder the peace process.
7. Pray against men and women of violence in both the settler and the Palestinian communities.
8. Pray for the citizens of Gaza facing serious hardships.
9. Pray for peace between Israel and Syria.
10. Pray for a change of leadership in Iran so that the serious nuclear threat is removed.

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*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 of 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](mailto:tony@higton.info)

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Tony Higton

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