

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 Higon, 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.
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The Streets are Orange

Jerusalem is becoming increasingly orange as opponents of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza increase their campaign. Orange ribbons flutter from cars and handbags. This evening the activists will block all the road junctions in central Jerusalem for two hours. Recently right wing activists sprayed painted pavements/sidewalks in Tel Aviv white and orange. The temperature is rising now that disengagement is only some six weeks away.

The government have set aside three weeks for the evacuation from August 15th. But they claim that the absolute deadline would be Rosh Hashana (New Year) on October 3rd.

1. The Israeli settlements in Gaza

The main block of settlements is Gush Katif in the southern Gaza strip on the Mediterranean coast. There are two settlements in central Gaza, including Netzarim, and three in the north.

Gush Katif is home for some 8000 people. They have experienced thousands of attacks by Palestinian activists, including 5000 mortar shells and Kassam rockets, plus shootings. Fortunately there have been few resulting deaths. However, in the nearby cities of Rafa and Khan Yunis, hundreds of Palestinians have died in gun battles between the IDF and (mainly) Hamas.

2. Ariel Sharon's determination

Some 426 families in Gush Katif (one third of families) have so far agreed to relocate. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni are applying pressure to the rest. Despite heavy security, Sharon was heckled by those opposed to disengagement when he spoke at the 50th anniversary of Bar-Ilan University. They shouted: "Jews do not expel Jews" and "Traitor!" before being evicted. Palestinian and Israeli officials met recently to plan co-operation over the disengagement.

3. IDF prepare for disengagement

The Israel Defence Force is charged with the unenviable task of removing Israelis from their established homes and businesses in Gaza. They are being given psychological training for this traumatic task. They are also having to face the possibility of soldiers or policemen being taken hostage or shot at by the settlers.

A great deal of intelligence has been gathered concerning the families who live in the area, including on those who have lost loved ones in the conflict. Soldiers are being trained on how to deal with the civilians when asking them to leave their homes. They are also being trained on using minimum force.

Police will be unarmed but special forces will be on hand in case of extreme violence. At the same time, troops will be on the alert to prevent attacks by Palestinians or infiltration by supporters of the settlers.

4. Opposition to pull out

A number of people petitioned the High Court against the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law. But the judges rejected the petitions by a majority of 10 to 1. One lawyer argued that settlers in Gaza were given

every reason to believe they would be permanent residents. He quoted Moshe Dayan, Defence Minister 1968, who said: "I consider settlement to be the most important act in creating political facts. I believe this on the assumption that wherever we establish a settlement or a paramilitary settlement, we will not budge from it."

The authorities are worried that soldiers will refuse to obey orders and they have urged rabbis not to encourage them to do so. They also called on the rabbis not to incite people to violent opposition to disengagement.

Israeli Finance Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, who hopes to succeed Sharon as Prime Minister, criticised the disengagement plan because, he said, it would give Palestinians the impression that Israel could ultimately be destroyed through terrorism. He added that he would only have withdrawn from Gaza in the context of a final Peace Agreement.

It is a cause of concern to Ariel Sharon that recent polls show that public support for disengagement has now fallen below 50%. One poll showed that 33% are opposed, and 19% are undecided. In February support stood at 65%.

5. Israel's positive action towards the Palestinians

Israel realises that if it shows too much support for Mahmoud Abbas, PA Chairman, they could weaken his already reduced credibility amongst Palestinians and strengthen more extreme elements.

However, the Israelis are planning to hand over Bethlehem and then Kalkilya to Palestinian security control.

Also twice as many permits have been issued this year to Palestinians from Gaza who wish to enter Israel for humanitarian reasons, e.g. to gain medical treatment or visit security prisoners.

6. Mahmoud Abbas' positive action on corruption and violence

Meanwhile Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian Authority Chairman has his own problems. He united all PA security forces under the jurisdiction of three bodies – the Interior Ministry, the National Security Forces and the General Intelligence. He also planned to retire corrupt security officers.

However, he promoted two of the retired security officers, General Musa Arafat, commander of the National Security Force and Military Intelligence and General Amin al-Hindi, head of General Intelligence to be his senior advisers. In this way he hoped to avoid a revolt against his leadership.

Unfortunately, however, Abbas was forced to cancel an award ceremony in Gaza to honour senior security commanders when most of them said they would boycott the event.

The Palestinian Authority also ordered a criminal investigation against five judges suspected of financial corruption and abusing their power.

In addition to fighting high level corruption, the PA is facing a great deal of lawlessness and anarchy in Gaza. Increased numbers of policemen will patrol the streets looking for stolen vehicles and suspected criminals.

Abbas also stated publicly that he believes the era of the suicide bomber is over. "We stopped the culture of violence and the Palestinian people have started looking at it as something that should be condemned and it should stop." However he warned that if there was no progress towards a Peace Agreement "despair and loss of hope will come back and a return to the old ideas" of armed resistance.

He strongly denounced bomb attack at the Stage club in Tel Aviv on February 25, but said: "It was perpetrated by individuals, and all the Palestinian factions have denied any involvement."

Abbas also ordered weapons seizures in the West Bank. However he warned that “a full and final cessation of violence is not possible while the Israeli army is killing Palestinians daily.” Also, according to Rashid Abu Shabak, commander of the PA Preventative Security Service in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the PA has no intention of disarming the Palestinian "resistance" groups, but it is determined to enforce law and order, thus preventing chaos on the streets or threats to democracy. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei threatened to suspend the activities of his cabinet unless the PA security forces took drastic measures to restore law and order. Armed criminals are roaming the streets and imposing a reign of terror and intimidation on the public.

On March 15th in Cairo, the Palestinian factions agreed, not a hudna (strategic ceasefire) but a tahdiah (calming of the situation), but only if the Israelis “stop all forms of aggression against our lands and against our Palestinian people wherever it exists, and to liberate all prisoners and detainees.” They pointed out the potential of continued Israeli settlements, construction of the Fence and the “Judaization of East Jerusalem” to cause an explosion.

7. Palestinian elections

At the beginning of June, Abbas issued an official statement postponing elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, from July 17th until November.

It appears that the main reason was that Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) did so well in the recent local elections, so threatening the ruling Fatah party with defeat. The security forces in Gaza also seemed to be rebelling against him. He faces personal problems too. He is suffering from health problems, which required a hospital visit in Amman. Afterwards he said that it was his intention to appoint a vice president in the very near future, “because life is in God's hands and it is better to be prepared for any development.”

Abbas was due to meet Khaled Meshal, political leader of Hamas, in Cairo soon to discuss the new election date which some Fatah sources are saying would not be until the end of the year. Hamas claims that the postponement is a violation of their earlier agreement

Hamas won almost a third of the cities and villages in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which poses a serious challenge to the ruling Fatah faction, which only gained 40% of the votes. Traditional Fatah strongholds in Gaza fell to Hamas.

It is important to remember that, though well known for terrorist attacks, Hamas provides a strong social and religious service for Palestinians, working through mosques and Islamic societies, and is generally regarded as less corrupt than Fatah. The dangers now facing Abbas and Fatah are that:

- Hamas will veto moves towards peace, since it is committed to Israel's destruction.
- Marwan Barghouti, who leads the more radical younger Fatah activists, might form an alliance with Hamas.
- Gaza will become a Hamas state. One Fatah leader warned: “The Gaza Strip will be controlled by Hamas and Islamic Jihad after the Israelis leave. Their power will grow when Palestinians realize that the Gaza Strip has been turned into a big prison after the withdrawal.” Former Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) director Avi Dichter publicly warned that Hamas is forming in Gaza "an army of thousands of armed men based on the model of the Hizbullah in Lebanon." Huge quantities of weapons have been smuggled into the Gaza Strip.

However there is a limit to the number of Palestinians who will support the radical Islamic policies of Hamas. The votes for Hamas may well be protests against the peace process, the weakness and corruption of the PA and adverse social and economic conditions. If these factors improve, support for Hamas may decline.

Hamas is not really ready to rule and it is unpopular with various countries, including the US. Coming into government could lead to an international backlash which could adversely affect the Palestinians, and therefore the popularity of Hamas. Currently, the organisation is popular because of its social services. If it became the government it would be blamed for all the inadequacies of Palestinian social provision.

Abbas thinks that including Hamas would tend to tame the organisation and make it subject to democratic forces.

However, Palestinian Authority Civil Affairs Minister Mohammed Dahlan warned that current Israeli policies will lead to a third intifada. This view is strengthened by the fact that the Palestinians regard the June summit between Sharon and Abbas, as a failure. They criticised Israel's making major concessions dependant on there being no violence on the Palestinian side.

Meanwhile, a Gaza psychologist has established the Palestinian Party of Love, to fight the "culture of death and hatred in Palestinian society." "Love is the only way to salvation," he explained. "Once love prevails among us, the signs of hatred, ignorance, bigotry, fear, death, corruption and anarchy will disappear. The stupidity of death must be stopped Love purifies our souls and enlightens us. Let's open our hearts and minds and declare the launching of the Party of Love." He has received death threats from many Palestinians, who are accusing him of promoting "immoral" values.

8. Other threats to peace

Jundallah, or "Allah's Brigades," a new Muslim terrorist group linked to al-Qaida, has started operating in the Gaza Strip, according to Palestinian Authority security officials. It consists mainly of former Hamas and Islamic Jihad members, who believe that Hamas and Islamic Jihad have become too moderate.

In early June, Syria test-fired three Scud missiles last week. Damascus' denied it but had to apologise to Turkey when missile debris fell on Turkish villages.

Islamic Jihad, which refused to accept the tahdiah, are threatening to resume attacks on Israel. They are seeking to undermine Abbas by doing so.

Please Pray

1. For there to be violent reaction to the Gaza withdrawal.
2. For God's protection to all concerned: the Jewish people being moved from Gaza, the IDF.
3. For those moved to settle in their new accommodation quickly.
4. For Mahmoud Abbas and his colleagues to be successful in fighting corruption and lawlessness in Palestinian Society.
5. For Israel to continue to give what support it can to Abbas.
6. For God to frustrate men of violence and those who favour terrorism.
7. For the Palestinian elections to take place at the right time and to lead to results which will serve God's purposes.

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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

Tahdiah: calming of the situation, e.g. curbing violence.

¹ Formerly, the Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (ITAC)