

# Paradox

by Tony Higton

## ***The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories Issue 39 March 2014***

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## **The serious situation facing Israel and the Palestinians**

I write with a deep sense of concern for both the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Peace Talks seem in danger of failing and, if they do, the results for both people groups could be serious:

- Israel could become increasingly marginalised by the world, as seems to be happening even now.
- The Palestinians will be seriously frustrated and angry that they are not moving towards having their own state.
- Another Intifada (Palestinian uprising) could well occur which would cause great suffering on both sides.

The Americans decided to intervene in the Israeli-Palestinian issue by proposing a new plan for peace, dealing with the core issues and based on the 1967 borders (with necessary land-swaps). It would also take seriously the Arab Peace Plan for regional peace. In addition the US would make a large financial investment in the Palestinian economy. John Kerry has been working tirelessly to further this plan. He wants to reach an outline agreement by the end of April.

### **Netanyahu and the Peace Talks**

Some people believe that Netanyahu spoke very positively some time ago of the idea of a Palestinian state because he wanted the Americans to support Israel in acting against the Iranian nuclear facilities. Now that there has been some apparent improvement in relationships between the world powers and Iran it is clear that the US is not going to take military action against Iran. So, these people say, Netanyahu is paying President Obama back by retreating from the two-state solution. He has been very critical of the agreement with Iran, calling it a 'historic mistake' and says it threatens Israel's security because Iran could still easily and quickly create nuclear weapons.

Others say that Netanyahu is moving towards genuinely wanting peace with the Palestinians. He did say at the end of 2013 that Israel was ready for historic peace with the Palestinians based on [two states](#) for two people and he repeated that at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual conference in Washington at the beginning of March. However, as always, he has to appease the powerful right wing politicians such as Avigdor Lieberman who distrusts the Arabs and predicts the peace talks will fail. But he did also say that US Secretary of State John Kerry's proposals were the best Israel could get: "Every alternative offer we will get from the international community will not be better than Kerry's offer." This should not be seen as him accepting the proposals, though.

Another right-wing politician, Moshe Ya'alon, Israeli Defense Minister, repeatedly recently: "Don't delude yourselves. We don't have a partner on the Palestinian side for a two-state solution." On another occasion Ya'alon said that Kerry was "obsessive and messianic," that his security plan is "not worth the paper it is written on." He added "the only thing that can save us is if John Kerry wins the Nobel Prize and leaves us alone." This produced a very negative reaction from the Americans. Also Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin said "the 1967 borders are Auschwitz borders" and therefore "The Jordan Valley must be under Israeli sovereignty forever." Ya'alon was forced to apologise by Netanyahu but he then began to make similar criticisms of the Americans as not facing up to Iran, manifesting weakness around the world and only showing self-interest in supporting Israel. Yet the Americans are Israel's main providers of military, economic and political assistance. As Minister of Defence he ought to understand that without their help Israel would be in serious danger. Again he was forced to apologise.

One potential cause of hope is that both Netanyahu and Abbas could face serious political problems personally if the peace talks fail. Two of Netanyahu's colleagues in government, Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni, (who between them control 25 seats in the coalition) have said they will leave the government if the talks break down.

Another cause for hope is that 76% of Hebrew-speaking Israelis would support a peace deal based on Kerry's proposals, an increase over polls taken in recent months.

## **Abbas and the Peace Talks**

In November Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, resigned because Israel revealed plans to build 24,000 homes on the West Bank. Fortunately Netanyahu ordered a halt to this development and talks resumed. However Abbas said he had written to 29 countries in Europe and elsewhere asking them to cease all commercial and business ties with Israel settlements.

Abbas said in February that the Israeli military presence and settlements in the West Bank could gradually be removed over a period of five years after a peace agreement was signed. He had previously said three years. He also said

that Palestine would not have an army but only a police force. They would be willing for NATO to provide forces on its eastern border for as long as necessary. However they refused Israel's demands that Israeli troops must remain in the Jordan Valley. Abbas also said that the Palestinians would not share sovereignty on Temple Mount but that they would allow Jews to pray at the Western Wall.

Hamas has different ideas. It said that any international forces on Palestinian territory would be unacceptable. It also called all Palestinian factions to unite in opposing the continuation of the peace talks.

## **Hindrances to reaching agreement**

### **Expansion of West Bank Settlements**

Israeli West Bank settlements continue to expand and Netanyahu has insisted that an Israeli military presence must remain in the Jordan Valley (which is in the West Bank). The Central Bureau of Statistics reported that the number of housing built in the settlements more than doubled in 2013. 2534 houses were built there last year and another 1400 have been approved this year. Also this year 558 new apartments have been approved in East Jerusalem.

Israeli Labor MP Stav Shaffir has recently revealed that \$172 million has been secretly transferred to settlements by the government over the winter session. They were not in the budget but were brought to the Knesset Finance Committee as 'budgetary changes.'

Even when the courts order that a settlement should be removed the process can be long delayed. The Amona outpost was ordered to be demolished in 1997. Another order was issued in 2003. In 2006 just nine buildings were demolished. In 2011 the state declared it would be evacuated by the end of 2012 but by the end of 2012 nothing had happened and in mid-2013 the state asked for a further postponement -16 years after the first demolition order.

In February *Breaking the Silence*, an organisation of ex-Israeli soldiers, reported that since the Second Intifada (2000-2005) Hebron has been transformed into a ghost town with 1892 shops closed and the city centre abandoned because of movement restrictions. 80% of Palestinians living there under Israeli army rule are under the poverty line. 650 soldiers man 18 army check points to guard less than 1000 settlers living in the heart of the city.

My wife and I lived in Israel for most of the Second Intifada with Palestinian terrorist bombs exploding around us. We also know that Hebron was a very tense and potentially violent city. That is the other side to the story. But Israel does not serve the cause of justice or peace by reacting in this way.

Some Israeli settlers themselves can be violent. In October masked Israelis attacked a Palestinian elementary school, pelting it with stones and terrifying the children, vandalised teachers cars and burnt hundreds of olive trees. Another Palestinian village was attacked overnight.

One Israeli newspaper published a strongly-worded editorial: “The settlement enterprise has turned Israel into an immoral state whose policies are unacceptable to the world of which it seeks to be part. It’s regrettable that the government hasn’t understood this on its own, but the international community must make this clear to it.” That was written by Israelis to Israelis and, although it is, of course, not the only Israeli opinion, it needs to be taken seriously, including by those of us who love Israel (as well as the Palestinians) and believe God has an important purpose for her.

On the other hand Israel has released a large number of Palestinian prisoners as part of the peace process. The Palestinians therefore put on hold signing up to international bodies and treaties after their recognition by the UN.

#### Demand for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state

I can well understand the Israeli concern for security. After 2000 years when most Jewish people have been in exile and suffered greatly, culminating in the Holocaust, they are determined to keep their safe homeland for Jewish people. They want security from military attack but also from demographic change which could eventually mean the end of a Jewish majority in the land. However, the demand from Netanyahu and others that the Arabs must agree to Israel being a Jewish state is seen by the Palestinians as a hindrance to peace. John Kerry has pointed out that the issue was resolved in 1947 UN Resolution 181 which divided Palestine into two states, one for Jews and one for Arabs. Yasser Arafat's accepted it in 1988. He added that it is unhelpful and unnecessary for the issue to be repeatedly raised during the peace talks.

Recently the Citizenship Law has been amended to prevent Israelis from forming a family in Israel with Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza. This is seen as discriminatory because it is likely only to apply to Arab Israelis. Palestinians are concerned about rights of the 20% of Israelis who are Arab. They also see it as a possible preparation for when Israel annexes areas of the West Bank, so increasing Israel’s Arab population. It is not helped by the fact that some people have racist reasons for insisting the state must be Jewish. For example Ben Dahan (deputy Minister of Religious Affairs) has stated that “a Jew always has a much higher soul than a non-Jew.” The need to protect a Jewish majority is a complex issue but Israel is a democracy and must protect the interests of Arab Israelis.

#### Knesset [Israeli parliament] debate on sovereignty over Temple Mount

On February 25<sup>th</sup> Moshe Feiglin a very right wing member of Netanyahu’s Likud party, initiated a debate because Jordanian-backed Palestinian officials

control Temple Mount and prevent Jewish people from praying or unfurling Israel flags on it. Feiglin wanted Israel to enforce Israeli sovereignty over the mount, which would lead to extremely serious consequences. Netanyahu managed to prevent a vote on the motion but that didn't prevent violence breaking out on the mount and the Jordanian parliament voting unanimously to expel the Israeli ambassador (although the cabinet is unlikely to do so). Hanan Ashrawi, PLO spokeswoman, said the debate was an "extreme provocation to Muslims worldwide. Using religion as a pretext to impose sovereignty on historical places of worship threatens to plunge the entire region into great conflict and instability."

### Palestinian violence

In October Israel discovered a Palestinian "terror tunnel" running into Israel from Gaza. In March at least 70 rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel. Fortunately there were no casualties. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman responded by saying "there is no choice but a full takeover of the [Gaza] Strip." He added that Gaza's many weapons are "a hostage in the hands of a group of terrorists."

There were 157 incidents of Palestinian stone-throwing attacks in September compared with 121 in the previous September.

The Israeli army confronted an armed Salafist [extreme Sunni Muslim] group near Hebron recently. It is known to have leanings towards Al-Qaida.

### Potential damage to Israel

If the peace talks fail the results are likely to be:

#### Political Isolation

The fact that there was no senior representation of Israel at Nelson Mandela's funeral is a symbol of her growing isolation. There is increasing economic boycott of Israel and this is a symptom of the growing disapproval of her failure to reach peace with the Palestinians (as well as to continue to expand the settlements).

Sadly, an associated problem is a new wave of anti-Semitism, particularly in Europe. Professor Guy Millière, of the University of Paris has written that "Hatred towards Israel is now the most widely shared sentiment among Europeans." It is a revival of traditional anti-Semitism but it now includes demonization of the State of Israel. Millière says that "The Islamic view of Israel is now the dominant view of Israel in Europe." This sees Israel as a colonial power which has robbed people of their land. It is not enough for

Israel simply to condemn this attitude. She must also seek to remove some of causes of it, particularly with respect to the Palestinians.

#### Economic problems

John Kerry has warned Israel of boycotts (although he does not support them) and some have already taken place. A Danish bank has blacklisted an Israeli bank for financing settlement expansion. A large Dutch pension fund has divested from Israel's five main banks. A Norwegian government pension fund will no longer invest in Israeli firms. Germany has taken similar action. Last summer the European Union Commission released new guidelines forbidding EU organizations from providing grants or loans to Israeli organizations with connections to settlements. The EU is Israel's largest trading partner and even a limited boycott which reduced Israeli exports to the EU by 20% would cost \$3bn a year. Israel has begun to take the possibility seriously recently.

#### Violence

At the end of 2013 a survey found that 70% of Palestinians thought the peace talks would fail and 58.7% think a third intifada will begin on the West Bank. 38% supported the intifada being violent, 55% didn't.

### **Potential damage to the Palestinians**

#### Takeover by extremists

If the talks fail, Hamas would seek to take over from Abbas by criticising him for being incompetent and claiming that negotiations with Israel are pointless. They claim the peace negotiations are a US-Israeli conspiracy to "quash the Palestinian national struggle and what is left of its principles, following 20 years of negotiations that have not produced anything but illusions."

#### US veto

If the peace talks fail Obama would be unlikely to support the Palestinians becoming full members of the UN, which is one of the few courses of action open to Abbas to apply non-violent pressure to Israel.

#### Economic difficulties

Failure of the peace talks would perpetuate Israeli restrictions on the Palestinians which the World Bank said in October were the cause of the Palestinian excessive dependence on foreign aid. They added that the

Palestinian economy would expand by more than a third if Israeli restrictions on movement, land access and water use were lifted

### **The wider picture**

In addition to all the issues with the Palestinians, Israel is very concerned about the situation in the wider region. We have already noted her concern about Iran and the deep distrust of the agreement reached between Iran and the world powers. Israeli Economy Minister, Naftali Bennett, said the only result of the agreement is that Iran is likely to construct a nuclear bomb within weeks.

Then there is the situation in Syria. The West supports the Syrian opposition but it is dominated by extremists of similar views to Al-Qaeda. One such group is Isis, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Apparently, Syria has now superseded Pakistan as the first choice of Muslims from the UK seeking terrorist training. Israel is reported as making air attacks on Syria six times this year, one in retaliation against an attack on an Israeli patrol in the Golan Heights and others to prevent rockets being conveyed from Syria to Hezbollah for possible use against Israel. Rockets were fired from Lebanon into Israel in December. Naturally, the Israelis are worried that if Assad falls the extreme jihadists will then turn their attention to Israel.

Israel is also suspicious of Saudi Arabia. The West tends to be friendly towards the Saudis for important economic reasons. But Saudi Arabia bears much responsibility for the actions of groups which share the philosophy of Al-Qaeda. The Saudis have criticised the West for “risking the security of the region” by not intervening in Syria. There are reports that, because the Saudis helped to finance the Pakistani nuclear weapons programme, the Pakistanis have made nuclear bombs for Saudi Arabia and they are ready to be sent there.

It is easy to see why Israel is worried about the regional situation and its behaviour with respect to the Peace Talks has to be seen in this context. On the other hand, failing to reach an agreement with the Palestinians makes Israel’s situation even more dangerous.

### **Pray**

1. For a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians and for John Kerry and others seeking to facilitate it.
2. For God to bring peace and justice to Syria.
3. For God to frustrate the intentions of extremists throughout the Middle East.

