

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

Yet another Crisis!

I wasn't intending to circulate another newsletter so soon but the situation in the Middle East is currently so sensitive and dangerous that I feel obliged to encourage your prayers.

PROGRESS IN NEGOTIATIONS

The encouraging factor was that Hamas seemed to be moving towards some acceptance of the proposals drawn up by Palestinian prisoners in Israel which Mahmoud Abbas had challenged them to do.

Only a week ago Hamas and Fatah agreed:

- to limit resistance operations against Israel which will focus on the 1967 borders
- to join in a government of national unity (presumably with Hamas retaining a majority)
- to recognise international agreements (which further the welfare of the Palestinians)
- to accept the PLO continuing as the sole representative of the Palestinians

These agreements display a very significant move by Hamas in a positive direction, which de facto recognises Israel, but it does not recognise the legality of occupation because that might be interpreted as Israel's occupation of the whole of the land and not just the West Bank..

Some will say that this is just a cynical move by Hamas to get out of a difficult situation with almost worldwide economic sanctions against them. But I am more hopeful because Hamas realise that:

- The economic sanctions would remain or be reinstated if they misbehave in the future.
- They cannot count on the Palestinian people supporting a hard-line policy (but see below)

Olmert and Abbas met in Petra and the two embraced but this meeting led to serious criticism of Abbas as a lackey of the Israelis. Whatever the motives (which are often very mixed in politics) I think we should thank God for all this as an answer to prayer. However there were two very negative developments.

THE DEATH OF INNOCENT PALESTINIAN CIVILIANS

There is argument as to whether it was an IDF shell which killed the innocent civilians on a Gaza beach on June 9th. The IDF, which normally accepts its errors, after a full investigation (including tracking and the type of shrapnel), claims it was not an IDF shell that caused the tragic deaths. Whether one accepts that or not, the fact is that the Palestinians believe it was an IDF shell. Obviously, this has done enormous damage to the negotiations and to Palestinian attitudes towards Israel.

THE KIDNAP OF GILAD SHALIT

The surprise and very effective Palestinian attack on the IDF via the tunnel in Gaza came as a great shock and humiliation to the Israelis. The kidnap of Corporal Shalit is a huge trauma for them. Some say the attack was in revenge for the death of the innocent Palestinians, but, given the tunnel construction, this would seem to be a long-planned action. It may be that the kidnap was an unplanned, opportunist event. But it is important to understand the emotional impact this has on Israelis. The army is an important, ever-present fact of life in Israel. Each family will have someone close in the forces and so a kidnapping is really traumatic. Link all this the shock, humiliation and trauma - with the Israeli conviction that only zero tolerance can prevent more such events and you have the background to the heavy military response with tanks and forces massing on the Gaza border and the warning shots which have caused extensive damage to the Gaza infrastructure. A power station, several roads, a university and other buildings were hit. This has led to power and water shortages for Palestinians. However, Israel decided to put a full scale offensive on hold as they have been urged to do by other countries including Egypt.

Meanwhile the IDF arrested 64 Palestinian Government Ministers and 23 military activists. They have made it clear that not even Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh is safe from arrest. Israel claims that this is action against a terrorist organisation but it greatly inflames the situation. Furthermore Israeli planes have buzzed the palace of the Syrian President because Khaled Mashaal, the supreme Hamas leader is in exile in Syria.

Israel has also refused to comply with Palestinian demands that Palestinian prisoners should be released in exchange for Shalit.

And all this comes at a time when the possibility of peace moves seemed very clear.

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY?

As is often the case, it is possible to give up hope. It seems a disastrous situation with both sides taking action which is guaranteed to wreck the whole peace process.

However, there are some signs of hope:

- Some in the Palestinian government clearly disapprove of the kidnapping. Hamas Government spokesman, Ghazi Hamed called on the kidnappers not to harm Shalit and PA Deputy Prime Minister Nasser al-Shaar called for his release. Mahmoud Abbas condemned the attack. Also at least one senior Fatah member has blamed Hamas for the Israeli action.
 - Egypt is negotiating with Hamas head Khaled Mashaal, in Syria, urging him to order the release of Shalit.
 - Although some call Israels military reaction blackmail, it does seem that it could possibly have the effect of bringing about more positive moves towards peace. Both Israel and the Palestinians must realise that further escalation would be very serious and would benefit no-one. In particular the Hamas Government could fall (which many could regard as a good thing but the alternatives may not be better. Also it would re-galvanise the violent activities of Hamas). Also Israeli citizens, especially on the West Bank, could become very vulnerable to kidnapping. Negotiations have not ceased and could have a positive outcome.
 - G8 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) are pressurising both sides to exercise restraint. China is advising restraint and urging the Palestinians to release Shalit.
1. Give thanks for positive moves by the Hamas Government (however they have been caused).
 2. Pray for restraint by both sides.
 3. Pray that Shalit will be released unharmed and that Israel will respond in a way which will further the Peace Process.
 4. Pray for the Palestinians who, in addition to on-going poverty, are, in Gaza, facing lack of electricity and water supplies. Pray that these will be restored quickly.
 5. Pray for Gilad Shalit and his family and all who are traumatized by his kidnap.
 6. Pray for a Palestinian coalition government which will accept a two-state solution.

Tony Higton