

Paradox

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories Issue 41 December 2014

*The newsletter, which seeks to take the needs, pain and fears of both sides seriously,
is available free on request to those who send their name and email address to:*

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The growing disapproval of Israel

It is a real cause of concern that Israel is becoming increasingly unpopular in the world. There are various causes:

1. The Gaza conflict

At the end of July a UN girls school in Gaza was hit by Israeli shells which killed 19 and injured over a hundred others. The UN Claims Israel had been warned 17 times that the school was full of refugees. The Commissioner for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees said the killings were the result of Israel action and were “a source of universal shame.” The US said the attack was “totally unacceptable” and “totally indefensible.” The EU said “It is unacceptable that innocent displaced civilians, who were taking shelter in designated UN areas after being called on by the Israeli military to evacuate their homes, have been killed.”

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary General called the attack “moral outrage and a criminal act ... a gross violation of international humanitarian law.” Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, accused Israel of deliberately defying international law and said the world powers should hold it accountable for possible war crimes. “This is why again and again I say we cannot allow impunity; we cannot allow this lack of accountability to go on.” However she added that by placing and firing rockets in heavily populated areas both sides were guilty of “a violation of international humanitarian law, therefore a war crime.” She continued that Hamas had violated international law by firing rockets indiscriminately into Israel.

The Goldstone inquiry into the previous Gaza war criticised both sides but eventually rejected the idea that Israel deliberately targeted civilians.

It is worth recording that in October the daughter of Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader in Gaza, was admitted to an Israeli hospital after she had suffered complications in a routine procedure. The Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv said: “She is one of more than 1,000 patients from the Gaza Strip and

Palestinian Authority territories, children and adults, who we treat every year.”

2. The failure of the peace talks

There were reports earlier this year that Khaled Meshal, leader of the political wing of Hamas had agreed to the idea of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Also a senior Hamas official said that Hamas would be willing to negotiate directly with Israel. It is thought this is because Hamas is worried that Mahmoud Abbas is trying to reclaim control over Gaza from Hamas. Subsequently Hamas and Fatah agreed to the civil administration of Gaza being ruled by a Palestinian unity government led by Abbas. Negotiations between Israel and Hamas were due to resume in Egypt late October but were postponed by Egypt when 33 Egyptian soldiers were killed by Palestinian militants on the Sinai.

In October Benjamin Netanyahu repeated: “I am committed to two states for two peoples.” He also spoke of involving Arab states in the peace process. However, it seems to many people that the current Israeli government is not serious about a peace settlement.

In December a poll revealed that 63% of Israelis favour peace talks, although 70% don't think they will be successful. An earlier poll found that 75% of Israeli Jews oppose the creation of a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders if it means withdrawing Israeli troops from the Jordan Valley.

Netanyahu, of course, defends his apparent lack of seriousness over the peace process. At the opening of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) in October he said: “Israel will not lose hope for peace, but neither will it cling to false hope. The Palestinians are demanding of us to establish a Palestinian state – without peace and without security. They demand withdrawal to the 1967 lines, admitting refugees and dividing Jerusalem – and after all these exaggerated demands they are not prepared to agree to the basic condition for peace between two peoples – mutual recognition. [They] refuse to recognize the national character of our state.”

Naftali Bennett, Israel's minister of the economy and the leader of the right wing, religious Jewish Home Party, made similar comments: “for its security, Israel cannot withdraw from more territory and cannot allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. ... terrorists who would be able to set up rocket launchers adjacent to the Old City of Jerusalem and on the hills above the runways of Ben-Gurion International Airport and the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. Take the Jordan Valley. The Palestinians demand that Israel withdraw from this narrow piece of land, which borders Jordan. But if we do so in today's climate, we potentially open the door for the Islamic State and other extremists to flood into the new Palestinian state. We cannot take that risk.”

These fears have to be taken seriously but the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people must also be taken seriously and his suggestion of upgrading Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank will not satisfy the Palestinians. Also, from Israel's point of view, its security is increasingly being undermined by the failure of the peace talks.

Shabtai Shavit, ex-head of Mossad (the Israeli intelligence service) said recently: "For the first time I fear for the future of Zionism. The nation of Israel is galloping blindly toward Bar Kochba's war on the Roman Empire. The result of that conflict was 2,000 years of exile. From the beginning of Zionism in the late 19th century, the Jewish nation in the Land of Israel has been growing stronger in terms of demography and territory, despite the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. We have succeeded in doing so because we have acted with wisdom and stratagem rather than engaging in a foolish attempt to convince our foes that we were in the right."

3. The provocative action over Temple Mount

It is understandable that some Jewish people want to have access to Temple Mount for Jewish worship, since it is the site of the Temple. However the sad fact is that any attempt to achieve this, and to change the status quo which only allows Muslim worship on what is the third holiest site in Islam, creates mayhem. Nevertheless there are Jewish groups working to achieve this change. Although some rabbis forbid Jews from going onto the mount because of its holiness an increasing number are willing to permit them to do so. This has created growing tension.

At the end of October a Temple Mount activist Rabbi Yehuda Glick was shot as he left a conference entitled "Israel returns to the Temple Mount." Israel immediately closed Temple Mount to both Muslims and Jews, an action which was guaranteed to create very strong reactions. The closure led to riots. Palestinian President Abbas said the closure was a declaration of war. The next day Israel opened the Mount to Muslim men over the age of 50 and to women. In November Jordan withdrew its ambassador from Israel because of "violations" in "the Noble Sanctuary" (Haram al Sharif – the Muslim name for Temple Mount). Netanyahu assured Jordan that the status quo would be maintained.

4. Continuing settler activity in the West Bank

Israel continues to develop settlements in the West Bank which creates antagonism amongst the Palestinians but also on a wide scale in the world community. In August some 988 acres (said to be the largest area in 30 years) was taken over by Israel in the West Bank near Bethlehem. In October Israel gave permission for 1060 homes to be built in Jewish areas of East Jerusalem

which are in the West Bank. This led to criticism from the US and the EU. The UN Security Council met to discuss the matter. Netanyahu was defiant. In November 500 homes were approved in a Jewish neighbourhood over the Green Line.

In October a 14 year old Palestinian/American youth who was alleged to be about to throw a Molotov cocktail was shot dead by Israeli forces. This led to riots in East Jerusalem.

Sadly, the failure of the peace talks, the controversy over Temple Mount and the continuing expansion of settlements in the West Bank have inevitably led to increasing Palestinian terrorism over recent months. A car terror attacked killed a baby in October. Another in November killed an Israeli adult. Also in November, a border policeman was killed and 13 people wounded in East Jerusalem and four people were killed and eight injured in terrorist attacks. The latter was the notorious attack on worshippers in a Jerusalem synagogue. Later in the month four Palestinians were arrested for allegedly planning to assassinate Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's foreign minister as he returned to his settlement home. And so it goes on. Many fear it could lead to a third intifada.

Israel defiantly defends its unacceptable policy of destroying the homes of terrorists even though the family may have had no knowledge of the intended attack. Five EU states condemned this practice in November.

5. Anti-Semitism

There are reports of an increase of anti-Semitism in Europe. For example, the Sunday Times reported that 100 incidents were recorded in July. France, which has the highest number of Muslims and Jews in Western Europe, has also seen a growth in anti-Semitism.

Palestinian reaction to Israel

In view of the failure of the Peace Process, President Abbas proceeded with the plan to make a proposal to the UN Security Council for an Israeli withdrawal from the West bank within two years and, if that failed, to take Israel to the International Court for alleged war crimes. Abbas says he will bring the proposal to the UN before the Israeli election. The Americans therefore sent John Kerry to meet with Netanyahu about the proposal.

At the end of September Abbas gave a very strong speech to the UN General Assembly which angered the Americans. He said that Israel had launched a "devastating war" in Gaza which amounted to genocide. He said "Its jets and tanks brutally assassinated lives and devastated the homes, schools and dreams of thousands of Palestinian children, women and men, and in reality destroying the remaining hopes for peace." He accused Israel of war crimes and said "We will not allow war criminals to escape punishment." In

December Abbas said he would take his proposal to the UN before the Israeli elections.

Netanyahu spoke at the UN shortly afterwards seeking to refute Abbas' criticisms. In his speech he said: "ISIS and Hamas share a fanatical creed." He added that "the profound moral difference between Israel and Hamas couldn't have been clearer. Israel was using its missiles to protect its children. Hamas was using its children to protect its missiles. In what moral universe does genocide include warning the enemy civilian population to get out of harm's way, or ensuring that they receive tons -- tons of humanitarian aid each day even as thousands of rockets are being fired at us, or setting up a field hospital to aid their wounded? "Israel cannot have territories from which it withdraws taken over by Islamic militants yet again, as happened in Gaza and Lebanon. That would place the likes of ISIS within mortar range, a few miles, of 80 percent of our population."

International reaction to Israel

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has called for a global boycott of Israel. Netanyahu visited President Obama in October for what he said was a good meeting. But shortly afterwards a White House spokesman issued a statement strongly condemning Israel for its plans to construct Jewish homes in East Jerusalem. It said this would "poison the atmosphere" and "call into question Israel's commitment to a peaceful negotiated settlement with the Palestinians." Afterwards Yair Lapid, Israeli Finance Minister, said that there was a crisis in Israel's relationship with the US. Senior officials in the Obama government used strong language in condemning Netanyahu and described him as a coward only interested in his political survival rather than peace.

Around the same time Ban Ki-moon said: "Time is not on the side of peace. We need to act immediately to prevent a deepening of an already unsustainable status quo... this is the only way to avoid yet another tragic conflict in the future. I once again strongly condemn the continued settlement activity by Israel. I am also deeply concerned by repeated provocation at the holy sites in Jerusalem. These only inflame tensions and must stop."

Later that month the House of Commons voted by 274 to 12 to urge the government to recognise the state of Palestine. Sweden officially recognised Palestine. A total of 135 countries now recognise Palestine. In November the EU published a document about sanctions against Israel, thought to include compulsory labelling on Israeli products made in West Bank settlements, limiting cooperation with Israel and imposing restrictions on an existing free-trade agreement. The European Parliament vote formally recognising Palestine has been postponed.

France, Germany and Britain are drafting a UN Security Council resolution outlining an Israeli-Palestinian final peace agreement with a two year

deadline. This is in response to the stronger Palestinian proposal sponsored by Jordan. The European resolution doesn't call for an immediate recognition of Palestine. The Americans want to avoid voting against such a proposal because they are seeking Arab help against the "Islamic State."

On December 17th the Swiss government, despite American pressure, is arranging a meeting of the 200 states which are party to the Fourth Geneva Convention to discuss the situation on the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

The threat from Iran

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of Iran, recently outlined a nine-step plan to "eliminate" Israel. He said that does not mean the massacre of the Jewish people. Rather there should be a referendum in which "all the original people of Palestine including Muslims, Christians and Jews" could vote, but from which "Jewish immigrants" would be excluded. The government resulting from that referendum would then decide whether the Jewish immigrants could remain in the country. The only alternative to a referendum would be "powerful confrontation and resolute and armed resistance."

Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people

Another huge controversy has arisen over Israel's decision to proclaim itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people. This might seem to be stating the obvious, but it isn't. It establishes Israel's commitment to the Jewish people's "right to national self-determination in Israel," to Jews in distress overseas, to Jewish holidays, calendar, law and cultural and historical heritage. But to non-Jews it affirms only "personal rights in accordance with every law."

So it ignores the existence of an Arab community (20% of the population of Israel) with its own language, culture and rights. It means Arab citizens are inferior and, although they have individual rights, do not have collective rights. It therefore gives priority to Israel's Jewishness over its democracy.

The Israeli President and the Attorney General have expressed deep concern about this bill. President Rivlin quoted the Knesset's (Israeli parliament) legal adviser that the bill placed Jewishness before democracy contrary to the Declaration of Independence. The President said: "Judaism and democracy, democracy and Judaism, said as one utterance, are combined – and continue to be so. These are not merely words. This is the beating heart of the state of Israel. A state established on two solid foundations: nationhood on the one hand, and democracy on the other. The removal of one will bring the whole building down."

Obviously, this decision is causing distress and opposition in Israel. It is also increasing disapproval of Israel by other countries. President Abbas said the Palestinians “cannot and will not recognise” Israel as a Jewish state because to do so would prevent the return of Palestinian refugees to *their* lands. However 73% of Israeli Jews and 14% of Israeli Arabs don’t think there is a contradiction between Israel as a Jewish state and a democratic state.

Israeli election

At the beginning of December Netanyahu sacked two ministers – Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni who disagreed with his policies including his backing for more Jewish settlements in the West Bank. There was also tension over the Jewish nationality bill. As a result Netanyahu called a General Election.

PRAY

1. For the right result for the Israeli general election and for the new government to pursue peace seriously.
2. For a resumption of serious peace talks.
3. For an end to provocative action by Israel in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.
4. For an end to Palestinian terrorism and prevention of a third Intifada.
5. For Israel to maintain its democracy and equal respect for all its citizens.
6. Against anti-Semitism throughout the world.
7. For wise support by other nations for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

SUPPORT BEIT NETANEL (“House of Netanel”): the evangelistic and reconciliation ministry of Rachel Netanel in the outskirts of Jerusalem, which seeks to reach Israelis (Jewish and Arab) and Palestinians with the Gospel in their own language and culture, bringing Jews and Arabs together under the love of Jesus, eating and studying together in a family atmosphere. Rachel holds a weekly meeting of some 50 people, group meetings for 10-20 people, bi-monthly meetings for 100-200 and daily individual ministry. Over 2000 people have heard the Gospel. Her newsletter is available through Paradox. Her website is www.rachelnetanel.net

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