

What has happened to the Peace Process?

Only four Israeli government ministers openly declare support for the two-state solution, according to a poll conducted in June 2016 by Wall News, an Israeli internet news source. Nine are against and the view of the other seven is unknown. This is a cause of deep concern to those who believe that the two-state solution is the only viable way forward towards peace, giving more security to Israel and justice to the Palestinian people.

President Obama said in March 2016: “There’s been talk about a one-state solution or sort of a divided government. It’s hard for me to envision that being stable, there’s such deep distrust between the two peoples right now. And the neighbourhood is in such a mess that I continue to believe that a two-state solution is the best way.” Similarly, John Kerry, US Secretary of State, warned that current trends were leading inevitably towards a single state solution and he commented: “The one-state solution is no solution at all for a Jewish, democratic Israel living in peace.”

However, the two state solution is still under discussion. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in December 2015 spoke in favour of a middle way – the establishment of two states (Israeli and Palestinian) in the context of a confederation. This would involve the two states with two parliaments and constitutions co-operating closely together. They would have only one army – the Israel army.

Isaac Herzog, head of the Israeli Labour Party had secret talks with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas before the 2015 general election and they agreed the way forward should be based on the Arab Peace Initiative. In particular, they agreed that the Palestinians should have an area of land equivalent to the territory Israel captured during the 1967 war (that would involve some land swaps); Israel should be able to monitor the border between Jordan and Israel and there would be a joint counter-terrorism body. However the agreements were shelved after the election.

In March 2016 Joe Biden, the US Vice President, presented a plan to Abbas to restart the peace process. It included designating East Jerusalem as a capital of a future Palestinian state, Israel stopping settlement construction on the West Bank and the Palestinians giving up the right of return for refugees to what is now Israel. However Abbas rejected the plan. Earlier Abbas claimed he had offered to meet Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu but Israel didn’t respond.

Netanyahu has often spoken in favour of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 (reaffirmed in 2007) but so far this has been just talk. One worry he has is what President Obama will do after the November US election when he will be free from political restraint. Is it possible he might put a proposal on the Israel-Palestinian issue to the UN Security Council, or refuse to veto a proposal put by others.

The peace-process was not helped by the appointment of Avigdor Lieberman as Israeli defence minister in May 2016. Lieberman is a West Bank settler who wants more settlements to be built. In the past, he vowed there would never be a Palestinian state. He wanted to re-occupy Gaza and to transfer Israel’s Palestinian citizens to the West Bank. He also threatened to assassinate the leader of Hamas and to blow up Egypt’s Aswan dam. However, after his appointment he spoke in favour of the two-state solution and added: “I absolutely agree that the Arab [Peace] Initiative also has some very, very positive elements that enable a serious dialogue with all our neighbours in the region.” Given his record, many people find it difficult to accept these positive comments.

And so the Peace Process effectively is on hold, although some say it is dead. Recent polls have shown that Israelis are now less supportive of the two-state solution. They are less approving of Israeli Palestinians having equal rights and are generally more hostile towards Palestinians and other Arabs.

However France has taken the initiative to discuss with senior executives from the West and the Arab world the possibility of holding an international conference later this year to attempt to restart the Peace Process.

There are, naturally, real fears amongst Israelis about the security situation. There is the violent instability of Syria in the North and the danger of a future Palestinian state being taken over by ISIS. Some, including Tony Blair, see the possibility of an alliance of Arab states – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf states – with a Palestinian state to protect it against ISIS. This would be to Israel’s advantage but the compromises required by all parties are daunting. However Netanyahu made it clear in June that Israel will never accept the original Arab Peace Initiative as it stands because it

requires Israel to withdraw to the 1967 borders (as opposed to swapping territory where deemed necessary), to withdraw from the Golan Heights (adjacent to Syria) and to allow all Palestinian refugees back into what is now Israel. The same month the Saudi Foreign Minister rejected Netanyahu's demand for the Arab Peace Initiative to be updated. Of course, there could be negotiations.

West Bank development and violence

According to Peace Now, Israel began to build 1800 settlement homes in the West Bank in 2015. In June 2016 the Israeli government approved an additional \$18 million (£12 million) to pay for West Bank settlements. In July the Israelis approved 800 new homes in East Jerusalem, plus 600 in the Arab neighbourhood of Beit Safafa. They also approved 560 new homes in Ma'aleh Adumim in the West Bank.

In March 2016 a Pew Research Centre survey found that 42% of Israelis believed building settlements in the West Bank furthered Israel's security. 30% thought they were harmful. 48% of Israelis favour the 1.6 million Arabs living in Israel with Israeli citizenship being expelled or transferred from Israel. 46% opposed that idea. 6% offered no opinion (I find these statistics quite shocking). 40% of Israelis believe it is possible for Israel to co-exist with a Palestinian State. A similar number believe it is impossible.

The Middle East Quartet (US, EU, Russia and the UN) said that Israel had taken 70% of Area C which contains 60% of the West Bank, including most of the agricultural land, natural resources and land reserves. Some 570,000 Israelis now live in settlements. On the other hand, the Quartet criticised the Palestinians for not "consistently and clearly" condemning terrorist attacks.

Israel has also drastically cut water supplies to the Palestinians this summer. It blames the Palestinians for not upgrading its pipes but the Palestinians deny this is the issue. Under the Oslo Accords Israel gets 80% of the water from the West Bank aquifer.

Human Rights activists have also criticised Israel for making Palestinians who need to cross into Israel to work wait in line for hours, in unbearable conditions. This applies to those with valid work permits.

A number of Israeli teenagers were arrested for an arson attack on a Palestinian family in 2015. In December 2015 a video was produced of a hall full of teenagers who were cheering the murder that had taken place of a Palestinian toddler. They were dancing with guns and firebombs and stabbing pictures of the toddler.

Palestinians murdered 20 Israelis in 2015 and the Israeli army killed 116 Palestinians, claiming that 79 of them had been carrying out or attempting attacks. But recent polls have found that 53.7% of Palestinians oppose another Intifada (uprising) and 42% support one. Also 69% of Palestinians support a two-state solution and 24.8% support a single state with full equality. 82.1% of Palestinians are negative towards ISIS.

Israeli Military Intelligence officials and some politicians are predicting that the Palestinian Authority is close to collapse. If that happened Israel would be responsible for the management of the occupied territories. But it could further undermine any hope of a successful peace process because Israel may not have an effective partner in that process.

Controversy in Israel

One controversy is over the Israeli ex-soldiers' group "Breaking the Silence." It was founded in 2004 and publishes anonymous testimonies from Israeli soldiers about alleged abuses against the Palestinian population. Recently Israel's Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon strongly condemned the group as acting out of malicious motives. He claimed that when the government tried to investigate allegations from the group "they turned out to be groundless." The government is now clamping down on Breaking the Silence and other human rights groups, forcing them to reveal their sources of funding and to reveal the names of the soldiers who give them information. The latter would, of course, greatly reduce the likelihood of soldiers speaking to the organisation. There has been heated debate in the Israeli parliament with some members strongly defending Breaking the Silence.

Netanyahu has turned from seeking a centre-left coalition and instead has linked with the ultra-nationalist party Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home). Ehud Barak, the former prime minister, has said that the government's new direction shows "the seeds of fascism."

Anti-Christian attitudes in Israel

Benzi Gopstein, head of the extreme right wing Lehava group, has recently called for the expulsion of Christians from Israel, saying “Let us remove the vampires before they once again drink our blood.” This led to calls for legal action against him. Vandals daubed the walls and doors of the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem with slogans such as “Death to the heathen Christians the enemies of Israel.”

In June 2016 Jewish extremists tried to disrupt Greek Orthodox Pentecost prayers at the Cenacle (possible site of the Last Supper). They screamed, booed and shouted: “We will tear down this abomination ... you are evil ... May the name of your so-called God be blotted out forever.” One ultra-Orthodox Jewish person said: “It hurts me that they are letting these goyim (non-Jews) come here. It hurts me that these evil men, who have oppressed the Jews throughout history, are being allowed to contaminate our holy sites. And it hurts me even more that the police, led by our Jewish government, are allowing them to do so.”

Jewish extremists have defaced churches and Christian property, desecrated Christian cemeteries, and spat on and verbally abused priests and monks.

International relations

The good news is that, after five years, Israel and Turkey have reached a reconciliation agreement. Turkey demanded a complete lifting of the Israeli siege on Gaza, but they settled for Turkish aid to be sent to Gaza (through Israel’s Ashdod port). Turkey is also to be allowed to build a hospital, a new power plant and a desalination plant in Gaza. Israel agreed to lift all restrictions on the supply of equipment, drugs and staff to the hospital. Turkey agreed to close down Hamas’ military command post in Turkey but will still allow Hamas offices to operate on its soil, solely for political activity.

Israel has also set up its first diplomatic mission to Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates. However the UAE said this is not a sign of a changed attitude towards Israel.

On the other hand, Iran recently fired two ballistic missiles bearing the slogan “Israel must be wiped out.” Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Commander of Aerospace Force of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, commented: “The 2,000-kilometre (1,240-mile) range of our missiles is to confront the Zionist regime. Israel is surrounded by Islamic countries and it will not last long in a war. It will collapse even before being hit by these missiles.”

The commander of the Israel Air Force Amir Eshel has warned that increasing international military deals by Israel’s neighbours could threaten Israel’s military superiority. Egypt wants to buy advanced Russian weapons. Syria has access to Russian air defence systems.

In Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, said a new war with Israel would have “no limits, and no red lines.” He added that Hezbollah would target Israel’s ammonia storage depot in Haifa which “will create the effect of a nuclear weapon.”

EU and UN attitudes towards Israel

It seems that Israel is becoming increasingly isolated diplomatically.

The EU has voted that products from West Bank settlements should be labelled so that customers can decide not to buy them.

Ban Ki-moon made strong criticisms of Israel’s policy of continuing to build settlements in the West Bank, saying they are an affront to the Palestinian people and adding: “Palestinian frustration is growing under the weight of a half-century of occupation and the paralysis of the peace process.” He also questioned Israel’s commitment to the two-state solution. Netanyahu responded: “The UN has long lost its neutrality and moral power; these comments by the secretary general do little to improve its standing.”

Makarim Wibisono, the UN Human Rights Investigator for Gaza and the West Bank called on Israel to investigate what he called excessive force against Palestinians. He added: “The upsurge in violence is a grim reminder of the unsustainable human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the volatile environment it engenders.” However the Middle East Quartet angered Palestinian leaders by laying equal – if not greater – emphasis on Palestinian “incitement” as on Israeli settlement policies.

UNESCO planned to adopt a resolution at its July meeting in Istanbul declaring the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (the most holy place for Jewish people) as sacred to “Muslims only.” However the failed coup in Turkey led to the decision being delayed. The EU favours the resolution. The Israeli Foreign Ministry commented: “The EU’s proposal continues to deny the Jewish people’s historic ties to Temple Mount, despite France’s apology in April, admitting it was wrong to support UNESCO’s decision to address the Temple Mount only as Al-Aqsa mosque.”

Then, when former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, visited London she received a letter from the British police asking her in for questioning on suspicion of involvement in war crimes during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008. The summons was cancelled after diplomatic contacts between Israel and Britain, at the end of which Livni received immunity. A recent survey of British Jewish attitudes to Israel found that 75% regarded expansion of the settlements as “major obstacle to peace” with 68% admitting to feeling “a sense of despair” every time there’s a further expansion. Approximately 50% said they believe the Israeli government is “constantly creating obstacles to avoid engaging in peace negotiations.” 73% believe this approach is damaging Israel’s standing in the world.

US attitude towards Israel

The attitude of the US seems to be changing. Younger Americans tend to look at Israel through the lens of human rights. America has the second largest Jewish community in the world after Israel and has strongly supported Israel. But there are signs of that support reducing, particularly among younger and more liberal Jews. President Obama has said that the Middle East is less important to the US because fracking and use of other energy resources reduce American dependence on Middle East oil. This could, of course, reduce Israel’s importance to the US as an ally and “the only democracy in the Middle East.” In future America is likely to be more concerned about ISIS and influence over Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is also frustration and irritation at the lack of progress in the Peace Process. If Israel experiences a significant reduction in US support that could be very serious indeed.

ISIS and Israel

In December 2015 the leader of ISIS, since killed, warned Israel: “With the help of Allah, We are getting closer to you every day. The Israelis will soon see us in Palestine. This is no longer a war of the crusaders against us. The entire world is fighting us right now. The Israelis thought that we forgot Palestine and that they had distracted us from it. That is not the case. We have not forgotten Palestine for one moment.” We can debate the current effectiveness of ISIS but such statements fan the fears of Israelis.

Comment: I believe the re-establishment of the State of Israel is the beginning of a fulfilment of biblical prophecy and that God has a purpose for the Jewish people. I strongly oppose all anti-Semitism, including that which, perhaps unwittingly, inspires unfair criticism of Israel. The only explanation of the virulence and persistence of such anti-Semitism is that it is demonic.

However, I also firmly believe that we must pray that Israel will act in accordance with God’s will (just as we should pray that for our own countries). Those (including Christians) who are only interested in Israel possessing ‘the Land,’ whatever that means to her neighbours, are reading the Bible with one eye shut. Yes, Scripture does foretell the re-establishment of the state of Israel. But equally it teaches that God is a God of justice and so requires justice to be shown to the Palestinians. Given terrorism, militant Islamism and other negative factors, the way to justice and peace is complicated. But there is no justification for pulling back from the Peace Process or merely paying lip service to it or superficially blaming the other side for its failures. Although Palestinian violence must be confronted, there is no justification for an oppressive oversight of the West Bank.

We must love our Palestinian ‘neighbours’ as well as our Israeli ‘neighbours.’ We don’t love either of them if we tolerate injustice or violence. We must pray against such evils and for peace with justice and security for both people groups. In particular, Christian Zionists must realise that they are not being positive to Israel if they don’t pray that she will act justly and sincerely seek peace.

PRAY

1. For Israel to follow the path of justice whilst ensuring its own security.
2. For Israel not to be increasingly isolated diplomatically in the world.
3. For the protection of both the Palestinians and Israelis, including from violent extremism in their populations.
4. Against anti-Semitism and unfair treatment of Israel and racism against Arabs in Israel.