

“Now Israel Can Be Isolated, Boycotted, Prosecuted”

This is how some Jewish commentators responded to the December 23rd **UN vote that Israeli settlements in Palestinian areas are illegal**. The US did not use its veto so the resolution succeeded. It opens the way for the International Criminal Court to move on from preliminary examination of the settlements to a full investigation of whether settlement building is a ‘war crime.’ The resolution requires the UN Secretary-General to report every three months on the settlement situation, so the issue is not going to fade away.

It also means that European nations could delay export of weapons to Israel even when Israel is facing war.

Then there is the global Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel based on the settlement issue.

However, an Israeli survey a few weeks after the decision showed that 62% of Jewish Israelis still supported building in the Palestinian areas.

This means that Israel is becoming more isolated in its confrontation with the rest of the world.

The **Paris Peace Conference** on 15 January 2017 urged the Israelis and Palestinians to stop violence and settlement activity and to restart negotiations on the two-state solution.

The Trump factor

WEAKENING OF COMMITMENT TO THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

Donald Trump has, of course, expressed a very positive attitude towards Israel. The most important effect is that Trump has undermined the long-standing US policy of supporting the two-state solution. Just before meeting with the Israeli prime minister at the White House, Trump said: “I’m looking at two-state and at one-state and I like the one that both parties like. I can live with either one. I thought for a while the two-state looked like it may be the easier of the two but honestly if [Mr Netanyahu] and if the Palestinians, if Israel and the Palestinians are happy, I’m happy with the one they like the best.”

Naftali Bennet, a right wing Israeli government minister said: “Trump’s victory offers Israel a tremendous opportunity to announce that it changes its mind regarding establishing a state of Palestine in the heart of our country. The era of the Palestinian state is over.”

SOFTENING OF OPPOSITION TO WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS

Trump has also softened the US policy over West Bank settlements. On February 2nd the White House stated: “The American desire for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians has remained unchanged for 50 years. While we don’t believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal.”

CONTROVERSIALLY MOVING THE US EMBASSY TO JERUSALEM

President Trump has also said he intends to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv, where it has been since 1966, to Jerusalem, which is a very controversial move because it implies that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel only. The official US view is that since 1948 Jerusalem has not been under the sovereignty of any nation, although previous presidents have spoken of moving the embassy there.

Sheikh Ekrema Sabri, imam of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem said that moving the embassy would be as good as a “declaration of war.” Palestinian leaders also threatened to withdraw their recognition of the State of Israel which they made in the 1993 Oslo accords, if the embassy moves.

Israel retrospectively legalises illegal West Bank settlements

In December 2016 the Knesset (Israeli parliament) legalised 55 settler outposts and some 4000 settler homes illegally built on Palestinian land in the West Bank. The bill was approved by 60 to 52 votes. Then in late January they announced 2500 new Israeli houses were being built in the West Bank and the following week announced another 3000. This was in defiance of the UN resolution which said that such action was a “flagrant violation” of international law. This is the first time Israel has applied its own civil law to Palestinian land. The PLO has said the decision is as good as a declaration of war. Israeli opponents of the decision are likely to go to court against it and the Israel Attorney General has said he believes it breaks both Israeli and international law. It could even finish up at the International Criminal Court.

Relevant Palestinian landowners will be offered compensation or alternative land, but their land is being taken away from them without their consent.

One state or two?

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said recently that Israel should annex the West Bank and give full citizenship to the Palestinians. However a January survey found that 68% of Israelis favour the two-state solution (66% of Jewish Israelis). 58% favoured returning to the 1967 borders (with some land swaps), Jerusalem being regarded as the shared capital of both Israel and the Palestinians and compensation being paid to Palestinian refugees (55% of Jewish Israelis favoured this).

In December John Kerry said that Netanyahu’s coalition government was the most extreme ever and dominated by the settlers. He pointed out that the number of settlers in the West Bank had grown by 270,000 since 1993. He added that many of the settler outposts were built on Palestinian land and strategically planned to make two states impossible. If the land is split up into small areas it can never become a real state. In Area C, 66% of the West Bank only one permit for Palestinian building was approved in 2014-5 whereas approval has been given for hundreds of Israeli settlement units.

Kerry believes that the one-state solution would be a disaster for Israel. Israel can either be a democracy, in which case eventually the majority of the population will be Palestinian. Or it can be an apartheid state, which is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Before he discontinued as UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon commented on the idea of a one-state solution: “This is madness. Replacing a two-state solution with a one-state construct would spell doom: denying Palestinians their freedom and rightful future, and pushing Israel further from its vision of a Jewish democracy towards greater global isolation.”

Peace process

The Peace Process has been on hold since 2014 and Netanyahu and Abbas have not met since 2010. In September 2016 Netanyahu said he was willing to meet with Abbas if there were no preconditions. Abbas’ senior political adviser said that Abbas had been willing to do this in Moscow but the Israelis didn’t co-operate. In January Abbas repeated his offer that he was willing to meet Netanyahu any time if settlement activity was put on hold.

In October a survey showed that almost two thirds of Israelis believe that a Peace Settlement will never be achieved. In January Avigdor Lieberman, Israeli Defence Minister said the only hope was a regional settlement involving moderate Arab countries who united with Israel to fight terrorism. This could achieve an Israeli-Palestinian settlement involving exchange of land and populations.

It has been reported that the US offered Israel a secret peace agreement in 2016 with a regional recognition of Israel and a renewal of peace talks. But Netanyahu rejected it. Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog commented “History will definitely judge the magnitude of the opportunity as well as the magnitude of the missed opportunity.”

Iran

In September, Iran displayed its 16 ballistic missiles and a new missile with multiple warheads. On the side of the truck carrying the latter was written: "If the leaders of the Zionist regime make one false move, the Islamic republic will destroy Tel Aviv and Haifa."

Donald Trump's threats to react against the hard-won agreement between the US and Iran to prevent the latter developing nuclear weapons could worsen the situation between Iran and Israel. Netanyahu intended to urge Trump to scuttle the agreement.

Other threats against Israel

Hezbollah terrorist cells in the West Bank and Israel have been dealt with by the Israelis. Hamas infiltrated the Christian organisation World Vision and re-directed tens of millions of dollars to purchase weapons for Hamas. The new leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip is Yahya Sinwar, who was released after 22 years in an Israeli jail in 2011. He is a hardliner who rejects any reconciliation with Israel. There are signs of heightened tensions between Israel and Gaza.

What are we to make of all this?

The largest pro-Israel group in the US is not Jewish but Christian Zionist. There are 6 million Jewish people in the US but 80 million evangelicals, many of whom are Christian Zionist. Many of them also voted for Donald Trump. His readiness to accept a one-state solution is supported by many (but not all) of these Christian Zionists, who do not want a Palestinian State. From a biblical point of view the issues include the following:

1. God requires Israel to act with justice towards the Palestinians. Many Christian Zionists are very clear on what the Bible says about God not having finished with the Jewish people, and about him bringing them back to their land (and I agree with them). But they seem to forget that the same God in the same Bible requires justice to be shown to the non-Jew. God will judge Israel if they do not act justly. This should deeply concern every Christian Zionist.
2. It is true that God gave the land to the Jewish people as a promised land. However we should note that the "Promised Land" included much of what is now Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Also Israel has had the whole of the Promised Land for only some 40 years during the last 4000 years, i.e. 1% of the time. So it has not seemed too important in God's purposes for Israel over the last few thousand years for it to possess the whole of the Promised Land. (See my article <http://www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/isitrighttodividethepromisedland.html>). Giving some of the land to the Palestinians does not therefore seem to be ruled out.
3. Christian Zionists differ over whether the one state or two state solution is the best. I personally have difficulties seeing the one state solution as viable. Like John Kerry I think it would lead either to the state not remaining mainly Jewish (which I don't believe is God's purpose) or it would be an apartheid state (which would be unjust).
4. Israel is isolating itself and facing increasing antagonism from around the world. I am well aware of what the NT says about such antagonism growing in the End Times but that is no reason simply to accept it and not to take steps to counteract it. We need to pray against it, which involves praying for a just government in Israel. We should not just sit back and say: "Ah, this is the fulfilment of prophecy."

The above four points are important prayer topics for Israel.