

Will there ever be peace?

The signs are not good and we must pray all the more earnestly – for the sake of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Controversy and threats continue. One current controversy is over the action of the UK in 1917.

The Balfour Declaration

It is 100 years since the Balfour Declaration when the UK Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote: “His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

There have been demands for the UK government to apologise to the Palestinians for the statement because it led to “mass displacement” and injustice. But the government refused saying:

“The Balfour Declaration is an historic statement for which HMG (Her Majesty's Government) does not intend to apologize. We are proud of our role in creating the State of Israel. The task now is to encourage moves towards peace. The Declaration was written in a world of competing imperial powers, in the midst of the First World War and in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire. In that context, establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in the land to which they had such strong historical and religious ties was the right and moral thing to do, particularly against the background of centuries of persecution. Much has happened since 1917. We recognize that the Declaration should have called for the protection of political rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine, particularly their right to self-determination. However, the important thing now is to look forward and establish security and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians through a lasting peace.”

A minority of Jewish people (mainly Sephardi Jews) living in Palestine in the 1920s thought a bi-national state – for Jews and Arabs – should have been set up. Yosef Castel was a public spokesman for this view. But Jews living in Palestine objected that, whereas Jewish Zionists living in the UK were consulted, they were not. However the majority of Jewish people welcomed the Balfour Declaration. Like most political decisions the Declaration was not without self-interest. The British Government had been concerned for some time about the number of Jewish people entering the UK from Eastern Europe where they were being persecuted.

Later Britain realised it was going to face great difficulties administering the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine so it watered down its commitment to a Jewish homeland, and eventually in 1939, having suppressed the Arab Revolt, came out in favour of “an independent Palestine State” where “the two peoples in Palestine, Arabs and Jews, share authority in government.” Then the Second World War changed the situation and in 1948 Britain relinquished the Mandate. The UN Palestine Commission condemned Britain's action as a “catastrophic conclusion to an era of international concern for the territory.” Britain also abstained in the historic UN vote in 1948.

Zionism in Israel

Zionism is controversial in Israel today. Writing in an Israeli newspaper in April 2017 a columnist Yossi Klein said that “Religious Zionists are dangerous. They're more dangerous than Hezbollah, hit-and-run drivers or girls with scissors... Their religious nationalism is extreme nationalism wrapped in hypocritical fear of heaven.”

On the other hand Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, speaking about the nation state bill which states that Israel is the home of the Jewish people, criticised the Supreme Court for not giving sufficient consideration to Zionism but concentrating on individual rights. The court disregards the Jewish majority. However some of the lawyers listening to her shouted out that Israel is an apartheid state.

Palestinian state

Some people point out that Jordan was created out of Palestine and has a population which is over 70% Palestinian. They conclude that this is effectively the State of Palestine. On the other hand in the 1930s it was anticipated that the part of Palestine to the west of the Jordan River would be divided between Israelis and Palestinians. And, of course, many Palestinian Arabs left their homes in that area due to the violence which followed the re-establishment of Israel. So the commitment to the idea of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan remains strong in the Arab world and elsewhere. Donald Trump also spoke in favour of a Palestinian state but added he would be “satisfied with whatever makes both parties happy.” Jeremy Corbyn called on Theresa May to celebrate the centenary of the Balfour Declaration by recognising the Palestinian state. God is a God of justice so justice for the Palestinians, as well as security for Israel, is important biblically.

Jerusalem and Temple Mount

In the face of on-going demands to divide Jerusalem between the Israelis and the Palestinians the Israeli parliament decided in July that any concession of sovereignty would require a majority vote of at least 80 out of 120 members. At present both Jewish west Jerusalem and Palestinian East Jerusalem are governed by Israel. A right wing political leader said: “The United Jerusalem Law that was passed today in the Ministerial Committee for Legislation will prevent any possibility of dividing Jerusalem.” One Israeli newspaper pointed out that in East Jerusalem, 80 percent of the population is below the poverty line and 80 percent of the homes are built illegally. It added that Jerusalem has two public transportation systems, two electric companies, two types of civil status and two separate sets of laws.

Temple Mount is, of course, a very sensitive site, being holy to both Jews and Muslims. In April a group of several hundred Jewish people celebrated the Passover, including an animal sacrifice, just a few hundred meters from the Mount. Israel MP Yehudah Glick said: “Ultimately the government wants to serve the people, and the people want the Temple; the people want to offer sacrifices. At this rate the day isn’t far off – just a few more years – when we’ll be privileged to do sacrifices on the Temple Mount itself.”

This year Israel installed metal detectors at the entrances to the Mount, which enraged the Muslims and led to a boycott by Muslim worshippers. In the end the Israelis removed them. In July two Israeli Border Police officers were killed on the Temple Mount. As a result, Muslim worshippers were banned from the Mount but Muslim muftis encouraged worshippers to break into the Mount.

Occupation and Settlements

This is a controversial issue in Israel.

On the one hand, in July two Tel Aviv University professors did a survey as part of a campaign called “Save Israel. Stop the Occupation.” But they found that only 30% of Israelis view Israeli’s action on the West Bank as “occupation.” In 2004 the figure was 51%. Many would regard the West Bank as Judea and Samaria promised to the Jewish people in biblical prophecy.

On the other hand, a former head of Israel’s Shin Bet intelligence agency said the country was being “driven by this occupation towards disaster”. He added: “This country was established on the values of liberal democracy, values written in the only kind of constitution we have – which is our declaration of independence – values we don’t fulfil any more. You can analyse what happened to us in the last 50 years, but everything is under the shade of occupation. It has changed us a society. It has made us an unpleasant society.”

Isaac Herzog, head of the Israeli opposition demanded a total freeze on settlements as a condition of joining the unity government with Netanyahu. A former head of Mossad, Israel’s secret service, said the occupation and conflict with the Palestinians was the only threat to Israel’s survival. Yet, for the first time ever, the Israeli government applied its own civil law to land it recognised as Palestinian in order to legalise 4000 Jewish settler homes.

Despite all the warnings of serious consequences of settlement activity, Israel seems to be doing well. Its economy is thriving. There is less violence in Israel. India and China who in the past supported the Palestinians are trading with Israel and the key Sunni Muslim Arab states regard Iran as a greater enemy than Israel. Hence there does not seem to be a move towards freezing the settlements to promote peace.

The Israeli government is clamping down on civil rights groups it claims act against the state. These include B'Tselem, which documents human rights abuses in the occupied territories and Breaking the Silence which encourages Israel soldiers to reveal any abuses practised by the army.

International action against Israel

The US has urged the UN Human Rights Council to stop its “obsession with Israel” and added that Donald Trump is considering withdrawing America from the world body. A hundred US Senators signed a letter to the UN Secretary General asking him to act against the organisation’s “anti-Israel agenda.”

In March the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) published a report saying that Israel is a racist state which “has established an apartheid regime that dominates the Palestinian people as a whole.” ESCWA is composed of 18 Arab states. The UN said the report was published without UN approval. A spokesman said the UN didn’t have a problem with the content of the report but objected to proper procedures being ignored.

Israel is open to criticism but to single it out for repeated condemnation whilst ignoring or minimising much injustice elsewhere in the world is profoundly unjust.

Israel and Christians

In July Prime Minister Netanyahu told a conference of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) that evangelical Christians were the best friends Israel had. But that doesn’t seem to apply to Israeli Messianic Jews. A rabbinical court ruled that Messianic Jews cannot be married as Jews but must either renounce their belief in Jesus as Messiah or must be married as Christians. In September Orthodox Jewish “anti-missionaries” demonstrated against a new Messianic Jewish congregation in Arad and claimed they had prevented locals from joining it.

Also Catholic, Ethiopian, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Syrian and other churches in Jerusalem joined in protests over what they claim is a major change in their status. A Jerusalem court had ordered the Greek Orthodox Church to sell three buildings in the Old City to a Jewish settlers. They also opposed an Israeli bill that would transfer ownership of church land sold to private citizens to the state.

The possibility of peace

It seems clear that there is no consistent will in the Israeli government to further the peace process. Prime Minister Netanyahu has spoken about peace from time to time but does not appear to be serious about it. Former President Jimmy Carter said that Netanyahu had “no intention at all of having a two-state solution.” However, one Israeli newspaper holds out hope: “Political deals such as the nuclear accords with Iran, the reconciliation in Ireland and the peace agreements that Israel signed with Egypt and with Jordan have proved that even the most far-fetched deal is attainable.” What is needed therefore is a prime minister who is actually committed to peace.

On the Palestinian side there is a need for Palestinian leaders to condemn incitement to violence and hate. Netanyahu also demands that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a Jewish state.

In May this year the Nation State Bill passed a significant preliminary vote in the Israeli parliament. It establishes Israel as “the national home of the Jewish people,” and adds that “the right to realize self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” It also revokes Arabic's "official language" status in Israel. It effectively states that Israeli Arabs are second class citizens.

Hamas and Gaza in crisis

This year Hamas has developed short range heavy rockets with a range of 10 km which can cause great damage to Israeli towns near the Gaza Strip. However the organisation said in a document some months ago that it would drop its call for the destruction of Israel and would accept the setting up of a Palestinian state along the agreed 1967 borders. This sounds good until it is noted that the document also says they are still rejecting Israel’s right to exist and support armed struggle against it! What the document actually means is that Hamas would accept a Palestinian state within temporary borders as a step towards eradicating Israel. The Israeli government responded that Hamas was “attempting to fool the world.”

In September Hamas, which has been seriously weakened by the Israeli and Egyptian blockades, decided to end its administration and to seek a unity government led by President Abbas, thus ending a long dispute with the Palestinian movement Fatah.

Gaza is facing a water and electricity crisis. Some 96% of its water is not fit for drinking and, in winter months, some areas only have three hours of electricity supply. This not only hinders washing, showering, cooking and doing laundry, but hospitals are warning that frequent power cuts endanger patients' lives. Hamas doesn't help by diverting electricity from its UNICEF water desalination plant to its terror tunnels, through which it launches attacks into Israel.

Other problems are that about 100 million litres of raw sewage flows into the sea from Gaza each day, unemployment is around 40% and movement restrictions severely hinder industry. UN Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov has said that "unprecedented Israeli restrictions" are partly to blame. Israel must take this seriously.

The threat of Iran

There is no evidence that Iran has violated any clause of the nuclear agreement signed over two years ago. But it still threatens Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu has accused Iran of using the Syrian civil war to "gain a foothold to fight Israel" because Iranian troops are stationed along the edge of the occupied Golan Heights which form the border between Israel and Syria. He also accused them of establishing sites to build missiles in Lebanon and Syria. He warned that anyone who attacks Israel will "put themselves in existential danger" – referring to Israel's nuclear capability. One expert on Lebanese affairs has said "I have never seen such a high degree of anxiety among Lebanon's political elite that war is coming." He means war with Israel.

The Iranians continue to make overt threats against Israel. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, predicted there would be "nothing" left of Israel by the year 2040. One of its top generals said recently "Israel should stay quiet and count the days until its death. Its smallest mistake will result in its destruction." Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said: "Any freedom lover and justice seeker in the world must do its best for the annihilation of the Zionist regime in order to pave the path for the establishment of justice and freedom in the world."

Netanyahu warned Vladimir Putin that Israel might have to act unilaterally to prevent Iran establishing a power base on the border with Israel. A recent survey shows that 56% of Israelis believe there is a moderate-to-high chance of war with Iran in the coming year and 50% fear for Israel's survival in such a war.

We must always take seriously the feelings of threat which many Israelis feel, otherwise we will not understand their response to the political situation. This will undermine the effectiveness of our prayers for justice and peace.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Give thanks that God has brought the Jewish people back to their homeland as prophesied 2000 years ago and pray for their security.
2. Pray for the Palestinian people to avoid violence and to be treated with justice and respect, especially for those families who had to leave their homes in what is now Israel back in the 1940s.
3. Pray for an end to unjust singling out of Israel for criticism by the UN but for Israel to heed the criticisms.
4. Pray for the safety and welfare of Messianic believers and Gentile Christians in Israel, including in the Old City of Jerusalem.
5. Pray for the people of Gaza facing huge problems and that both Hamas and Israel will respond appropriately.
6. Pray for the curbing of the threat of Iranian influence in Syria and the Middle East.