

Threats to Israel

It is easy to think of Israel as a strong nuclear power which ignores world opinion and continues to act unjustly towards the Palestinians. But it has to be remembered that Israel is a small country (the size of Wales) with a population less than that of London. It is threatened with total destruction by Iran and groups like Hezbollah (in Lebanon and Syria) and Hamas in Gaza.

Israel clearly thinks that a conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon is growing closer. Hezbollah has 20,000 full-time, trained fighters, 25,000 reservists and more than 100,000 missiles. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke of the heightened “risk of miscalculation and escalation into conflict.”

Both Israel and Saudi Arabia think that Iran, which is dedicated to destroying Israel, is trying to establish a corridor from Iraq, through Syria to Lebanon. The Iranians have started building a missile base in Syria, south of Damascus, although President Assad and the Russians have some concerns about Iran’s intentions. Iran’s influence has grown in Iraq and Syria (with Russian cooperation) and in Lebanon. A weakened Syria increases Iran’s influence.

After an Iranian drone entered Israeli air space in February Israel responded by attacking Iranian sites in Syria. An Israeli fighter was shot down in the operation and the Israelis attacked 12 sites in Syria, including three Syrian anti-aircraft batteries and four Iranian sites. Hezbollah hailed the shooting down of the jet as the “start of a new strategic phrase” aiming to limit Israel’s air superiority. It threatened to attack Israel’s Mediterranean natural gas rigs in a future conflict.

Some people think that Saudi Arabia, which opposes Iran, is trying to encourage an Israeli-Hezbollah war as a means of combatting Iranian advances. The Saudis are encouraged by Israel’s increasing threats to strike at Iranian forces in Syria. Some experts say that war in the North of Israel is only a matter of time.

Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz revealed that Israel has been having secret meetings with the Saudis about Iran.

ISIS has recently come into conflict with Hamas in Gaza and clearly wants to set up a base in Palestine. It is tapping into Palestinian anger at the lack of any progress in the peace process with Israel. Some Palestinians might think that ISIS is the only effective organisation operating in the Israel-Palestinian region.

According to Israeli Army Deputy Chief of Staff General Aviv Kochavi, in March Israel was preparing for war on six fronts - Iran and probably ISIS in Sinai, Hamas in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria plus the increasingly dangerous world of cyberwarfare. It is feared that, following the West’s attack on Syria after the chemical warfare incident, Russia will limit Israel’s use of Syrian airspace to attack Iranian targets. Before that it turned a blind eye to such Israeli attacks. Now Russia is considering supplying Syria with advanced missile systems, warning that Israel would suffer catastrophic consequences if it attacked the missile bases. The Israeli Defence Minister has responded by saying that Israel will attack the Russian anti-aircraft systems if they are used against Israel.

All these developments seem to bring the time closer when the prophecy of Zechariah will be fulfilled “On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations” (Zech 12:3 see also Joel 3; Ezk 38-39).

A different sort of threat against Israel comes from the UN. As we have noted before, the UN seems to have singled Israel out for condemnation. The Autumn 2017 session considered 20 resolutions against Israel but, as someone pointed out, “not one against gross human rights abusers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Venezuela, China, Cuba, Pakistan or Zimbabwe.” Israel has faced 70 resolutions against, it which is three times the resolutions against Syria (the second most criticised country). In March the UN Human Rights Council passed five resolutions condemning Israel and only one against N Korea, Iran and Syria.

Israel's treatment of the Palestinians

Palestinian diplomats have recently made an official complaint to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. They are accusing Israel of having “the common aim of displacing and replacing the Palestinian people, for the purpose of maintaining a colonial occupation.” In particular, they say Israel severely limits Palestinian freedom of movement, subjects them to “confiscation and seizure” of their land, including home demolitions, violates the right to equal treatment before tribunals by using separate legal systems for Palestinians and settlers, and metes out higher maximum sentences for Palestinians. If Israel is found to have breached the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination then all the signatories to it, including the US, would be obliged to ensure the offences are corrected.

Earlier in the year the Likud Party, headed by Prime Minister Netanyahu, unanimously backed a resolution calling on the Israeli government to formally annex the West Bank. Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas commented: “We hope that this vote serves as a reminder for the international community that the Israeli government, with the full support of the U.S. administration, is not interested in a just and lasting peace. Rather its main goal is the consolidation of an apartheid regime in all of historic Palestine.”

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter warned that the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “is being overtaken by a one-state reality which will have dire consequences for Israel in the long-term.”

Later the Palestinian Liberation Organisation decided to call on the UN Security Council to recognise the State of Palestine within the 1967 borders. They also decided to withdraw from the customs union between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, whereby Israel collects value-added tax, import duties and other taxes on the PA's behalf and hands them over on a monthly basis.

In Gaza, water from the fresh water aquifer is 96% undrinkable because it is so salty. The power supply, which was available between 8-12 hours a day, fell at one time to 2-3hours. Unemployment rose recently from 30% to 40% with youth unemployment at 65%. Raw sewage flows into the sea leaving a horrible smell in the air.

In February this year Israeli Army Chief of Staff, Gadi Eisenkot, warned that Gaza was on the point of collapse due to the humanitarian crisis. He pointed out that whereas there used to be 800-1200 trucks per day carrying food and equipment into Gaza, now there are only 300 because the Gaza people are unable to afford more. Israel published a plan to help humanitarian rehabilitation, asking the international community to help fund it.

Then recently protestors from Gaza planned a six-week demonstration close to the border with Israel, demanding a right for Palestinian refugees to return to what is now Israel. The Israeli army claims that the demonstrations were camouflage for terror attacks. But Israel has come under heavy international criticism for killing (according to the Palestinian Health Ministry) 15 people, including two children, and injuring another 1,479 during a two day period at the beginning of April. William Bell, Head of Middle East Policy at Christian Aid said that Israel's action against unarmed civilians “constitutes a violation of the international legal obligation to distinguish between civilians and combatants.” The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has warned Israel he may intervene because the action could “constitute crimes under the Rome Statute.” Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman didn't help by saying “there are no innocent people in Gaza.” The Israeli army claims it only acted in appropriate ways.

The situation of Israeli Arabs

The Israeli Knesset (government) recently passed a bill which allows the authorities to strip Arabs living in East Jerusalem of their residency documents and therefore of their right to live there.

On the other hand many Israeli Arabs are very positive about living in Israel. A recent poll revealed that 73% of Arabs feel they belong to Israeli society. 60% said they are proud to be citizens of Israel. 82% do not wish to live under Palestinian rule. Only 14% said they did. However slightly less than 50% supported Israel's right to exist, which seems inconsistent with the other results.

Trump's recognition of Jerusalem

Donald Trump's official recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has, of course, stirred very different reactions. One Palestinian activist said: “This is an unprecedented escalation by the US president and it will detonate a third intifada [Palestinian uprising]. History will not have seen an intifada like this. Unfortunately it will jeopardise the

interest of the US and the lives of US people all over the world if he does this. The declaration has destroyed the peace process and all the agreements that have been signed. This will be met with a wave of public reaction.”

A Jewish commentator stated: “The second intifada – which turned into a bloody two or more years of death for Israelis at the hands of Palestinian suicide bombers, and death for Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli military – started after a 45-minute visit in late 2000 by the then leader of the Israeli opposition, Ariel Sharon, to the place that represents the nuclear core of this most radioactive conflict, the site Muslims call the Haram al-Sharif and Jews call the Temple Mount.” (It should be noted, though, that Trump called “on all parties to maintain the status quo at Jerusalem’s holy sites, including at the Temple Mount, also known as the Haram al-Sharif.” He added that his declaration was not taking a position on the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem).

The Palestinian ambassador to London said that Trump’s action amounted to “declaring war on 1.5 billion Muslims”. Others thought the move could adversely affect the relationship between the US and its Sunni Arab allies (Saudi Arabia etc) who have already expressed concern over America’s declining influence in the Middle East which therefore extends the influence of Iran and Russia.

Mahmoud Abbas said at a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that Palestinians will no longer accept any American role in the Middle East peace process at all. He said Washington can no longer be accepted as a “fair negotiator,” having upset Muslims and Christians over the future of the holy city. King Salman of Saudi Arabia, who had been encouraging the Palestinians to accept a less favourable peace settlement i.e. a two state solution without the right of return of Palestinian refugees, rebuked the Americans. Abbas said Salman promised that there will be no peace deal without a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Similarly Egypt said it would only accept the establishment of a Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, “on the 1967 borders.” The United Nations General Assembly voted by 128 to 9 to declare Trump’s controversial action “null and void”.

On the other hand, some Christians see Trump’s decision as a fulfilment of prophecy. They believe it brings us a step closer to the Return of Christ. Now I firmly believe that the return of the Jewish people to Israel is a partial fulfilment of biblical prophecy (e.g. Luke 21:20-24). I also believe that the Bible foretells that the Jewish people in Jerusalem will play a very important (though controversial) role in the End Times. But we need to take the whole of relevant biblical teaching seriously. This includes the following points:

The Bible clearly calls upon the Jewish people to act with justice towards the ‘foreigner’ (non-Jew) amongst them. So we must ask if Israel is treating the Palestinians with justice. Is it right for the Jerusalem question to be settled unilaterally rather than by (admittedly difficult) negotiation? (Also on the issue of justice, we need to ask if Israel is acting justly towards the people of Gaza). God is a God of justice.

The Bible clearly teaches that God will fulfil all the prophecies about the very important role of the Jewish people in Israel and Jerusalem in the End Times. We do not need to worry that if, on the basis of compassion and justice, Israel gives territory to the Palestinians including in Jerusalem that will prevent God’s purposes being fulfilled. God can easily overrule and work out his purposes.

I am well aware that some Christians favour the rebuilding of the Temple (prophesied by Ezekiel) on Temple Mount (which is in East Jerusalem). But since the site is sacred to the Muslims it is very difficult to see how there could ever be agreement to that happening. We should note that some of Ezekiel’s prophecies are clearly intended to be taken symbolically. I do not believe God would want the Jewish people to re-build the temple and resume the animal sacrifices in the End Times because the death and high priesthood of Jesus have replaced the old sacrificial system. Remember the Bible prophesies a massive turning by the Jewish people to Jesus in the End Times (Rom 11:25-26). He does not want them to practice the Old Covenant rituals with the Temple and sacrifices. Jesus is the “great high priest” (Heb 4:14) who “provided purification for sins” (Heb 1:3). “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (Heb 7:27 cf 9:28; 10:14). He “did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (Heb 9:24). The earthly sanctuary (temple) “is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Heb 8:5, cf. 9:24). The old covenant (with its animal sacrifices) “is obsolete and outdated” (Heb 8:13). “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:1-4).

Some Christians might think Israel should “drive out” the Palestinians as it once was called to drive out the Canaanites from the Promised Land. But the reason for God’s call to drive out the Canaanites was because they were very depraved in their worship and were highly likely to draw the Israelites into their depraved

worship practices and so away from God. It is not credible to draw a parallel between the Palestinians and the Canaanites.

I therefore conclude that it is not right to accept the unilateral declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel uncritically. We must ask questions based on the biblical teaching summarised above and seek to discern what God is saying.

Christians being driven out of Jerusalem?

Theophilos III, the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, has expressed deep concern over a proposed bill in the Knesset which would restrict the rights of churches to deal independently with their own land. He also referred to the unacceptable activities of radical Jewish settler groups, who are attempting to establish control over Christian properties around Jaffa gate in the heart of Jerusalem's Christian quarter.

Prayer Topics

1. For the protection of Israel from attack, which could lead to wider confrontation.
2. For Israel to act justly with respect to the Palestinians.
3. For the protection of Palestinians from attack.
4. For the United Nations to act justly with respect to Israel.
5. For the deliverance of the people of Gaza from the humanitarian crisis.
6. For a resumption of the peace process.
7. For Christians to follow the whole of the relevant teaching of the Bible about developments in Israel, not just "exciting" End Times considerations.
8. For the protection of the Christian community in Jerusalem.