

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories
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The newsletter, which seeks to take the hopes, needs, pain and fears of both sides seriously, is available free on request to those who send their name and email address to: tony@higton.info. Please encourage others to join the mailing list.
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IN THIS ISSUE

God yearns to bring Israelis to faith in Jesus and to make Israel a blessing internationally. But:

- The serious physical threats (from three regional enemies) and international bias against Israel are growing. Pray for her protection and for her to act with justice. Pray for the right people to be elected to government in April.
- The Palestinians continue to suffer, particularly in Gaza. Pray for their welfare and for them to avoid terrorism.

We look at:

- **CONFLICT IN GAZA:** Palestinians have demonstrated with violence. Israel accused of overreacting militarily.
- **CONFLICT WITH IRAN:** Iran has strengthened its influence in the Middle East, especially Syria and is an increasing threat to Israel.
- **CONFLICT WITH HEZBOLLAH:** This terrorist group in Lebanon is building attack tunnels under the border into Israel and has missiles which can reach the whole of Israel.
- **US WITHDRAWAL:** This is likely to increase Iranian and Russian influence in Syria, increasing the threat to Israel.
- **PEACE PROCESS:** Some think it is dead but discussions continue, though they face very serious difficulties.
- **ISRAEL'S NATION STATE LAW:** This controversial new law makes Israel Arabs (who have Israeli citizenship) second class citizens.
- **ELECTIONS:** Israel will have a general election in April 2019.

Continuing threats and uncertainties

Conflict with Gaza

This year has seen further conflict between Israel and Gaza. The people of Gaza have been protesting at the border and clashes led to over 118 Palestinians, including 15 children, being killed in April-May 2018. A Palestinian teenager was shot in the head, apparently by Israeli army snipers while peacefully protesting near a border fence. Human Rights Watch said eyewitnesses reported seeing Palestinians shot from a great distance from border fences, and others who "had not thrown stones or otherwise tried to harm Israeli soldiers" being shot from a closer range. Israel also launched the most air strikes since the 2014 war.

The UN General Assembly described Israel's military response as "excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate." The UN Human Rights Council voted for an independent inquiry to be set up to investigate violation of human rights. However Australia and the US voted against and another 14 countries abstained. The Australians said the language of the resolution prejudged the outcome and pointed out that the role of Hamas was not mentioned. The UN has been criticised for bias against Israel. Hamas, which governs Gaza, is regarded as a terrorist organisation by the EU, US, Canada and Israel.

In May some 40,000 Gazans gathered at the border, many throwing stones at the Israeli forces. They were protesting against the US moving its embassy to Jerusalem and in favour of Palestinian refugees being allowed back into what is now Israel. Hamas urged them to break through the border fence and provided maps for them to find the easiest route to nearby Israeli towns. Israel accuses Hamas of deliberately putting innocent civilians in the front line so that if any are killed it is an effective propaganda coup. However Hamas claimed more than once that the majority of people killed were members of the organisation.

Then, the Gazans began to float burning kites and balloons into Israel which the Israelis said started over 750 wildfires, causing hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of damage. They also began to fire rockets into Israel. An Israeli soldier was killed.

Senior Israeli officers have said that the Gaza protests stem first and foremost from the bad conditions in Gaza. The people face serious poverty, unemployment (57%), overcrowding and lack of basic services, which causes frustration

and anger. 95% of Gazan tap water is undrinkable. Electricity is only available for 4 hours a day. These are partly caused by the Israeli blockade of Gaza but also by sanctions from the West Bank Palestinian Authority which is run by Fatah, the political rival of Hamas. Fatah is trying to force Hamas to relinquish its rule over Gaza.

However, in November, with Egypt's mediation, Israel and Hamas established a ceasefire.

Conflict with Iran

Simon Tisdall, former foreign affairs editor for the Guardian, wrote a few months ago: "According to Israeli and regional experts, the storm now gathering around Israel's borders potentially surpasses in severity anything the country has faced throughout its short and difficult history. Whichever way you look, in any direction, trouble looms. At its heart, connecting all the geopolitical Scrabble pieces, is one four-letter word: Iran."

Iran, which frequently threatens to destroy Israel, has extended its influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen. It has succeeded in building a corridor of power from Iran across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean.

Dov Zakheim, former US undersecretary of defence, said; "Coupled with Hezbollah's growing strength, and the weekly Hamas-inspired protests in Gaza, Israel faces the spectre of a three-front war for the first time since 1967."

In February 2018 Israel shot down an armed Iranian drone which had entered Israel territory from Syria. Later Israel attacked Syrian airbases which contained Iranian forces, missiles and drones. Several Iranians were killed and Iran threatened revenge. In May Iran attacked various Israeli army bases and Israel responded with attacks on Iranian bases in Syria. There was a further exchange of missiles at the end of December.

Security experts say that Iran would only use its weapons in Syria against Israel for retaliatory purposes. Steven Klein, Professor of the International Program in Conflict Resolution and Mediation at Tel Aviv University, said recently: "If Netanyahu keeps hitting Iranian targets without allowing Iran a diplomatic way out, he will eventually back Iran into a corner from which it will feel compelled to strike back. The consequences would be disastrous for everyone." He added that without the nuclear deal (from which the US has just withdrawn) Iran would feel less restrained about attacking Israel.

Russia is seeking to encourage Iranian forces to withdraw to some 60 miles from the Israeli border but Israel is demanding that Iran withdraws its long range missiles.

Threats from Hezbollah in Lebanon

Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed terrorist organisation in Lebanon, has recently stated that the whole of Israel is within reach of its missiles. Also, after lengthy searching, Israel discovered Hezbollah cross-border tunnels in December. Israeli forces will destroy them on both sides of the border.

US withdrawal

The US is pulling back from influence in the Middle East. President Trump decided to withdraw US troops from Syria. The US is cutting more than £155m in aid to the Palestinians. It is also closing its main diplomatic mission to the Palestinians, reducing the consulate in Jerusalem to a unit under the control of the embassy to Israel.

However, the withdrawal from Syria is likely to increase Iranian influence in Syria, with Russian backing, which would increase the threat to Israel. Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote "Let us imagine that Israel wakes up one morning to find Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds forces on the Golan border, along with a warning from Russia to refrain from air strikes. Then what? Can Donald Trump be counted on to stand up to Putin on Israel's behalf?"

The reduction in aid to Palestinians and the demoting of the diplomatic mission, alongside the moving of the US embassy to Jerusalem, is likely to reduce US influence with the Palestinians.

The reduction of US influence in the Middle East is likely to have serious consequences.

What about the Peace Process?

Many people think that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not really interested in a peace settlement, but has been taking advantage of the lack of interest in the Palestinians by Arab countries. There seems to be more concern throughout the Middle East about the threat of Iran, than about the needs of the Palestinians. And the Arabs see Israel as an ally vis a vis Iran.

There are however on-going discussions about President Trump's peace plan. Trump has said recently that he thinks the two-state solution is the best. But reports of the plan include very controversial aspects. It seems that it would mean the Palestinians giving up the idea of East Jerusalem as their capital. Israel would withdraw from villages to the north and east of Jerusalem but Jewish settlements in the West Bank would remain. Also the Palestinian state would be under Israeli security control. Netanyahu stated: "I am willing for the Palestinians to have the authority to rule themselves without the capability to harm us. Israel will not relinquish security control west of the Jordan."

Another problem is the issue of the return of Palestinian refugees to what is now Israel. The demonstrations in Gaza focussed on this. But Israel will not accept it. Dr Hanan Ashrawi, a leading Palestinian politician said: "Palestinian refugees have been longing for home for 70 years after being violently uprooted and expelled from their ancestral homeland. To deprive them of their rights and to crush their hopes and aspirations for redress and a life worth living is the utmost cruelty. Such an injustice will also fuel the flames of extremism and violence, leading to further regional instability and conflict. In addition to being morally reprehensible, such a policy is utterly dangerous and irresponsible."

Tzipi Livni, co-leader of Israel's centre-left opposition, the Zionist Union and ex-foreign minister was chief peace negotiator with the Palestinians. She wrote recently: "As a true supporter of peace based on the principle of two-states-for-two-peoples, the demand that Palestinian refugees "return" to Israel is not only at odds with the very rationale of a two-nation-states solution, but if accepted, would lead to a continuation of the conflict long after the establishment of a Palestinian state. Such a scenario should be rejected by anyone who truly seeks peace in our lifetime." She added: "Unfortunately, Palestinian refugees have been used as a political playing card for far too long since 1948. Palestinians are the only group since the end of the second world war to have kept their refugee status and to have passed this status down to over four generations, creating a problem of millions of "refugees" that are kept as pawns in a political game instead of solving their humanitarian situation."

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, has said that the US negotiators have suggested a Palestinian state could go into a confederation with Jordan. This would be an alliance between sovereign states which agree over economic, security and national interests. Abbas said he would consider it if the Israelis would also join the confederation. Also it would need international recognition of a Palestinian state. A confederation is not a new idea. It was considered in the 1980s but abandoned because of disagreements between Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel accused of passing an Apartheid law

In July 2018 Israel passed the very controversial Nation-State law, which led to demonstrations and strong criticisms in Israel itself. The law affirms that:

- "Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people who have the unique right of self-determination."
- "Jerusalem is the united capital of Israel"
- "The official language is Hebrew. Arabic has special status."
- "The state places national value on the development of Jewish settlement and will act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation."

The main criticism is that the country has 1.8 million Arab citizens ("Israeli Arabs" as opposed to Palestinians who are not Israeli citizens) and this law renders them *officially* second-class citizens. Obviously this applies to other non-Jewish citizens too. Many Israelis see this as undermining democracy, saying that Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people *and a democracy*. Tzipi Livni said that some of Netanyahu's ministers thought the law was "a mistake," and added "It's not too late to apologize (again), to amend and introduce equality. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, on that we all agree - for equal rights for all we still need to fight."

The law was passed by 62 votes to 55 after a heated eight-hour debate during which opposition and Arab MPs tore up the printed text of the law, waved black flags and shouted "apartheid." Mordechai Kremnitzer, Professor of Law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said the bill would "remove the mask so as to reveal the ugly face of ultranationalist Israel in all its repugnance." Rabbi Steven Wernick, of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, said "Israel is losing its soul and weakening its democracy and Jewish character. Its beacon of light on the

nations is now dim. Even I am having difficulty seeing it.” One Israeli newspaper said Netanyahu regarded Israeli Arabs as a “nuisance” and “has visited Arab communities only rarely, and has never shown any interest in the culture or distress in Arab society here.”

Israeli elections

Benjamin Netanyahu has been prime minister for 11 years. In November defence minister Avigdor Lieberman resigned over Netanyahu agreeing to a ceasefire with Hamas. The departure of Lieberman’s party from the coalition left Netanyahu with a majority of only one. He tried hard to correct this but in the end the cabinet decided to hold the elections, due in November 2019, in April. There are fears that this could result in a more extreme right wing government.

Tony Higton

PRAYER TOPICS

Pray for revival in Israel so that many Israelis will come to faith in Jesus (cf Rom 11:25-26).

Pray for the spread once more of Christianity, in the face of persecution, in countries surrounding Israel, that many will come to faith in Jesus.

Pray for Israel and the Palestinians to act with justice towards each other, and for an end to corruption and violence.

Pray for the welfare of Palestinians, especially in Gaza, and for the proper provision of the necessities of life.

Pray for the right people to be elected to government in Israel in April.

Pray for the protection of Israel, surrounded as it is by enemies seeking its destruction, and against the bias and antisemitism in the world, including the UN. (Many Christians see the bias in the UN and widespread antisemitism as setting the stage for the biblical predictions to be fulfilled of the nations gathering against Israel - Zech 12:3; 14:2).