

***The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories***  
**Issue 50 March 2020**

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](mailto: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:

- Israel faces serious threats from Iran and Hezbollah and still faces international bias not least after the US withdrawal and the Trump peace process which is deemed anti-Palestinian. Pray for her protection and for her to act with justice. Pray for the right people to lead the nation.
- The Palestinians continue to suffer, including from their leaders. Pray for their welfare and for them to avoid terrorism.

We look at:

- **POLITICAL TENSION IN ISRAEL:** After three elections in a year no new government has been established.
- **RADICAL US ACTION:** The US has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the Golan Heights as being in Israel. It has supported Israel annexing the West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley.
- **THE DIRE PALESTINIAN SITUATION:** There is serious poverty in the Palestinian areas and Human Rights Watch calls Gaza and the West Bank “police states” which practice oppression and torture.
- **CONFLICT WITH HEZBOLLAH:** This terrorist group in Lebanon has increased its influence in Lebanon and since the US withdrawal, especially in Syria and Iraq. It frequently threatens to destroy Israel and is said to have bought nuclear weapons.
- **THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF IRAN:** This affects Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and is an increasing threat to Israel.
- **THE PEACE PROCESS:** Many see the two-state settlement as dead, especially after the recent US actions, and there is less concern about it in the Arab world.

## Benjamin Netanyahu

Netanyahu did well in the third Israeli election within a year, but he did not win a clear majority. He needed 61 seats in the 120 seat Knesset. His right wing Likud party gained 36 seats and his allied right wing and religious parties won another 22. He will now be seeking to get three Knesset members to defect from other parties because it is unlikely that he will be able to form a coalition with other parties (other than the right wing and religious parties linked with Likud). The largest other party is the “Blue and White” coalition of centrist and liberal political parties led by Benny Gantz who refused to form a coalition with Netanyahu, as did other smaller parties.

Netanyahu’s limited success is controversial as he is facing imminent court cases over bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Left wing Israeli newspaper Haaretz accuses him of incitement, division and racism. It called his success “a defeat for the rule of law” because “millions of Israelis voted for a candidate charged with committing felonies.” It predicts that Netanyahu will major on halting the legal proceedings against him. He says the accusations against him are a political witch hunt. He has unsuccessfully tried to push through immunity laws which would prevent him from being indicted but he could face ten years in prison for bribery.

The Arab Joint List party did well in the election, gaining 15 seats. In the April 2019 election it received 337,000 votes but in this election it received over 575,000. It is anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian but some 20,000 Jewish people voted for it. It is thought that the success of the Arab Joint List was a reaction to Donald Trump’s Peace Plan, which they see as anti-Palestinian and was also a reaction to Netanyahu’s negativism towards them. Many Israelis see the Joint List as supporting terrorism. However some Israelis think it is not impossible that the “Blue and White” coalition might seek an alliance with the Joint List. Others disagree.

Since I wrote the above, the President of Israel has asked Benny Gantz to try to form a government because he had managed to secure enough support from the 120-member Knesset to form a majority of 61 seats. However it includes support from the Arab Joint List and from Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, who strongly oppose each other. So it remains to be seen if Gantz will succeed. He is also trying to get legislation through the Knesset which would prevent Netanyahu from entering a third term as prime minister. The involvement of the Arab Joint List is a cause of concern to many Israelis because the Arabs involved could make demands which would reduce the Jewish character of Israel.

## US action

### *Recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights*

Donald Trump has, of course, taken controversial action with respect to Israel including the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017. Then in March 2019 he recognised Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights which Israel captured from Syria in 1967. This is despite the fact that Syria was demanding the area back as a condition of any peace treaty. Trump's official statement said "aggressive acts by Iran and terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, in southern Syria continue to make the Golan Heights a potential launching ground for attacks on Israel. Any possible future peace agreement in the region must account for Israel's need to protect itself from Syria and other regional threats." The action met with international condemnation.

### *Trump's Peace Plan*

Many people see the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as dead. An Israel Democracy Institute survey discovered that support for the two-state solution by Jewish Israelis has reduced from nearly 70% in 2008 to 47% in 2019. Only a third of Israelis in the 18 - 34 age range supported it in 2018. Israel's ambassador to the UN said "Palestinian leaders have rejected multiple peace overtures, launched intifadas and wars, and sponsored countless acts of terrorism in adherence to this belief."

Sir John Jenkins, former Middle East director of the UK Foreign Office also blames the Palestinians for the decline of the two-state solution. He said the Palestinian political structure had collapsed and that the Palestinian Authority is "widely distrusted and despised as corrupt by many Palestinians." Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia said that for four decades the Palestinian leadership "has missed opportunities again and again and rejected all the offers it was given." He added "It's about time that the Palestinians accept the offers, and agree to come to the negotiating table - or they should shut up and stop complaining."

However, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research published a poll which shows that support among Palestinians for a two-state solution to the conflict has fallen. A poll in September 2019 found that 56 percent of Palestinians polled opposed the two-state solution and nearly a third (especially younger Palestinian voters) supported the establishment of one binational state for Palestinians and Israelis. Netanyahu has on several occasions declared his intention to annex Israeli settlements on the West Bank. He has said "Not a single settlement or a single settler will ever be uprooted."

Donald Trump's peace plan reaffirms recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, allows Israel to annex its West Bank settlements and recognises the Jordan Valley (about a third of the West Bank) as part of Israel. In return, the Palestinians would be given land near Gaza. They would eventually be given a state (but no army) so long as they demilitarise Gaza, recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israel as a Jewish state. They could be given Abu Dis, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, as their capital. Certain border towns currently in Israel but adjacent to Palestinian territory might be transferred to the Palestinian state but the Israeli Arabs who live in them would lose their Israeli citizenship. Palestinian refugees who lost their homes in conflicts with Israel would lose their right of return.

People describe Donald Trump's peace plan as "money for peace" rather than "land for peace." He is offering to open up the West Bank and Gaza to regional and global markets in order to improve the Palestinian economy. The US claims that this would double the Palestinian economic output within ten years.

### *Reactions to Trump's plan*

The Palestinian Authority rejected Trump's plan and cut off all ties with the US and Israel. The chief Palestinian envoy to Britain said that the plan gives Israel a green light to establish an apartheid state. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which has 57 member states, rejected the plan. The UN Security Council condemned the idea of Israel annexing West Bank settlements. Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Yemen, Hezbollah and Hamas also expressed disapproval. But Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait were more positive.

### *The legal status of the settlements*

The UN continues with its criticisms of Israel over the West Bank settlements. When he was UK Foreign Secretary in March 2019, Jeremy Hunt said the British Government would oppose every UN Human Rights Council measure

about Israel's alleged violation of Palestinian rights in the West Bank and Gaza. The US was also critical of the fact that Israel's human rights record is debated at every session of the UNHRC, which is not done with any other country, including Iran, Syria, North Korea and Myanmar.

In January 2019 the US and Israel quit the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural agency for criticising Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, naming ancient Jewish sites as Palestinian heritage sites and granting full membership to Palestine in 2011.

In December 2019 the International Criminal Court decided to investigate alleged war crimes by Israel in the Palestinian territories. The Israeli attorney-general claimed the ICC had no jurisdiction over the territories because the Palestinians are not legally a state. The court responded that since Palestine became a member of the ICC in 2015 they can ask the court to investigate.

### *The situation in Gaza*

The situation in Gaza is grim. Half of its 1.9 million population live under the poverty line, over 70% of its youth are unemployed and 97% of the water is undrinkable. The UN said in May 2019 that Gaza was on the verge of a "humanitarian catastrophe" in which 1 million Palestinians could go hungry. It added that they would have to close schools and people would have no access to the health care system. The Palestinians cut off diplomatic ties with the US after Trump recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Then Trump ended US support for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees and cut US bilateral aid to the Palestinian Authority.

In February 2020 Israel extended the Palestinian fishing zone off Gaza to 15 miles and increased the number of work permits for Palestinians entering Israel by 2000. Off the record, Palestinians express a desire to work in Israel. And some Palestinian parents arrange for their children to have medical treatment in Israel, only to abandon their children at the border and disappear into Israel. One man from Gaza said: "I know lots of people who supported Hamas in the past, but became disillusioned with their policies. If you look at Hamas demonstrations five or ten years ago, they had tens of thousands of participants. Now they garner only a fraction of that, so Hamas avoids big rallies. They are trying to conceal diminishing public support." About 120,000 Palestinian Arabs working legally in Israel and the Jewish settlements, and thousands more are seeking work permits or seeking to enter Israel illegally.

On the other hand there have been violent clashes between Gaza and Israel with many rocket attacks on Israel and Israeli reprisals which have killed numerous people in Gaza. Israel and Gaza have been negotiating for ceasefires with the help of Egypt and Qatar.

### *The Palestinian situation*

Human Rights Watch has produced a scathing report on the Palestinian leadership. It called both the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza "police states" accusing them of "systematic arbitrary arrests and torture." Shawan Jabarin, Director of al-Haq (a Palestinian human rights organisation and member of a Human Rights Watch committee) said: "The fact that Israel systematically violates Palestinians' most basic rights is no reason to remain silent in the face of the systematic repression of dissent and the torture Palestinian security forces are perpetrating."

Christians are being persecuted and churches attacked in Palestinian areas but they are pressured not to report these incidents because this could undermine the financial support from Europe.

The World Bank says unemployment is around 18-19% in the West Bank and over 50% in Gaza.

It seems that some Arab leaders no longer regard the Palestinian situation as a major priority. So ambassadors from Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates were present when Trump unveiled his controversial peace plan in the White House. There have been muted responses from Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, Egypt and even from Jordan and Lebanon. It seems that they no longer regard the plight of the Palestinians as a top priority.

### *Hezbollah in Lebanon*

Hezbollah is dominant in Lebanon and more powerful than Lebanon's army. It is backed by Iran and has been fighting in Syria on behalf of President Assad. Now the civil war in Syria is winding down, the Israelis are worried that Hezbollah will start to refocus on Israel. It is thought to have 150,000 rockets capable of reaching almost the whole of Israel.

## Iran

Iran continues to be influential in Syria and is seeking to retain its military presence there. It is also a dominant influence in Lebanon and is seeking to control Iraq. All of this increases its threat to Israel. It continues to make threats against Israel saying it is ready to “eliminate it from the Earth” not least because Israel launches attacks on Iranian targets in Syria. A leading Iranian politician said: “If America attacks us, Israel will survive for less than half an hour.” There are reports that Iran has bought nuclear weapons from other countries. Netanyahu has said that “Iran is directing Hezbollah to build secret sites to convert inaccurate projectiles into precision-guided missiles, missiles that can target deep inside Israel within an accuracy of ten meters.” Now that Trump has decided to pull out US Special Forces from Syria, Iran believes it can become a leading regional power. The leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps said “We have become powerful and invincible and all the enemy’s options orchestrated against the country have been weakened and cannot confront us and this reality has been proven today and is visible.” He added that Iran had the “capability to annihilate” Israel which must “be wiped off the world (map) as soon as possible.”

Susie Gelman Chairman of the Israel Policy Forum expressed the following concern: “Despite offering a veneer of commitment to Israel, the current White House is actually shaping an environment, both in the Middle East and internationally, that is less stable and less safe for the Jewish State.”

*Tony Higton*

### PRAYER TOPICS

Pray for revival in Israel so that many Israelis will come to faith in Jesus (cf Rom 11:25-26 “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.”).

Pray for Christians being persecuted in Palestinian areas and Messianic Jewish believers facing attacks from ultra-Orthodox Jewish people.

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, for an end to oppression and torture and for the proper provision of the necessities of life.

Pray for the right people to be given leadership in Israel. The country is clearly very divided politically.

Pray for the protection of Israel, especially with the growing influence of Iran, 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).

#### Other new articles you may be interested in

CHRISTIAN TEACHING RESOURCES WEBSITE: I’ve updated my Christian Teaching Resources website <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/> which includes 200 articles, 7 training courses & 4 books. It includes practical, resources for clergy, ministers & lay folk which may be downloaded & used free of charge.

A BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO CHRISTIANITY: My short article “A beginner’s guide to Christianity” explains 12 points about Christianity (incl: why believe in God; what God is like, etc) for those with little or no knowledge about it. We can no longer assume people have basic knowledge about the Faith. See <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/abeginnersguidetochristianity.html>

UPDATE ON ABORTION: My new article shows the remarkable early development of the human embryo which becomes a human being at conception; c99% of abortions in the UK are morally unjustified yet they involve ending the life of unborn babies. See <http://christianteaching.org.uk/blog/uncategorized/update-on-abortion/>

A BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO THE OLD TESTAMENT: The OT was the Bible Jesus knew and loved. We can’t fully understand the New Testament without some knowledge of the OT. This 9-page paper gives an overview of the OT and its stories. See <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/beginnersguidetotheoldtestament.html>