

The Paradox Newsletter

by The Rev. Tony Higton

**The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the
Palestinian Territories**

Issue 6 July 19th 2006

Paradox Ministries encourages Christians to understand and pray about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, seeing it through the eyes of both people groups involved, and taking the needs, fear and pain of both sides seriously. Its director, the Rev Tony Higton, who was Rector of a church in the Old City of Jerusalem for a number of years, circulates this email newsletter, speaks at seminars and encourages support of indigenous reconciliation ministry in Jerusalem. The newsletter is available free on request to those who add their email address to our Newsletter update list, available on the top of the ['Newsletter' page](#). Alternatively, send your email address and name to us via our online [Contact Form](#). Please encourage others to join the mailing list.© Tony Higton

War on two fronts

It seems such a long time ago when the alarm was raised about Qassam rockets from Gaza hitting Ashkelon for the first time. Yet it is only three weeks since it happened. Now a much more deadly and serious conflagration is in process, proving just how quickly war can flare up in the Middle East..

POSSIBLE AGREEMENT BEFORE THE LEBANESE CONFLICT

It had seemed possible that circumstances might force the warring parties towards some sort of agreement. Egyptian President Mubarak was urging Assad to press Hamas to accept the prisoners' document. 58% of Israelis favoured negotiation and release of Palestinian prisoners. The IDF made it clear it would not favour release of prisoners "with blood on their hands" but only those not involved in terrorism. The Israeli Government, though, maintained a hard line against negotiation.

Meanwhile, a poll of Palestinians revealed that Hamas was favoured for its record on education and health but was less popular as a political party than in February. Only 30.8% would vote for Hamas in June as opposed to 41.4% in February. However support improved to 33.1% as Israeli attacks escalated and more civilians were killed.

On July 7th Nasser al-Lahem, editor-in-chief of the independent Palestinian news agency, Maan, wrote an article criticising the kidnapping and those who fire Qassams into Israel. He pointed out that the many Palestinian casualties and other problems were too high a price to pay for such attacks on Israel. At the same time Ismail Haniyeh Prime Minister of the Hamas Government called for a cease-fire on both sides.

Mahmoud Abbas regarded the successful attack on the IDF and the kidnap of Gilad Shalit as an attempt by Hamas to torpedo any agreement between Fatah and Hamas on the document drawn up by the Palestinian prisoners concerning a two-state solution.

It is clear that the conflict in Gaza was being run by Khaled Meshal, the hard-line head of the Hamas political bureau in Damascus. Meshal was the victim of a botched Israeli assassination attempt in Jordan in 1997. Two Mossad (Israeli Secret Service) agents poisoned him, but were caught. King Hussein of Jordan forced Israel to provide the antidote in return for the release of the Mossad agents. Meshal is in league with Syrian President, Bashar Assad and the Iranians. Assad sees Meshal as a very useful pawn after Hamas won the Palestinian election.

ATTACK BY HEZBOLLAH

Then, on July 12th, Hezbollah, under cover of a barrage of Katyusha rockets and mortar shells, kidnapped two more Israeli troops. Ehud Olmert said this was an "act of war" by a sovereign state – Lebanon – because Hezbollah now has a Minister in the Lebanese Government, and Lebanon has de facto rejected UN resolution 1559, which called for disarming Hezbollah. Olmert promised that "Israel's response will be restrained but very, very, very painful." Army reservists were called up. IAF planes flew ominously over Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's palace, because Syria was seen as behind the Hezbollah attack, and Israel began its bombardment of Hezbollah positions.

In response, Hezbollah rockets began for the first time to rain down on Nahariyah, Haifa, Tiberias and Safed.

HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION?

The present attitude of Hamas

Like Hezbollah, Hamas is a terrorist organisation which has always been committed to the destruction of Israel. However, as we have noted in earlier editions of Paradox, the realities of winning the Palestinian elections with the consequent worldwide economic sanctions against them, have brought Hamas to the point of considering a peace agreement with Israel. It is true that the Qassams have continued to be launched from Gaza into Israel, with the support of 60% of the population of Gaza. But Hamas would argue that this is in response to Israeli military actions in Gaza since Israel withdrew from the territory.

After all, the people of Gaza have experienced bombing and shelling which has killed and wounded civilians, including women and children. There have been assassinations, and damage to infrastructure including electricity blackouts.

Abductions and executions are seen as against international law, as is the deliberate use of sonic booms by aircraft to create fear amongst a whole population. The Gaza Community Mental Health Center reported that the supersonic booms caused loss of concentration, loss of appetite, bedwetting, and other disorders amongst children, and headaches, stomach aches, shortness of breath, etc., among both children and adults. Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states that "Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited ... Reprisals against protected persons and their property are prohibited."

However, it should also be remembered, of course, that the deliberate targeting of civilians by rockets is a war crime. Also it can be argued that any use of Qassams, which are so inaccurate, even against military targets, always endanger innocent people and so are illegal.

The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, claimed that the organisation ultimately wanted to make peace with Israel, but added that it had been preparing to fight Israel, stockpiling weapons for years. It threatened that all of Israel is now within the range of its missiles (see below).

Hezbollah's talk about making peace is contradicted by its unprovoked attacks on Israel, despite Israel's withdrawal to within its internationally recognized northern border. It is also contradicted by its close connections with Syria and Iran, both of which signed a military co-operation agreement in June. Iran is publicly committed to an escalation of the violent activity against Israel and against "Zionists" around the world. It is also seeking to draw world attention away from its nuclear programme, which succeeded at the recent G8 conference. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is constantly speaking of the need to destroy Israel. Syria is frustrated by having to withdraw from Lebanon and would dearly like to increase its influence in the country.

Iran has provided Hezbollah with some 11,500 missiles and rockets, 400 short- and medium-range pieces of artillery, and a huge number of SAM7

shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. This arsenal includes Fajr missiles with an effective range of 100 km, Iran130 missiles with an effective range of 90-110 km, Shahin missiles with an effective range of 150 km and 335-millimeter rockets with an effective range of 150 km.

3000 Hezbollah fighters have been trained by Iran in guerilla warfare, missile aiming and launching, use of artillery, handling of unmanned aircraft, use of hang gliders, naval warfare techniques, handling of speedboats and conventional warfare. Iranian Revolutionary Guards have assisted Hezbollah in setting up 20 permanent missile bases along the Lebanese border with Israel. The Iranians also use advanced means to track the movement of the Israeli forces in the field, and select targets in Israel. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of Iran, said on Iranian TV on July 16: "Hezbollah will not be disarmed."

The right of Israel to defend herself

The leader of an Evangelical Christian Zionist organization in Israel is quoted as saying: "This was certainly an unprovoked attack and Israel has every right to go in and pound them." I agree that no sovereign state can stand by whilst terrorist organizations are showering much of its territory with deadly missiles. But I have to say that I was moved to tears as I watched TV reports of the suffering of innocent individuals on both sides, resulting from the "pounding." There is very widespread sympathy for Israel making some military response. The question is whether they will be able to destroy Hezbollah without destroying Lebanon and causing a completely unjustifiable amount of "collateral damage" (a chilling euphemism for the unintentional deaths of innocent civilians). A further question is whether the conflict will become wider, although, despite "sabre-rattling," this seems unlikely to me.

Some Israelis are calling for an agreement with Hamas, doubtless based on the Palestinian prisoners' document mentioned earlier. For all its violence, they regard Hamas as a lesser-of-two-evils potential legitimate partner. Such an agreement could divide the two terrorist organizations. However Hezbollah is seen as a totally negative force, seeking Israel's destruction, which must itself be destroyed.

It is easy for other nations to call for a cease fire. But this could leave Hezbollah in place, with a very weak Lebanese Government. Understandably, Israel cannot tolerate that. Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora said in an interview with an Italian newspaper: "It's not a mystery that Hezbollah answers to the political agendas of Tehran and Damascus The entire world must help us disarm Hezbollah. But first we need to reach a cease-fire." Experience teaches, however, that even international peace-keeping forces can be ineffective too. Also with long-range rockets, an internationally-policed buffer zone in southern Lebanon seems irrelevant.

President Bush has called on Syria, which has great influence over Hezbollah, to rein the organization in. But Syria is an unpredictable partner, virulently anti-Israel and seeking its own advantage in Lebanon.

Also, behind Syria is the spectre of Iran with its extremist leaders. Kayhan, the conservative Iranian daily paper, linked with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, makes that country's position clear. The editor wrote: "The annihilation of the Zionist Regime is not only a religious and national duty, but a universal human duty; the whole world must be made unsafe for the Zionists, [and] their political and commercial centres." He speculated that the day when Israel would be "wiped off the map" has already begun. Then, in language which will interest Christians who are into eschatology (teaching on the End Times), he urged the G8 summit to "send Israel a strong message to halt its mad rush towards Armageddon." He went on to make it clear that Iran sees itself as the central pillar of the Islamic world.

We must not forget the underlying clash of theologies in the Middle East conflict. Jews and many Christians see Israel as the promised land for the Jewish people. But most Muslims see it as part of the one Islamic nation which has been temporarily usurped by the Zionists. This dispute will not go away, however secure Israel is made by international agreement and the Israelis know this.

The Israeli over-reaction?

Israel's increasing use of force in Gaza has encouraged suicide bombings, the firing of Qassams etc. Many would condemn what it sees is Israel's attempt to topple a democratically-elected government by force, including arresting members of its parliament.

It is in Israel's interest for Palestinians to enjoy a life of prosperity and fulfilment, yet Israel has destroyed Gaza's power station and other infrastructure, condemning Palestinians to more hardship and poverty. Gaza is shut off by land, sea and air, except for the Rafa crossing. The people cannot visit family in the West Bank or seek work in Israel (a factor on which the Gazan economy has relied for some 40 years). Clearly, no-one is going to invest currently in development in Gaza. Whatever justification Israel makes for this, it is not in her interests. Poverty and oppression breed violence, and promote the use of Qassams to remind the world of their plight. (To be fair, though, some of the poverty and oppression is caused by criminal activity and corruption within Gaza and the Palestinian leadership itself)

By contrast, Israel has sat back, hence allowing Hezbollah for many years to build up its huge arsenal of weapons and to make occasional rocket attacks without the strong military reaction we are now witnessing.

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY?

1. For the protection of innocent civilians in Gaza, Israel and Lebanon, and healing of those injured, traumatized and bereaved.
2. For the neutralizing (ideally by diplomatic efforts and negotiation, including by Lebanon and Syria) of all who initiate violence.
3. For an acceptance, however grudging, of Israel's right to exist within secure borders, especially on the part of the Hamas government and, if possible, Hezbollah.
4. For wisdom and proper restraint, within international law, on the part of Israel in its use of its massive military superiority.
5. For frustration of Iran's efforts to see Israel destroyed and to draw international attention away from its nuclear programme.
6. For the removal of poverty and oppression in Gaza and the rebuilding of infrastructure etc., in Gaza and Lebanon.
7. Against any spread of the conflict.

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