

# The Paradox Newsletter

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

Issue 7 October 18<sup>th</sup> 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

## Who won the war?

Who won the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah? The answer is complicated. Hezbollah humiliated Israel by showing that the sixth most powerful armed force in the world could not wipe it out, but rather left it with the ability to attack Israel again. However, Hezbollah was, it seems, genuinely taken aback by the ferocity of the Israeli response and, given the huge damage to its host country Lebanon, might think twice about any serious new attack on Israel.

Israel was, of course, seeking to restore its deterrent power. It destroyed a good deal of Hezbollah and forced the Lebanese to take seriously the need to curb Hezbollah's power. However, it is clear that Israel cannot trust simply in the deterrent power of its massive armaments (as the US and other western powers are discovering in Afghanistan and Iraq).

Lebanon has benefited in that it can, for the first time in 31 years, regain control of the south of the country with international backing, albeit with a strong Hezbollah presence, but without a Syrian presence. However the cost

in terms of loss of life and devastation has been extremely high. And a great deal depends on whether the international force really implements UN Security Resolution 1701.

## Threats to Israel

Israel's security situation has changed a great deal. Over two million Israelis live within range of Hezbollah missiles. It must be remembered that Hezbollah still has many missiles and it is likely they will be re-supplied along the Iran-Syria route. There is, of course, also a danger that the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank will be emboldened by Hezbollah's performance to attack Israel in similar ways. And Israel now knows how very difficult it is to defend itself against such attacks. Senior IDF staff believe that there could be another conflict with Hezbollah in the near future and that the only way to stop Iran supplying Hezbollah with weapons through Syria would be by Israel attacking the supply lines.

However, there are much more widespread threats to Israel's security. The Iranians, who have signed an agreement to defend Syria from any Israeli attack, are issuing blood-curdling threats against her and clearly have sufficient military power to back them up.

Syria, despite President Bashar Assad having spoken of making peace with Israel, has said that Syria expected Israel could attack them at any moment so they were heightening their preparations for war. He added that, given the popularity of Hezbollah, it would be impossible for them to stop the supply of Iranian weapons passing through Syria. Meanwhile, a new organisation has been formed to resist Israeli control of the Golan Heights and to liberate them using Hezbollah's tactics.

One of Hezbollah's main pretexts for continued attacks on Israel is the claim that Israel occupies the Sheba'a Farms, an area of about 40 sq km (about 24 sq miles) on the slopes of Mt. Hermon, which is Lebanese territory. However, until the Six Day War in 1967, it belonged to Syria and the UN rejected Lebanese government claims, declaring it part of the Golan Heights.

A larger-scale change is taking place though which is reminiscent of cold war politics. Iran, supported by Russia, is obviously making a bid to become the dominant regional power in the Middle East. Russia is seeking to gain dominant superpower influence in the Middle East, now that the US is seen as bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and is losing influence as a result. Despite rhetoric, America is unlikely to use military power against any other nations in the foreseeable future. Iran knows this and is successfully defying

American power. The danger is that relatively moderate powers like Egypt and Saudi Arabia could lose influence to Iran backed by Russia.

In early October Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned: "The Middle East is on the verge of exploding." Around the same time Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said: For the first time in my life I feel that there is an existential threat against the state of Israel. Another Israeli commentator wrote: It is hard to believe, but only 60 years after the Holocaust the Jewish people is once again in danger of being destroyed - at least in its own state, where 40 percent of the world's Jews are concentrated.

## **Israeli disillusionment**

There is a good deal of disillusionment in Israel. Despite an 11 billion dollar annual defence budget, the armed forces performance against Hezbollah was deeply disappointing to many. They seemed somewhat unprepared for the conflict and there appeared to be serious intelligence failures. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah remains alive and defiant. Like many of their enemies, Israelis are amazed the IDF could not bring a terrorist organisation with less than 1500 combat activists to its knees in a whole month of warfare, when over a million Israelis were confined to bomb shelters, 163 died, 427 were injured and \$1.1 billion worth of damage was caused in Israel. Instead, its missiles remain pointing at the northern region of Israel. Many are also aware that Israel's military deterrent is seriously weakened.

It is also now clear that the policy of unilateral withdrawal (from Palestinian areas or Lebanon), in which many Israelis trusted, doesn't work. The response to it is attack by missiles.

Little wonder Ehud Olmert became the least popular Prime Minister in Israel's history.

## **The situation in South Lebanon**

Two-thirds of Lebanon lies in ruins. A million Lebanese were forced out of their homes and some 250,000 left the country. Huge damage was done to infrastructure: roads, bridges, banks and financial institutions. Their great suffering caused the Lebanese people enormous resentment against Israel and conversely huge support for Hezbollah. According to the UN, some 1,183 people, mostly civilians, died, about a third of them children, and 15,000 civilian homes were destroyed. Lebanese authorities say 4,054 people were injured.

The Lebanese Army and the UN force can stabilize South Lebanon but it seems that the demilitarization of Hezbollah, as is detailed in Security Council Resolution 1701, will not be carried out.

Nasrallah stated: We did not think that the capture [kidnap of the Israeli soldiers] would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me if I had known on July 11 ... that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not. He added that Hezbollah would keep to the ceasefire. However, on another occasion, he said that the raid was meant to preempt a planned IDF offensive against Hezbollah and to provoke Israel to react at a time when it was not ready.

## **Did Israel commit war crimes in Lebanon?**

Some Israelis justify Israel's actions by pointing out that no sovereign nation can allow its citizens to be subjected to rocket attacks from across its borders. They point out that this was a just war in that it was a battle for survival, not for territory and a battle to protect innocent civilians, not militant settlers. They add that Hezbollah deliberately hid itself and its rocket launchers in civilian areas so that Israel was faced with a huge moral dilemma and, in order to attack Hezbollah, could not avoid extensive but unintentional civilian casualties. Furthermore, they argue, many of the civilians involved actively consented to assisting Hezbollah, so they have, in effect, become combatants.

Defenders of Israel also claim that her reaction to Hezbollah's attack was not disproportionate because in war proportionality does not relate to the proportion between the damage experienced by a country and the force used in retribution. Rather it relates to the proportion between the amount of force used to the amount required to achieve a justified objective, in this case, destroying Hezbollah.

Another argument used by those defending Israel is that since the terrorists, with government connivance, use the Lebanese infrastructure Israel is justified in attacking it.

Other Israelis say that Israel used excessive force without distinguishing between the civilian population and Hezbollah. They add that widespread bombing of infrastructure such as power stations and bridges is unethical because it punishes the entire Lebanese civilian population.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan condemned the use of cluster bombs by the Israel Defense Forces. These bombs explode while still falling and scatter over a broad area. About 10 percent fail to explode.

## The Palestinian situation

Despite being overshadowed by the war in Lebanon, the immense suffering of the Palestinian people continues. Since the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, 500 Palestinians have been killed and over 3,000 wounded, and more than 150 homes have been demolished. There is huge damage to the infrastructure with sewage flowing in the streets, etc. 60% of Gazas electricity was provided by the destroyed power plants (the other 40% is purchased from Israel). The irregular electricity supply has caused severe water shortages. Much food has been lost through lack of refrigeration, etc.

Many thousands of Gazans used to work in Israel but can do so no longer. Subcontract goods for Israeli firms and agriculture products are blocked at the Karni crossing, which is closed most of the time. Unemployment is 50%, which causes some to turn to extremism.

There are an estimated 70,000 automatic weapons in Gaza, excluding antitank weapons and shotguns. Anarchy reigns with armed gangs, family feuds, tribal warfare and murders. Violent demonstrations broke out because international sanctions have meant the government could not pay its 165,000 employees for the past six months. Fatah encouraged tens of thousands of teachers, health workers and other government employees to go an open-ended strike. Hundreds of Palestinian policemen and security officers blocked the main roads in Gaza City in protest against unpaid wages, firing their rifles into the air. Hamas security forces attempted to stop Fatah security forces demonstrating and this led to fighting in which Palestinians were killed and injured. After Saudi Arabia and Qatar had made funds available, Abbas distributed about 190 (\$350) each to PA employees.

PA Government Spokesman Dr. Ghazi Hamad said in the PA daily Al-Ayyam: The reality in which we are living in Gaza can only be described as miserable and wretched, and as a failure in every sense of the word. We applauded the elections and the unique democratic experience, but in reality there has been a great step backwards. We spoke of national consensus, [but] it turned out to be like a leaf blowing in the wind... The situation in Gaza is a powder keg ready to explode.

In August Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas agreed to form a Palestinian national unity government. Fatah and Hamas agreed to continue the temporary cease-fire with Israel. However the international community made it clear that the terms

for the unity government were not acceptable because the original foundation document (drawn up by Fatah and Hamas prisoners in Israel) had been amended. Originally it included an implicit acceptance of Israel's right to exist within the 1967 borders. The amended version excluded this. Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri declared: The Hamas movement will not recognize Israel even if all its members are killed.

Hamas turned down an Israeli offer to free between 900 and 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for captured Israel Defense Forces soldier Gilad Shalit. Then the government of Qatar proposed a plan to establish a Palestinian unity government. This entailed, in effect, recognition of Israel, acceptance of agreements made with Israel, and an end to violence. Abbas agreed to this but Hamas rejected it. Haniyeh said Hamas was willing to have a temporary ceasefire but only if Israel agreed to Palestinian refugees returning from Lebanon and Syria.

## Where do we go from here?

After the events of the last three months, Israel could decide to bolster its military ability, training its armed forces, which are more used to low key conflict in the Palestinian areas, to cope better with more serious conflicts like that in Lebanon. She might decide that it is pointless to talk with her neighbours. There is evidence that more Israelis are now swinging to the right politically. But that would be very sad. It seems that what has happened recently gives an incentive and an opportunity for serious negotiations to be held between Israel and her neighbours, especially the Palestinians and the Lebanese, and even the Syrians. This has not happened for six years and there is evidence to suggest these three are willing to talk with Israel. The Arab League resolution and the Saudi initiative suggesting a way forward should not be cynically dismissed, especially in the light of the threat to the Arab world, as well as the West, from Iran and Al Qaeda. In a recent survey 67% of Israelis support negotiations with a Palestinian national unity government and 56%, favour talks with the present Palestinian government, led by Hamas (cp. 48% in June).

It must be remembered that some of Israel's enemies are determined to destroy her. And some of those Arabs suggesting a ceasefire intend that it should only last until Israel's opponents are strong enough to attack her successfully. But, as noted above, it seems clear that military force and trusting in deterrence is seriously inadequate to provide security for Israel. Also unilateral withdrawal from occupied territory has proved not to achieve peace. Instead there is a serious threat to Israel now a small terrorist organisation has proved it can withstand Israel's military might. Also the balance of power in the Middle East could move away from moderate nations in favour of extremists like Iran, now American influence has been weakened.

Israel needs to realise that without international support, ensuring the security of internationally accepted borders, the conflict will continue. She needs to negotiate with the backing of the international community. The Lebanese government is a respectable partner in negotiations despite the presence of two Hezbollah representatives. It is encouraging that Olmert has called on Lebanon to join in peace talks but the Lebanese prime minister has refused until Israel returns the Sheba'a Farms. Mahmoud Abbas may not be the strongest of political leaders but he is someone Israel should take seriously. It is encouraging that, at the end of September, Ehud Olmert said he would meet with Abbas. He has also said, with US backing, that he will help Abbas to create a better environment and return to peacemaking.

Israel also needs to seek to improve the Palestinians conditions, partly for strong ethical reasons and partly for its own welfare. The current dire situation, especially in Gaza, is not only terrible, but it fosters extremism and could lead to an explosion of violence.

## How should we pray?

1. For all affected by the violence, the bereaved, injured and homeless in Lebanon, Israel and Gaza.
2. For Lebanon as it reconstructs the south of the country.
3. For the people of Gaza facing such terrible conditions plus the anarchy and violence which is rife.
4. For the relevant national leaders to have the courage and skill to negotiate for peace, backed by the international community.
5. For the frustration of the aims of men and women of violence, including those who desire the destruction of Israel.
6. For restraint on Iran, especially in its threatened development of nuclear weapons.
7. For peace and security with justice for Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian areas.
8. For Israel and her Muslim neighbours to turn to God who alone is their true Rock and Fortress.
9. Pray also for me, newly invited onto a very significant group working with high-level political and religious leaders for relief and reconciliation in the Middle East (more details next time).