

# The Paradox Newsletter

by The Rev. Tony Higton

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

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*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

There seems to be a growing weariness amongst the vast majority who are ordinary decent people in Israel and the Palestinian areas. Hopefully there is a growing realisation that violence only breeds violence, and doesn't lead to peace. It is not beyond possibility that some, though not all, activists and men of violence will realise it too. It is in this context that the current cease-fire should be seen.

## Palestinian weariness

Recently Ghazi Hamad (a Palestinian government spokesman) and Abdallah 'Awad, (columnist for the Palestinian Authority daily Al-Ayyam), wrote highly critical articles about the situation in Palestinian society. They condemned the division and factional violence which have led the Palestinian people to the brink of national, political, economic, and social disaster. They lament the fact that Palestinians are emigrating. The articles accused the Palestinian leaders of self-serving and lying. The oppression caused by the warring factions is described as worse than the oppression resulting from Israeli actions.

Hamad wrote that violence has become the master that we obey everywhere - in the home, in the neighbourhood, in the family, in the tribe, in the

organization or the university - and no place remains safe from it. He concluded: We must call an 'Honesty and Reconciliation' conference, in which we express regret for mistakes and sins, acknowledge them, and undertake, before Allah and before our people, to abandon violence forever, and henceforth not to use bullets, shells, or disgraceful words [and for] the spirit of tolerance and love to grow within us.

As I write, news has come in of the horrific drive-by shooting of three children of a senior Fatah intelligence officer in Gaza City. The gunmen shot about 30 bullets into the car, in a street crowded with hundreds of children. Hamas condemned the attack but senior intelligence officers are blaming Hamas for it. The incident has led to widespread calls from Fatah, for Abbas to dismiss the Hamas government. Saeb Erekat, a senior aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas commented: This will lead us into civil war.

Abbas and Hamas have held exhaustive consultations about establishing a unity government but Hamas refuses to accept the conditions for removing the crippling international economic embargo, which include recognition of Israel's right to exist. Hamas policy is clearly expressed in a recent speech by Mahmoud Al-Zahar, the Palestinian Foreign Minister, who stated that "Israel is a vile entity that has been planted in our soil, and has no historical, religious or cultural legitimacy. We cannot normalize our relations with this entity. The history of this region has proven that occupation is temporary. Thousands of years ago, the Romans occupied this land and left. The Persians, Crusaders, and English came and went. The Zionists have come, and they too will leave. [We say] no to recognizing Israel, regardless of the price we may have to pay."

Similarly, Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya said: "We [derive] legitimacy from the legitimacy of the jihad. We are a government born from the womb of the resistance, from the womb of the martyrs... We are a government that comes out of resistance and jihad, and out of the desire for resistance and jihad against the Zionist occupation..."

However, Abbas recently declared: "Bread is more important than democracy." By this he meant that Hamas may have been democratically elected but if as is the case - it cannot pay salaries and provide food it cannot continue to rule. This is part of the evidence that he is indeed contemplating dismissing the Hamas government before calling early elections, and he is being pressed by the US and moderate Arab governments to do so.

Hamas, which was elected for three years, claims he cannot do this legally under the Palestinians' Basic Law. But he could hold a referendum on early elections and so circumvent that law.

All of this internal chaos and carnage is in addition to attacks by the IDF which continued until recent weeks. The worst event was the killing of 19 Palestinians, including 17 members of a single family, in Beit Hanun, N. Gaza, by IDF artillery shells. 40 others were injured. At that time the IDF were threatening a large scale military operation in Gaza.

## Israeli weariness

Disillusionment remains in Israel after the humiliation of the war against Hezbollah and its implications. Hamas has been seeking to stockpile large quantities of precision Soviet missiles, smuggled from Egypt through secret tunnels. There is evidence that attempts are being made to smuggle these arms into the West Bank. It appears therefore that Israel could potentially face the same sort of bombardment from Gaza and the West Bank that it did from Hezbollah, which caused the evacuation of a million Israelis. Also Hamas has been building up a force of commandos in Gaza who specialise in anti-tank weapons.

Opinion polls in Israel indicate that 80% of the population are unable to feel pride in their country because of corruption amongst its leaders, including allegations against the prime minister and president. 51% do not trust public institutions to help in a time of need (compared with 27% in 2003). Only 16% trust the police and 25% the courts. 25% don't trust the military, 48% don't trust the national labour union.

The IDF determined that the incident where 19 Palestinians were killed in Beit Hanun was a tragic accident caused by faulty radar equipment but some Israelis condemn the planned strategy because it was aimed at a residential neighbourhood. One Israeli journalist wrote: The overwhelming, crucial, shocking fact is that the IDF bombards helpless civilians. Others would disagree, but such events add to the disillusionment in Israel. The UN General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned the attack.

Then there were, until the cease-fire the constant bombardment of Qassam rockets from Gaza, especially on the town of Sderot. 33% of Sderot children suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder which involves acute anxiety. One journalist wrote: I sit in front of the television and watch the disturbing images from Sderot. Frightened residents seeking to flee to Eilat pile into a long line of buses. The pressure, the pushing, the mass flight. In a single word, shame. The pictures on television said it all. The shame of being a resident of the State of Israel, whose great army cannot provide a minimum of personal security. The shame of living daily in the shadow of the Qassams, which are nothing more than primitive metal pipes filled with explosives. The shame in the knowledge that a great army with a very great budget cannot deal with a few terrorists and some flying pipes.

On a wider front Ehud Olmert reminded the Knesset that an Iranian nuclear bomb would be "an existential threat to Israel." Iranian President Ahmadinejad said of Israel recently: "The existence of this regime has been based on military threat, on military strength, and on its myth of invincibility. Today, by the grace of God, this myth has been shattered, with the help of the believers in Palestine, and thanks to the self-sacrifice and the belief of the Hizbullah commanders. Today, the Zionists do not feel safe, not even in their homes, [or] anywhere in the world."

Iran is gaining increasing influence in Syria. The murder of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri in 2005 destroyed good relations between Syria and moderate Arab governments, driving the country more towards Iran.

Meanwhile, Syria, Iran and Hezbollah appear to be trying to topple the Lebanese government. Hezbollah has been demanding more than five Ministers in the government, out of 24. Having failed in this, the five Hezbollah-aligned ministers resigned from the government. The assassination of the Christian Lebanese minister Pierre Gemayel further destabilised the situation. Hezbollah called thousands of its supporters out onto the streets of Beirut to demonstrate against the government.

## The cease-fire

It is against this difficult background, for both Israelis and Palestinians that the ceasefire was called from 6am on 26<sup>th</sup> November. Mahmoud Abbas had managed to reach agreement with Palestinian factions to facilitate this. The IDF were ordered not to respond to any Qassam rocket attacks and they have kept to that despite rockets being fired by extremists. Abbas deployed 13,000 Palestinian soldiers to patrol the border to prevent further Qassam attacks.

Ehud Olmert made a major speech responding to the cease-fire. He proposed negotiations with Abbas over the creation of a Palestinian state that would enjoy territorial contiguity in the West Bank and promised to evacuate any Jewish settlements established in that new state. It would be a state with full sovereignty and defined borders. His conditions were that the new Palestinian government should be committed to the principles of the Quartet (US, Europe, Russia and the UN, i.e. recognizing Israel, relinquishing violence and accepting previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements), implement the road map, (i.e., disbanding terrorist organizations), and release captured Israeli prisoners (Israel would release Palestinian prisoners). He also urged the Palestinians to give up their demand for the right of return for Palestinian refugees from Israel. He made no reference to the thorny issue of Jerusalem.

There is now evidence of secret contact between Olmert and Abbas, partly through emissaries and partly by phone.

If the cease-fire holds, Olmert promised to reduce the roadblocks and increase movement of people and goods to and from Palestinian areas. Israel would also release frozen Palestinian funds for humanitarian purposes and help with economic reconstruction. It is thought that a summit between Bush, Abbas and Olmert could take place.

Some people think that the cease-fire is an opportunity for Hamas to rebuild its stock of weapons. Others, pointing to previous cease-fires say that Israel will probably break it with a targeted killing. But it seems to me that the situation has changed. The weariness of violence and its effects is greater. The humiliation of Israel in the recent Lebanon war and its inability to deal effectively with rocket attacks, together with the many Palestinians killed in Israeli attacks and internal violence could make for a lasting cease-fire. Israel's willingness to exercise restraint in the light of extremists firing rockets is another positive factor (15 rockets were fired in the first two weeks of the cease-fire).

However, the very divided situation in Palestinian politics is still a major negative factor, as is Hamas refusal to recognise Israel. But surveys indicate that the Palestinians would not vote for Hamas again, so Hamas may, in the end, be forced to be pragmatic.

Another positive factor is the Saudi Arabian peace initiative (which is even supported by Syria and Libya). The Arab League has appealed to the UN Security Council to adopt this plan. So, for the first time, there is a pan-Arab plan for peace with Israel. This is a historic change. It is helpful also that the plan does not mention the evacuation of Jewish settlements but allows the possibility of exchanging them for territory elsewhere. It also allows Israel to decide how many Palestinian refugees would be allowed to return and under what conditions. The Jerusalem holy sites, which have often been a stumbling block, were also not mentioned.

The US Baker-Hamilton Study Group on Iraq recommends talks between Israel, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians. There are also voices in Lebanon calling for peace talks with Israel. Even Syrian President Bashar Assad is calling for talks with Israel. However, Israel, with US support, does not believe it is time to negotiate with the Syrians, though 50% of Israelis support such negotiations.

Olmert said recently: "The state of Israel is so strong that it can allow itself to hold back, to give a real chance to the cease-fire. After all, a cease-fire is not the supreme goal. It is only a stage in the process, which we hope will create

the dynamic that will lead to negotiations and dialogue, and perhaps will finally bring about an agreement between us and the Palestinians."

As Winston Churchill said: Jaw, jaw is better than war, war.

## How do we pray?

1. For the Palestinians in their suffering as a result of external and internal violence and economic hardship.
2. For the Israelis in their anxieties, particularly over rocket attacks, and their disillusionment.
3. For a reaction against violence with the recognition that it only breeds more violence.
4. For God to restrain the extremist men and women of violence.
5. For God to strengthen the resolve of both sides to maintain the cease-fire.
6. For God to bring about a stable Palestinian government which recognises Israel and is committed to peace.
7. For Israel to continue its policy of military restraint.
8. For God to bring stability to Lebanon, to move Syria in the direction of peace and to restrain the Iranians, especially in their nuclear ambitions.

Finally, I wish you all a very happy Christmas. May the Prince of Peace, who is also the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God and the Everlasting Father, bring peace dignity and justice to the war-weary people of the Middle East: Israeli, Palestinian, Lebanese (and for the people of Iraqi).

Tony Higton