

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories ***Issue 51 December 2020***

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Why the two-state solution is now very unlikely

Israeli politics have been in chaos in 2019-2020 with three elections giving indecisive results. Eventually Benjamin Netanyahu (who is facing corruption charges) and his main rival, Benny Gantz, formed a rather precarious unity government.

Annexation of the West Bank

For most of his time in office Netanyahu supported disarmed Palestinian autonomy. But more recently he has favoured annexing the West Bank. The Trump plan gave Israel full military control over the Palestinians, the Israeli West Bank settlements and the whole of Jerusalem. It offered the Palestinians economic benefits, land swaps and a form of self-rule. But no Palestinians would be offered citizenship in Israel, although Benny Gantz believes Palestinians in areas Israel annexed should be given full rights.

Half of Israelis supported annexing the West Bank. But a group of prominent liberal Israeli public figures wrote: "For 53 years, Israel has deepened its hold on the occupied territories without being held accountable. While de facto annexation has long been a policy of the Israeli government, de jure annexation will put paid to the argument that the occupation is temporary and will turn Israel into an apartheid state."

Arab countries condemned the annexation plan. However, there are reports from senior Arab officials, including in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, that privately their governments are not against it. Jordan is thought to prefer Israeli forces on its western border to Palestinian, not least because the Palestinian Liberation Organisation attempted to seize control of Jordan in 1970. In July 2020 the Jordan Prime Minister said in a newspaper interview "You close the door to the two-state solution, I could very well look at this positively, if we're clearly opening the door to a one-state democratic solution."

The Palestinians rejected the deal immediately and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said the Palestinian Authority would end all agreements with Israel. The Palestinian Prime Minister said that if Israel proceeded with the annexation plan, the Palestinian Authority would declare an independent state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Hamas began to launch rockets into Israel. However, some Palestinians favour annexation because they prefer to live under Israeli rule. They are negative towards Palestinian rule. Some of those who expressed this view have been arrested.

Diplomatic relations between Arab nations and Israel

The annexation issue was overtaken by the unexpected developments in Arab-Israeli relations. The attitude towards the Palestinians has changed in some Arab countries. On the one hand, they see positive relations with Israel as beneficial. On the other they see the Palestinians and Iran as supporting each other - a serious threat. Therefore, a Palestinian state is regarded as a destabilising influence.

There seems to be some growing impatience with the Palestinians in the Arab world. Back in 2018 Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's said: "For the past 40 years, the Palestinian leadership has missed opportunities again and again, and rejected all the offers it was given. 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." In October 2020 later Saudi senior royal Bandar bin Sultan (former intelligence chief and ambassador to the United States) described decades of Palestinian leaders as "Liars, cheats and ungrateful."

In August 2020 the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates was announced. Israel agreed to suspend declaring sovereignty over areas in the West Bank detailed in Trump's peace plan. 76.7% of Israelis said they preferred the UAE deal to West Bank annexation. Iran and Turkey joined with the Palestinians in condemning the agreement.

In mid-September Bahrain decided to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. In October Sudan and Israel agreed to work towards normalising relations. In November Israeli President Netanyahu met up with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. They discussed normalisation of relationships and the threat from Iran.

U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman predicted that other Arab countries would normalise relations with Israel “five, ten countries, maybe more, over time.” Of course, Egypt and Jordan signed peace treaties with Israel in 1978 and 1994 respectively.

The Palestinians strongly condemned the agreements made with Israel by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. The condemnation was so strong that the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council condemned them for “irresponsible language of incitement and threats,” and demanded an apology.

Pressure for 2-state solution

After the agreement between Israel and the UAE, the Saudi Foreign Affairs minister said that Saudi Arabia would continue to press for the Arab Peace Initiative which requires the creation of a Palestinian state. This was confirmed by King Salman in his first speech to the UN. Bahrain’s Interior Minister explained that the agreement with Israel was not “an abandonment of the Palestinian cause ... it is to strengthen Bahrain’s security and economic stability.”

At the end of September, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas spoke at the UN General Assembly and called for an international conference to launch a new peace process. He said “There can be no peace, no security, no stability, no coexistence in our region without an end to the occupation. We will not bow down. We will not surrender. We will not compromise. And we shall triumph.” The UN is strongly in favour of a two-state solution and frequently passes resolutions critical of Israel.

Joe Biden (who has a longstanding friendship with Netanyahu) and Kamala Harris are both strongly in favour of a two-state solution. Biden will be more conciliatory, moderate, and ready to compromise than Trump. Kamala Harris has said that the Biden government would immediately restore financial and humanitarian aid to the Palestinian Authority and would give humanitarian aid to Gaza. But Biden has made this conditional on the PA stopping welfare payments to the families of Palestinian prisoners and alleged Palestinian attackers killed by Israelis.

Trump’s moving of the US Embassy to Jerusalem was, of course, a very controversial action. But Joe Biden has said he would keep the embassy there. He also is against the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement which seeks to sanction the export of goods made by Israelis in the West Bank.

The challenges facing Israel

The threat of military attack

The Middle East seems to be dividing into two main blocs. One bloc consists of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and, now, Israel (together with her new partners Bahrain, the UAE). The other bloc consists of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and now Turkey. Iran and Turkey want to dominate the Middle East. They will support the Palestinians. In October 2020 the Palestinian Authority was seeking to join the so-called Islamist resistance coalition against Israel which is led by Iran and Turkey.

Iran announced it has bomb-carrying drones with a range that could reach Israel. It also has thousands of rockets aimed towards strategic targets in Israel. In May 2020 Iran made a cyber attack on Israel’s Water Authority. Israel reacted with a cyber attack on an Iranian port. It also attacked other Iranian targets including a nuclear site. Iran is threatening retaliation. It is thought that Israel was behind the assassination of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, the head of the Iranian nuclear programme which is secretly continuing despite agreeing to discontinue it in 2003.

Hezbollah, backed by Iran and active in Lebanon and Syria, is digging tunnels and bringing weapons towards the Israeli border. It is thought that Hezbollah has 58 bases along the border between Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights. Israel has launched about 1000 attacks on Syrian and Hezbollah targets since 2017.

President Erdogan of Turkey is trying to revive the Ottoman Empire which occupied Jerusalem for 400 years. In October 2020 he claimed in the Turkish Parliament that Jerusalem is “our city” and is attempting to infiltrate the Palestinian and Jordanian custodianship of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. He also speaks strongly in support of the Palestinians and is supporting Islamist organisations in East Jerusalem which are seeking to radicalise Arab people. Turkey has close ties with Hamas.

Wrong Palestinian attitudes

In November 2020 the Palestinian Authority said it would resume co-ordination with Israel, which had been suspended since May. This is after the Israelis stated they remained committed to past agreements with the

Palestinians and it will have been made easier for the PA to say this after Biden was elected. The motivation is largely economic. The PA is obviously facing economic difficulties because of Covid and stopping co-ordination with Israel meant Israel withheld some £666 million in tax transfers from the PA. However, Hamas condemned this new agreement saying it “goes against all agreements reached among leaders of the Palestinian factions.”

More significant, the Palestinian Authority’s Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs made it clear that “Normalization with the Zionist entity is high treason against Palestine, Jerusalem, the blood of the Martyrs, and the suffering of the prisoners” and incurs the wrath of Allah. This is saying that seeking peaceful relations with Israel is against the will of Allah, which is a total rejection of any peace process.

There are numerous reports of seriously wrong attitudes by the Palestinian leadership towards peace with Israel:

Refusing Israel’s right to exist

Mahmoud Abbas said in February 2020: “We have also recognized Israel and Israel has recognized us. We recognize Israel – in the Oslo [Accords].” [Official PA TV, Feb. 11, 2020]. But the same month Senior Fatah official Tawfiq Tirawi defined “Palestine” as stretching from “the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea.” He added: “I dare any Palestinian, any senior Palestinian official, or any Palestinian leader to reduce the Palestinian map to the West Bank and Gaza! He would not be able to walk one meter in the streets of our Palestinian cities among our people!”

Egyptian MP and official PA TV host Mustafa Bakri said: “Teach your children that regardless of what happens, the Zionist entity will come to an end.” [Official PA TV News, Oct. 30, 2020].

The PA Mufti stressed that “if an inch of the Muslims’ lands is stolen, Jihad becomes a personal religious commandment for everyone.” The PA defines all of the State of Israel as stolen Islamic land – a waqf – which is an inalienable religious endowment in Islamic law. Therefore, according to the PA Mufti, Shari’ah law prohibits Palestinians from recognizing Israel in any borders and commands that every Muslim has a personal duty to wage war against Israel until the “Muslim” land is freed. He further stated that the UAE and Bahrain are “twisting” these religious rulings, noting that this is “forbidden” and that they will have to answer to Allah for this. [Official PA TV, *Fatwa*, Sept. 18, 2020].

Hamas Movement Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh said: “I declared that we [Hamas] will not recognize Israel, we will not relinquish one inch of the land of Palestine, [and] armed struggle is a strategic choice.” [Official PA TV, From Beirut, Sept. 6, 2020]

PA Chairman Abbas’ Advisor on Religious Affairs who is also the PA’s Supreme Shari’ah Judge, Mahmoud Al-Habbash, posted maps of British Mandate Palestine with the text: “It was called Palestine, it is called Palestine, and it will be called Palestine until the promise of Allah arrives” [Facebook page of Mahmoud Al-Habbash, Sept. 19, 2020]. This was repeated in the Facebook page of Abbas’ Fatah organisation in November 2020.

Honouring terrorist martyrs

1. Palestinian university’s new gate was named after the mastermind of the Munich Olympics massacre. Palestine Polytechnic University Student Union Council Chairman said: “We have built this structure to commemorate the name of late Martyr Salah Khalaf ‘Abu Iyad.’ We are proud of the distinguished leaders whose bodies are no more, but whose spirit remains among us.” [Facebook page of Fatah Central Committee member Abbas Zaki, Oct. 18, 2020]
2. Official PA TV, Oct. 16, 2020 honoured 16 terrorists who murdered 14 people and attacked others.
3. PA Grand Mufti Muhammad Hussein, speaking of terrorists in Israeli prisons, said: “Our heroic prisoners – all of them without exception – are sons of this precious homeland. The entire Palestinian people and every free person in this world view them with admiration and honour.” [Official PA TV, *Fatwa*, Oct. 7, 2020].
4. Avi Dichter, former head of the Shin Bet security service, said recently that “in all the years of the Palestinian Authority’s existence, there has not been a single case in which a terrorist who murdered Israelis was interrogated by the PA and prosecuted or sentenced to imprisonment and is serving in a Palestinian prison. This is not how we fight terrorism.”

Israeli reaction to wrong Palestinian attitudes

Prior to the Second Intifada, the majority of Israelis supported peace negotiations with the Palestinians, but after it most lost interest in launching new peace processes.

Dr. Einat Wilf used to be a left-wing member of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) who believed the Palestinians would have their own state and this would bring peace. But she gradually changed her mind. She co-authored a book ‘The War of Return: How Western Indulgence of the Palestinian Dream Has Obstructed the Path to Peace.’ In it she

describes the real obstacle to peace: the Palestinian insistence on a “right of return” to sovereign Israel. The book points out that the normal advice to refugees is not to return to where they came from (which creates more conflict) but to move on. This happened in Europe after the war. However, the international community has encouraged the Palestinians to remain as refugees. The UN created a special agency UNRWA. Dr Wilf expressed disapproval of the annexation of the West Bank but said that it isn’t the real issue. She explained that the real issue is that “the two-state solution was never alive for a single minute because of the Palestinian vision of return. A two-state solution as originally envisioned by the UN, a Jewish state and an Arab state, is one that the Palestinians are yet to accept.”

Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians

Sadly, there is a fair amount of maltreatment of Palestinians.

The demolition of Palestinian homes in the West Bank is a controversial issue. Some Israelis (and the UN) believe that many of these demolitions are illegal. They report that, despite the pandemic dangers, some 741 Palestinians were made homeless in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between January and September 2020.

Violence by some Jewish settlers against Palestinians increased during the Covid pandemic and happened almost daily. Palestinians were prevented from using their land and there is a deal of criticism of the Israeli police and military for failure to take appropriate action.

The IDF (Israeli Defence Force) operates internal checkpoints in the West Bank and is accused of deliberately delaying Palestinians. One report in an Israeli newspaper said this led to “frayed nerves, missed meetings, uncertainty, cancelled doctor’s appointments, being late for dinner with the children.”

There is evidence of frequent IDF invasions of Palestinian homes without a court order or even a reasonable cause for suspicion, often in the middle of the night, causing great distress. The UN reports this happened 6042 time in 2017-8.

Has the two-state solution died?

Israeli-Palestinian talks (part of a peace process that began in the 1990s) collapsed in 2014. As the Saudi Crown Prince put it “For the past 40 years, the Palestinian leadership has missed opportunities again and again, and rejected all the offers it was given.” There are, of course, many good Palestinians and this includes not only Muslims but some 50,000 Christians (up to 3000 in Gaza), but they are dominated by extremists. Despite agreements with various Arab countries, Israel is genuinely threatened. The Palestinians continue to reject Israel’s right to exist and want to regain the whole territory. This is never going to happen. Israel would never allow an armed state of Palestine. But the Palestinians are linked with more threatening foes of Israel – Iran and its partners in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon (dominated by Hezbollah) and now Turkey. Iran seeks Israel’s destruction and is edging towards being a nuclear power. The new agreements with Arab countries do not remove the threat to Israel.

After many years of encouraging prayer for a peace settlement, which may have included the creation of a Palestinian state, I have concluded that this would be too dangerous and is highly unlikely to happen. I believe God gave the Palestinian leadership 40 years to be willing to accept Israel as a state and to seek a win-win solution, but they have refused. Yes, some Israelis openly or privately have long supported annexation of the Palestinian territories but, given the serious threats to Israel’s security and the on-going Palestinian rejection of Israel as a state, this is understandable.

I am well aware of Israel’s faults as a largely secular state, including her seriously wrong attitudes sometimes towards Christians and Messianic Believers. She is also very seriously wrong in rejecting her Messiah. But God, in his mercy, has manifestly not given up on Israel. Hence, in fulfilment of his biblical promises, he re-established the State of Israel (with UN support) in 1948 after the Holocaust. It is therefore a very serious error for the Palestinians (and their allies) to want Israel destroyed. Such antagonism is relevant to prophecies of End Times attacks on Israel.

It is difficult to imagine a credible alternative to the two-state solution, including a single state solution, especially given the above attitudes of the Palestinian leadership. It is difficult to see how Israel could remain a safe democratic homeland for the Jewish people if it adopted the single state solution. And how could Israel, with its 9 million population (including almost 2 million Israeli Arabs), take on the responsibility of receiving another 5 million citizens? On the other hand, God, who loves both the Israelis and the Palestinians, requires Israel to show justice to the Palestinian people. They should not adopt an apartheid approach.

Although surrounded by threats, Israel will survive under God’s protection. However, as always, God requires and works through the prayers of his people. We must pray for Israel’s protection and welfare. But God also requires us to pray for the protection and welfare of the Palestinians, for many to come to faith in Jesus, for the overruling of extremists and a just political settlement. It seems clear that this requires divine wisdom – and a miraculous divine

intervention! But we must also pray that Israel will recognize Yeshua HaMashiach – Jesus as her Messiah and fulfil her calling to proclaim him to the world. Paul writes: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: 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” (Rom 11:25-26).

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