

WILL THE UN RECOGNISE A PALESTINIAN STATE IN OCTOBER?

This is a major factor affecting Israeli-Palestinian relationships at the moment. The Palestinians have warned over recent months that if a peace treaty with Israel is not reached by September they would approach the UN to recognise Palestine as a new member. However some senior Palestinians oppose the idea of going ahead. Palestinian President Abbas claimed that 130 nations were ready to recognise a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and that number could easily rise to 140 or 150 (out of 192 nations in the UN). 128 nations would need to vote in favour – a two thirds majority. At the time of writing only five western countries – the Czech Republic, Germany, Holland, Italy and the US have said they would vote against the Palestinians. However, if the resolution is moderate and includes the possibility of peace talks resuming immediately it is thought they might abstain.

The Palestinians made formal application in July in good time for the deadline of August 10th. They are expected to ask the UN secretary general for recognition of Palestine as a member state on September 20th. It is thought that they will ask the General Assembly to vote (a weaker option) rather than the Security Council as the latter is subject to the US veto. It seems however that President Obama is not keen on using the veto (especially after Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu humiliated him publicly in his recent visit to Washington) and that the US is therefore encouraging other members of the Security Council to oppose the Palestinian initiative.

There are four conditions for being recognised as a state by the UN: (a) a permanent population; (b) defined territory; (c) effective government; and (d) a capacity to enter into relations with other states. The borders of Palestine are, of course, not defined which undermines condition (b) but, as some people have pointed out, neither are the borders of Israel! Abbas is stressing that even after a UN vote the borders would be settled through negotiation.

However, even if the Palestinian attempt to become a member of the UN fails, they could succeed in having their status raised from “observer” to “a non-member state” (a status already given to the Vatican). This would mean they would be able to be a full member of all the agencies such as WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, etc.

The vote is likely to take place in October.

Israel Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, has called for Israel to retaliate against this unilateral Palestinian action by revoking the 1993/1995 Oslo Accords which allowed the Palestinians a certain amount of self government and agreed to economic co-operation. But it seems unlikely this will happen.

There is, of course, a danger that if the Palestinian action fails there will be an outbreak of violence. The Israelis are preparing for riots, but some Israelis are warning that a new intifada (Palestinian uprising) could erupt whether or not the Palestinians are successful. If they are successful they think the Palestinians would go to war to demand their rights which Israel would be unwilling to concede, e.g. a state within the 1967 borders. The IDF is providing tear gas and stun grenades to settlers to help in dealing any Palestinian violence.

Israeli Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz suggested stopping the transfer of the taxes which Israel collects for the Palestinians. But Defence Minister Ehud Barak said that would lead to anarchy in the West Bank, undermining the PA and making Israel responsible for the welfare of 2.5 million Palestinians. It could also give Hamas more influence on the West Bank.

IS THERE ANY HOPE FOR PEACE TALKS?

There doesn't seem much hope for the foreseeable future.

The US – Israel relationship

President Obama in his speech on May 19th spoke of a Palestinian State within the June 4th 1967 borders. Netanyahu very publicly disagreed with the President during his visit to Washington. It is reported that both sides expressed a “sense of great tension and profound mutual insult” after their meetings.

A few days later Obama spoke to the American pro-Israel lobby AIPAC (The American Israel Public Affairs Committee). Here, to Palestinian disappointment, he modified his stance, stating: “Israelis and Palestinians will negotiate a border that is different to the one that existed on June 4, 1967 ... and allows the parties themselves to account for the changes that have taken place over the last 44 years, including the new demographic realities on the ground and the needs of both sides.”

The President also agrees with Israel that a Palestinian state should be demilitarized and expressed concern about the Palestinian unity government. The PA and Hamas reached a reconciliation agreement in April, after secret negotiations arranged by the Egyptians. (However, since then Hamas has rejected the PA's nomination of Salam Fayyad as prime minister, which could seriously affect the reconciliation process. A senior Hamas spokesman has said if the PA insists on appointing him this could threaten the whole process).

Conflicting demands

It seems that Israel follows what the staff of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir called the “Teaspoon Policy.” It involves endless negotiating sessions at which mountains of sugar would be stirred into oceans of tea and coffee, but no agreement would ever be reached. Sadly, the present situation is even worse. There are no peace talks at all.

Netanyahu:

- insists that the Palestinians support Israel as a Jewish State but the Palestinians see this as a racist policy which makes non-Jews second class citizens. (A recent report from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel claimed that the current Knesset (Israeli parliament) is “the most racist in state history.”)
- insists that Israel must control the Jordan Valley and retain the large Jewish settlement blocs which the Palestinians see as an illegal occupation of Palestinian land.

Abbas:

- insists that all Palestinian refugees since 1948 be allowed to return to what is now Israel which, amongst other things, Israel sees as a threat to the Jewish majority in the Israeli democracy.
- insists on having the Palestinian capital in Jerusalem

Israeli insecurity

Just as one needs to remember that the Crusades are still an issue for Muslims, so one needs to remember that the centuries of persecution culminating in the Holocaust are a big issue for Jewish Israelis. This leads to an insecurity which outsiders may not understand. Recently Netanyahu said that Israel fought for centuries to gain autonomy and does not have a margin for error e.g. in the peace process because “history will not give the Jewish people another chance.” It doesn't help that recently Iranian President Ahmadinejad said: “Iran believes that whoever is for humanity should also be for eradicating the Zionist regime (Israel) as symbol of suppression and discrimination.”

However, some Israelis have accused Netanyahu of dishonesty when he speaks of Israel's present borders bringing security. They refer to the possibility of rocket attacks from Gaza and Lebanon and the threat from Iran. One Israeli newspaper stated: “Borders themselves do not guarantee security. But borders that are recognized by the international community give a country the legitimacy to defend its sovereignty. Israel has

no such borders, and more and more countries are finding it difficult to defend Israel's position, which seeks to persuade others that occupation is a means of defense.”

Israeli critics also say that Netanyahu likes being “the leader of a persecuted people.” They say he ignores the 9-year old Arab Peace Initiative whereby 22 Arab countries recognised Israel’s right to exist. (One survey showed that only 15% of Israelis know about this Initiative).

The critics add that Netanyahu is constantly warning that the world wants to delegitimize Israel, which they say is untrue, except in extremist areas like Iran. Rather, they say, the world is increasingly impatient with Israel’s perceived lack of seriousness about the peace process.

The “Arab Spring” is increasing Israel’s sense of insecurity. No-one can tell what the attitude of the new regimes may be towards Israel. It is worrying that some Egyptian officials have referred to Israel as “the enemy” and there are anti-Israel demonstrations in Egypt. Also, since the revolution Hamas, in league with Iran, has been able to smuggle more weapons into Gaza and these may include anti-aircraft missiles, which would be a serious blow to the Israelis. In addition, terrorist attacks are emerging from the Sinai.

However some Israelis believe the Arab Spring will benefit Israel because the Arab rebels are fighting for the values which Israel holds dear. Also they point out that, with all the uncertainty over Arab countries, Israel is the only stable, pro-Western country in the area and this will be greatly valued by the West.

Actions hindering the peace process

On the Palestinian side: A large number of rockets and shells were fired from Gaza into Israel in August which led to Israeli attacks on Gaza. There were deaths and injuries on both sides. Eventually Hamas agreed to a ceasefire which was brought about with Egyptian help. There have been other terrorist attacks and intelligence alerts.

The PA insists on continuing the process of reconciliation with Hamas, after the recent agreement, but Israel says it cannot negotiate with an organisation which does not accept its right to exist. (Israel is supported by the US and the EU in this. Obama said recently: “Palestinian leaders will not achieve peace or prosperity if Hamas insists on a path of terror and rejection. And Palestinians will never realize their independence by denying the right of Israel to exist.” He added: “How can one negotiate with a party that has shown itself unwilling to recognise your right to exist.” However Abbas insists that it will be the PA which will continue to control the negotiations with Israel, although Hamas has a majority in the Palestinian parliament. Israel is also worried about Hamas prisoners being released by the PA in the West Bank).

On the Israeli side: Israel continues to expand the West Bank settlements, including 277 new apartments in Ariel. However the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the removal of Migron, a large settlement by April next year.

After the Fogel family were murdered in Itamar the former chief rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces, Brig. Gen. Avichai Ronski, spoke of punishing the whole village from which the murderers came: “A situation must be created whereby the inhabitants prevent anyone in this village from harming Jews. Yes, it is collective punishment. They must not be allowed to sleep at night, they must not be allowed to go to work, they must not be allowed to drive their cars. There are many ways.” As it is, some soldiers searching for evidence in Palestinian houses broke up household appliances such as washing machines, refrigerators, televisions as well as children’s toys. Bags of rice and sugar together with bottles of oil were emptied on the floor. Such humiliation of Palestinians happens not infrequently.

The legal advisor for the Judea and Samaria Justice Ministry has admitted that Israel covertly cancelled the residency status of 140,000 West Bank Palestinians between 1967 and 1994. Palestinians travelling abroad via Jordan had to leave their ID cards at the Allenby Bridge border crossing. If they did not return within six months of the card's expiration, they were registered as no longer residents. Apparently no warning was given to these people. Residents of East Jerusalem with Israeli ID cards lose the right to return if they have been abroad for seven years. This has happened to students who go to foreign universities, people who left for work in the Gulf, etc.

PRAYER TOPICS

In the light of all the above information it is obvious that we need to increase our prayers at this crucial time.

1. Pray for the right conclusion to the Palestinian initiative seeking UN recognition of Palestine, namely that which will further peace with justice.
2. Pray about the effect of the reconciliation between the PA and Hamas on Israel's willingness to negotiate with the Palestinians.
3. Pray for an early resumption of peace talks and for a determination to reach peace with justice in practice.
4. Pray for Israel to be willing to freeze the settlements and avoid humiliation of Palestinians and for the Palestinians to control extremists, including those responsible for rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza.

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 an indigenous reconciliation ministry in Jerusalem.

Tony is convinced that one cannot understand Israel without remembering the vivid and enduring memory of the Holocaust, in the context of centuries of anti-Semitism which continues today, not least in the Arab world. They feel that long and bitter experience shows they cannot trust the world to protect them. Despite their military strength, they fear extinction as a nation. Tony feels that one cannot understand the Palestinians without remembering their humiliation of not having their own state and their sense of betrayal by the world powers, not least in the re-establishment of the State of Israel on what they regard as their land. They also feel humiliated and oppressed by Israel. Many of them believe that armed resistance is legitimate. Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, God loves both people groups, so should we.