

## The Palestinian bid and punishment

The unilateral initiative by the Palestinians on September 23<sup>rd</sup> to gain recognition as a state by the UN has been the backcloth to the last few months in the Holy Land. The Palestinians have been frustrated by a lack of progress in the peace process. The peace talks have been stalled for over a year. Israel has continued settlement development in the West Bank. It has also insisted the Palestinians accept Israel as a Jewish state (despite including a million Arab citizens) which is not acceptable to the Palestinians because it effectively means ruling out the return of Palestinian refugees. This issue is obviously important to both sides. Israel will never accept the return of the refugees because they are afraid they will outnumber the Jewish citizens, but there is a possibility of compensation being paid. Another hindrance has been that Israel has not made it clear that, in settling the borders of a new state, it will ensure an equal amount of Israeli land is swapped for any land on the Palestinian side of the 1967 lines which Israel needs for strategic reasons.

### ISRAELI FEARS

Despite the last four Israeli prime ministers stating they favoured the establishment of a Palestinian state, Israel has strongly opposed the Palestinian UN initiative, partly because of the action being unilateral. But there are also Israeli fears as to its implications. Some Israelis claim that it would lead to widespread terrorism and military threats to Israel which could move the Middle East towards nuclear war. They claim that, having received their state, the Palestinians would flex their muscles and seek to expand into Israeli territory perhaps with the use of conventional and biological weapons. Also, these Israelis fear that, after a Palestinian state is set up, the international community would lose interest and focus on other issues, making Israel vulnerable to Islamic expansion, especially in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. This they claim would mean Israel would have to make its nuclear capability more prominent. This seems a rather alarmist view, which would, of course, prevent Israel ever accepting a two-state settlement, but it does indicate the threat felt in Israel.

Perhaps a more credible worry is that, were a Palestinian state to be established, Israel would be taken to the International Criminal Court over its settlement policies. International law states that an occupier which transfers its own population into an occupied territory commits a war crime, and the Palestinians would accuse Israel of doing so. The only way Israel could prevent this would be if it were conducting its own investigation into the matter in order to deal with those responsible. Israel could also counterattack in the courts against Palestinian terrorism.

### OBAMA'S DIFFICULTIES

The United States strongly opposes the Palestinian initiative and is expected to veto it in the Security Council. The General Assembly could vote to make the Palestinians a non-member state which would allow them to join various UN agencies. The US could not veto that. Both Abbas and Netanyahu have shown recently that they are willing to defy the US, which is not good for Obama. He is also in a very difficult situation because of the serious economic situation in America and he is facing an election next year. He cannot afford to offend the strong US Jewish lobby. Earlier his speech to the UN in 2009 was seen by some American politicians as the most anti-Israel speech ever made by a US president. When UNESCO accepted the Palestinians as a member in October (by 107 votes to 14, with 52 abstentions), the US punished the organisation by reducing its 22% funding of the organisation. Israel withdrew its \$2million annual support too. The US congress also withheld \$200 million in humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. Obama urged Congress to reverse this decision.

Through their initiative, the Palestinians have certainly brought the Palestine issue into the spotlight and they have increased Israel's isolation in the world. There is great uncertainty as to the implications for Israel of the Arab Spring. Will the Egyptians, for example, maintain the 'cold peace' with Israel? The invasion of the Israeli embassy in Cairo by Egyptian protestors in September is not encouraging. The dispute between Israel and Turkey after the killing of Turkish citizens in the Gaza flotilla continues, not least because Netanyahu refuses to apologise. Turkey expelled

many Israeli diplomats in September. There is also a prospect of non-violent protest in the West Bank which would continue to highlight the Palestine issue. President Abbas has already called for it.

## ISRAEL'S PUNISHMENT OF THE PALESTINIANS

However, Israel added to the pro-Palestinian sympathy for a time by withholding the taxes which Israel collects for the Palestinians under the Paris Agreement joint customs provision of 1994. The taxes for October alone were \$100 million. They did this to punish the Palestinians for their initiative, causing suffering to ordinary people and being seen as bullying them. Right wing Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman wanted the tax freeze to continue but eventually Netanyahu, under strong American pressure, decided it must end. However, a German newspaper reported that Netanyahu's decision was brought about because Germany said it would not allow Israel to purchase a new submarine unless they discontinued the freeze.

Israel is also punishing the Palestinians by increasing settlement building in the West Bank. Contrary to the 1993 Oslo Accords on Palestinian self-government, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank has increased from 110,000 to 320,000 and dozens of illegal outposts have been established.

The Middle East Quartet called for a renewal of peace talks without preconditions. Israel has agreed to this but the Palestinians won't agree unless there is a settlement freeze and agreement for Israel to withdraw to the 1967 borders. However they did say they would co-operate with the Quartet's envoy, Tony Blair. Jordan has urged the Palestinians to renew peace talks.

## THREATS TO THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

Senior Israel Defense Force officers, and other Israelis, are concerned that the Palestinian Authority could collapse. They have been impressed with the Palestinian security forces on the West Bank who are provided by the PA and who would disappear if the PA collapsed, opening the area to terrorists. One factor has been the Hamas success in gaining freedom for 1000 Palestinian prisoners in Israel in exchange for their release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. These Israelis urged the government to make some confidence-building concessions to the PA to counteract the boost given to its extremist rival Hamas. On the other hand, Abbas has announced there will be elections on May 4<sup>th</sup>, which are intended to end the division between the PA and Hamas.

Some Israelis believe that Netanyahu would quite welcome the collapse of the PA because it would mean an end to pressure to freeze West Bank settlements and to negotiate about the 1967 borders. They also say the subsequent growth of terrorist bases in the West Bank would enable him to re-occupy the area.

## EXTREMIST SETTLERS

The IDF and the Shin Bet Israeli security service are also very concerned about extremist Jewish Settlers on the West Bank. On 5<sup>th</sup> September settlers set fire to a mosque in the village of Qusra near Nablus destroying holy books etc. This was in response to Israeli police demolishing three illegal structures nearby. Later 200 Palestinian olive trees were uprooted in the same village. A similar attack took place in the village of Tuba. Around the same time Netanyahu announced a task force was going to explore the legalising of Israel West Bank outposts built on private Palestinian land. However he did also announce a willingness to freeze government construction on the West Bank if Abbas resumed peace talks. This is, of course, only a partial freeze – simply of government buildings. So, for example, the 2600 new houses being built in East Jerusalem and condemned by the UN General Secretary were not included in the freeze.

Little wonder that a recent poll found that 66 percent of Israeli Jews do not believe there will ever be peace with the Palestinians. In the same poll 45 percent of Israeli Jews fear for Israel's survival.

## IRAN

Iran continues to threaten a strong response to any Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities. Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak favour an attack and managed to convince Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. Polls show that

52% of Israelis favour an attack, 37% are against and 20% unsure. But 80% believed an attack would lead to war with Hamas and Hezbollah. There have been rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza in recent weeks. Islamic Jihad is held responsible. Gaza is also now thought to have anti-aircraft missiles, some of them from Lybia.

## GROWING ISOLATION OF ISRAEL

It is a real cause of concern that the present Israeli government seems to be leading Israel into isolation.

- It is not seen to be serious about the peace process. (Netanyahu's father told Israeli TV (Channel 2 News) that, despite his Bar-Ilan speech advocating a Palestinian state, his son doesn't really support the establishment of a Palestinian state except on conditions which the Palestinians would never accept).
- It maltreats the Palestinians in various ways – settlement expansion, punishments for the Palestinian initiative at the UN, etc.
- It is not properly reaching out to the Arab nations who (partly out of fear of Iran) have suggested a helpful peace plan for the Holy Land.
- It is not effectively seeking to achieve reconciliation with its ex-ally Turkey.
- Netanyahu has humiliated President Obama.

All of this can antagonise even some friends of Israel. Leon Panetta (US Defense Secretary) has warned Israel is becoming increasingly isolated in the Middle East and should “reach out and mend fences with those who share an interest in regional stability countries like Turkey and Egypt, as well as Jordan.”

## PRAYER TOPICS

1. Pray for an early resumption of peace talks and for a determination to reach peace with justice in practice.
2. Pray for Israel to be willing to freeze the settlements and to avoid humiliation of Palestinians
3. Pray for the Palestinians to control extremists, including those responsible for rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza and for the Israelis to control extremist Jewish settlers on the West Bank who perpetrate violence.
4. Pray for Israel to avoid isolation and to reach out to the Arab nations and Turkey.

**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 Higon, 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 evangelistic ministry in Jerusalem to both Jewish people and Arabs.

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.