

**NEW PAPERS ON OUR CHRISTIAN TEACHING RESOURCES WEBSITE <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/>**

**“DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BRITISH CHRISTIANS”**

A growing number of British Christians say that believers in this country are being persecuted. They refer to the various successful court cases which, they claim, discriminate against Christians. Are British Christians being persecuted or is this a case of paranoia, or, as one secular website put it, “Christian cry-babies”? This paper seeks to obtain all the relevant evidence on the recent cases, including reading any court judgments, and to give due weight to the arguments used by judges and employers. *(For updates on this issue, see the blog site).*

**“WHAT ABOUT GAY MARRIAGE?” on the blog site <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/blog/>**

This is a short paper which addresses the issue from a general, rather than specifically Christian, viewpoint. It is therefore suitable for non-Christians as well as Christians.

## **Are the Israelis serious about the Peace Process?**

### **Israeli fears**

God deliver us from becoming armchair experts on the Middle East! We can sit in our comfortable homes in the secure Western world and pontificate about Israel or the Palestinians and the issues between them. But, as I’ve often said, our opinions need to take into account the needs, pain and fears of both people groups living in the Holy Land.

It is different when you’re in Israel and feeling vulnerable to rockets, suicide bombs and potentially even worse from Iran in the future. I well remember trying on my gas mask, setting up our safe room and ensuring we knew if and when to inject ourselves with Atropine against a gas attack. Israel is a small country with a strong sense of history and that history includes the Holocaust (as well as centuries of anti-Semitism). To us in Britain, history is a long time ago. In the Middle East history is much more recent and whether it is the Jewish memory of the Holocaust or the Muslim memory of the Crusades, it is a disturbing experience.

Israelis fear losing their safe Jewish homeland, whether by military attack or simply by ceasing to be the majority in their democracy. This heightens the threat of Iran developing nuclear weapons or of a Palestinian state becoming militarized, but also of allowing Palestinian refugees back into the country.

### ***The Iranian threat***

The fears about Iran are uppermost at present in Israel and the Israelis have been warning about it for 15 years. It seems incontrovertible that Iran is steadily moving towards producing nuclear weapons. They believe they have a right to do so not least because Israel has 250-300 nuclear warheads and would certainly not be willing to decommission them, even if other countries did. Also in the Shah’s day Iran was developing nuclear weapons with US approval.

It is very worrying that the regime is so extreme and has frequently threatened the extermination of Israel. If Iran develops nuclear weapons it would be a huge new threat to Israel and would destroy hopes of peace. The Israelis also worry that, if Iran has nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will follow suit, creating an even greater threat to Israel. Currently, those nations are being positive towards Israel because of fears of Iran. Israel thinks that the US would have to appease a nuclear Iran, especially in view of its potential to control the Persian Gulf and control the cost of oil. This could isolate Israel. Then there are worries about the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in countries affected by the Arab Spring.

On the other hand, the question is whether Iran would actually use nuclear weapons, or even a non-nuclear pre-emptive attack, knowing that the counter attack would be devastating to the Iranian people.

Russia has warned that an attack on Iran would destabilize the whole world. It would be a difficult mission for Israel. It is calculated that they would need at least 100 planes which would have to fly 1000 miles. There is no guarantee that the attacks would be successful as Iranian nuclear facilities are buried under 30 feet of concrete.

Washington is urging Israel to put its trust in sanctions, which they claim are proving effective, and dialogue, in which Iran has expressed a willingness to be involved. The Americans don’t want yet another war in the Middle East. More personally, Obama doesn’t want anything to hinder his chances of re-election in November. He wants to show support for the Israelis, because of the powerful US Jewish lobby so he threatens Iran and maintains a military option.

Netanyahu has spoken of occasions in the past when Israel has acted unilaterally, without US support: the declaration of independence in 1948, starting the Six Day War in 1967 and bombing the nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981. He has also negotiated an agreement with Azerbaijan, on Iran's northern border, to have access to their air bases.

Some think that Israel is making threats of a military attack on Iran but doesn't intend to carry them out because of the potentially devastating counter-attack, not only by Iran, which has chemical weapons, but also by Hezbollah. It is true that Netanyahu hasn't urged the Israelis to take precautions against counter-attack.

The prime minister doesn't have strong support for an attack by Israel alone. In polls 60% of Israelis believe that only a military attack could stop Iran's nuclear program and 65% think Israel would suffer more from Iran having nuclear weapons than it would from an attack on Iran. But only 19% of Israelis favour an attack by Israel alone. 42% would support an attack with US backing. A third of Israelis is against a strike in any circumstances.

Some experts say that an Israeli attack would only delay the development of Iran's nuclear weapons by two years at most.

However, Netanyahu keeps up the rhetoric. He said recently: "The will to destroy the Jewish people has not changed. What has changed is our ability to defend ourselves and our determination to do so." The trouble is that such statements can be used politically to justify not taking the Peace Process seriously, and Netanyahu has been criticized by some Israelis spreading unnecessary alarm for that purpose. Others say he is using the Iran threat for a similar purpose. So we have to take the fear seriously whilst not being naïve about politicians.

## **Israeli frustrations**

Israelis have been disappointed time and again by the Peace Process. The majority of them supported the Oslo Accords but they failed. They supported the withdrawal from S Lebanon but it was followed by many rocket attacks across the border by Hezbollah. A similar thing happened when Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip. Most Israelis support the two state solution but that seems to be fading as well. Many Israelis wonder if concessions will ever bring peace. The election of right wing Netanyahu and the recent defeat of Tzipi Livni, the opposition leader who is strongly pro the two state solution, seem to be indications of Israel's frustrations.

There is another side to the story but if we don't take these perceptions seriously we will not understand the Israelis.

## **Hamas and Gaza**

Hamas and Fatah signed a reconciliation agreement at the end of 2011. Around the same time Hamas leader Khaled Meshal controversially told Hamas fighters to stop attacking Israeli targets. This was partly because of Palestinian public opinion and partly because of the fear of Israeli reprisals. The reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah includes the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. However this doesn't include recognition of Israel and Hamas reserves the right to engage in armed struggle. Unfortunately Israel seemed to ignore this change in Hamas' approach.

Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh said: "The non-violent approach is part of a strategy for our present situation to draw world sympathy to our cause" and added that armed resistance is the only path against Israel. This statement was probably for the benefit of the Iranians and is typical of political double-speak.

Sadly, in early March over 200 rockets were fired into Israel from Gaza and, in retaliation, Israel killed the leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, Zuhir al-Qaisi who was one of the organizers of a terror attack in August 2011, which killed eight Israelis. Other militants were also killed. Some of the rockets were intercepted by the 'Iron Dome' defence system. Both Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal called for a ceasefire. The problem is that Hamas has lost some of its control in Gaza to Iran-backed Islamic Jihad.

Another problem is that since Mubarak was deposed the Egyptians no longer have control of the Sinai so it has become a strategic area for Gaza militants to attack Israel. The Sinai has a long unprotected border. Israel is hampered from going into Sinai because it is Egyptian territory.

## **Peace Process? What Peace Process?**

It seems that the best one can say about the Peace Process is that it is on hold. There are those who say that the two-state solution is dead and others who say a single Israeli-Palestinian state is preferable. Some believe the Palestinians secretly favour a single bi-national state. It is very difficult to see how the latter would work. The Israelis fear losing control because the Arab birthrate is higher than the Jewish birthrate, which could mean, in a democracy, the Arabs could become a majority. It also seems unlikely that a single state solution would satisfy Palestinian yearnings for their own state.

As noted above, it seems that Netanyahu has no real interest in the Peace Process and two-state solution, despite his Bar-Ilan University speech, and has instead majored on the Iranian threat, including stressing the dangers to the Israeli public. Some time ago Abbas said that the second Intifada was a huge mistake on the Palestinians' part because it discouraged the Israelis from taking the Peace Process seriously. The victory of Hamas in Gaza and resulting rocket attacks on Israel have added to that discouragement. Israel seems to be ignoring the Hamas statement about ceasing attacks on Israeli targets, just as it seemed to ignore the Arab Peace initiative which offered normal relations between Israel and the Arab nations. Some see this as a long-term lack of interest in the Peace Process and the two-state solution on the part of Israel.

### ***The January meeting***

Jordan brought the two sides together in January and, under pressure from the Quartet (the US, EU, UN and Russia) the Palestinians dropped their demand that Israel ceases all settlement activity on the West Bank as a precondition of talks. However they demanded that Israel freed 100 Palestinian prisoners as a gesture of goodwill, which the Israelis refused to do because the Palestinians' intentions were unclear. Netanyahu said he was willing to negotiate with the Palestinians but refused to hold any negotiations if Hamas were involved. At the January meetings the Palestinians accused Israel of conveying unclear proposals about borders and security. They claimed Israel wanted the border to be the separation barrier and wanted to keep East Jerusalem in Israel, neither of which was acceptable. Some Israeli commentators see this as a wrecking action by Israel to stop the peace talks. The Palestinians want a return to the 1967 borders with some land swaps. They agreed to a demilitarized state, with no heavy weapons, and an international force along the border. Netanyahu asked Hilary Clinton to press the Palestinians to continue talks with Israel but eventually accepted that the talks had ceased.

### ***The April meeting***

However, a couple of months later there were further secret meetings between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. There was discussion of a letter Abbas had written to Netanyahu, which originally had contained ultimatums, but which had been toned down because of US pressure. The Palestinians asked for a meeting in which the letter, outlining preconditions for resuming talks, could be presented and a meeting between Netanyahu and Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad was planned for April 17<sup>th</sup>. However Fayyad pulled out at the last minute (which has caused a rift between him and Abbas) and it was left to senior Palestinian officials to hand the letter to Netanyahu and the Israelis said they would look carefully at it. Netanyahu accused the Palestinians of being the ones refusing to negotiate and saying he wanted to reach a settlement. Time will tell if this is a serious intention. Israeli President Shimon Peres has said it has been possible to reach a peace settlement with Abbas in the last three years and that there is a reasonable chance it can be achieved.

### ***Settlement activity***

Meanwhile Israel continues its policies of expanding settlements in the West Bank whilst seriously restricting Palestinians from obtaining planning permission and demolishing Palestinian buildings. The Palestinians are inhibited by the separation barrier and other barriers to free movement, and they are also inhibited from gaining access to water resources etc.

The Migron outpost was in the news because the High Court ordered its evacuation. The settlers refused Netanyahu's suggestion that they allowed the settlement to be demolished so a new community could be built on nearby state land. The High Court rejected Netanyahu's suggestion that the evacuation should be delayed until 2015 and ordered that it take place by August 1st 2012 but he still intends to legalize three settlements and says the court order to evacuate Migron is "a decree the public cannot accept." It should be noted that previous governments encouraged settlers to go and settle in areas like Migron. On the other hand, in January the IDF demolished three illegal outposts on the West Bank.

Some politicians wanted to legalize illegal settlements retrospectively, so if the owner of land on which a settlement had been built did not claim it back within four years it would not be evacuated but he would be compensated. Since the 1970s Israel has designated 225,000 acres of the West Bank as "state lands" in order to allow settlements to be built on them.

Israel's military establishment approved an expansion of the Etzion Bloc of settlements near Bethlehem. Groups of right wing settlers seeking to protect settlements, have attacked police and IDF soldiers on several occasions, calling them 'Nazis.' On one occasion 50 settlers attacked a West Bank military base, throwing rocks, burning tyres, and vandalizing military vehicles. Mosques have also been attacked and set on fire.

Many settlers believe the biblical promises to the Jewish people about the land overrule the Palestinians' territorial rights and the legitimacy of legal rulings from Israeli courts. But this is to ignore the equally biblical teaching which states that the land belongs to God, not the Jewish people (God calls them aliens and tenants in it), and residence in it

by any generation depends on obedience to God (which, in New Testament terms, is not the case with the majority of Israelis or Jewish people today). Throughout most of history the Jewish people have not occupied the whole of the land promised to the Patriarchs so that promise does not rule out their occupying only part of that land or even, following God's demands for justice and love for non-Jewish people amongst them, giving part of it to the Palestinians. Such sacrifice is not wrong in principle. Nor does it frustrate God's purposes for the Jewish people.

### ***Palestinian unrest***

There is some evidence that unrest is growing amongst the Palestinians and some think this could lead to another Intifada. Gen. James Mattis, Head of the U.S. Central Command said that the Palestinian-Israeli dispute is a "preeminent flame that keeps the pot boiling in the Middle East, particularly as the Arab Awakening causes Arab governments to be more responsive to the sentiments of their populations [who are hostile to Israel]."

### **Israel's popularity**

Israel continues to be uncritically supported by many of the Jewish and Evangelical lobby in the United States. An example of uninformed and offensive views held by that lobby is that expressed by Newt Gingrich, who when running for President, called the Palestinians an "invented people" who "are terrorists." This is an old argument beloved of hard-line Zionists.

Sadly, in an election year, Obama backed off from his call for an end to Israeli settlement activity because of this powerful lobby. It is widely held that Netanyahu humiliated Obama in his recent visit to Washington although he did not succeed in gaining US support for attacking Iran. He is playing a high-risk game because it maybe that, if re-elected, Obama will make trouble for him.

Netanyahu spoke to 13,000 people at the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) meeting and they loudly cheered and clapped him. However Israel is facing growing worldwide unpopularity because of its perceived intransigence over settlement activity.

### **PRAYER TOPICS**

1. Pray for an early resumption of peace talks and for a determination to reach peace with justice in practice.
2. Pray about the fears on both sides.
3. Pray for Israel to be willing to freeze the settlements and to avoid humiliation of Palestinians
4. 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.
5. Pray for sanctions rather than military attack to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power

**SUPPORT BEIT NETANEL** ("House of Netanel"): the evangelistic and reconciliation ministry of Rachel Netanel in the outskirts of Jerusalem, which seeks to reach Israelis (Jewish and Arab) and Palestinians with the Gospel in their own language and culture, bringing Jews and Arabs together under the love of Jesus, eating and studying together in a family atmosphere. Rachel holds weekly meeting of some 50 people, group meetings for 10-20 people, bi-monthly meetings for 100-200 and daily individual ministry. Over 2000 people have heard the Gospel. Her newsletter is available through Paradox. Her website is [www.rachelnetanel.net](http://www.rachelnetanel.net)

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