

## ***The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories Issue 52 June 2021***

*The newsletter, which seeks to take the hopes, needs, pain and fears of both sides seriously, is available free on request to those who send their name and email address to: [tony@higton.info](mailto:tony@higton.info). Please encourage others to join the mailing list.*

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### **The Israel-Gaza War**

Hamas began rocket attacks when Israel failed to withdraw security forces from the area of the al-Aqsa mosque and the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in the Old City of Jerusalem. Hamas had been provoked by an impending court decision on whether dozens of Palestinians could be evicted from Sheikh Jarrah and replaced by Jewish settlers. The law allows Jewish people to reclaim property in East Jerusalem which was transferred to Jordanian control after the 1948 War of Independence. Clashes in Sheikh Jarrah led to Israeli police firing stun grenades and teargas. 300 Palestinians and 21 Israeli police officers were injured.

In the next 11 days Hamas fired 4340 rockets and 261 people were killed in Gaza and Israel. At least 129 out of the 248 killed in Gaza were civilians. Israel attacked over 1500 targets and destroyed the underground city Hamas had built with Iran's help as a military base.

Israel has been condemned for the high number of civilian deaths, and, of course, civilian deaths are particularly tragic. However, Hamas chose to fire its rockets from civilian areas, and civilian deaths can be used as propaganda against Israel. Waseem Yousef, a Muslim cleric from the United Arab Emirates commented "Hamas launches rockets from civilian homes, and when the response arrives, Hamas screams, 'Where are the Arabs? Where are the Muslims?' You turned Gaza into a cemetery for the innocent and children! ... You do not respect anyone. You did not feel sorry for the children and the elderly in Gaza. ... All Muslims and the world are not happy with the bloodshed of innocent civilians. Intelligent people warn against Hamas and its supporters, and those who applaud them. You are the ones launching rockets which in turn are destroying Gaza!"

It must also be remembered that Hamas rockets are not aimed at specific targets in Israel. They are aimed at particular areas and civilians in those areas can easily be killed. It is only because Israel has an advanced anti-missile shield that many more Israeli civilians were saved. However, Hamas had more sophisticated missiles than in previous attacks and they fired large numbers of rockets in quick succession. This resulted in the Israeli anti-missile shield not being able to shoot them all down. Ironically, some Hamas rockets landed in Gaza causing some of the casualties. Since the war, Israel has attacked Hamas armed sites in response to incendiary balloons sent by Hamas causing fires in Israel.

Israeli is deeply concerned about the widespread outbreaks of intercommunal violence in Israel, during the war, Extremists on both sides were involved. Israel sees such clashes as a bigger threat than the battle with Hamas. Israeli President Rivlin commented "a civil war [would] be a danger to our existence, more than all the dangers we have from the outside."

### **Israel's popularity was growing before the war**

Firstly, there are the Abraham Accords, in which diplomatic relations are being created or restored between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman wants to cooperate with Israel over their common enemy Iran, although other Saudi leaders are negative towards Israel. President Erdogan of Turkey said he wanted better relations with Israel, although later he contradicted this, saying to the Pope over the phone "All of humanity should be united against Israel." It is possible that Qatar will re-establish economic relationships with Israel.

Equatorial Guinea and Guatemala have moved their embassies to Jerusalem and Malawi is doing the same. Israel established diplomatic relations with Bhutan. The Republic of Kosovo (which has a Muslim majority) established diplomatic relations with Israel, recognising Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, and the Czech government opened a Jerusalem office of the Czech Embassy.

Interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had fallen in Europe before the war. In 2020 only 35% of Europeans had a strong interest compared with 42% in 2019 and 68% in 2008. Many people can see no practical solution to

the conflict. At the same time there had been a rise in positive attitudes towards Israel in Europe from February 2020 to February 2021. In England it rose from 24% of the population to 30%. In France it rose from 22% to 34%, in Germany from 30% to 35% and in Denmark from 25% to 33%. Overall the positive opinion had risen by 8% throughout Europe as a whole.

## Reaction to Israel after the war

All of these positive developments have taken place in recent months and are quite remarkable. But, of course, then the war with Gaza took place. Turkey and Iran accused Israel of inciting the Palestinians at the al-Aqsa mosque, then committing atrocities in Gaza. However, other Arab countries, particularly those who have made peace with Israel in the last year, were more restrained (unlike in previous conflicts).

A disturbing aspect of the recent Israel-Gaza war has been the, often violent, demonstrations in Israel and the West Bank. This has been accompanied by large pro-Palestinian demonstrations in other countries.

Jonathan Freedland, a Jewish journalist, wrote a significant comment, warning Israel of opinion turning against it: “Those with a strong connection to Israel scratch their heads . . ., wondering why, of all the appalling things going on in the world, [the Israel-Gaza conflict] is the one that cuts through – bringing huge crowds on to the streets of European capitals, filling up social media timelines. They note that people who have barely stirred at the detention of a million Uyghur Muslims in China; who have not so much as “liked” a tweet about the tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims murdered by Myanmar; who rarely get agitated by the 200,000 civilians butchered by the Assad regime in Syria or by the 130,000 killed in Saudi Arabia’s war on Yemen; and who might be wholly unaware of the 52,000 estimated to have been killed in the Ethiopian-Tigray conflict since November, have nevertheless been filled with fury by events in Gaza. Those of us who have long condemned the occupation always argued that if Israel did not do the right thing and end it, it would eventually be branded a pariah state. If the last two weeks are anything to go by, that day is getting closer.” This perceptive comment shows the demonic influence behind antisemitism and anti-Israelism.

However, not all pro-Palestinian demonstrators are antisemitic or anti-Israel. Nesrine Malik, a Muslim journalist, laments the fact that in recent years the Palestinians have been abandoned by many governments. She wrote in support of peaceful street demonstrations “People are showing up for Palestine not because their politics are dodgy or their characters questionable, but because governments across the Arab and western worlds have left them with no other choice.”

So, whatever improvements there are in relationships between Israel and Arab and other governments, strong opposition and serious danger to Israel has been re-ignited.

## Decent people and extremists

It is important to remember that there are many decent people as well as extremists on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There have recently been hundreds of right-wing Israelis chanting “Death to Arabs” in East Jerusalem. But there are many decent, caring Israelis who desire peaceful living together by Jews and Arabs. I have met a lot of them. There are similar extremists on the Palestinian side. But, again, there are many decent Palestinians who want to live peacefully alongside Jewish people. Again, I have met such people. The “Standing Together” movement recently held demonstrations in Tel Aviv, Jaffa and Haifa. Hundreds of Jews and Arabs joined in with the slogan “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies.”

We must not regard either side as totally in the wrong. But we need to take seriously those on both sides who are in the wrong, including those in leadership.

### *Violations by Israel*

B’Tselem, the Israeli human rights organisation writes that “violent acts by settlers have become a routine matter for Palestinians in the West Bank, who learned long ago that no one intends to protect their lives, wellbeing or property.” They add “Throughout 2020, Israeli security forces killed 27 Palestinians, seven of them minors; home demolitions spiked sharply, leaving 1,006 Palestinians, 519 of them minors, homeless; and our field researchers documented 248 incidents of state-backed settler violence against Palestinians.” The Israeli military judicial system in the West Bank is accused of violating Palestinian rights, including the use of torture.

However, one piece of good news is that, since the war, Israel has decided to discontinue “mapping missions.” These missions involved Israeli troops entering Palestinian homes, often in the middle of the night, over 250 times every month. They used roofs for observation posts, or searching for weapons or fulfilling other intelligence purposes. Dr Jumana Milhem, a psychologist who works with Physicians for Human Rights Israel, commented on the psychological damage caused by such action: “The process involves the dehumanisation of a whole society. [Its] point is to break their human spirit ... People are reporting stress weeks after these events.”

### *Violations by Palestinians*

The other side of the story, though, is extremism amongst Palestinian leaders, especially Hamas, which is a terrorist organisation. Hamas is growing in popularity, partly because of discontent with Mahmoud Abbas’ Fatah party in the West Bank. A recent poll found that 32% of Palestinian voters supported Hamas and only 17% supported Fatah. Hamas is supported because it is standing up to Israel, whereas Fatah doesn’t.

The Hamas Charter states that the whole of Palestine (including what is now Israel) is an Islamic Waqf (Holy Possession) and Islam will eliminate Israel through Jihad (holy war) which is the individual duty of every Muslim.

Here are some of the **recent headlines from Palestinian media**. They include statements by Hamas and by Fatah and are all documented by Palestinian Media Watch (<https://palwatch.org>):

- “Fatah: ‘Palestine from the Sea to the River’ – will be liberated” (May 18, 2021).
- “We will continue the cycle of blood and killing,’ threatens Fatah leader Rajoub” (May 20, 2021).
- “Fatah: Palestinians have ‘a natural right’ to attack and murder Israelis” (May 3, 2021).
- “PA presents the PLO Charter as currently calling for Israel's destruction” (March 6, 2021)
- “Palestinian Authority: The Holocaust was Europe repaying Jews for their “wickedness” (Jan 23, 2021).
- “‘Teach your children: the Zionist entity will come to an end’ says Palestinian Authority TV host” (Oct 30, 20).
- “Fatah: ‘Let Jerusalem ‘be freed of the Jews’ and prepare ‘the Jews’ graveyard’ (Oct 13.2020).
- “OK to murder Israeli civilians because they are all ‘criminals’” - Hamas’ message in TV series (Aug 25, 2020).
- “Senior Fatah official – ‘Palestine’ stretches from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and is ‘waqf’ - an inalienable religious endowment in Islamic law (Feb 2, 2020).
- “Palestinian Authority encourages suicide bombings: ‘Life is insignificant... God, grant us Martyrdom’ (Feb 16 2020).

Facing these attitudes and threats, it is no surprise that Israelis are strongly defensive and do not trust the Palestinian leadership, including over the two-state policy.

## **Continuing threats to Israel**

Iran is working to take control of the Middle East and is very influential in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon. It believes the Shia Muslim messiah (the Mahdi) will establish a new world order (a Persian Empire) centred on Iran and Iraq in the End Times. It feels threatened by the Abraham Accords between Israel and various Arab nations, which are neighbours of Iran and Israel fears this could lead to Iran launching a multi-front attack involving its allies in Syria, Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

President Erdogan of Turkey also wants to re-establish the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.

Iran and Israel are living dangerously. Iran has developed more sophisticated weapons including precision-guided rockets and missiles, cruise missiles and drones, which it can supply to its allies, including Hezbollah and Hamas. It is also developing its nuclear capabilities in breach of the international agreement which was meant to stop such action but was undermined by the Trump administration. In April Iran said it had introduced new uranium enrichment centrifuges.

Iran supports Hezbollah in Lebanon. Lebanon is facing a massive economic and social crisis and Hezbollah is seeking total control over the country which would gravely endanger Lebanon and Israel. Hezbollah also has some 58 bases in southern Syria, supported by the Syrian president. Missiles have been fired into Israel from

southern Syria, and from Lebanon. Doubtless Hezbollah is behind these attacks. The Israeli air defence system failed to shoot down a rocket which landed very near Israeli's nuclear reactor.

Israel has launched over a thousand air strikes on Iranian vehicles transporting weapons etc., to its allies in Syria. In April Israel attacked the Natanz underground nuclear site in Iran, where the new uranium enrichment centrifuges had been installed, causing serious damage. Iran threatened revenge.

The new Iranian president, Ibrahim Raisi, is an extremist. He is nicknamed 'The Butcher of Tehran' because he is responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iranians. He was a member of the so-called 'death commission' which is responsible for the secret execution of thousands of political prisoners.

The editor of one of Israel's newspapers has written that Israel didn't see the Hamas attack coming from Gaza and it couldn't cope with all the rocket attacks. He added that Iran and Hezbollah will have noted that and feel emboldened, because they have more powerful weapons than Hamas.

## **Israel's new government**

Israel has a new government, bringing to an end the 12-year leadership of Netanyahu and his government – just. It won by only one seat, which is, of course, very precarious. There are eight parties in the coalition. The two biggest parties with 17 and 8 seats respectively are centrist. Three with a total of 20 seats are right wing. Two with a total of 13 seats are left-wing. And the most surprising is an Arab Islamist party with 4 seats, which denies Israel's right to exist. One member of the Islamist party decided not to vote against the establishment of the new government, but instead abstained. The parties include atheists and nationalist Jewish people.

Naftali Bennett, leader of the smaller centrist party, is to be prime minister for the first two years. The Yair Lapid, leader of the largest centrist party, will take over for the next two years. However, a recent poll showed that only 11% of Israelis expected the new government to survive for four years. Also less than 50% believed Bennett would honour the agreement with Lapid because he promised his voters he would not allow Lapid to become prime minister.

## **Prayer Topics**

Pray for protection for Israel from extremist Palestinian leaders and terrorists, anti-Semites and unjust political opponents.

Pray for protection for innocent Palestinians from oppression by Israel and dangers from cynical, extremist Palestinian leaders.

Pray for secure and wise government for Israel.

Pray for useful peace negotiations.

Pray for Israel to turn to the Messiah and "for all Israel to be saved" so that it can be a major factor in fulfilling God's purposes in the End Times.

Pray for blessing and protection for Christian Palestinians and for more Palestinians to turn to Christ.

*Tony Higton*