

How should we respond to the Middle East situation?

The complex Middle East situation raises all sorts of questions. They include asking whether Israel's actions are justified. This is crucially important for many reasons.

How do we respond to Israel's actions?

We must avoid prejudiced views of Israel, i.e. uncritical Zionism or judgmental condemnation of Israel, both of which encourage Antisemitism. People react against uncritical Zionism – “Israel can do no wrong” - a view held by numerous Christians, and this increases negativism of others towards Israel. Similarly, judgmental condemnation of Israel can have the effect of indoctrination and appear to confirm what Antisemites proclaim. It is quite clear in Scripture that God is not uncritically positive towards Israel. Look at the condemnation of Israel's sins by the Prophets. Look at Jesus' strong criticism of unbelieving and sinful Jews. Remember that 45% of Israelis identify as secular. They are neither observant religious Jews nor Messianic (Christian) Believers.

Israel is constantly being criticised for its killing of innocent civilians, including children, health workers etc. How are we to respond to this? Obviously, we must pray for the protection of innocent civilians in Gaza and Lebanon, and for their healing when injured or bereaved.

However, there are various issues we need to remember:

- Unlike the old days, with modern media we can see the horrific details of war close up, which makes them seem worse than those earlier wars, which is not the case (all war is terrible).
- We can be influenced by the constant anti-Israel indoctrination:
 - some of it unintentional on the part of the media e.g. excessively showing in graphic detail the effects of Israeli attacks, including tragic effects on innocent civilians
 - some of it intentional:
 - Lies about Israel's actions.
 - Lies about statistics e.g. the number of innocent people killed.
 - Hamas and Hezbollah deliberately placing their military groups and weapons amongst innocent civilians in order to create negative propaganda against Israel when they are killed by legitimate attacks (approved by international law).
- We must also ask is there any country that wouldn't strongly react against regular **indiscriminate** rocket attacks from its **nearby neighbours who want to annihilate that country**. Just imagine, if Wales and Scotland were regularly firing rockets indiscriminately into England, how would England react. That is exactly what Israel is facing, and has been for years. However, Israel was confident about its defence strategy until the humiliating October 7th attack. Now, that confidence has been very seriously undermined. Israel feels very threatened.

I am no military expert, so I'm unsure about some of Israel's tactics, for example, telling people in Gaza and Lebanon to evacuate to certain places which are then attacked shortly afterwards by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Also, the number of innocent civilians being killed by the IDF seems very excessive. It seems that Israel does not care sufficiently about innocent civilians (although any army might have immoral extremist individual fighters). But I find it much more difficult to believe that the IDF is deliberately attacking innocent but rather is fully aware that in targeting where terrorists hide out, civilians will be killed as well.

On the other hand, we need to listen to the experts. For example, Hamas claims some 41,000 people have died through Israeli attacks in Gaza, which amounts to genocide, but the IDF says some 18,000 of them were terrorists. Experts tell us that this means the ratio of combatant to civilian deaths is well within the norm (terrible though that is) of similar conflicts such as the war in Afghanistan and the Anglo-Irish War (Irish War of Independence) which were wars against terrorists.

So, I have serious questions about some of Israel's tactics, and, as I have said, we must not give uncritical support to Israel. But we have to remember that misunderstanding and disinformation are rife, so we need to suspend judgment over some issues. However, if Israel is in serious error over some of its tactics we should express disapproval of such actions. That doesn't mean we give up on her but that we pray for an end to such errors.

There is, of course, the danger of the conflict being escalated into all-out war. It is thought that Iran doesn't want it. The Israeli view is not so clear. Both Iran and Israel have extremists in government. We need to pray that God will overrule in this issue, because it could lead to huge suffering.

How do we respond to the Ring of Fire?

Iran is creating an anti-Israel "Ring of Fire" in countries around Israel. It includes Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Sudan.

Rockets and drones are sent over Israel by Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. There are pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq. Iran is very dominant in Syria – It controls 570 of the 830 foreign bases in Syria today. The West Bank has Iranian weapons. Sudan and Iran have signed a military cooperation agreement. Iran recently attacked Israel directly.

There are many calls for a peace settlement with Iran and its allies. But the problem is that no peace settlement would stop Iran and its allies hating Israel and wanting nothing less than its total destruction. This would also be the case with a "Two-State settlement" – a State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel. A strong international control of the militant Islamists would not remove the hatred for Israel and the passion for its destruction. Terrorists would remain and take action. We also need to note the huge Palestinian backing for Hamas and Hezbollah. Polls taken by Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research show that an overwhelming majority of Palestinians said the October 7th attack by Hamas "made them proud." AWRAD took three polls in December 2023, March and June 24 and found that around 80% believed the Hamas decision to launch the October 7th attack was "correct."

We must recognise that the hatred against Israel is demonic, not simply human. It is a response to God reestablishing Israel through the UN in 1948 after the Holocaust, which is part of God's End Time purposes.

How do we respond to the long-term effects of the Middle East Crisis?

We must increase our prayers against the growth of Antisemitism and Anti-Israelism

We know that recently there have been huge pro-Palestinian demonstrations in many countries, including the UK, with many people denying Israel's right to exist. In the US an Anti-Defamation League survey in January 2024 found that nearly a quarter of Americans hold antisemitic beliefs, with a disturbing reversal in trends showing that younger generations are more likely to believe antisemitic comments. Jewish people have said they don't think there's been a more worrying period for the Jewish people since World War II.

Antisemitism is a demonic evil and we must pray against evils. The current Middle East crisis, including many criticisms of Israel (whether justified or false) has done and will continue to do enormous damage to Israel and the Jewish people. Countries which currently support Israel are vulnerable to strong long-term pressure from antisemites in their population.

We need to pray earnestly for the protection of Israel. Given the widespread hatred of Israel and the complexity of its Ring of Fire opponents, it is not likely to be achieved by human action. It will require divine intervention.

We must pray and act against Christian involvement in Antisemitism/Anti-Israelism past and present. Jews are seriously hindered from accepting Jesus because of Christian (and nominally Christian) Antisemitism over the centuries. It is good that the Church of England publicly apologised for centuries of Antisemitism in 2019 and the Roman Catholic Church did the same in the 1960s. Churches and individual Christians should take opportunities to reassure Jewish people that we reject antisemitism, because many Jewish people feel seriously threatened because of antisemitic attacks since the October 7th massacre.

We must also act against supersessionism – the idea that the Church totally supersedes and replaces the Jewish community in God's purposes, i.e. that God has no purpose for the Jewish people. Romans 11:1-32 makes it clear that this is not the case. God does have a purpose for the Jewish community which will be completely fulfilled when Jesus returns.

However, we must also pray for the fulfilment of God's purposes

We don't know the timing of significant End Time events. But Jesus told us we are to keep watch for pointers towards these events.

One of the most amazing pointers has been the re-establishment of Israel after 2000 years of exile, after she rejected the Messiah. Jesus foretold this when he said the Jewish people "will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). It is significant that this re-establishment was brought about by the worst-ever hatred and murderous treatment of the Jewish people – the Holocaust. So, one of the main End Time events was brought about by one of the greatest evils. This should encourage us to recognise that the current serious growth of Israel's unpopularity around the world could serve God's purposes.

Ezekiel 38 refers to a coalition of nations attacking Israel in the End Times. It is not difficult to imagine this, the way things are going in the Middle East at present. Of course, we don't know the timing or the details. But an alliance like the Ring of Fire could figure in it. However, the alliance could become bigger than that - growing antisemitism could eventually turn currently positive world powers against Israel.

Could it be that what is happening in the Middle East at present is a foretaste of this End Time prophecy?

In Ezekiel 37 we read an End Time messianic prophecy: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms... I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God. ... My servant David [*the Messiah*] will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees ... Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy ..." (Ezekiel 37:21-24, 28; also see Zechariah 12).

God has brought the Jewish people out of the nations and re-established them in their own land. That happened 76 years ago. Are we now seeing through the current traumatic events a further step towards the return of Christ, which will include an international attack on Israel? We need to pray for the fulfilment of God's purposes and for the hastening of the return of Christ. But the prophecies in both Ezekiel and Zechariah include an emphasis on a) following God's law and b) Jewish people repenting over the death of their Messiah.

Therefore, God's purposes for Israel will not be fulfilled without one very important aspect happening. Paul says that in the End Times "All Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25-26, the context clearly shows this is literal Israel). So, in praying for God's purposes to be fulfilled, we must pray against their serious failings and for Revival amongst the Jewish people.