

GAZA vs ISRAEL

by Geoffrey Marshall, Dean of Brecon Cathedral

3rd January 2009

After the bloodiest week in the Middle East since the 1967 Six-Day War (a few weeks after which I first went to Israel / Palestine) I feel a bit of a failure for not spending yesterday joining several hundred people in Swansea demonstrating against the continuing one-sided human tragedy going on between the only two elected governments in the area. A week of bombardment by Israel has not been able to stop the rocket fire from Gaza, and Israel now has to decide how far to send in ground troops. Israel tightened its control of what gets in and out of the crowded coastal strip after Hamas, the elected power, gained control of the area 18 months ago. Since then, the U.N. says there has been a significant deterioration in infrastructure and basic services, with 80% of the 1.4m population (mostly refugees) unable to support themselves.

So why didn't I demonstrate yesterday? I don't want to get into the game of comparative suffering – there may have been 400 deaths on one side and four on the other, but that simply makes 404 too many. Israel's military action doesn't look like a defence measure at the end of a six-month truce, but more like a well-planned offence measure; but if I demonstrate against Israel I don't want to be thought to be condoning Hamas's untargeted attacks on Israeli civilians. And if I demonstrate against Israel should I not also boycott Israeli goods? If so I mustn't use their national airline when visiting Jerusalem next month, if that pilgrimage goes ahead. My Christian friends in the Middle East, and most Christians in the Middle East are Palestinian Arabs, hope I'll still take my 48 pilgrims. But in supporting them I don't want to be seen to be anti-Semitic; mind you, being anti-Israeli doesn't mean being anti-Jewish; a majority of Jews don't live in Israel but in places like Manchester and New York; anyway Zionism is a racist creed in itself.

Why does this particular conflict matter to us? We Anglicans need to know that Gaza's Al Ahli hospital, which we see on TV trying to cope with far too many injured, is an Anglican owned and run institution; we Welsh need to remember that it is the Church in Wales which provides the best dental service in Gaza. Our Bishop in Jerusalem, Suheil Dawani, has been very balanced for a Palestinian Arab in calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities; on Tuesday he wrote that his diocese was "stunned and saddened by the events unfolding in Gaza and greatly grieved by the severity of the ongoing military operations that are occurring in heavily populated areas and impacting the civilian population. The heavy loss of Palestinian lives and the serious wounds and injuries to many hundreds of innocent bystanders require the immediate cessation of hostilities for the wellbeing and safety of both the Palestinian and Israeli communities, and especially for Gaza and the nearby Israeli population centres. The gravity of the situation threatens to engulf this entire region, and we ask the Palestinians and Israelis to return to active negotiations for the wellbeing and safety of both communities."

I have Israeli friends as well as Palestinian ones, but they know I also support Palestine because Israel has for so long ignored U.N. resolutions. Aside from the enormous core issues—refugees, Jerusalem, and borders—the major themes of the U.N. resolutions against Israel over the years are its unlawful attacks on its neighbours; its violations of the human rights of the Palestinians, including deportations, house demolitions and other forms of collective punishment; its confiscation of Palestinian land; its establishment of illegal settlements; and its refusal to abide by the Convention on the protection of civilians in time of war.

I fear for friends in the Middle East because one of the main victims of the disproportionate Israeli action is moderate public opinion in the Arab world, upon which Israel's long-term existence depends. And I fear for us because for every innocent civilian killed in Gaza, the Israelis are creating new suicide bombers; I disapprove of them too; but that's not just about Gaza - that could be about any of us.