

Now, if you look at the Roadmap which for two years has been the internationally agreed route to a two-state solution in the Middle East, you can see progress, or at least agreement on the way to progress, on nearly every aspect of Phase 1, from Palestinian elections to judicial reform and financial accountability. The sticking point is security.

The Roadmap is clear, right at the start, in emphasising Palestinian responsibility for “sustained targeted and effective operations aimed at confronting all those engaged in terror and dismantlement of terrorist capabilities and infrastructure.”

Israel argues that until it sees a sustained attempt at dismantling the terrorist infrastructure it is let off the hook regarding its obligations under the Roadmap.

The Palestinian reply is that confrontation with the terrorists is not the only way of dealing with the threat. Hamas, for one, has too much popular support in Gaza and confrontation would result in civil war among the Arabs. So the preferred route is co-optation. There will be democratically elected Hamas candidates in the Palestinian Parliament after new elections in the summer, and Hamas fighters will be brought within the new Palestinian security arrangements. Instead of anarchy or confrontation, the twelve separate armed groups will be brought together in three groups under the control of the Palestinian Authority. The American General Ward will lead a security co-ordination group under which Britain and other powers provide technical support to these reformed and restructured Palestinian security forces.

It is an attractive vision, but persistent reports of rearming by the terrorist groups make it difficult to credit. In a somewhat parallel situation, would we credit Sinn Fein’s political involvement if there were reports that the IRA was using a ceasefire to rearm for battle?

Progress towards democracy among Israel’s neighbours is always to be welcomed, especially in the Palestinian Authority. A time of relative peace in Israel, as in Northern Ireland, is better than resumption of bombing. But there is a long way to go. We need to pray for **grace and security** if the hopes for peace on both sides of the conflict are to be maintained.

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A NEW BEGINNING IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Israel’s Palestinian neighbours were the focus of a key meeting in London on 1st March 2005. Tony Blair and Jack Straw hosted the meeting which was attended by Mahmoud Abbas, Kofi Annan, Condoleezza Rice and the foreign ministers of 25 countries.

Israel chose not to attend as it felt its presence would distract from the main object of the meeting, to help the Palestinians put their own house in order after the departure of Yasser Arafat.

I was following the conference from an adjoining room where hundreds of journalists from Europe, Russia, America and the Arab countries were gathered. Around my table were correspondents from Kuwait, Latin America and Luxemburg, some of them veterans of Middle East diplomacy. They could probably overhear the report I phoned through as London correspondent for the Media Line in Jerusalem.

The conference was not concerned with territorial questions, or the issues that will be faced down the road in final status talks. But it did spell out more clearly than before what kind of security structure the Palestinians would establish and how it would be monitored; and by what means institutions of government would be developed across the board, from an independent judiciary to a new pensions law. It responded to concerns for transparency and accountability in finance to ensure that in future donors’ monies would not be squandered in corruption.

Later we went down to the press conference with Tony Blair and Mahmoud Abbas before I headed back to the Life Group from our local community church meeting in my home. There are days when a scripture you’re reading holds up a mirror to the events of the day. It was a bit like that for me that Tuesday.

Grace is the Glue

The passage set for study that evening was Paul’s letter to the church at Rome chapter 15 verses 5-7. The question posed in this is – how can we be open hearted to those we would initially reject? Why should we accept one another? What does it feel like when you are accepted?

These are the kind of questions Paul was putting to the first century-church in Rome. He was grappling with the practical problems of how Jews and non-Jews could relate together.

For me they are truly 21st century questions, and they are double-edged. To the news agency in Jerusalem, I am a non-Jew but accepted by grace. To the Kuwaiti correspondents around me I was the nearest to a Jew they would encounter that day, and they asked about my background with genuine interest. No interrogation this, but fellow professionals with overlapping interests – one of them had family in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Another asked about my life in the Pacific.

As I reflected on the experience during my journey home, I prepared for our Life Group that evening and thanked God for His grace. You see, it is possible for each one of us to relate to others in the grace of God and find others respond to you.

It's frankly worlds away from the statement issued a few days earlier by the World Council of Churches which called for resolution of the Middle East issues based on law and justice. ***Without security and grace, justice and law will never be enough.*** We'll just go on fighting, changing the weapons from time to time from words to guns or bombs.

Grace – or *chesed* in Hebrew – is the missing ingredient. It is there in the Hebrew Scriptures. And in the final question and answer session on Tuesday, grace was in the tough questions that the Israel radio correspondent asked, expressing the concerns and fears of his countrymen. Grace, too, was in the way Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Council, responded to those questions. And yes, grace was in the handshake with a colleague from my table as the media pack dispersed.

Tony Blair didn't mention grace in the list of building blocks – governance, security and economic development – but without grace there is no glue to hold them together. Without grace, the meeting could not have taken the constructive form it did.

The following week I saw a report from a freelance journalist based in Israel since 1985. He was reporting a dialogue in which he was involved during a recent hospital stay in Jerusalem. Grace was in that conversation, too, but the implications for security were disturbing.

Security is the Sticking Point

Mike Levine was a patient for four days in the Hadassah Hospital, Jerusalem. He writes:

One morning the nurses and a doctor rolled a new patient into our four-bed room. He was accompanied by his brother, mother and sister.

It was obvious from their conversation they were Arabs.

His bed was directly across from mine. I said, "Shalom" and they all replied except for the patient who seemed to be sedated. I went back to reading my newspaper.

The patient was a medical Doctor from Gaza, the director of a clinic which treats about 1,500 people a month. You name it, everything from a runny-nosed baby to gunshot wounds.

Fifty three years of age, and facing quadruple bypass surgery to replace arteries totally blocked and worn out. He was admitted two days early in order to fortify him with fluids, antibiotic, and medications before the operation.

His brother, who planned to stay with him, sleeping in a chair during the entire hospital stay, is a school principal, well educated, erudite, caring, and communicative.

He and I had several interesting, in depth discussions about relations between Jews and Arabs.

We basically agreed that:

- *Biblically and genetically we are cousins.*
- *There is no reason most of us can't get along.*
- *There is enough of everything—land, food, water—for both peoples.*
- *The Arab attitudes toward Jews must change.*
- *The leadership of both sides have made many mistakes.*
- *We were glad Arafat was gone.*
- *We can all live in peace if the haters and killers are eliminated.*
- *Cooperation will bring great benefits to both sides.*
- *We are both tired of this war that has dragged on for 100 years.*

I was curious how someone from Gaza, a hotbed of anti-Israeli terrorism, could manage to get himself admitted into a hospital in Jerusalem.

He told me that there never was hostility between most of the doctors in Gaza and their colleagues in Israel, that in fact, there was constant communication, and that Israeli medical people had often shipped medical supplies and medicines when Gaza had shortages, which was often. He told of numerous children sent to Israel for treatment and surgery impossible to do in Gaza, and that there never was a charge for anything!

He told me that most of the educated people in Gaza were more than ready to live in peace with us, but that they were afraid to speak out, fearing a 'collaborators' execution.

What he feared most, he told me, was what would happen the moment the Israeli army left Gaza following the expulsion of the Jews of Gaza! That terrorist groups, Hamas, Jihad, Fatah, Hezbollah, and others were already amassing huge stocks of arms and explosives, most brought in from Egypt, taking advantage of the temporary lull in fighting to build hundreds of Kassam rockets, bigger and more accurate ones, that were now being infiltrated into Samaria and Judea (West Bank), close to most Israeli population centres.

In his eyes, a much larger, more deadly 'Intifada' was on its way following Sharon's abandonment of Gaza.