

## **ISRAEL IN THE NEWS**

Israel is in the news a lot these days and not for the best of reasons. Many of its friends, such as the UK, have become quite upset with the current Government's policies.

### **The growing tensions in Israel**

Israel is deeply divided within. Netanyahu is battling corruption charges in the courts and trying to dismiss senior officials whom he regards as hostile, as they are forcing him and his colleagues to obey the law. His Minister of Justice is doing his best to destroy Israel's democracy with his flagship to change the constitution so that courts are subservient to the cabinet.

There is a great deal of anger brewing amongst Israelis serving in the forces against the Ultra-Orthodox religious Jews and the Arabs for not pulling their weight in national service. The talk is to make it compulsory for Arabs to undertake national service at least, primarily assisting the vulnerable in society. The Ultra-Orthodox, who are coalition partners in the Government, are paralysing the work of the cabinet and threatening to bring down the coalition unless a law is passed giving them permanent exemption from military service.

Then there is the right wing, the hostages, and the ongoing war in Gaza. The extreme right-wing parties are pushing hard for the expansion of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories and making the lives of Palestinians as miserable as possible. Netanyahu is very sympathetic to this, but is under growing pressure for his policies from within Israel and internationally. He gets away with it only because Donald Trump allows him to.

### **Israel within the context of growing tensions in the Middle East**

All this is going on within the Middle East, which is heating up. The primary tension was between the Shia nations and proxies led by Iran, but this front has weakened since Israel bombed Iran and Hezbollah, and the Assad Government in Syria collapsed.

The growing tensions are between Turkey, motivated by a vision to reestablish the Ottoman Empire, and Saudi Arabia, which leads the Sunni Arabs. Turkey and Egypt compete to control the eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt and Qatar are trying to outdo each other over primacy in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia, which has until recently remained on the margins of regional politics, is now asserting its primacy leadership of the Arab world, and so it goes on....

## **THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR**

Israel's economy is unexpectedly booming. Amidst all this, life in Israel goes on as normal. Its economy, which was predicted to collapse under the burden of war, is booming. Just

over the past couple of months, all public transport, including trains, has become free for anyone over 67, and a massive expansion of the rail network has been announced.

### **The effects of war and animosity against Israelis are still palpable**

Despite this, life remains unsettled. We still feel the war, with the occasional missiles being fired and the need to go into the safe rooms, foreign airlines cancelling their flights because of occasional Houthi missiles, the hostages that have not yet been released, and the absence of those called up for military service.

There are tragedies and joys. Yaron Lischinsky, an Israeli diplomat working in the USA, was preparing to propose to his American girlfriend Sarah Milgrim, who was also working in the embassy, were both shot and killed outside the Jewish Museum. They were both Messianic Jews. Yaron was a member of a Messianic congregation in Jerusalem and was well known for his involvement in the Messianic youth movement and circle of Messianic soldiers. Many from congregations across Israel attended his funeral.

Last month, we remembered Israel's fallen, and amongst these was Mordechai's son Aviel. Mordechai is well known to us in IEF. He told me a crowd of friends gathered around Aviel's grave, where they told stories about him, hugged each other, cried, and worshipped the Lord. We also celebrated Israel's 77th Independence Day. Just last week, the congregation I attended baptised ten people and will tomorrow baptise another who is serving in Gaza and was given a few days' leave.

## **MY OWN LIFE WITHIN ALL THESE HAPPENINGS**

### **My health within all this**

Through all that is going on, I'm struggling to keep on top of things. I have been struggling with my health. On the one hand, I feel great with the desire to be fully engaged, to buzz with energy, and on the other, I have too many days when I just can't cope with much. I am involved in the Messianic community, the projects we are engaged with in IEF, my engagement with fellow tour guides and those I was at school with, and just friendships and activities. As my priorities are with the projects IEF is engaged with and my tour guide colleagues, I have less time for other things.

### **A typical day out with a friend**

Last week, I spent a day with Jarle, the General Secretary of the Norwegian Church Ministry in Israel. We spent the day getting to know each other and sharing and discussing our visions for the future. I took him to the biblical sites of Megiddo and then to Jezreel, which I excavated.

### **A visit to the Circassian Kfar Kama**

As we were looking for a place to eat, I remembered that not far away was a Circassian village. I knew of the community but had never visited it. We found their village, and to my

surprise, despite having been brought by the Turks 200 years ago, they looked very Scandinavian, or Russian. We found their heritage centre with the director giving us an interesting explanation of his people and their presence in the land. We then found a restaurant and had our Circassian lunch.

## **THE RELIGIOUS MAP OF ISRAEL**

### **JEWISH ISRAEL**

This made me think of the rich diversity of people and religions in the land.

#### **The diversity of Jewish groups**

The majority are Jewish, with the vast majority having immigrated to the country. They are divided into two basic groups, the Ashkenazi's, i.e. Europeans, and the Sephardi's, or those who originated in Spain but after 1492 were kicked out of Spain.

Then there are the Yemini Jews, and the Ethiopian Jews, both of which claim to be descended from the time that the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon. When the Ethiopians first came, they were told they had to conform to the Rabbis and Orthodox Judaism. They didn't know better and went along with it but in recent many have objected to this and gone back to their traditional Ethiopian traditions.

Amongst the Ashkenazi's are the Hasidim, who are considered the Ultra-Orthodox and originated from villages of the 17th and 18th centuries in Eastern Europe. They put more emphasis on the Spirit and its manifestations than on the study of the Talmud. Though an inaccurate comparison, they are more like the Pentecostals of the Jewish world.

#### **Secular Judaism**

With the Enlightenment and the rise of secularism in the Western World, many Jews became secular and formed the majority. Zionism and the early State of Israel were largely built by the seculars. They would see Judaism as being primarily an ethnic group, and regard Judaism as the religion of this ethnic group, but this is secondary to their ethnic identity. The seculars received a massive boost in the 1990s with massive immigration from the former Soviet Union.

#### **The religious nationalists**

During the pre-State days, a small number of religious Jews bought into the vision of Zionism but wanted to retain their religious identity, they became the religious Zionists. Following the Six-Day War and with a dwindling membership, they shifted their focus to

claiming the whole land of Israel, having been given by God and refuted any attempt to find an amicable solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. Many settlers come from their ranks and are today termed the extreme right wing. They have become a major force in Israeli society.

They have strengthened largely due to a gradual shift to the right in Israeli society.

The Revisionist Likud Party, founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, was secular. Netanyahu's father was a major force in the development of this Party and his son, the current Prime Minister, adopted this philosophy with vengeance. As the State of Israel developed and absorbed a large number of Jews from conservative Arab countries, they rejected the secularism of the ruling Labor Party and voted for the Likud. The Party's leader from the establishment of the State was Menahem Begin, who was an observant Jew, and in 1977 they won the elections and have largely ruled the country ever since.

### **Anomalies in Judaism**

This saw a decisive shift in perspective with the country shifting to the right. This has spawned some strange views. A woman I was chatting to said she was an atheist and then told me that the whole land belonged to the Jews. I asked her why. And she said it because God gave it to them. She didn't have an answer to the contradiction of being an atheist and believing God gave them the land. This shift to the right has produced growing militancy on behalf of the religious nationalists. Not only do they aggressively attack Palestinians, but they have also begun a campaign of spitting on Christians touring the Old City of Jerusalem.

Orthodox Judaism does have a few threats to its monopolistic position in Israel. Many Americans are Reform or Conservative Jews, but these branches of Judaism are not recognised, causing tension between a large section of American Jews and the Israeli Orthodox establishments. Then there are also many mixed marriages with partners from abroad, but unless they are Jewish or convert to Judaism, they are not recognised as such. If it's the woman who is not Jewish, then the kids are not counted as Jews.

Also, Messianic Jews, who were regarded as converts to Christianity, are increasingly being considered as a Jewish sect, something like Mormonism or Jehovah's Witnesses are considered in Christianity. Jesus is gradually moving from being referred to as Yeshu (which stands for 'May his name be erased and forgotten') to Yeshua (Saviour or Christ).

## **ISLAM IN ISRAEL**

### **Islam**

Islam is the next biggest religious group, which is primarily Sunni Muslim.

There are two tiny Shi'ite communities in Galilee, but there are several sects that Shi'ism has spawned. The majority of Shi'ites believe that there are twelve divinely inspired Imams and the last Imam, Imam al-Mahdi, will reappear as the awaited Mahdi. The breakaway sects have slightly different beliefs from those Imams to the mainstream. Three such groups exist in Israel.

### **The Druze**

The Druze appeared in Egypt in the twelfth century when Egypt was under the Shi'ite Fatimid Caliphate. This new faith was taken up by several of the Fatimid Caliphs, with one of them inexplicably disappearing. They believe that he will reappear as the last Imam. Despite being Muslim in origin, the Druze have disavowed any association with Islam.

Today, there are about a million Druze, mainly in Syria, Lebanon and Israel. Amongst their beliefs is an understanding that they should not aspire for a state of their own but become faithful citizens of the country they are in. Israel's 120,000 Druze serve in the IDF. They do struggle with the moral dilemma of fighting their co-religionists who serve faithfully in the Lebanese or Syrian armies. The Druze have very strict rules over conversion. One can only be a Druze if both parents are Druze. This results in very few marriages taking place with someone who is not Druze.

### **The Baha'is and Alawites**

Another Twelver Shi'ite sect are the Bahais, a faith that developed in Shi'ite Iran. The Bahai faith was established by Baha'ulla who claimed that his teacher, the Bab, was a prophet similar to Jesus and Muhammad.

The faith has spread throughout the world, largely because they have teachings that appeal to modern Western spirituality, such as the equality of all people. Although their world centre is in Haifa, in Israel, they forbid Israelis from becoming members. People can choose to give up their Israeli citizenship and become members, or retain their Israeli citizenship and cease being Bahai. Their justification is that Israel is a holy land and therefore people can't belong to it or claim it. They are allowed to have 1,000 volunteers at any one time, and these come from all over the world.

The final Shi'ite sect is the Alawites, who largely live on the coast of Syria and ruled the country until the overthrow of Alawite Assad. They believe that Ali, the cousin of Muhammad and who is important to Shi'ites, was empowered with divine powers. They have absorbed elements of it into their version of Islam, ancient Greek religion, eastern religions, and Christianity.

Their story in Israel is curious. There is only one village, Ghajar, with a population of 3,000. After the Six Day War, when Israeli forces were clearing up military debris, a jeep full of soldiers was surprised to see a column of people coming towards them carrying white flags. The soldiers were puzzled as their information was that all Syrian villages captured on

the Golan Heights were under Israeli control. On questioning the people, they found they came from a village that wasn't on their maps, so they took control of it.

It was only later realised that this village was not in Israel or its occupied territories. The village lay on the meeting point of the Israeli, Lebanese, and Syrian borders. Israel had no claim to it, but it was disputed by the Syrians and Lebanese. Israel didn't want it and passed the question on to the Security Council. They could not agree on a satisfactory solution, proposing to split the village down the middle.

The villagers strongly rejected this as family members lived across the village. In protest, they wanted to become Israeli and were recognised as such when the Likud government in the 80s extended Israeli law to the Golan. Today, they serve in the IDF.

### **The Ahmadis and other Muslim Sunni groups**

There is one more sect, but this is a breakaway from Sunni Islam and today exists in large numbers in Pakistan. They are the Ahmadis. The Ahmadiyya believe that their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, is the prophesied Mahdi and Messiah. In Israel, they number some 2,200 individuals in the Kababir district of Haifa. They were founded when the second leader of the Ahmadies visited British Palestine in 1924. They first lived in the West Bank town of Nablus but later moved to Haifa. They are one of the only Ahmadiyya communities in the world that live within a land that has religious freedom.

There are a number of ethnic Muslim groups of people from other ethnicities brought it by the Turkish Empire, these include some 5,000 Circassians from the region between the Black and Caspian seas; some 5,000 Marsh Bedouin from southern Sudan, as well as others from Bosnia in the Balkans. In Galilee and the desert areas of southern Israel are also Bedouin. Many of these groups serve in the IDF.

## **CHRISTIANS IN ISRAEL**

### **Catholics and Orthodox Christians**

The third religious grouping is the Christians. They developed from the New Testament Church in the Greek Orthodox community of Byzantine Palestine and have survived since. With the entry of Catholicism, particularly in the Crusader period, tension and competition grew between the Orthodox and the Catholics. Foreign powers largely supported the Catholics, but local Muslim rulers preferred the Orthodox.

This competition between the Orthodox and Catholics took place in other countries, so for example, there are both an Armenian Orthodox and an Armenian Catholic denomination. Many of these Catholic groups agreed with various Popes that they would be autonomous of the Vatican but submit to the authority of the Pope. The largest of these, and numerically

the largest in Israel, are the Greek Catholics, but there are also Maronite (Lebanese) Catholics.

### **The Aramaic and Coptic Christians**

Two other branches developed in the early Church, the Syrian or Eastern (Nestorian) Church and the Copts in Egypt and Ethiopia. There is a community of Syrian Christians but refer themselves as Aramaic Christians and speak Aramaic. In recent years the Government has recognized them as having special status and they serve in the IDF. There are only a handful of Copts with 2-3 churches.

### **Protestants**

Protestants were essentially barred from the land until the early 19th century with the rise of British power.

The first mission to enter was the Church Mission to the Jews (CMJ), which was primarily interested in Jewish evangelism. The German Lutherans came in soon after and formed an alliance with the CMJ. They set up the diocese of Jerusalem with Bishop Solomon Alexander, a Jewish convert, as the first bishop.

According to the agreement, when Bishop Alexander died, a German Lutheran was to be appointed bishop, but CMJ reneged on the agreement, and the two churches went their own way. They soon agreed that to avoid competition between them, the Lutherans would focus on Jerusalem and the south of Jerusalem, whereas the Anglicans would have Jerusalem and the north of Jerusalem. As the north largely became part of Israel, there is an Anglican community in Israel, whereas the Lutherans primarily operated in Palestinian areas and are therefore unknown in Israel.

CMJ saw very few Jews come to faith, whereas a large number of Arabs did join and particularly during the British Mandate. Today the Anglican Church is the only recognized Protestant Church and is virtually exclusively Arab. Despite having emerged in 1948 as a strong entity, they have since weakened because of very high migration to western countries.

Later in the 19th century and into the 20th century, the Church of Scotland, the Southern Baptists from the USA, and the Scandinavian Lutherans established themselves. Others, like various Pentecostal groups, have since entered. In the last ten years, the Arab Evangelicals have 'forced' their sponsoring missions to hand over control and assets to them. Some 5,000 evangelicals are falling into several primary groups – Baptist, Open and Closed Brethren, Nazarenes and Apostolic Pentecostals.

## **THE MESSIANIC-EVANGELICAL COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE EDOT SYSTEM**

## **THE SYSTEM OF EDOT**

### **Edot**

Israel has continued the system developed by the Ottoman Empire in which people belong to a recognised community, or an 'Edah' in Israel. Every Israeli belongs to a recognised Edah, which is recognised by the Knesset, Israel's Parliament. The recognized Edot are the Orthodox Jewish Edah (that includes Reformed and Conservative Jews, and Messianic Jews); Muslim Sunni Eda (includes the Shi'ites, Alawites, and Ahmadiyya's); the Druze Edah; and various Christian Edot include the Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Maronites, Armenians, Syrian, and Anglican.

The Edot are responsible for the personal affairs of its members, including marriage, divorce, burial, and inheritance. Many issues also depend on the Edot. So, for example, a child would very rarely be fostered or adopted outside the Edah.

Membership is by birth or dependent on the rules of the Edah. Anyone can become a member of a Christian or Muslim Edah, but membership of the Druze Edah depends on both parents being Druze. There is no possibility of conversion. In Judaism, membership depends on the mother being Jewish or on an arduous process of conversion. Every Edah has its own governing structure and laws, and they have their own courts. The courts come under the court system and are supported by the Ministry of Justice. A person can appeal the decisions of the court of their Edah to the secular courts.

### **Personal experience of the Eda and inheritance**

When my father died, we found that the car was registered only in his name, and my mother couldn't sell it until the court decided that she was the one to inherit it. She had decided to return to Denmark and needed it sold. Being Protestant, I went to see the President of the Anglican court.

By law, the Anglican Edah represented all Protestants. Even though we were not Anglican and never had anything to do with it, we were legally members of the Anglican Edah. I knew the President of the Anglican court, and he called a meeting for the next morning, where the court decided my mother was to inherit the car. All I needed was to have faxes from my brothers stating that the three of us had no claim on the car.

### **Edot, Marriage and Divorce**

It is not possible to marry, in Israel, across Edot. It would require one member converting to the Edah of the other – nearly always wife to husbands. The wife also automatically assumes the husband's family name. Legally all Messianic Jewish weddings can only become legal when performed in front of a rabbi. There are no civil marriages. Divorce amongst Arab Christians is nearly unheard of.



In cases of divorce, this causes difficulties when one of the partners is not Israeli and they marry abroad. In these cases, the courts will only deal with the case based on the Edah the Israeli partner belongs to. In the Jewish Edah only the husband can grant divorce, Catholics can't divorce, and in the Muslim Edah, both husband and wife can divorce the other.

So, for example, if a Jewish husband refuses to grant his wife a divorce, he will be supported by his religious court, but when the wife appeals to the secular court, the court harasses him with prison sentences and fines until he changes his mind.

Sometimes this system breaks down. An Arab evangelical couple decided, once their children had grown up and left home, to divorce. To their surprise, they were informed they had never been married. The Baptist minister who had married them had done it without the appropriate authorisation and created his own wedding certificates. They had gone to the Ministry of Interior to register their marriage, but the officials hadn't checked the documentation properly and registered them as married. When the officials checked the documentation of their marriage in the divorce request, they discovered it had not legally taken place.

Everyone, and not least the Government, was embarrassed by this.

With the failure of this attempt, the Government decided to give certain churches the right to manage only marriages and in this be accountable directly to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. As part of this process the Evangelical Alliance was also given this authority.

## **THE MESSIANIC-EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY**

### **The Arab evangelicals attempt to become an Eda**

The Government then entered negotiations with the evangelical Arab congregations to recognise them as an Edah. With 5,000 members, this would normally be too small to be recognised as an Edah.

Negotiations went well until the Attorney General pointed out that an Edah was expected to have a recognised 'Head' and that the laws of the Edah, once approved by the Knesset, would override any internal rules of each denomination. This posed an insurmountable obstacle as, for example, the Brethren don't even have ordained pastors, far less have the equivalent of a bishop over them. Also, each of the evangelical denominations wanted to retain its identity and objected to merging into a new denomination.

### **Three 'Evangelical' Networks**

The believing community is divided into three branches: the Messianic movement, the evangelical Arabs, and the expatriates. Although each of some 200 Messianic congregations is independent, each can send representatives to the Conference of Congregational Elders that meets twice a year. This body has next to no powers but at times when serious issues have arisen, they have elected a working party to study the issue and make recommendations.

The Arab evangelicals are very focused on their Arab identity and do not accept non-Arab churches. They all belong to the Convention of Christian Churches, where they make decisions that apply to all.

The expatriates had set up the United Christian Council (UCCI) in Israel in 1956 when the expatriates were the dominant force. In time the Messianic and Arab evangelicals set up their own networks, leaving the UCCI. One of the UCCI's key objectives was to be recognized as an Edah. At the time the Anglicans were part of the UCCI but secretly negotiated an agreement with the Government to become the recognized Protestant Edah.

The UCCI joined the World Evangelical Alliance and changed its name to the Evangelical Alliance in Israel (EAI). They primarily deal with issues affecting expatriates and missions. Their status is now being challenged by the Arab evangelicals, who highlight the fact that the EAI is expatriate, whereas they are the only national evangelicals and should replace the EAI in the World Alliance. In doing so, they conveniently ignore the Messianic who are easily four times their number. Fortunately, the Messianic are not interested in joining the World Evangelicals.

### **A personal experience in Messianic Haifa**

In conclusion, I would like to share an experience I had. As part of my tour guides course, we were taken on a tour of Haifa. The guy who guided us emphasized how in planning a tour we had to have a theme with clear objectives.

He said he was going to focus on Messianic Haifa. I was surprised he was going to spend the day on the Messianic congregations in Haifa, but what he wanted to tell us was about the various sects that have a Messiah dimension. This too was surprising as Haifa is a secular city, and if one talks about the Holy Land and its Holy cities, the assumption is that it needed to be Jerusalem-centric. He then pointed out that many sects came to Haifa precisely because it was considered religiously irrelevant, and they could feel safer there.

### **Haifa Messianic movements**

We were first taken to two Druze villages on the outskirts of Haifa, and we then went to the Kababir neighbourhood and were introduced to the Ahmadiyya. From there to the Bahai Temple, then mention was made of the Messianic congregations.

He then told us that in the 19th century, the Arab Catholics used to go up to the Carmelite Church at Stella Maris, but when the German Protestants of the German Colonies arrived in the 1860s, they built their neighbourhood between the Arab Catholic community and the French Carmelite Church. This was also the period when the Germans and the French constantly fought each other in Europe.

The Germans therefore blocked the road to Catholics. The Germans had their summer houses up on Mount Carmel and had to use the only road that ran past the Carmelite French. The French in revenge blocked the way for the Germans to reach their summer homes. The Germans have long since disappeared. They were deported by Britain to Australia during the Second World War.

Then in conclusion he said there was another Messianic movement, Zionism. He told us that Hertzels first book was a novel on an imaginary future city in Israel that was built on a mountain by the sea, had electric lighting, and had an underground. Although he had never been to Haifa, and when he wrote the book Haifa was only just emerging from the Middle Ages and yet his description is exactly that of Haifa. Hertzels is considered the father of modern Zionism, and Haifa did become a bastion of Zionism but is also the most integrated city of Jews and Arabs.