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The Israeli Scene

Israel's economy continues to flourish, although the cost of living continues to rise and the Israeli Shekel remains strong against most world currencies. A lite (quart) of gasoline now costs US\$2.07 (equaling US\$8.28 per gallon), electricity is slated to rise incrementally by 30% in the next 12 months and food prices are rising at least as much as everywhere else in the world.

Protests against social injustice have stalled during the winter months, but last year's protest organizers have said that they are preparing for the summer, especially in light of the fact that most of the protest's putative gains were eroded by Government committees and determined Government opposition.

Vocal concern over Orthodox incursion into civic liberties has also died down, while bills have been presented that would legislate compulsory national service for all citizens and efforts are being made to include the Orthodox in the nation's productive workforce. The latter efforts are generally resisted by the Rabbis and by the Orthodox establishment for fear that exposure to everyday life would weaken religious commitment. Many buses, sidewalks, lines in the bank and at the supermarket continue to be segregated. The military are also mulling ways to secure the role of women without imposing on what it considers to be the inordinate sensitivities of some of the orthodox enlistees.

Paradoxically, the Israeli Government, presently led by Benjamin Netanyahu, considered the weakest of all Israeli Prime Ministers, is one of the most stable. Formed by a broad coalition of small and smaller parties, five in all, supported from the outside by a sixth, none of them dare challenge the unity of the Government lest they be weakened at the next elections. Three of these are extreme right wing (Shas, Israel Beiteinu and HaBait HaYehudi), three or Orthodox (Shas, HaBait HaYehudi, Agidat Israel). Netanyahu's Likud is the more moderate of the parties in power, but is steadily

drifting toward the fringe and Netanyahu's leadership is consistently challenged from within the party by those who would take it further to the right.

There is a lull in activity directed at local Jewish Christian congregations, and these seem to be flourishing. An increasing number of young people from the congregations are becoming part of the fabric of Israeli society. Young men and women are earning a reputation of being excellent soldiers: moral, humble, reliable and gracious, with an increasing number serving in crack units and openly professing their faith. Others are setting up successful businesses, gaining a reputation in the professional field and winning respect for their family values. There is, to date, no significant Gospel impact on society as a whole, but pocket of influence are growing; the process bodes well for the future.

The Middle East

Egypt – The Role of the Military

The Egyptian army continues to control the interim Government set up at the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Protests are calling for the army to concede power to civilians, but the army is reticent to do so. The implications for the Egyptian military would be considerable: it is difficult to obtain concrete information on the extent and holdings of the army's business activity.

The armed forces have portrayed themselves and the government generally as. That is certainly of the Egyptian Government, but the army is in a much better financial position. In December 2011, the military loaned the central bank (!!) \$1 billion to help support the sagging Egyptian Pound. Amr Hamzawy, a political analyst and newly elected Member of Parliament, estimates that the military controls as much as a third of Egypt's economy. Paul Sullivan, a US National Defense University professor and expert on Egypt's military, told Time magazine last year that the military accounts for some 10% to 15% of the economy. Mohamed Kadry Said, a retired general and a military analyst for the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, puts the figure at 8% of gross domestic product. In Egypt's \$180 billion economy, the annual turnover of "The Egyptian Army Inc." is more than \$14 billion.

The army's efforts to preserve its business interests are likely to be a major barrier to any move in the direction of democracy, as the army is resistant toward transparency and any step that might threaten its' economic clout. Many doubt the generals will ever agree to relinquish power, except under pressure. Mohamed ElBaradei, who dropped out of the presidential race, was quoted as saying he saw no hope that elections will bring an end to military rule.

"They use their businesses to maintain their power now more than ever. They own restaurants and tourism companies, so for the leadership today, stability and crushing the opposition to their rule is paramount to maintaining their wealth,"

Ahmed, a former general who asked that his name not be used, told The Media Line. The military in Egypt "has a long history of running business, and they are stronger economically than any other institution in the country," he said. "Don't be fooled by their power, it is now political and economic and they like it this way."

The reach of the military's influence extends far beyond its financial holdings through a vast network of retired officers who have moved into important positions in

government and the industry. “Retirement here in Egypt from the military is never final,” the general said.

According to Jane’s, the Egyptian military’s budget is some \$5 billion annually, supplemented by \$1.3 billion of American financial aid— far more than the country receive in economic assistance - as well as more in the form of budgets for joint training and excess military hardware. Ahmed believes the army’s spending is much higher, thanks to revenues from its extensive business enterprises.

The armed forces own and run much of the food industry, including the manufacture of olive oil, milk, bread and bottled water – all of which are subsidized by the government, which the military now controls. The forces also run cement factories, gas stations and refineries, clothing and kitchen facilities, vehicle production factories – one local newspaper reported the military is in partnership with Jeep to produce Cherokees and Wranglers – as well as resorts and hotels.

These industries, says economic analyst Gamal Abdel-Salam of CS Securities in Cairo, lead to a conflict of interest. “The military runs these companies, factories and tourist destination spots, and now is in charge of the government, so it means they are giving money out and supporting industry that in essence they are already in charge of,” he said. Military businesses are free from government oversight and are not required to pay taxes, which Abdel-Salam said means that the government is increasingly impoverished while “the military and its leaders are becoming wealthier. Why would they want to leave power?”

Yussif, a shopkeeper, said the military controls all aspects of society, including the everyday function of businesses. Before, there were places that they couldn’t get to and didn’t control, but now, if you argue or fight for your rights, they arrest and charge you with crimes against the government,” he said. “I don’t like it. My friends don’t like it.” He recounts the story of a fellow shop owner who was sent to jail because he refused to continue paying the officer a share of the profits. “It had been 10 years and their contract had run its term,” said Yussif. “We live in a tough time.”

Syria – Presently in Power

An aspect of present unrest in Syria is the product of the fact that the majority of the population belongs to Sunni Islam, whereas the 12% minority of Alawis control the country through key military and governmental positions, and a disproportionate share in the educational resources of the country. This also explains the close ties between the present Syrian regime and Shi’it Iran and Hezbollah, as well as (Sunni) El Qaida’s support of the uprising. The following is a brief survey of the beliefs and history of the Alawis, and of their rise to power. Our main source of information is Daniel Pipes’ excellent article in <http://www.danielpipes.org/191/the-alawi-capture-of-power-in-syria> , to whom credit is due.

Historical Background

The Alawis number some 1.3 million, of which about a million live in Syria, primarily in Latakia, in the northwest of Syria. In the past, the Alawis sought separate identity within or apart from Syria. The name, “Alawi” suggests an adherent of 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and accentuates Alawism’s similarities to Shi'i Islam.

Alawi doctrine dates from the ninth century A.D. and derives from the Imami branch of Shi'i Islam. Around A.D. 859, Ibn Nusayr declared himself the *bab* ("gateway to truth"), a key figure in Shi'i theology and proclaimed a host of new doctrines which make 'Alawism a separate religion. Muslims proclaim their faith with the phrase "There is no deity but God and Muhammad is His prophet," whereas Alawis assert "There is no deity but 'Ali, no veil but Muhammad, and no *bab* but Salman." Alawis reject Islam's main tenets. Wine drinking has a sacred role in 'Alawism, for it represents God. The religion holds 'Ali, the fourth caliph, to be the incarnation of divinity. It has a holy trinity, consisting of Muhammad, 'Ali, and Salman al-Farisi, a freed slave of Muhammad's.

Alawis celebrate many Christian festivals, including Christmas, New Year's, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, and Palm Sunday. They honor many Christian saints: St. Catherine, St. Barbara, St. George, St. John the Baptist, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Mary Magdalene. The Arabic equivalents of such Christian personal names as Gabriel, John, Matthew, Catherine, and Helen, are in common use.

The specifics of the Alawi faith are hidden even from the majority of Alawis. Only males born of two 'Alawi parents may learn the some of the religious doctrines at 16-20 years of age; other mysteries are divulged gradually. Religious secrecy is strictly maintained, on pain of death and being incarnated into a vile animal. Women are expected to do most of the hard and are never inducted into the mysteries; their uncleanness requires exclusion from all religious rituals. Females are thought to have no souls.

Alawis reject Islam's sacred law, the Shari'a, ignore Islamic sanitary practices, dietary restrictions, sexual mores, and religious rituals. They pay little attention to fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage. All dictated by Islam; pilgrimage to Mecca is viewed as a form of idol worship. Alawis have no prayers or places of worship and no religious structures other than tomb shrines (Alawism has a history of firm opposition to the use of mosques). Prayers take place in private houses.

Alawi life follows its own rhythms, radically different from the Muslims. In fact, Alawis have never been Muslims and are not to be considered such now, although they have always wanted to be considered Muslim. Alawis practice *taqiya* (religious dissimulation). For example, they will pray with Sunni Muslims but silently curse the Sunni caliphs. Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani explains: "They take on the outward practices of all sects. If they meet [Sunni] Muslims, they swear, "We are like you; we fast and pray." But they fast improperly. If they enter a mosque with Muslims, they do not recite the prayers but lower and raise their bodies like the Muslims, while cursing Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and other [major figures of the Sunni tradition]."

Mainstream Muslims, Sunni and Shi'i alike, traditionally disregard 'Alawi efforts at dissimulation and view 'Alawis as beyond the pale of Islam. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the Thomas Aquinas of Islam, wrote that the 'Alawis "apostatize in matters of blood, money, marriage, and butchering, so it is a duty to kill them."

As Christian missionaries began to take an interest in the Alawis toward the end of the 19th century, Ottoman authorities tried to bring them into Islam: they built mosques in the 'Alawi areas, built schools to teach Islam, pressured 'Alawi religious leaders to adopt Sunni practices, and generally tried to make the Alawis act like Muslims

– with little impact. Centuries of hostility took their toll on the 'Alawi psyche. In addition to praying for the damnation of their Sunni enemies, Alawis acquired a reputation as fierce and unruly mountain people who resisted paying taxes and frequently plundered Sunni villagers on the plains.

Alawi Ascendancy

In 1920 the Alawis were a lowly minority; by 1970, they ruled Syria. It all began with Alawi support of the French Mandate in Syria and their efforts against the (Sunni) Ottoman authorities during the First World War. Once the French were ensconced in Syria, they promoted Alawis to prominent government and military positions, assisted their educational and commercial enterprises and promoted their cultural ascendancy. In return, the Alawis supported the French and assisted the quelling of rebellions on the part of the majority of the population. Needless to say, this hardly added to the Alawi's popularity.

The French mandate ended in 1940, and the majority Sunnis came to power. The Alawis recognized the military and the Ba'ath party as vehicles of social and national ascendancy, and enlisted in droves. Under French rule, they had already become a significant part of the military. The Sunnis' on the other hand, despised and feared the military, fearing it would become a power in the political life of the country. Repeated coups, led by senior Sunni military officers depleted their ranks and made room for the rise of Alawis, who functioned in tandem while Sunni officers served as individuals.

At the same time, the Alawis invested themselves into the Ba'ath party, which always had a special appeal to minorities in their respective countries. Here too, the Alawis functioned as a coherent group, steadily arising in rank until they became the dominant force. Finally, in 1970, following a coup designed to pre-empt a government coup that would have purged senior Alawi officers from the military, and some Alawi infighting, Hafiz ibn 'Ali ibn Sulayman al- Wahsh (Hafiz Asad, formerly long-time President of Syria, father of the present President) gained control, entrenched Alawi ascendancy and brought an end to Alawi factionalism. Hafiz changed his name from El-Wahsh ("the wild animal") to El-Asad ("the lion").

Hafiz El-Asad ruled Syria with an iron hand. Alawi control finds its main opposition in the Muslim Brotherhood, although most Syrians describe themselves as "Muslim secularists". Hama is a city in west-north Syria, just north of Damascus, and a stronghold of conservative, Sunni Islam in the country. In 1982, in response to a revolt, the Alawi-led Syrian army conducted a merciless scorched earth operation. Most of the city was razed and between 10,000 to 20,000 residents killed. Some put the number as high as 40,000. The operation was described as one of the "deadliest attacks by any Arab Government against its own people in the modern Middle East" (Wright, Robin. 2008. *Dreams and Shadows: the Future of the Middle East*. Penguin, pp. 243-244).

Upon Hafiz El-Asad's demise, his son, Bashar El-Asad was appointed President, while the previous Government remained in power. This is the Government against which the majority of the Syrian people are now revolting. Shi'it Iran naturally support the Alawi regime, while Sunni Saudi, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf Emirates oppose. Iraq, torn between its Shi'ite and Sunni factions, is sitting on the fence.

Baruch's Biography

(continued)

The Maoz family moved to Rehovot, where CWI provided a flat designed to provide housing, office space and ample room for the fledgling church. In this way, CWI reaffirmed its commitment to and sacrifice for the growth of a local church that affirmed the doctrines of grace. The Orthodox community launched an ineffective campaign designed to drive the Maozs out of town, providing further opportunity for the Gospel.

The Intercongregational Fellowship

The evangelistic agency, Jews for Jesus (JFJ), decided to look into commencing a ministry in Israel. Part of the process involved sending an industrial psychologist to assess Israeli Jewish-Christian leaders. Findings indicated that the scene was a confusing mosaic of conflicts, personalities, fears, hurts and aspirations. Moishe Rosen, then leading JFJ, decided to initiate a gathering of leaders in the hope that they would discover common grounds on which to relate to one another. I was asked to be responsible for organizing this and was glad to do so.

Premeditatedly, my role was kept at a low profile. I reserved a local Christian conference center for the purpose, composed the letter of invitation, the list of invitees and the program. The invitations were sent out by JFJ and, during the gathering, JFJ representatives led the formal conversation. Local Israeli Christian leaders, some of whom who had not met for years, found themselves together. Tensions were high and interest – personal and organizational – were obvious. These were carefully restrained while attendees were invited to introduce themselves and describe their ministries, concerns and aspirations. Opportunities for fellowship laid the ground for some instances of reconciliation, some recriminations and plenty of airing of differences and shared concerns.

As we drew near to the close of the gathering, I told Murdo that I decided to continue the impetus created. At the closing meeting, open discussion was held. I proposed that we labor together for such a continuation and suggested that three of us – Paul Swarr, David Stern and myself – be asked to meet and forge the way ahead. We three were a careful balance between the various factions of the local church. My proposal was adopted, with Paul and David agreeing to fulfill the role proposed. I asked the two to meet me immediately following the gathering, at which time we determined a time and place to meet for further extensive discussion.

We met as planned. I had prepared an outline of a proposed course of action: we would form an inter-congregational Forum of all professedly evangelical congregations in which Hebrew was the common language and which belonged to a list we drew up. David wanted us to include Jewish-Catholic congregations, but I opposed the idea: shared doctrinal convictions were by far to be valued over shared national background. My opposition carried.

At the first meeting of the Forum, an Organizing Committee would be elected, authorized to organize and lead periodic forums, but no more. The forum was to be called The Inter-Congregational Fellowship of Hebrew Speaking Congregations, to which officers of the various congregations would be invited. Early in the history of the

Fellowship, I proposed that we drop the linguistic distinction and that Arabic-speaking congregations be invited. After all, we were one in Christ with our Arab brethren regardless of the cultural and linguistic differences. To my sorrow, the proposal was firmly rejected. I deeply regret having proposed that linguistic distinction at the outset. It was a mistake that remains with us to this very day, and I bear most of the responsibility for not thinking of this at the outset.

At the first meeting of the forum, our proposals were adopted and an Organizing Committee was formed. I continued to serve on that Committee, in fellowship with others, for over a decade.

At one stage, the Committee was authorized to propose an organizational structure that would enable the Fellowship to become a more meaningfully practical expression of our shared faith and fate. We devoted months of careful study, prayer and thought to the proposals we were to bring. The result was a relatively loose structure, with a broad but coherent confessional basis, a Moderator void of executive powers, a General Assembly in which limited authority was to be vested, and a incorporated body of independent local congregations.

The Fellowship met on alternate months for a period of over two years to discuss these proposals. The Statement of Faith, and the Rules of Membership and Procedure framed by the Committee were discussed, dissected and incrementally adopted. At the end of the process, after every point had been approved, I made a grievous mistake: I proposed that we throw the next meeting open to all congregations, including those that had declined to attend until that time. I further proposed that to we submit the adopted Statement and Rules to ratification of all participating congregations.

The following meeting of the Fellowship was extremely well attended. Among the attendees were representatives of congregations that had declined to attend a single meeting prior to that day, and who attended that gathering with a clear agenda. When the Statement and Rules were submitted for ratification, there was a hue and a cry, especially from those who had attended for the first time. We are, it was said, in danger of being taken over by a dictatorship: "before we realize what had happened, we will all be required to sign on a dotted line and submit to foreign interests". Most of such claims were being made by the more obviously dictatorial among us. As I saw it, their concern was not so much with dictatorship, but with the fact that they would not be the ones to dictate! The Statement and Rules were rejected.

Since then, the Fellowship has continued, with the Organizing Committee incrementally assuming increased authority and broadening its mandate, usually without discussion or ratification by the Fellowship. In the course of time, a National Evangelistic Committee was formed, ostensibly subject to the Inter-congregational Fellowship but in fact operating independently.

The Statement of Faith was adopted at a much later date, under very different circumstances, but I will reserve that part of the story for the appropriate time.

Other Initiatives

One of my concerns has always been the laying of thoughtful, well-grounded, biblical foundation for our efforts in Christ. The evangelization of the Jewish people is one area in such undergirding seemed to be required. I had contemplated the possibility of an

international theological and historical journal devoted to the study of Jewish evangelism. I approached friends with the idea that we initiate such a journal, and that the journal be produced under the auspices of the Caspari Institute. We agreed, and the first issue of *Mishkan*, and International Theological Forum on Jewish Evangelism was produced in 1984. It later was transferred to the oversight of the United Christian Council in Israel (UCCI) and is now produced by the Pasche Institute of Jewish Studies.

A good friend, Ole Christian Kvarme, of the Norwegian Mission to the Jews, shared my concern for biblical and theological reflection. He approached me with the idea of commencing a Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program in Hebrew. A committee was formed. I contributed two books – *How to Study the Scriptures*, and *The Gospel of Luke* --- and HaGefen became the publisher for the Israel TEE (Telem, in Hebrew, an acronym for “Program for Christian education”). For the next five or six years, I traversed the country two or three times a week, teaching TEE courses while busy at the church and with HaGefen Publishing.

The United Bible Society in Israel decided to produce an annotated NT, with historic and cultural (non-interpretive) background notes. I was invited to join others to create and edit the annotations – a project that took some four years of strenuous work, during which I learned more than I contributed. I also became increasingly conscious of weaknesses in the Modern Hebrew translation of the NT we had created some years back.

In 1977, a bill was presented to the Knesset, ostensibly aimed at inhibiting evangelism. Orthodox Jews had insisted for years that Christians took advantage of straitened emotional and economic circumstances in their efforts to persuade people to convert. With a view to reducing missionaries’ liberty to act in such an unworthy manner, the bill proposed outlawing the offering of emotional, social or economic advantages in exchange for conversion.

Needless to say, the Christian community did not oppose the law itself – there was firm Christian opposition to any such abuse of human dignity and of the Gospel. But the passing of the bill involved crediting false rumors and thereby substantiating a grievous charge against the Christian church. It also opened a wide door for the Orthodox to harass Christians under the false charge that they had transgressed the law, or even to entrap Christians under false pretenses. The United Christian Council in Israel (UCCI) spearheaded opposition to the bill, and I joined arms with the UCCI in this important matter. We met with the Minister of judicial Affairs and with the Attorney General, professor Aaron Barak (later President of Israel’s Supreme Court). We also met with the ambassadors of various countries and sought their support, with Knesset committees, various Knesset Members and other influential individuals. We appealed to them all to work for the rejection of the proposed law.

Political circumstances were such that the bill inevitably passed. However, our contacts with the Attorney General led to him effectively emasculating the law by ordering that no investigation be conducted unless approved in advance by the AG. That order has never been rescinded. As a result, no investigations have been conducted nor charges laid against anyone in accordance with that shameful law.

To be continued

Ministry and Family News

I am pleased to be able to say that, for the first time in years, we have **met our budget requirements**, hiring of office help excluded. Assuming all commitments are met in the course of the year, we will not need to draw on our pension savings to maintain the ministry. In light of the economic circumstances under which we must all now function, this is remarkable. A sincere thanks is due to all of you, who stand with us, and have undertaken to support us, and hearty praise to God. Rather than buttressing our depleted pension resources, Bracha and I have decided to devote any further income toward **hiring office help** than would render my work more productive by releasing me from administrative duties and research, and assist in translating my books into English.

Work on my **thesis** is a little bit ahead of schedule. We expect preparations for the **summer trip to the US** to put us back on schedule. Baruch has been invited to teach seminars on Malachi, Romans and Galatians, present a paper to a Symposium on Messianic Judaism and address a Founders Movement annual Founders Conference on the subject of missions. Very few windows remain for ministry in the US. If you or your church is interested in inviting Baruch, please write as soon as possible, as each of these few windows is fast filling up.

We hope to have a short family reunion in Texas, where I have been invited to address the **Founders Movement regional conference**.

This year promises to be busy. **Shlomit is expected to give birth** to her second child in late February or early March. Bracha plans on being with her to help with the house and with Yonatan as of February 24th, and to return to Israel on May 1st. **The Erez family** (Avital, Eran and their three children) hope to visit Israel for six weeks as of June 13th, and the Maozs to **depart for the US** four days after they return to the US.

Snow and ice in the Seattle area occasioned an **accident while Marcus was driving to work**. The car was totaled but he was not hurt. Happily, Tamar and the children were not with him. They have purchased a replacement. **Yotam** now attends day school twice a week. **Avishai** has learned to walk and is fast learning to talk.

Rose completed her military service and is working hard with a view to putting as much aside as she can. She and a friend are hoping to find an *au pair* position in a Christian context in the US. Her father has not so much as called to congratulate her on completing her military service and show interest in her plans for the future.

You can help us by 1. writing a review of my book on Malachi on the Amazon website, 2. recommending it to others, 3. using it for your devotions or Church Bible Study group and 4. asking for it at your Christian local bookshop.

TAX-deductable **support for our ministry** should be written to the order of **Berean Baptist church, P.O. Box 1233, Grand Blanc, Michigan 48480-3233**. Direct bank transfers may be made to **Franklin Bank, 24725 West Twelve Mile Road, Southfield, MI 48034 USA, Routing Number 241271957 Berean Baptist Special Account No. 567495976**. Please inform **Max Sharp** of the details of the transaction (date, transaction number and sum) at maxsharp@earthlink.net

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Please do not send contributions directly to us – we consider accountability extremely important.

Funds sent for the ministry will be used exclusively for that purpose.
We reserve the right to use for the ministry funds sent for personal use.