

MIDDLE EAST

Aiming at eliminating each other makes Israeli Palestinian peace impossible

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While hopes for a real cease-fire - apart from the brief pauses to allow polio vaccination in Gaza - are being buried by acts of terrorism (the killing of six more hostages by Hamas) and the annexation warfare (see the Israeli operation in the West Bank), the

fundamental knot that prevents any step forward towards a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be tackled once and for all.

And it is a knot that comes before any possible political and institutional arrangement or any territorial agreement. What should be clearly stated and accepted by the parties involved is the recognition of the other's right to exist. To think that the world is better without people we do not like or without opposing parties or without certain irritating peoples is a common temptation. But in the case of Israel and the Palestinians - or at least most of the time - it is a deeply ingrained belief that prevents any serious discourse to find not only a permanent solution but also a temporary arrangement.

Recognising the other, his right to exist: this is a concept that for those of us who are Catholics should be taken for granted - Christ came for the salvation of everyone, not just for those who seem to us to be the 'good guys' - and yet it is clearly not.

But it is exactly the same reality that proves that it is not an abstract religious principle, but a profound reality: how can I expect someone else to trust me when it is clear that my ultimate goal is to eliminate them, or at least get them out of my sight?

This is exactly the problem that lies beneath all other reasons for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a well-known fact that in Palestinian schools (which are also financed by the European Union) geography is taught that does not include the existence of the state of Israel. And the same is true in Iran and wherever the cause of the Palestine 'from the river to the sea' is supported, a slogan that also forms the background to all the pro-Palestinian demonstrations that have been characterising the West for months. And Hamas' charter maintains that objective.

On the other hand, for the Israeli side, the objective though disguised is no less real. The offensive in Gaza certainly has the immediate aim of destroying Hamas, but in the name of security, it would like to move the entire Palestinian population elsewhere, an attempt so far blocked by Egypt's refusal to open the border and accept another mega refugee camp in Sinai. And the offensive in the West Bank, a development of the settlement policy, is clearly an attempt to annex the entire Palestinian territory, perhaps thinking in this way to put the international community in front of a fait accompli.

Of course, there is a difference: while among Palestinians the consensus for Hamas is massive - and the current war has even reinforced it - in Israel the situation is much more varied. Evidence of this are the anti-government demonstrations that have been

going on for months through the main Israeli cities, and which are increasing week after week, and after the finding of the six murdered hostages are turning into a general strike. The fact is, however, that for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the war has become a sort of insurance for his political life, and he is pushed further by the extremism of the ultra-religious right, whose votes are necessary for the survival of the government.

All possible distinctions, however, do not affect the basic issue: Israel must be recognised as having the right to exist where it is - and let us remember that it is there by virtue of UN Resolution 181/1947 - just as the Palestinians must be recognised as having the right to live in their land.

If we do not start from here, if we do not address this knot, everything else is wasted time.