

HOLY LAND

Cardinal Pizzaballa challenges clichés on Middle East conflict

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The two-state solution, one Palestinian and the other Israeli, 'is not realistic now'. Words of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa pronounced in an interview with the American Catholic television station EWTN. It is the judgement that

obviously made the most headlines in the news, but Pizzaballa made several other equally interesting points in the interview about the Middle East conflict, which deserve to be well pondered.

Let us begin with these. First of all the observation that this is the worst period experienced in 35 years of his presence in the Middle East. Not so much for the violence of the war itself, since it is certainly nothing new, 'the emotional impact on the population, Israelis and Palestinians, and now in Lebanon, which is enormous; and power of violence, the language of hatred that you breath and find everywhere. This is terrible'. This is not the first time the Patriarch has highlighted this factor, he had also done so in [his letter to his diocese on 26 September](#) last, noting the existence of 'a vortex of violence and hatred never seen and experienced before'. It is a deep-seated hatred that is destroying any possibility of social relations between Israelis and Palestinians that before 7 October 2023, despite a thousand tensions, resisted. And in fact Cardinal Pizzaballa explains his 'concern' in the interview 'not so much about the war - war sooner or later will finish like all wars - but for what it will be after, the consequences will be terrible'.

The hatred between people, is a factor that is always underestimated but which constitutes a decisive element that cuts at the root any illusion of peace. And indeed Pizzaballa sweeps away any rhetoric: 'Now it is not realistic to talk about peace', because 'peace is an attitude, not just an agreement'. And if everyone's hearts are full of hatred, there is no room for peace.

What then is there to be hoped for? Today 'first of all we have to talk about a ceasefire: to stop any kind of violence; to find also new leadership with political vision, also religious leaders. Then you can start thinking about a new perspective for Middle East, not before' Pizzaballa replies.

So here is another important step as a way forward for any long-term solution.

What is needed is at least a cease-fire that paves the way for a change of leadership in politics and also in religious groups. Today, one must note the absence of any leader who 'has a vision', i.e. who really has a political and religious perspective that can lead to stability in the region. It is easy to find confirmation of this statement by the Patriarch: if one looks at the various leaders in the region, but also internationally, it is evident that they oscillate between the desire to annihilate the enemy and the re-proposition of old formulas that are empty rhetoric, devoid of any real meaning. Pizzaballa speaks of the need for 'a new language', but this will only be possible if 'there are new people, new names, new faces'.

A new language and also new solutions: 'You need something new, creative, I don't know what. But all the previous agreements, ideas, perspectives of two-state solution, everything is not realistic now'.

And here too Cardinal Pizzaballa has the merit of dismantling those trite and repetitive formulas that the more they are repeated the more they demonstrate the detachment from reality of those who pronounce them. Vatican Secretary of State included: even recently [Cardinal Pietro Parolin, speaking at the UN General Assembly](#), relaunched as 'the only possible solution' the creation of 'two States with a special status for Jerusalem'.

Not only should it always be remembered that what was at the origin of the war (i.e. UN Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947 that established the creation of two states) can hardly be its solution, especially in the conditions that have matured since then; but there is also the fact that today a situation has been created on the ground that makes it unworkable. How is it possible to define borders when there are hundreds of Jewish settlers' settlements in the West Bank? And when there are other groups of settlers, backed by members of the Israeli government, who also plan to occupy Gaza?

The Patriarch of Jerusalem points to a key criterion: 'Violence in language, in attitude, the rejection of the other is not a solution. Palestinians and Israelis are called by God to live one closed to another, not against the other'. It is a criterion that seems to accord better with the solution of a single state for Jews and Arabs, which the Catholic bishops of the Holy Land (including Pizzaballa) had already evoked in a [statement in 2019](#), and which other Catholic scholars have recently re-proposed, as [Sandro Magister pointed out in his blog](#).

Pizzaballa, above all, does not enter into possible political solutions, he says

explicitly that this is not the Church's task and that, indeed, the Church must stay well away from the temptation to somehow enter into negotiations between political parties: 'I do not believe that the Church should enter into this sphere, political solutions are up to politicians, the Church must support the hope of the people. It must point the way to the conversion of hearts, which is the only one that leads to peace. And remember that 'the answer to violence and evil is the Cross', as the Patriarch told his faithful in the Holy Land.