

MIDDLE EAST

Gaza, why Israel's response is 'disproportionate'

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On 22 March, with the same calm courage that has always distinguished him, the Patriarch of Jerusalem called on the West to take action to put an end to the tragedy in Gaza, describing the Israeli response to the 7 October massacres as disproportionate. It was a courageous move, because Cardinal Pizzaballa knows very well that he will be severely challenged for his stance. On 14 February, the Secretary of State, Cardinal

Parolin had ventured to express the same message. "I agree with what Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin said," Cardinal Pizzaballa stated, "it is a disproportionate response. At the time, he was strongly contested, with harsh, severe reactions: the problem is that everyone wants everyone to be enlisted to one narrative against the other, a line that the Church absolutely cannot follow. One of the main difficulties we encounter is precisely to make people understand that the Church has its own narrative, its own way of expressing itself, a language that aims always and only at peace'.

On that occasion, the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See had defined Parolin's statements as "deplorable", but then corrected himself with the term "unfortunate"; a laughable correction insofar as it didn't make sense. And that's not all. The aforementioned ambassador even exonerated Israel by blaming the West, stating that while three civilians lost their lives for every Hamas militant killed," during NATO operations in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, the rate was 9 or 10 civilians for every terrorist. Thus, the IDF's (the Israeli army's) rate of avoiding civilian deaths is approximately 3 times higher, despite the fact that the battlefield in Gaza is much more complicated'. Which is nonsense [according to the data](#). In Afghanistan, 52 thousand insurgents and 46 thousand civilians were killed, but at least half of these were victims of Taliban attacks. In Syria, out of 95 thousand civilian victims, 13 thousand are attributable to Western strikes, since the Russians have been much more active in Aleppo. As for Iraq, we recommend consulting [Iraq Body Count](#). Out of 120 thousand civilians killed (from 2003 to 2011), 15 thousand are attributable to US-led coalition actions. All others are attributable to terrorist attacks and, to a large extent, banditry. 39 thousand insurgents were eliminated.

Therefore, the West, which backs the Israeli government to the hilt, has received this grateful response in return. And, on the other hand, given the difficulties and isolation in which Israel finds itself at the moment, one could hardly expect anything else. Criticising the Israeli government has become an extreme sport, like bungee jumping or parkour; it doesn't take much to be called anti-Semitic, and not only by the Israeli government, but also by the press, lined up and as if in a parade ground. And this also has to be premised, every time, that the massacre of 1,200 Jews of all ages and sexes was committed by bloodthirsty subhumans and that a state has the right to defend itself and ensure that similar massacres do not happen. Yes it does, but at what price? And to what limit?

Let us then explain by turning to history and numbers, trying to understand why

Cardinal Parolin and then Pizzaballa said that ugly word: 'disproportionate'. In the 1948 war of independence, Israel managed to resist against all odds with the loss of 6,000 lives against that of 20,000 Arabs. In 1967 with an entirely justifiable pre-emptive strike, Israel inflicted a resounding defeat on the Arabs with almost 1,000 Israeli and 18,000 Arab deaths. The Yom Kippur campaign in 1973 proved much more difficult resulting in 2,800 Israeli deaths and 18,000 Arabs. After the Lebanon campaign (654 Israeli deaths from 1982 to 1985) there are at least four military campaigns against Gaza in 2008, 2014 and 2021 with 98 Israeli deaths (almost all military) and 3,900 Palestinian deaths (mostly civilians).

The deaths inflicted on all Arab nations in the Arab-Israeli wars alone over seventy-five years can be calculated to be at least 70 thousand. While the latest figures for the Gaza battle, ongoing since 7 October 2023, report, as of today 23 March 2023, 32,000 Palestinians killed of whom 13 thousand militiamen (according to the Israeli government) with 74,000 wounded and 8,000 missing, probably still buried under the rubble. All this in less than seven months. And to this must be added at least 442 Palestinians killed in the West Bank by the army and settlers.

What must be noted, unfortunately, is that the values that characterised Israeli society in the past, despite being a nation at war and defending itself with great toughness, are no longer there. The practice of Free Fire adopted by the Israeli army in recent months is no longer what it was in the 1970s and 1980s, not even when it comes to saving the lives of its own citizens, which, for a Golda Meir, was sacred even though she did not make deals with terrorists. Three Israeli hostages were mistakenly killed by their own army on 16 December, and so was the Israeli lawyer Yuval Doron Kastelman who had heroically defended civilians against Palestinian terrorists in Jerusalem on 1 December. In vain, Kastelman had thrown down his gun proclaiming that he was Jewish. He was ruthlessly shot down according to a practice that reflects the substantial impunity enjoyed by the Israeli military today. And Nethanyau's comment was 'That's life. Accidents happen', arousing the ire of former General Benny Gantz.

An appropriate symbol of this barbarism is Minister May Golan who said 'I am personally proud of the rubble in Gaza and that every Palestinian child, even 80 years from now, will be able to tell their grandchildren what the Jews did'. Add to this the indiscriminate and unpunished looting of Palestinian homes as reported by an [independent Israeli newspaper](#). And we must add yet another massacre on 29 February where the Israeli army fired on the crowd desperately trying to get foodstuffs so as not to starve. It will be the autopsies that will tell how many of the 104 victims were killed by

the bullets or by the stampede, but it must be pointed out right away that the 'incident' is the outcome of the ruthless conduct adopted by the Israeli government during these five months of war.

History has run its course. As *The New Auschwitz* lyrics state in an old, prophetic song, 'it is not possible to be like them/it is not difficult to be like them'. Yet the flame of hope has not been extinguished in Israel. There are **Jewish activists who defend the Palestinians** from the violence of the settlers and the army; the daily Haaretz and with it other independent newspapers resist the sovereignist and authoritarian drift of Nethanyau's 'democratisation' and strongly stigmatise those who, in the name of Jewish solidarity, end up aligning themselves with the most extreme right-wing. The Israeli director **Yuval Abraham won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival** with a documentary on the oppression of Palestinians in the West Bank and, for this, he is accused of anti-Semitism while he is only anti-fascist on whatever side and of whatever colour the new fascism is. Israel is in danger of losing its soul as **Aluf Benn wrote** in a magnificent essay in *Foreign Affairs*.

In his essay, Benn recalled the funeral speech he gave in memory of young Roi Rotberg, who was maimed and murdered by Palestinians in 1956. 'Let us not blame the murderers. For eight years they lived in the Gaza refugee camps and before their eyes we transferred the lands and villages where they and their fathers lived into our property'. The person who said these words was not anti-Semitic, nor was he denying Israel's right to defend itself. He was none other than Moshe Dayan, the general who was the architect of the 1967 triumph, and who, like so many Israeli generals (from Ytzhak Rabin to Ehud Barak) have been able to win wars in order to work for peace, without looking for 'final solutions' but taking responsibility, year after year, generation after generation, to fight hard but to keep themselves humane and seek a compromise between justice and security. This is how Israel has saved its soul so far.