

MIDDLE EAST

Pizzaballa: 'Israel's reasons do not justify Gaza'

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**Riccardo
Cascioli**



Yesterday, as widely announced, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and Portugal recognised the Palestinian state, and today, at the United Nations General Assembly, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Malta will follow suit. This change in recognition will not alter the situation on the ground, which remains critical (as we have previously mentioned), but it is a political signal to the Israeli government, as the traditional allies

are becoming increasingly intolerant of it. This situation was summed up by Yair Golan, leader of the Israeli left, who said that these decisions were 'a direct consequence of Netanyahu's political recklessness: the refusal to end the war and the dangerous choice of occupation and annexation'.

For his part, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is undaunted and dismisses the prospect of a Palestinian state ever being established: 'I have a clear message for those leaders who recognised a Palestinian state after the terrible massacre of 7 October,' Netanyahu said. 'You are greatly rewarding terrorism. I have another message for you: this will not happen. A Palestinian state will not arise west of the Jordan'.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Finance Minister and leader of the ultra-Orthodox Right, Bezalel Smotrich, is putting further pressure on the Prime Minister by claiming that 'the only answer to the anti-Israeli move is sovereignty over the homeland of the Jewish people in Judea and Samaria, and the permanent removal of the idea of a Palestinian state from the agenda'.

In the meantime, the operation to destroy Gaza City continues unabated, with further enormous human cost: the IDF announced yesterday that 550,000 civilians had fled the city, heading south (*photo: LaPresse*), where they are expected to arrive at a 'humanitarian zone' created by the IDF.

In short, the military and political situation offers no hope of a cessation of hostilities, let alone peace. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, recently emphasised this distinction. In this regard, to gain insight into the situation, it is useful to consider Cardinal Pizzaballa's recent interviews with Open Festival and L'Azione, the diocesan weekly of Vittorio Veneto. He was unable to attend the celebrations at the Motta di Livenza sanctuary due to the ongoing war.

The Patriarch's verdict on the situation in Gaza is clear: 'It is of enormous gravity,' he told L'Azione, 'and I cannot understand how something like this can be tolerated.' The Patriarch recognises that 'there is instrumentalisation' on the part of Hamas and that 'Israel has reasons', but 'they cannot in any way justify what is happening in Gaza'. This must be said".

Cardinal Pizzaballa also considers the seriousness of Israeli behaviour in Gaza from a future perspective: 'I am distressed for all the hatred that this situation is creating, which is increasingly distancing any future prospect of reconciliation and healing these wounds.' A concept reiterated at Open: 'Even if it ended today, it would still not be the end. We will still be paying the consequences for a very long time: wounds, distrust, resentment and hatred will remain for a very long time'.

To understand this, Pizzaballa's comments on the sentiment of the Israeli population are interesting: 'The desire for an end to the war is there. I believe that the majority of the population is tired of the war today. But wanting an end to the war does not necessarily mean wanting peace with the Palestinians — they are two quite different things'. The same can be said for the Palestinians.

However, another aspect stressed by the cardinal helps us to understand where certain reactions come from: 'the disproportion between what happened on 7 October and Israel's response'. 'Israel is living inside a bubble of its own, where it feels it is the one and only victim of everything that is happening. This prevents it from having a lucid, clear and free vision of the present or future prospects.'

Regarding the future, Cardinal Pizzaballa makes a second point: although he believes that recognising the Palestinian state would be useful, as 'the Palestinians need human support, but they also need to be recognised as a dignified people', he is sceptical that 'two peoples, two states' is a realistic solution. 'The two-state solution remains an ideal prospect, but it risks becoming merely a declaration, however necessary.' We will have to be very creative for the future because any solution will require long periods of time, as well as public opinion and a cultural context that understands this. A lot of work will have to be done to create the conditions for whatever the future holds. 'Two peoples and two states' is an increasingly distant possibility.

A third point concerns the proximate roots of what happened on 7 October and the events that followed, namely the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Rabin was the protagonist of the 1993 Oslo Accords with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. With his assassination at the hands of an Israeli settler who

considered the agreement with the Palestinians to be a betrayal, the prospect of a negotiated solution to the conflict was effectively eliminated. According to the cardinal, this set in motion a process that led to today's violence: '7 October is the result of years of polarisation that has grown over time. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was already a sign of radicalised thinking that developed over time and entered the institutions. The same thing happened on the other side. The inability to build trust and develop inclusive language has led us to today's disaster.'

In seeking a solution, one final point should be emphasised: the Patriarch of Jerusalem has no faith in politics, instead pointing to civil society: 'I would not waste too much time on politics. What is evident at this time is the weakness, if not paralysis, of local, international and multipolar political institutions. I would also include religious institutions here. This is the moment for civil society. It is there, above all, that we must act, and it is there that we must speak," he told Action. He further explained the task to Open: 'Rebuild a fabric in the territory and create alliances within civil society that keep humanity alive'.