

30TH ANNIVERSARY

Rabin's assassination still weighs on future of Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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Remembering the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which took place exactly 30 years ago on 4 November 1995, helps us to understand the current crisis. Although the interpreters and, in some cases, even the acronyms change, the reasons

for the conflict in the Middle East, the arguments that inflame it and the projects that seek to redesign the region remain constant over time. What happened 30 years ago inflicted a deep wound, the consequences of which are still being felt today.

Rabin was assassinated by 25-year-old Yigal Amir, an exponent of the Israeli extremist group Eyal — an acronym in Hebrew for 'National Jewish Organisation'. He was shot twice in the back as he was leaving the stage at a demonstration in favour of the peace process. He had been guilty of signing the 1993 Oslo Accords with the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, for which they were both awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. The accords provided for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from parts of Gaza and the West Bank, where the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was established. The PNA renounced the destruction of Israel in return. Although it was still a long way from achieving 'two peoples, two states', for the first time in almost 50 years, a concrete possibility of a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was in sight.

With Rabin's death, that hope quickly faded. Two factors in particular stand out to me, having worked as a foreign correspondent to Israel at the time. First, the deep division that ran through both Israel and Palestine. Rabin's murderer was not an isolated fanatic; he was a product of the poisonous climate in Israel. The prime minister and his foreign minister, Shimon Peres, were subjected to violent attacks from the right, and the parliamentary vote to ratify the accords was not peaceful: the Knesset approved it with 61 votes in favour, 50 against, and eight abstentions.

Even though Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu swiftly condemned Rabin's murder, he had spent months leading a fierce campaign against the prime minister and the Oslo agreement. The most extremist groups had grown in strength, enjoying a certain impunity, even in university environments. Posters depicting Rabin as an SS officer were already circulating. "The extremist elements on the right had created such an atmosphere that an assassin would feel justified in acting," said Ehud Shprinzak, who was a Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a leading expert on the religious right at the time. The climate was so heated that, even then, there was much controversy over security, to the point of suspecting that Amal had been able to count on the complicity of some of the agents supposed to protect the premier in order to get close to Rabin.

However, there was also a deep division among the Palestinians, to the extent that even Arafat was under threat from his internal enemies. Hamas, a growing force at the time, as well as Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), constituted a 'rejection front', which, in the following years and in parallel with

the growing loss of confidence in a diplomatic solution, increased its political weight within the Palestinian world.

These divisions remain to this day. It would be naive to think that the conflict is simply 'Israelis versus Palestinians'; there is also conflict within the two camps. The difference is that today, partly due to events 30 years ago, the forces hostile to a peace agreement that envisages coexistence between the two peoples prevail among both Israelis and Palestinians, regardless of the institutional form.

The second factor to be emphasised is the religious one. While opposition to any agreement is also politically motivated, there is no doubt that fundamentalist religious positions prevail among both Israelis and Palestinians today, making any compromise impossible. What does this mean? I will try to explain it with reference to two meetings I had in those days. The first was in Hebron, among Orthodox Jews living in an architectural oasis — clean and tidy — surrounded by the disorder and filth of the Arab city. Mishael, a teacher, summarises a common sentiment: 'I want peace. I have nothing against the Arabs, but we cannot give them the land — God says so.' God gave us this land; it is written in the Bible. We cannot now say to God, 'No, thank you, we don't want it; let's give it to the Palestinians'.

The second meeting was in Bethlehem, outside the mosque facing the Church of the Nativity. Among the many Muslims gathered there, one man spoke for everyone: "In Palestine, there is no room for two states. This is all the land of Islam.' The Jews? Those who were there before can stay, but only within the Islamic state.'

If the land is God's word, there is no room for compromise. The only chance of reopening the dialogue is for these positions to be reduced and marginalised. This is probably what the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, was referring to when he recently said that there is a need for new faces among politicians and religious leaders — people who truly desire and speak the language of peace and coexistence.

Finally, I would like to recount an encounter that particularly struck me, which illustrates the tragic nature of Rabin's assassination for the Jewish people. David Bar Ilan, the grandson of the Tel Aviv University founder bearing the same name and later Netanyahu's political advisor, used the Bible to explain: "What happened is already written in chapter 24 of the Second Book of Chronicles", referring to the conspiracy that led to the murder of King Joas, who was in turn responsible for the stoning of a prophet. 'The truth,' he continued, 'is that what we are experiencing is more than tragic for our

people. Throughout history, whenever Jews have killed other Jews, it has been a triumph for the enemies of Israel'.

Whether as a warning or a prophecy, the fact remains that Rabin's assassination will cast a long shadow over Israeli-Palestinian relations.