
Israeli-Palestinian relations: Pizzaballa (Patriarch): “Rebuild mutual confidence with new credible leadership to turn a new leaf”

Fundamental Agreement, resumption of Peace Talks, pilgrimages and the life of Christian communities: these were some of the points touched on by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, **Pierbattista Pizzaballa** in an interview with SIR.



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On July 7, Isaac Herzog was sworn in before the Knesset as Israel's 11th President. In his address to parliament he commented on the polarisation in Israel: "These, regrettably, are not ordinary times. Polarisation and alienation between people and groups could deteriorate. The heaviest price of all is the erosion of our national resilience." The implicit issue is the one involving the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, the area near the Old City disputed by Israeli settlers and Palestinians, which last May triggered clashes that spread like wildfire across Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. On June 13 the Knesset, Israel's parliament, gave its vote of confidence to Naftali Bennett's new coalition government, the first in 12 years not led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Bennett, right-wing Yamina party leader, heads an unwieldy coalition despite being backed by eight political parties, including "Raam", an Arab Islamist group, governing for the first time. In this highly complex scenario, Philippine Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana from Australia was appointed Apostolic Nuncio to Israel and Cyprus and Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem and Palestine by Pope Francis in early June. **Your Beatitude, with a new government, a new President and now also a new Apostolic Nuncio, is it reasonable – after so much effort and work - to look forward to a successful outcome to the negotiations on matters pertaining to property, taxation, along with a number of economic issues laid down in Article 10(2) of the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel?** I would say there is indeed a window of opportunity. I hope that both sides are willing to find a solution to this painful situation. I believe the right conditions are in place. Furthermore, the procedure for the recognition of the ecclesiastical legal personality of Ecclesiastical entities has begun in the Knesset. It would seem there is both willingness and the potential to reach a consensus. **Addressing the Knesset, incumbent President Herzog cautioned the country against the risk of divisions. After the riots past May, it is a warning to be heeded...** In this respect, President Herzog's speech was extremely important. The recent protests, which escalated into open clashes, exposed the deep-rooted divisions and tears within Israeli society, all of which require serious attention. This did not occur. In fact, the opposite approach was pursued, for political reasons or of self-interest. The incidents in Jerusalem also testify to the political developments in Israel over the past few years. All of this shows that unilateral solutions are not an option. **Who could embrace President Herzog's appeal within Israeli society?** A large part of society and of the political world has recognised this problem and is keen to address it. At least I hope so, because it is a matter of increasing urgency. In fact, the situation has not changed. Tensions persist, although the open and uninterrupted clashes of the past weeks are not taking place. **In this regard, could the presence of an Arab political party in the government coalition help appease tensions and**

mend the divisions? It should be remembered that 20 per cent of the Israeli population is Arab, and has consistently been somewhat marginalised in Israeli society. The opportunity of forming part of the government and starting, step by step, to make the voice of this minority heard is not a negative sign. Co-existence is not being questioned: we will all continue living together here. However, it must be ensured that it is a positive form of coexistence and not one that is simply being endured. **While Israel is weeping, Palestine is not rejoicing, paraphrasing a known saying that well describes the situation. In fact, there are major rifts also on the Palestinian side. In Ramallah, Hebron and Bethlehem, there were protests against President Abu Mazen following the death on June 24 of Nizar Banat, an opponent of the government...** Divisions within Palestinian society are hardly recent. In fact, divisions exist between Hamas-run Gaza and the Palestinian Authority-run West Bank, with the latter increasingly undermined by allegations of corruption and misrule. The situation has come to a head for both Israel and Palestine. **How should this be resolved?** First of all, there must be the political will to address these issues. In my opinion, the next essential step is

rebuilding mutual confidence, making room for new faces and a change of leadership on both sides.

In other words, there must be the courage to turn a new leaf. If not, it will boil down to the same old rhetoric. As we read in the Gospel, No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one... **In this case, is the "Two States for two Peoples" solution, also supported by the Holy See, the patch or the garment?** *It is the only solution left, even though it is unfeasible, unattainable. Moreover, discussing it now, in the present circumstances, would be tantamount to discussing something abstract. What I mean is that today the conditions for a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians are not in place.* These are scenarios for the future. As I mentioned earlier, the task at hand is to rebuild the local fabric and establish credible leadership on both sides in order to pave the way for that to happen. If not, we will be left with unrealistic slogans. **Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio has recently made a statement on the resumption of the talks between Israelis and Palestinians, announcing his intention to pay a visit to the new Israeli government at the end of July and then visit the Palestinian Territories with Spanish Minister Arancha Gozalez Laya. The purpose, he said, is to "rekindle and revitalise the role of the Quartet (EU, US, UN and Russia, ed.'s note) and attempt to enhance the profile of the EU" in order to bring the parties back to the negotiating table.** Right now, it doesn't make much sense to talk about negotiations. With whom and between whom? Negotiations require interlocutors. However, I believe that these initiatives are important to heighten the level of awareness. At the moment it would be hard to accomplish more than that.



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We must determine what is meant by international community, whether it is the UN, the EU, the US, Russia and so on. We all know who the players are and that none of them is motivated by generosity. Unless they have an interest in the matter, they are unlikely to take action. Hence the Israeli-Palestinian question has virtually faded from diplomatic agendas. Having said that, it should be made clear that

the international community cannot possibly act in the place of Israel and Palestine.

However, it could help them, accompany them along their path. But unless Israelis and Palestinians are talking to each other, there is little the international community can do. With the pandemic, endless crises such as in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq - which have also seen the failure of Western involvement - have shown that the international community is not in a position to do anything, other than provide economic assistance, and not even much. **You were appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem five years ago, and you immediately took steps to restore the viability of the Patriarchate's economy and finances. Nine months ago you were appointed Patriarch of Jerusalem. You have made the first new appointments and changes over the last few days. Which pastoral guidelines do you plan to pursue to revitalise the patriarchal ecclesial community?** The Patriarchal Church has been active throughout these years in all its pastoral, educational and formation spheres. I joined the Latin Patriarchate five years ago, the titles change but not the content. But the times and perspectives have changed. *It was necessary to give directions to the diocese, to present new faces and work on the unity of the diocese, in its various areas of pastoral care, and form a new group of lay faithful working in the Church. During this period you have met and been in contact with the Christian communities: how are they responding to this particularly tense situation?* Christians are not a people apart. They are affected by the situation just like everyone else. They are not exempt from the problems, not in Israel, not in Palestine, not in Gaza. As a minority, they are obviously more vulnerable. I have noticed that they want to contribute as much as possible, and if they complain it's because they see no response to their expectations. **Could pilgrimages provide a concrete response to their needs? They seem to have resumed slightly since the lockdown imposed by COVID-19.** We hope so because we need pilgrims. Pilgrimage is an essential component of our Church, made up of people and holy places. Moreover, pilgrims provide livelihood improvement to Christian households, many of whom work in the tourist and pilgrimage sector. After two years of utter vacuum, many are

struggling to recover their future prospects and their hopes. We are counting on recovery, but there are new concerns due to the Delta variant. It will take a long time to return to pre-Covid-19 pilgrimage standards. Some restrictions will be in place, but hopefully this will not hinder the gradual resumption of travel, which is vital for future prospects and commitments.

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