

THE DIPLOMACY OF THE HOLY SEE IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract

This article explores the Holy See's enduring impact, moral authority, religious diplomacy, and peacebuilding efforts in one of the world's most protracted conflicts. It examines the Holy See's engagement, from its early support of the 1947 UN Partition Plan to its 2015 official recognition of the State of Palestine, emphasizing its advocacy for peaceful coexistence and the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians. Key milestones include the 1993 Fundamental Agreement with Israel, the 2000 Basic Agreement with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Pope Francis's groundbreaking 2014 prayer meeting with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. Through decades of humanitarian aid, interfaith dialogue, and moral diplomacy, the Vatican has sought to elevate the global discourse on justice, human dignity, and reconciliation. Despite the limitations imposed by entrenched political complexities, the Vatican continues to advocate for a two-state solution, the protection of Jerusalem's sacred status, and an end to violence.

Keywords: The Holy See, diplomacy, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Holy Land

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Introduction. Overview of the Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most complex and enduring disputes of the modern era in a region of profound religious and historical significance: the Holy Land.

On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was founded, triggering the first Arab-Israeli War. The war ended in 1949 with Israel's victory, leading to the displacement of approximately 750,000 Palestinians and the division of the territory into three areas: the newly established State of Israel, the West Bank along the Jordan River under Jordanian control, and the Gaza Strip administered by Egypt. These events marked the beginning of decades of conflict and negotiations, with both regional and global actors playing pivotal roles in either exacerbating hostilities or facilitating peace efforts.

The Vatican holds a unique position in the conflict as a religious and diplomatic actor, using religious diplomacy, moral influence, and international engagement to advocate for peace, justice, as well as the protection of Christian communities in the region.

The Vatican's Position on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In 1947, the United Nations proposed Resolution 181, known as the Partition Plan, which aimed to divide the British Mandate of Palestine into two separate states—one Arab and one Jewish. The plan also envisioned Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum* (separate entity), an international city to be administered by the UN, due to its religious and historical significance to multiple faiths. Israel's Declaration of Independence the following year led to the first Arab-Israeli War, which resulted in the Nakba ("catastrophe"); the mass displacement in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees were forced to flee, became a central issue in the ongoing conflict.

The Vatican, which had expressed support for the 1947 UN Partition Plan, maintained its stance on the issue and responded to the turmoil in the Holy Land through Pope Pius XII's encyclical *In Multiplicibus Curis* (1948). The encyclical called for peace in the region and strongly condemned any resort to war, emphasizing the need for a just resolution to the conflict. The Pope emphasized that Jerusalem and its surrounding areas should be given an international status to better protect the Holy Places, with international guarantees ensuring free access, freedom of worship, and respect for customs and religious traditions:

“We are full of faith that these prayers and these hopes, an indication of the value that the Holy Places have for so great a part of the human family, will strengthen the conviction in the high quarters in which the problems of peace are discussed that it would be opportune to give Jerusalem and its outskirts, where are found so many and such precious memories of the life and death of the Savior, an international character which, in the present circumstances, seems to offer a better guarantee for the protection of the sanctuaries. It would also be necessary to assure, with international guarantees, both free access to Holy Places scattered throughout Palestine, and the freedom of worship and the respect of customs and religious traditions.”¹

The Holy See’s concern for stability in the region was reaffirmed in a second encyclical *Redemptoris Nostris Cruciatu*s (1949), in which the Pope reflected on the fragility of the truce that ended the hostilities of the first Arab-Israeli War, and expressed deep concern that peace and order had yet to be restored in Palestine, pointing to the ongoing desecration of sacred sites and the severe hardships faced by refugees displaced by the war, many of whom continued to suffer in exile under dire conditions. Regarding the status of Jerusalem, it was reiterated, as in the previous encyclical, that the city and its surrounding areas should be granted an internationally recognized status, considered the most effective way to ensure the protection of its sacred sites:

“We have already insisted in Our Encyclical letter *In Multiplicibus*, that the time has come when Jerusalem and its vicinity, where the previous memorials of the Life and Death of the Divine Redeemer are preserved, should be accorded and legally guaranteed an "international" status, which in the present circumstances seems to offer the best and most satisfactory protection for these sacred monuments.”²

In the same year, Pope Pius XII established the *Pontifical Mission for Palestine* as "a temporary agency of the Holy See to feed, clothe, and educate Palestinian

¹ Pope Pius XII, *In Multiplicibus Curis*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_24101948_in-multiplicibus-curis.html], 23 September 2024.

² Pope Pius XII, *Redemptoris Nostris Cruciatu*s, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_15041949_redemptoris-nostris-cruciatu.html], 23 September 2024.

refugees."³ Over the decades, the Mission has expanded its role, providing not only substantial emergency relief but also long-term development programs, significantly impacting the lives of those affected by the conflict.

Key Historical Milestones and the Vatican's Role

The next major stage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the 1967 Six-Day War, which resulted in significant casualties on both sides and concluded with a resounding Israeli victory. As a result, Israel took control of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, Syria's Golan Heights, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

Pope Paul VI wrote a message to the UN Secretary-General expressing deep concern over the impending conflict in the Middle East and urged the UN to take action to prevent the war and, in case of escalation, called for Jerusalem to be declared an open and inviolable city due to its sacred nature.⁴

Back in 1963, shortly after becoming Pope, Paul VI shared his desire to make his first pastoral visit abroad to the Holy Land, a "pilgrimage of prayer and penance:"⁵

"We will bring to the Holy Sepulcher and to the Grotto of the Nativity the desires of individuals, of families, of nations; above all, the aspirations, the anxieties, the sufferings of the sick, the poor, the disinherited, the afflicted, of refugees, of those who suffer, those who weep, those who hunger and thirst for justice."⁶

This represented the first papal visit to the region, a journey that Paul VI described not only as a pilgrimage and "spiritual event," but also as one of "enormous historical importance,"⁷ in which the Pope not only met with

³ Michael La Civita, "Pontifical Mission for Palestine: An Expression of Papal Concern," in *CNEWA*, [https://cnewa.org/magazine/pontifical-mission-for-palestine-an-expression-of-papal-concern-30827], 23 September 2024.

⁴ Marco Mancini, "The Pope, Jerusalem and the Holy Land," *EWTN Vatican*, [https://www.ewtnvatican.com/articles/popes-jerusalem-and-the-holy-land-1824], 23 September 2024.

⁵ Michael La Civita, *op.cit.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ "Paul VI's trip to the Holy Land 50 years ago marked the dawn of papal visits," in *La Stampa*, [https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2014/05/23/news/paul-vi-s-trip-to-the-holy-land-50-years-ago-marked-the-dawn-of-papal-visits-1.35756969/], 23 September 2024.

heads of state and religious leaders, but also reaffirmed the Holy See's commitment to supporting refugees and to continue advancing the Pontifical Mission's efforts to assist the Palestinian people.⁸

The Six-Day War had far-reaching and destructive consequences, including displacement, occupation, escalating violence, and regional instability. The renewed refugee crisis prompted NGOs to collaborate more closely, working with the *Pontifical Mission* on various relief efforts, including education, healthcare, and economic support programs.⁹

The Vatican's deeper engagement continued and in 1974 Paul VI wrote an encyclical letter on the increased needs of the church in the Holy Land, *Nobis in animo*, highlighting "the grave religious, political, and social problems existing in the Holy Land,"¹⁰ and emphasizing the complexities of coexistence and peace among its diverse communities:

"the continuation of the state of tension in the Middle East, without conclusive steps towards peace having been taken, constitutes a serious and constant danger. This danger imperils not only the peace and security of the people there — and the peace of the whole world — but also threatens certain values which for various reasons are supremely dear to such a great part of mankind."¹¹

Paul VI continued to expand on the call for peace and reconciliation, and in his 1975 Christmas message, he acknowledged the Jewish people's tragic history and their need for a secure, independent state, at the same time, he urged for the recognition of the rights and legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, who had also endured prolonged suffering.¹²

⁸ Michael La Civita, *op.cit.*

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ "Pontifical Mission," in *CNEWA Canada*, [<https://cnewa.org/ca/about/history/pontifical-mission>], 23 September 2024.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² Matthew Santucci, "Vatican Support for a Two-State Solution Started Long Before Pope Francis," in *National Catholic Register*, 15 April 2024, 23 September 2024. [<https://www.ncregister.com/news/vatican-support-for-a-two-state-solution>]

The Vatican's Diplomatic Recognition of Israel

Although the Holy See had not formally recognized the State of Israel at the time, high-level contacts between the two sides continued, with Pope Paul VI meeting prominent Israeli officials, including Foreign Minister Abba Eban in 1969, Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1973, and Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan in 1978.¹³

The election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II in October 1978 represented a momentous event, with reverberations not only throughout much of the religious world but also across the global stage.

In his Apostolic Letter *Redemptionis anno* (1984) on Jerusalem and the Middle East, John Paul II reflected that the Holy See has consistently called for a peaceful solution to the complex situation in Jerusalem, driven by both its concern for peace and the city's spiritual, historical, and cultural significance. The Pope emphasized that the question of Jerusalem remained fundamental for achieving a just peace in the Middle East, and that the city's religious identity, particularly its shared monotheistic heritage, can foster harmony among those who regard it as sacred.¹⁴

John Paul II underscored that the failure to find a solution to the question of Jerusalem delayed a peaceful and just resolution to the broader Middle East crisis, where longstanding antagonism between Israelis and Palestinians remained unresolved, also emphasizing that both the Jewish people in Israel and the displaced Palestinian people have the right to security, peace, and the ability to live in their homeland, with justice and tranquility for all peoples in the region:

“It is natural in this context to recall that in the area two peoples, the Israelis and the Palestinians, have been opposed to each other for decades in an antagonism that appears insoluble. The Church, which looks at Christ the Redeemer and sees his image in the face of every man, invokes peace and reconciliation for the people of the land that was his. For the Jewish people

¹³ *Israel-Vatican Diplomatic Relations*, [https://embassies.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/religion/Pages/Israel-Vatican_Diplomatic_Relations.aspx], 23 September 2024.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, “On Jerusalem and the Middle East (Apostolic Letter *Redemptionis Anno*),” [https://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/jp2-84apr20], 20 April 1984, 23 September 2024.

who live in the State of Israel and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies to their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress for every society. The Palestinian people, who find their historical roots in that land and who, for decades, have been dispersed, have the natural right in justice to find once more a homeland and to be able to live in peace and tranquility with the other peoples of the area.”¹⁵

Diplomatic Breakthrough: 1993 de jure Recognition

The Holy See formally recognized the State of Israel in 1993, following decades of dialogue. The *Fundamental Agreement* between the Holy See and the State of Israel, signed on December 30, 1993, marked a significant milestone in their relations, enabling the exchange of ambassadors and the establishment of commissions to address unresolved issues. It also highlighted the unique relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people, reaffirming the Church's condemnation of antisemitism as articulated in the declaration *Nostra Aetate*¹⁶ (1965). On January 19, 1994, the Vatican Nunciature in Israel and the Israeli Embassy in Rome were officially opened, marking a significant milestone in the diplomatic relationship between Israel and the Holy See.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ “As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock. Thus, the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. ... The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles....Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues” (DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS *NOSTRA AETATE*, PROCLAIMED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI ON OCTOBER 28, 1965), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html], 23 September 2024

Following the 1993 Vatican-Israel Accord, the Vatican established official links with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1994. This collaboration aimed to foster communication and jointly pursue peace, justice, and the preservation of religious and cultural values in the Middle East, particularly in Jerusalem and the Holy Land.¹⁷

Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Jubilee Year of 2000 remains a landmark event in Vatican diplomacy. The pilgrimage emphasized promoting inter-religious dialogue among Jews and Christians, inspiring them to draw from their faiths and shared humanity to work toward the peace and justice long yearned for in the Holy Land. Israel's high hopes for a closer political-diplomatic relationship with the Vatican following that visit were shattered by the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000, as the Vatican disapproved Israel's military response to the Palestinian uprising and the resulting stagnation of the peace process.¹⁸ However, the Vatican shifted focus from strained political-diplomatic relations with Israel to strengthening Jewish-Catholic dialogue, leading to various initiatives, and the establishment of a productive relationship with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in 2003.¹⁹

Pope Benedict XVI built upon the efforts of his predecessors and played a significant role in promoting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, balancing support for Palestinian statehood with strengthened Vatican-Israeli relations. His 2009 visit to Holy Land further underscored this commitment. In his address to President Peres and "all the people of the State of Israel,"²⁰ the Pope portrayed his pilgrimage to the holy places as "one of prayer for the precious gift of unity and peace for the Middle East and for all humanity."²¹ Benedict XVI underlined that religious leaders have a

¹⁷ Marshall Breger, "The Fundamental Agreement Between the Holy See and the State of Israel: A Symposium," in *CATH. U. L. REV.*, vol. 47, 1988, p. 379

¹⁸ "Israel-Vatican Diplomatic Relations,"

[https://embassies.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/religion/Pages/Israel-Vatican_Diplomatic_Relations.aspx], 23 September 2024.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI, 11 May 2009, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090511_presidente-israele.html], 23 September 2024.

²¹ *Ibidem.*

crucial role in promoting peace and unity highlighting the shared search for God and the oneness of humanity rooted in the divine image, and as they should avoid divisions or suspicions that undermine this unity and instead work together to demonstrate peaceful coexistence, particularly in a city like Jerusalem, which symbolizes the intersection of faiths: "Jerusalem, which has long been a crossroads for peoples of many different origins, is a city which affords Jews, Christians and Muslims both the duty and the privilege to bear witness together to the peaceful coexistence long desired by worshippers of the one God."²²

The Pope emphasized the importance of finding a lasting solution to the suffering caused by the ongoing conflict, stressing the hope for a stable and secure future for all people involved and urging those responsible for peace negotiations to explore every possible avenue to ensure both Israelis and Palestinians can live peacefully within secure, internationally recognized borders:

"The eyes of the world are upon the peoples of this region as they struggle to achieve a just and lasting solution to conflicts that have caused so much suffering. The hopes of countless men, women, and children for a more secure and stable future depend on the outcome of negotiations for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In union with people of goodwill everywhere, I plead with all those responsible for exploring every possible avenue in the search for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties so that both peoples may live in peace in a homeland of their own, within secure and internationally recognized borders."²³

Continuing the Vatican's unwavering commitment to peace and justice in the Holy Land, Pope Benedict XVI stressed the importance of fostering dialogue and reconciliation between all parties involved. While supporting the UN General Assembly's 2012 recognition of Palestine, which granted Palestine *non-member Observer State* status, he also worked to advance bilateral discussions on the 1993 *Fundamental Agreement*, which formed the basis of Vatican-Israel diplomatic ties. The Pope's clear and consistent approach earned respect from Israeli and Jewish leaders, who valued his

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Marco Mancini, *op.cit.*

transparency and reliability, as reflected in Israeli President Shimon Peres's praise of Vatican-Israeli relations as *the best they have ever been*.²⁴

The Vatican's Recognition of Palestine

Throughout the turbulent decades, the Vatican established itself as a moral advocate, consistently promoting dialogue and peaceful resolution, calling for peace talks, reconciliation, and a just solution for both Israelis and Palestinians.

A landmark in Vatican diplomacy, the *Basic Agreement* between the Holy See and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), signed on February 15, 2000, was aimed at securing the rights of the Catholic Church within a future Palestinian state.²⁵ It also emphasized the Vatican's commitment to peace, calling for a "peaceful solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which would realize the inalienable national legitimate rights and aspirations of the Palestinian People"²⁶ and "an equitable solution for the issue of Jerusalem, based on international resolutions."²⁷ The agreement's focus on both territorial justice and the protection of religious sites highlighted the Holy See's dual concern for political stability and religious heritage. However, the Israeli government expressed dissatisfaction with this move, signaling the contentious nature of such agreements amid ongoing tensions.

The Diplomacy of Pope Francis: Advocating Peace and Reconciliation

Pope Francis, known for his advocacy of interfaith harmony and social justice, played a pivotal role in advancing Vatican diplomacy within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Under the papacy of Francis further efforts to bridge divides were made, including his 2014 visit to Israel and Palestine, the invitation of Israeli and Palestinian leaders to the Vatican for a prayer meeting, and his calls for peace during significant moments of conflict.

²⁴ Edward Pentin, "The Pope as Diplomat. How the Vatican does Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Affairs*, February 2013, [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/pope-diplomat>], 23 September 2024.

²⁵ Matthew Santucci, *op.cit.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

The 2014 visit to Israel, Palestine, and Jordan symbolized the Vatican's enduring commitment to peace and dialogue. The Vatican's official program notably referred to Mahmoud Abbas as the president of the State of Palestine,²⁸ further affirming the Vatican's recognition of Palestinian aspirations. During his visit the Pope advocated for a lasting peace that would allow Palestine and Israel to "live side by side,"²⁹ calling on all parties to "cherish Jerusalem," envisioning it as "a city of fraternal encounter among Christians, Jews, and Muslims, safeguarded by a special internationally guaranteed status."³⁰ The Pope also expressed criticism of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has extended invitations to leaders from both sides to visit the Vatican.

In a historic 2014 event at the Vatican Gardens, Pope Francis hosted Israeli President Shimon Peres, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I for a prayer meeting, during which they also symbolically planted an olive tree. Pope Francis emphasized the responsibility to foster dialogue and peace for future generations, urging the leaders to overcome enmity and build a world rooted in love and friendship, and reaffirming that 'peacemaking, "much more than warfare," calls for courage.'³¹

The Vatican's 2015 decision to officially recognize Palestine as a state highlighted once again the Holy See's role as a moral authority in global diplomacy, as the recognition of Palestine was not just a diplomatic gesture but also a moral stance that aligned with its long-standing advocacy for the rights of the Palestinian people and the need for a peaceful, negotiated resolution to the conflict. The recognition was formalized through a bilateral agreement, known as the *Comprehensive Agreement between the Holy See and*

²⁸ "Vatican recognizes state of Palestine in new treaty," in *The Times of Israel*, [<https://www.timesofisrael.com/vatican-recognizes-state-of-palestine-in-new-treaty/>], 23 September 2024.

²⁹ Deborah C. Lubov, "Pope: May the States of Palestine and Israel live side by side," in *Vatican News*, [<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-06/pope-at-invocation-war-cannot-resolve-problems-and-bring-peace.html>], 23 September 2024.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Deborah C. Lubov, "Pope to commemorate 2014 invocation for peace in Holy Land," in *Vatican News*, [<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-05/pope-to-commemorate-2014-invocation-for-peace-in-holy-land.html>], 23 September 2024.

the State of Palestine. Unlike the previous *Basic Agreement*, this *Comprehensive Agreement* was signed by the Holy See and the State of Palestine, reflecting the progress of the Palestinian Authority and the growing international support for Palestine (highlighted by the 2012 United Nations General Assembly's Resolution which granted Palestine non-member Observer State status).³² It covered various aspects of the relationship between the Vatican and Palestine, such as the Church's rights and activities within Palestinian territories. Archbishop Paul Gallagher, secretary for relations with states of the Holy See, expressed hope that the document would promote a two-state solution and help end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.³³

Following the agreement's implementation in 2016, the Palestinian Embassy to the Holy See was officially inaugurated in 2017, an event that was attended by Mahmoud Abbas, president of Palestine and the Palestinian National Authority, and Issa Kassissieh, Palestine's ambassador to the Holy See.³⁴

Reactions from Israel and the International Community

Israeli officials expressed disappointment with the Vatican's recognition of Palestine, arguing that it hinders efforts to bring Palestinians back to negotiations: "We're disappointed by the decision taken by the Holy See. We believe that such a decision is not conducive to bringing the Palestinians back to the negotiating table,"³⁵ Foreign Ministry spokesperson Emmanuel Nahshon told *The Times of Israel*.³⁶ Furthermore, Israel, which had opposed the unilateral recognition of Palestine by other countries, expressed its displeasure with the Vatican's decision, arguing that the recognition should only come as a result of direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The Vatican's recognition of Palestine transcended mere

³² *United Nations*, "Joint Statement on the occasion of the Signature of the Comprehensive Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine," [<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-208959/>], 23 September 2024.

³³ Matthew Santucci, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ "Vatican recognizes state of Palestine in new treaty," in *The Times of Israel*, [<https://www.timesofisrael.com/vatican-recognizes-state-of-palestine-in-new-treaty/>], 23 September 2024.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

diplomatic acknowledgment; it symbolized an endorsement of the Palestinian right to statehood while underscoring the importance of a negotiated two-state solution. This action aimed to galvanize international efforts to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with renewed urgency.

The Vatican's Religious and Moral Perspective

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the *Invocation for Peace* in the Vatican Gardens, Francis expressed that "every day I pray that this war will finally end...";³⁷ and emphasized that believing war can solve problems is a deception, calling for prayers "that the leaders of nations and the parties in conflict may find the way to peace and unity."³⁸ The Pope emphasized that achieving lasting peace requires collective effort to ensure that Israel and Palestine coexist peacefully, with Jerusalem as a shared city of reconciliation for all faiths, protected by international guarantees:

"All of us must work and commit ourselves to achieving a lasting peace, where the State of Palestine and the State of Israel can live side by side, breaking down the walls of enmity and hatred. We must all cherish Jerusalem so that it will become the city of fraternal encounter among Christians, Jews and Muslims, protected by a special internationally guaranteed status."³⁹

On the same occasion, the Pope conveyed his concern for all those suffering in Israel and Palestine and reiterated his call for a ceasefire to end the violence in Gaza and ensure the release of Israeli hostages. The Vatican framed its involvement in the conflict through its teachings on social justice, human dignity, and the right to self-determination, calling for the protection of Palestinian rights, the end of occupation, and peaceful coexistence with Israel. While it refrained from engaging in technical territorial issues, it asserted the right to offer moral judgments, recognizing that the territorial and religious dimensions of the conflict are deeply interconnected:⁴⁰

³⁷ Deborah C. Lubov, "Pope: May the States of Palestine and Israel live side by side," in *Vatican News*, [https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-06/pope-at-invocation-war-cannot-resolve-problems-and-bring-peace.html], 23 September 2024.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ Matthew Santucci, *op.cit.*

The Vatican has repeated that its involvement is based on pastoral or spiritual needs, not on temporal claims, a point articulated in Article 11 of the Fundamental Agreement and buttressed by the Secretariat of State's 1996 document on Jerusalem, which noted that while the Holy See will "not get involved in territorial problems as far as strictly technical aspects were concerned," it does, however, maintain the right "to express a moral judgment on the situation." But it went on to express that the "the territorial and religious dimensions of the problem," far from being separate issues, are "interrelated."⁴¹

Conclusion

The Vatican's engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict illustrates its unique role as a moral and diplomatic actor on the global stage. Rooted in its religious mandate and commitment to human dignity, the Holy See has consistently called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, emphasizing the rights and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians. Over the decades, it has leveraged its moral authority to shape international discourse, advocate for justice, and protection of sacred sites and communities in the Holy Land.

From its early support for the 1947 UN Partition Plan to its ongoing calls for a negotiated two-state solution, the Vatican has balanced advocacy for Palestinian rights with efforts to strengthen Jewish-Catholic relations and support Israel's security needs. The 1993 Fundamental Agreement with Israel and the 2015 recognition of Palestine underscored these commitments while under successive popes, particularly John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, the Vatican has embraced a proactive role in peacebuilding, urging all parties to pursue reconciliation and coexistence.

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to challenge global diplomacy, the Vatican's voice remains a crucial advocate for peace, justice, and mutual understanding. Its efforts to promote reconciliation, bridge interfaith divides, and address humanitarian needs in the region highlight the enduring relevance of the Holy See's role in addressing one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

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