

(A FOLLOW-UP TO THE ARTICLE IN LAST WEEK'S NEWSLETTER)

An Israeli Jesuit priest on the war in Gaza, Jewish-Catholic relations and the future of the two-state solution – Gerard O'Connell Interviews Fr David Neuhaus SJ in the Jesuit magazine *America* (on 5 January)



Palestinians walk past the building destroyed in the Israeli Bombardment of the Gaza Strip in Gaza City on Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024. (AP Photo/Mohammed Hajjar)

As Israel continues its military campaign in Gaza in retaliation for the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, I contacted the Israeli priest David Neuhaus, S.J., who is living in Jerusalem, and asked how he reads the deteriorating situation there and elsewhere in Palestine and Israel. I also asked how he views U.S. support for Israel, the equating of criticism of the Israeli government's war policy with antisemitism, how he sees the war ending and whether he thinks a two-state solution is a viable proposal.

Father Neuhaus is an astute political observer and a man committed to peace. Born into a Jewish family in South Africa, he became an Israeli citizen at the age of 17 and has lived most of his life in Israel. After obtaining his Ph.D. in political science from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he decided to become a Catholic and entered the Society of Jesus in 1992. He was ordained a priest in 2000. Father Neuhaus studied Scripture in Rome and has spent many years teaching at the Seminary of the Latin Catholic Patriarchate in Bethlehem and in other academic institutions in Israel and Palestine. This interview was conducted on Jan. 2 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Gerard O'Connell: Israel's war of retaliation against Hamas for the Oct. 7 attack has gone on for almost 13 weeks. What do you think it has achieved?

David Neuhaus, S.J.: Perhaps it is important to begin with what the war has not achieved thus far: victory against Hamas. Even now, after weeks of ferocious Israeli attacks, Hamas is still alive and kicking. No one has been able to understand what the political and military establishment means when it says that Hamas must be destroyed. The fear is that the real strategy is to depopulate Gaza, and this might mean that the war will be an ongoing reality for many months still. Israel has succeeded in reducing most of Gaza to ruins and displaced the majority of the population. Yet resistance continues. Hamas ideology thrives on despair and rage and ongoing war has created even more of that.

For the moment, the war has achieved the unity of an otherwise divided Israeli population, united now in sorrow, rage and a desire for revenge. Yet this might prove to be a very surface phenomenon, as the anger against the ruling elites gathers momentum, as witnessed by the families of the hostages, who feel betrayed. But the cracks go deeper.

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The war has achieved the explosion of certain Israeli foundational myths. The myth of military invincibility and omniscient intelligence has been shattered. The question of “How did they succeed in breaking into the Israeli fortress?” hangs over Israeli society. The explosion of the myth of invincibility has shattered another: that Jews, after facing centuries of insecurity in the diaspora, are safe in the State of Israel. Might it be that their safety depends not on military might but on their relationship with the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab world?

As the Israeli forces bomb Gaza and destroy homes, they are at the same time carrying out raids on towns and refugee camps in the West Bank and have killed more than 300 Palestinians and arrested almost 5,000. Furthermore, many Arab Israeli citizens of the State of Israel feel seriously intimidated. What does this strategy of collective punishment mean? How do you read it?

The Netanyahu government is even more opposed than its predecessors to compromise with the Palestinians. Even before Oct. 7, clashes between Palestinians and the army and/or bands of settler vigilantes in the West Bank had reached unprecedented proportions. The war in Gaza provides a smokescreen for military incursions and vigilante activities seeking to impose full Israeli control on the West Bank. While international attention is focused on Gaza, the Israeli government is determined to make the West Bank Israeli territory through land confiscation, expulsions of the population and the policing of Palestinian civil life, hand-in-hand with strengthening the Jewish presence there and enthusiastically arming them.

Inside Israel, this government is committed to ethnocentricity, promoting Israel as the national state for Jews. The consequence is the curtailing of the freedoms of Israeli non-Jewish citizens—the 1.75 million Palestinians. This is not only collective punishment connected to Oct. 7 but also continuing policy under the cover of war in Gaza. Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel are under surveillance for any expression of dissent from the ruling ideology. Unlike their fellow Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, they have political rights in Israel but are faced with structural discrimination and widespread suspicion. What was once considered extremist racism rearing its head at the margins of Israeli society has become strategies proposed by government ministers, for those one-time extremists are now the ruling elites.

Various polls show that the Israeli public strongly backs this war. Does the Israeli media inform them that the bombing of Gaza, in retaliation for Hamas’s killing of some 1,200 Israelis on Oct. 7, has already caused the deaths of more than 22,000 Palestinians (almost half of them children), which means about 20 Palestinians for every Israeli killed? And if they know it, how do they justify it?

Mainstream Israeli media are supporting the war effort. The media make sure that Israelis stay focused on the horrific events of Oct. 7. Every day, they profile someone killed or someone kidnapped. Each week, new and gorier details of the massacres perpetrated are revealed in order to focus on the necessity for self-defence. While the grief and loss of Israelis are very real, there is nonetheless an ongoing exploitation of their emotional state by the media, which continually emphasizes that they are the victims, to justify the war, and so the narrative in the media must be confined to Oct. 7, Israeli mourning, loss and the trauma of the ongoing hostage crisis. There is no place left in the Israeli narrative for what might be happening in Gaza.

According to this presentation, every person in Gaza is responsible for what happened on Oct. 7. Did they not vote for Hamas? And if they wanted to, could they not rebel against Hamas? The demonization of Hamas and by extension the entire Gaza population is essential to shield Israelis from the so-called collateral damage of their army, the deaths of non-militants, men, women and children and the total destruction of entire neighbourhoods.

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The Israeli army is presented as the most moral in the world. Death and destruction wreaked in Gaza is collateral damage in a just war. Israelis are told that many of those killed are militants rather than civilians, and civilians killed were used as human shields by the militants. After an Israeli rampage through a Catholic school in Gaza City, an Israeli soldier scrawled on one of the walls: “Hamas is responsible, you pay the price.”

The rhetoric used counts on revitalizing the most traumatic memories of Jewish history, pogroms in Russia and the Shoah. From the first day, the language used to describe Oct. 7 drew its images and gory poetics from Jewish literature penned in the aftermath of those historic traumas.

The U.N. says 1.9 million Palestinians are being forced to struggle for survival in a decreasingly small part of the Gaza Strip. What do you see happening here?

What we see is the almost total devastation of Gaza. What we hear repeatedly from political spokespeople in Israel are genocidal intentions and dreams of ethnic cleansing. These range from proposals to drop “a nuclear bomb on Gaza” to burying the population or expelling it. Plans to transfer huge populations to other countries continue to surface. Over 70 percent of Gazans are refugees whose forefathers were pushed out of what became Israel. Pushing them even further away from the borders seems to be the dream of the present Israeli political and military establishment.

What can abort this dream is the concerted response of the international community. So far, there has been a blanket rejection of the idea of transferring the Gaza population. That means that the devastated Strip will have to be reconstructed once again, as it has been after each successive Israeli attack since 2008. And this cycle of destruction and reconstruction will continue, until when?

Pope Francis, like some 153 governments at the U.N., has called many times for a ceasefire. He has urged the leaders on both sides to listen to their consciences, but this has provoked negative reactions not only from the Israeli government but also even from rabbis. How do you see his call?

The Holy Father is courageously sticking to his guns despite not only Israeli pushback but also criticism from the Jewish world. The chief rabbi of South Africa released a strident video attacking the pope. Chief Rabbi Lau of Israel sent a letter condemning the pope’s position. In a more respectful tone, over 400 Jews engaged in dialogue with the church asked the pope for more understanding of Jewish fears.

The pope has provoked fury for pointing to a parallelism between the terror used by Hamas on Oct. 7 and the terror used by the Israeli army since then. He is rejecting the claim that the conflict began with Hamas’s attack and Israel then responded in legitimate self-defence. The horrific massacre on Oct. 7 triggered the latest phase in this decades’ long conflict, a continuation of the cycle of violence.

The Holy Father has called for responsibility in leadership. In June 2014, at the invocation for peace in the Vatican, in the presence of the Israeli and Palestinian presidents, he called for “an act of supreme responsibility before our consciences and before our peoples.” According to the pope, the only thing that can “break the spiral of hatred and violence” is “the word ‘brother.’ But to be able to utter this word we have to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge one another as children of one Father.”

The Holy Father is deeply committed to relationship with the Jewish people. It is unfortunate that he is not heard within the framework of the deepening friendship between Catholics and Jews that has developed since the Second Vatican Council. Friends can disagree. Jewish-Catholic relations must not be held hostage to Israel’s attempts to legitimate its policies and practices. A distinction must be made between the Jewish people and the State of Israel. As Catholics, we are committed to relationship, based upon our shared heritage and our remorse for a shameful past, but that cannot compromise our call for justice for the Palestinian people.

What do you say to those who equate criticism of the Israeli government’s war policy with antisemitism?

Criticism of Israel’s government, its policies, army and vigilantes is not antisemitism. Whereas this war might indeed strengthen antisemitism, providing an unjustifiable excuse to vilify all Jews and attack them, protesting Israel’s behaviour does not constitute antisemitism. Catholics are indeed called to be sensitive to Jewish fears and historic traumas. When we address Jews today, we are addressing friends, companions on the way, united with them in fighting antisemitism in all its forms.

However, this precious relationship cannot be manipulated and perverted in order to silence voices that condemn Israeli aggression against Palestinians. The insistence of the Israeli administration on total

solidarity with its war instrumentalizes antisemitism, Jewish suffering and the Jewish-Christian relationship in order to silence voices of protest.

What do you say to the total U.S. support for Israel in this war?

This for me is one of the most shocking elements of this war. Total and uncritical U.S. support for Israel is not new. Decades of veto at the U.N. in favour of Israel bear witness to the United States' refusal to play a constructive role in bringing the conflict to an end. But this time, the one-sided support has reached unthinkable degrees when war crimes of the dimensions that are being committed are ignored or even justified.

How do you see this conflict between Israel and Hamas ending?

The basic conflict is not between Israel and Hamas. The conflict is between Jewish Israeli nationalism and Palestinian nationalism. It has been going on for decades, and in its present form, the most extremist versions of this nationalism on both sides confront each other. Jewish nationalist refusal to recognize Palestinians and their rights led to the emergence of Hamas, born of the anger, frustration and despair provoked by this refusal.

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However, the conflict can be traced back to the fateful years when Jewish nationalists aligned themselves with British colonialism rather than engaging in a dialogue with Palestinians and their emerging nationalist movement. Things might have looked very different if Jewish nationalism had not used British hegemony in Palestine to achieve its goals and instead had sought to promote the freedom and development of all peoples in the Middle East.

Perhaps, the conflict will only come to an end when there is a reorientation of Jewish Israeli consciousness, accepting the Palestinian and Arab context in which Israel exists. Israeli dreams to have Palestine and Palestinians disappear need to be replaced with creative energies to engage with Palestinians in promoting a common home in which all live in equality, justice, mutual respect and peace.

Given the hate this conflict has produced, do you see any hope for Palestinians and Israelis living together after this war?

I keep hope alive through my faith. I believe God is the Lord of history and not the political leaders who have betrayed humanity generation after generation. I also derive my hope from other conflict situations that have been transformed, sometimes quicker than anyone would have believed. People are resilient and seem capable of waking up from their darkness. I was born in South Africa, and that example keeps me hopeful, too.

Do you think a two-state solution is still a viable proposal? If not, what is the alternative?

The partition into two states was the proposal of the U.N. in 1947 after the British had failed dismally in their mandate for Palestine. Since that time, the international community has done very little to ensure that partition becomes a reality. Israel has sought to block partition through occupation and discrimination. Now partition might no longer be a possibility. However, the two-state solution does not derive from a language of encounter, dialogue and reconciliation but rather from the language of separation and division.

Foundational to moving beyond war is the promotion of equality, freedom and mutual respect.

Palestinians sense that the whole land is theirs. Is Jaffa or Nazareth less Palestinian than Gaza or Hebron? Jews sense connectedness, spiritual, religious and historical, to East Jerusalem and Hebron, even more than to Tel Aviv. Today there are 14 million inhabitants between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Seven million are Jewish Israelis and seven million are Palestinian Arabs. Perhaps we need to cultivate a dream of starting over again in a shared space where Jews and Arabs can build together a common future. Amid this war, where hatreds run so deep, any culture of encounter seems like a dream. So why not dream wild, of the day after Jew against Arab, of a day when Jew is with Arab?