

Interview with the Israeli ambassador Ifat Reshef

The shock of Hamas' brutal attack on Israel was very short-lived internationally: after just a few days, the sympathies of many were with the people in the Gaza Strip - the reason for Israel's reaction seemed to be forgotten. Do you have an explanation for this?

Indeed, the solidarity expressed with Israel after the horrific October 7th massacres was unprecedented, but the speed of change we have witnessed in the public narrative is very alarming.

I believe this was the outcome of a very well planned, organized and financed propaganda campaign against Israel which pre dated October 7th but was immediately used to try and change people's perception of Israelis from victims to aggressors.

What bothers me is why those professional Israel haters and antisemites are so successful in winning the hearts and minds of so many people who just want to do the right thing. Why are people ready to believe the worst about Israel, and why is Israel not allowed to exercise its right to self-defense the way any other democracy would be.

In connection with the pro-Palestine protests at universities, the former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared: «Israel has already lost the war of opinions.» Do you share this opinion? What could be the reasons for this?

I agree that we are not doing well right now in the war of opinions. It both angers and saddens me, but most of all I am very concerned. We already see very detrimental implications, such as the alarming rise in antisemitic expressions and physical attacks against Jews in the US and in Europe, including here in Switzerland.

But what other choice do we have? A democratic country's most sacred obligation is to defend its citizens. This is a war of no choice that we were not planning to fight. This was brutally forced upon us by Hamas on October 7th. If we do not fight until we take away their military capabilities, they will come again.

So all those attacking Israel right now should ask themselves if they are not unintentionally serving Hamas's cause.

Hamas wants to bring about an end to the fighting without having to free any more hostages so they will be able to maintain enough combatants and terrorist infrastructure, as they still have in Rafah, in order to rebuild their force and continue to govern Gaza.

Is this really the future the critics of Israel envisage for all of us?

Why are US elite universities in particular manifesting such one-sided, militant partisanship in favor of the Palestinian people?

I believe students there are being used by people with a clear anti-Israel agenda coming mostly from outside the campuses. Young people are persuaded to chant slogans whose meanings they do not understand, such as "from the river to the sea", which is a call to eliminate the State of Israel and commit ethnic cleaning of Jews in the Middle East.

To me, this is not at all helping the Palestinian cause. It is serving Hamas terrorists who are the greatest enemies of Palestinian children in Gaza and elsewhere. Their leaders are ready to sacrifice all Palestinians in order to defeat Israel.

Just think of the millions of dollars they invested in building the huge tunnel apparatus under Gaza. If only they had invested just a fraction of it in the future and well-being of children in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly emphasizes that the war will only end with the complete destruction of Hamas. This stance also brings him criticism from within his own country. What is the Israeli position on this issue?

This indeed is one of the main goals of this war that Hamas forced upon us - to take away Hamas's governing and military capabilities so they cannot continue to threaten and attack us from Gaza as they did on October 7th and have continued to do ever since.

It's important to note that since October 7th Israel continues to be targeted daily by rockets and missiles fired not only by Hamas but also by other Iranian proxies who are trying to help their partner Hamas, the main one being Hezbollah in Lebanon. To date, we still have more than 120,000 displaced Israelis and entire communities evacuated of their population because of this dangerous situation both to our south and to our north.

What other country would have accepted such a situation and not fight back to restore security for its citizens?

But perhaps the most difficult thing is the inhuman dilemmas Hamas created for us on October 7th, which are behind the criticism and heated debates in Israel that you alluded to. Time is running out to get our hostages back while there is a chance that they are still alive. Our government is faced with an impossible decision: whether to stop the fighting before Hamas is completely defeated in order to save more hostages, while not at all convinced that Hamas leader Yahia Senwar even wants a deal. We believe that given the mounting international pressure on Israel, he thinks this could make Israel cease fighting without him having to release any more hostages.

Israel argues with the right to self-defense. In view of the fact that most of the victims are civilians and tens of thousands of people in the Gaza Strip are suffering from a lack of food and medical aid, the question arises as to whether Israel can still be said to be waging a legitimate war of self-defense.

There cannot be a more justified war than the one we were forced to enter into following the unspeakable atrocities committed against Israeli men, women, children, babies and the elderly on October 7th. But this has also been a disproportionate war because on one side you have a UN member, a democratic state which adheres to international law, and on the other side, a murderous terrorist organization which acknowledges no law nor moral or human values.

The Israeli army informs the enemy where we are heading next each time it advises the civilian population where it should evacuate from. Israel is also engaged with the

international community in a vast and proactive operation to facilitate the entrance of growing quantities of humanitarian assistance into Gaza (so far more than 33,000 trucks carrying more than 612,000 tons of aid). At the same time, Hamas is looting the aid for its own use and shooting at the crossings through which it enters Gaza.

Israel is trying to mitigate the suffering of the Palestinian population in Gaza brought about by their own (illegal) government and at the same time is being accused for the situation Hamas has created. Hamas can end this war immediately but chooses not to do so, encouraged by the increasing criticism against Israel.

What is Israel doing to protect the Christian minority, whose existence is increasingly threatened?

As mentioned, Israelis are trying to keep all civilian populations in Gaza out of harm's way and have repeatedly and consistently used various methods of advising people to evacuate beforehand into safer areas. At the same time, unfortunately, Hamas continues to use civilians in Gaza as human shields and benefits from images of civilians suffering on both sides.

I believe the Christian community in Gaza was not doing very well even before the war Hamas started on October 7th.

It's been almost 20 years since Israel withdrew from the Gaza strip and therefore, we were not in a position to intervene with what was happening there. The Christian minority, like other vulnerable minorities in Gaza, as well as in the West Bank, has been under constant threat by Hamas, even before the war, and this is why its numbers have gradually decreased over the years with many members of the community choosing to flee to the West.

Being aware of their dire situation and despite the war, Israel allowed Cardinal Pizzaballa from Jerusalem, who is also responsible for the Christian community in Gaza, to visit his congregation there before Pentecost so he could strengthen them and pray together. He also paid a visit to the Greek Orthodox church.

How do you assess the Vatican's policy on the current war between Hamas and Israel?

After the 7th of October, the Pope said that Israel has a right to defend itself, designated Hamas a terror organization and called for the release of the hostages. But as the war continued, the Holy See made a point of "remaining balanced", thereby describing the situation as if, from a moral point of view, Israel, a UN member state fighting to defend itself, could be compared to a terror organization which has committed the most barbaric atrocities against peaceful civilians (Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians) and who is responsible for the biggest attack against Jews since the Holocaust. We of course do not agree with this misrepresentation and made sure to convey our dismay in the appropriate channels.

Is there a realistic prospect of a lasting peace and what do you think it should look like?

We in Israel continue to aspire for peace and normalization with all our neighbors. The

important Abraham Accords, which have a huge potential contribution for prosperity and resilience for the entire Middle East region, continue in the face of joint challenges, and this is a great source of hope in this very dark and painful period. But of course Iran's continued support of all its proxies, including the Palestinian terrorist organizations, is a major concern. As to our future relations with the Palestinians, one has to understand that peace in the Middle East will not last without addressing Israel's security needs. We will need strong guarantees, especially after October 7th, that such attacks cannot happen again.

Any political solution should be the outcome of direct negotiations between the parties and agreed upon by them, and not forced unilaterally by the international community. For that, we will need a credible and moderate partner on the Palestinian side. Hamas should be out of the equation as a legitimate actor which can participate in any future elections or government.

For that to happen, Hamas needs to be sanctioned or banned as a terrorist organization by the vast majority of the international community, including Switzerland.

Gaza should be demilitarized and deradicalized, including its educational system, and anyone who takes part in a future leadership there should denounce terrorism completely. Only then will we have a chance of restoring Israelis' trust in the Palestinian willingness to live in peace and give up the dream of eliminating us. Only then do we stand a chance of conducting serious political negotiations on our future together.