

Two peoples, two States: The unwavering position of the Popes and the Holy See

By Salvatore Cernuzio

The “two-State” solution is, and remains, the only possible path to peace between Israel and Palestine. Popes have changed, as has the situation in the Middle East, where violence and division have intensified dramatically since 7 October 2023. Yet for almost eighty years, the Holy See’s diplomatic position has remained unshakeable: “two States” as the only prospect capable of guaranteeing justice and a just and lasting peace. Pope Leo XIV is the latest to forcefully reaffirm this historic position, which has endured through the decades despite the Israeli government’s firm rejection of it.

“I urgently call on the international community to work toward advancing the two-state solution, for a just and lasting peace,” Pope Leo said at the Angelus in Castel Gandolfo on Sunday, 16 August, after condemning the abuses and violence suffered by Palestinians in the West Bank. The Pope called for renewed momentum so that this project—first formally outlined in 1947 in the plan adopted by the United Nations General Assembly to partition Mandatory Palestine into two States—might finally become a reality.

A firmly established diplomatic position

Beginning with the call for the internationalization of Jerusalem’s holy sites in 1947, the two-State solution became, from the 1980s onwards, a cornerstone of the Holy See’s diplomatic position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a steadfast stance, not shaped by emotional reactions to repeated escalations, but firmly rooted in history and consistently reinforced by successive Popes.

Pius XII’s call to protect the holy places

The first statements date back to 1948, when Pius XII, in the Encyclical *In multiplicibus curis*, called for “an order that may guarantee security of existence and, at the same

time, the moral and physical conditions of life conducive to spiritual and material well-being” for each of the parties to the conflict.

In the subsequent Encyclical *Redemptoris nostri cruciatus* of 1949, concerned that the holy places associated with the life of the Saviour might suffer the devastation of war, Pope Pius XII urged the faithful to “use every legitimate means” to persuade world leaders to accord Jerusalem and its surroundings “a juridical status” whose stability could be adequately guaranteed by the united efforts of peace-loving nations.

Paul VI and the legitimate rights of the Palestinians

Paul VI, the first Pope to travel to the Holy Land, in 1964, spoke explicitly of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967, reframing the issue from a humanitarian emergency into a fundamental political question.

In a heartfelt message to United Nations Secretary-General U Thant, Pope Paul VI appealed on behalf of the entire Christian world for “every effort” to be made to ensure that Jerusalem, “because of its peculiarly sacred and holy character,” might be declared “an open and inviolable city,” free from military operations and spared the consequences of war.

The decisive impetus of John Paul II

The decisive impetus, however, came from John Paul II, the first Pope to call forcefully for the Palestinians’ right to an independent homeland while at the same time reaffirming Israel’s right to live in security.

This twofold appeal was enshrined in the 1984 Apostolic Letter *Redemptionis anno*.

“For the Jewish people 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 Pope said.

“The Palestinian people, who find their historical roots in that land and 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.”

He reiterated the same message in 2000 during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land—not the first by a Pope, but one acclaimed as “historic” because of its significance.

Benedict XVI’s support

Nine years later, another Pope set foot in the holy yet wounded land of Jesus. It was May 2009, when Benedict XVI travelled to the Middle East.

Following in his predecessor’s footsteps, he stressed that the “two-State” formula was not a utopian vision, but a necessary condition for ending the spiral of violence and securing a future for the region.

“The Holy See supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbors, within internationally recognized borders,” Pope Benedict said.

He urged Palestinians to “keep alive the flame of hope, hope that a way can be found of meeting the legitimate aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians for peace and stability.”

The words and gestures of Pope Francis

Under Pope Francis, this commitment took on a more international and formal character. It was reinforced by diplomatic initiatives—including the Holy See’s signing in 2015 of the Comprehensive Agreement officially recognizing the State of Palestine—as well as by more pastoral gestures, such as the 2014 prayer for peace in the Vatican Gardens with Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

That gathering was one of the fruits of Pope Francis’ journey to the Holy Land in late May, during which Jorge Mario Bergoglio stated unequivocally: “The time has come for

everyone to find the courage to be generous and creative in the service of the common good, the courage to forge a peace which rests on the acknowledgment by all of the right of two States to exist and to live in peace and security within internationally recognized borders.”

In the years that followed, until his death, Pope Francis sought to give greater diplomatic and symbolic momentum to the implementation of the solution. His words and gestures were consistently supported by statements from the Holy See’s Permanent Missions to international organizations and by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, who repeatedly stressed that the “two peoples, two States” solution is the most urgent political path to pursue.

Pope Leo XIV’s appeals

This legacy is now in the hands of Pope Leo XIV, who from the outset has placed the two-State framework back at the center of the global debate.

Particularly memorable were his remarks aboard the flight from Istanbul to Beirut, during his Apostolic Journey to Türkiye and Lebanon: “The Holy See for several years has publicly supported the proposal of a two-state solution. We all know that in this moment Israel still does not accept this solution, but we see it as the only solution that could offer—let us say—a solution to the conflict that they continuously live.”

He reiterated this position during his address to the Diplomatic Corps on 9 January 2026: “In particular, the two-State solution remains the institutional perspective for meeting the legitimate aspirations for both peoples.”

The appeals of Pope Leo and his predecessors still await a response. War continues to devastate peoples, while the path towards peace appears increasingly clouded. Yet for the Popes and the Holy See, political deadlock and humanitarian tragedy do not invalidate the solution; on the contrary, they demonstrate its urgency. This is the urgency Pope Leo XIV has highlighted by calling upon the international community to assume its responsibility.