

CONFLICT

Iran-Israel, a war to change the balance of power in the Middle East

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Israel's ongoing attack on Iran is not merely the predictable response of the Jewish state to the renewed threat of Iran's nuclear program, given Tehran's rejection of the Trump administration's attempts at negotiation. Nor is it just another episode in the recurring,

dramatic skirmish between Jerusalem and the Ayatollah regime, such as the two exchanges of airstrikes between April and July 2024.

This time, from the outset of the ambitious operation (not coincidentally immediately described explicitly as “war” by Benjamin Netanyahu's government), the stakes appeared much higher. The Israelis' ambition to inflict such heavy damage on their main existential enemy as to not only roll back the uranium enrichment program for military purposes that Tehran has stubbornly pursued, but even to put an end to any power ambitions of that regime for a long time, if not its possible downfall, has clearly emerged. This objective is also evident in the targeted killings not only of scientists and political leaders involved in the nuclear program, but also of senior political figures in the regime, such as those in the interior and defense ministries, and the leaders of the Pasdaran, which is the regime's real armed wing.

To fully understand the significance of this turning point, it must first be placed in the broader context of the radical change in the balance of power in the Middle East following the massacre perpetrated by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023. Since that date – despite the intention of the Islamist organization and its inspirers in Tehran to block the rapprochement between Jerusalem and the Sunni Arab countries – a process of rapid and radical weakening of Iran and its proxies throughout the area has been set in motion. This process began with Israel's impressive military response, continued with a series of other upheavals, and was reinforced by Donald Trump's election to the White House. After a brief period of renewed appeasement towards Tehran marked by the Biden administration, Trump has resumed his efforts to weave the interrupted fabric of the “Abraham Accords,” which began in 2020, aiming to crown them with an axis between Israel and Saudi Arabia that would serve as an insurmountable barrier against Iranian influence.

In less than a year and a half, almost all the cornerstones of the destabilizing action of the Ayatollah regime have fallen or been cruelly reduced. Hamas has been decapitated of almost its entire leadership and is now reduced to a very weak catacomb resistance in Gaza, which is once again occupied. Hezbollah has suffered an equally bitter defeat in southern Lebanon, and a president acceptable to the Saudis has been elected to lead the country bordering Israel.

The Assad regime in Syria, Tehran's number one ally in the so-called “Axis of Resistance” against Jerusalem and protected by Russia, has fallen disastrously, making way for a new government that is indeed an offshoot of Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood, but has for the moment ensured peaceful relations with the Israelis and

was invited by Trump, during his visit to the Middle East a few months ago, to join the “Abraham Accords” negotiations.

The Houthis in Yemen, who remain the most effective weapon of blackmail for the fundamentalist axis against the West due to their ability to block oil traffic between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, have been heavily hit by repeated US air raids. Qatar itself has been ensnared by Trump's diplomatic web and no longer seems to be in complete harmony with the Iranians.

Tehran has remained increasingly isolated, while the convergence between Jerusalem and the “petromonarchies” has been cemented. This has been further confirmed in recent days, when Jerusalem launched its devastating offensive. In fact, beyond an isolated statement of condemnation from Riyadh, the eloquent silence of almost all Sunni Arab countries demonstrates—adding to their repeated pronouncements against Shiite theocracy—that they consider Iran their main antagonist, are as distressed as the Israelis by its nuclear projects and expansionism, and willingly allow Israel, as on other occasions, do the ‘dirty work’ for them by striking Tehran painfully.

The last important element in understanding the context in which the current conflict is taking place is Trump's attitude. Many observers noted, when the attack was launched, that the US administration wanted to distance itself from Israel's action, specifying that it would not participate directly. This could indicate either a division of labor between the two allies (“good cop/bad cop”) or a certain irritation on the part of the US president, who would have preferred to continue contacts and start negotiations with the Iranian regime rather than open a new front in the war. This impression seems to be corroborated by Trump's statements on Sunday, in which he relaunched the idea of a deal between Jerusalem and Tehran, sponsored by him, to end the conflict, and even, after a telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin, declared himself open to the latter's role as mediator.

The truth, in this regard, may lie somewhere in between. On the one hand, it is clear that Trump's preferred scenario would be a decisive downsizing of Tehran's power ambitions in the area through a peaceful negotiation process, rather than through a conflict that, in any case, would risk undermining the delicate balances he is trying to consolidate—and, for example, opening up new spaces for Ankara's ambitions to penetrate. But, on the other hand, the terrible blow dealt to Tehran just one day after the deadline he had set for resuming nuclear negotiations is confirmation, before the eyes of the world, that he is increasingly the one calling the shots in the new Middle East

order. And if the blow were so strong as to lead to regime change in Iran, or at least to a transition to a less extremist government, this could be a further opportunity for him to pursue that strategic “great game” in which the renewed balance in the Middle East is linked to the resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Promoting a peace agreement with Kiev that is overall favorable to Moscow, while at the same time confirming, in a spirit of reconciliation with Israel, Russia's influence over Tehran, would in fact mean for the US president to further clear the way for the Jerusalem-Riyadh agreement, which would provide for Saudi protection over Gaza and the Saudis' entry into the Mediterranean.