

MIDDLE EAST

Israel against Hamas: two options, one big risk

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**Gianandrea
Gaiani**



The new, ferocious war between Israel and Hamas is dividing the world and public opinion in the West between those who justify the Israeli reaction to the ruthless attacks carried out on its territory by the Palestinian jihadist militias and those who instead consider the Palestinians eternal victims of abuse and Israeli "occupation". As often happens when propaganda steeped in humanitarian assessments and speculations

dominates on both sides of the barricade, it is the fundamental political and strategic issues that remain in the shadows.

The motivation that pushed Hamas (and its sponsors) to unleash such a brutal attack on Israeli territory on the night between 6 and 7 October (fifty years after the attack by Syrian Egyptian troops in the 1973 Yom Kippur War) is in fact of a political and strategic nature: to block the process to normalise relations between the Jewish State and several Arab countries, known as the Abraham Accords. So far, agreements of this type have been signed between Jerusalem and the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Bahrain and Morocco while negotiations were underway with Saudi Arabia. Arab nations that would join Egypt and Jordan which already have had normal relations with Israel for many years.

The attack by Hamas and the ferocity of its militias in killing and kidnapping even Israeli civilians therefore seems to have had the sole purpose of humiliating Israel and unleashing its fury as was well highlighted by the words of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who did not speak of "reprisal" or "punitive expedition" against the Palestinian militias but rather "revenge", an uncommon term in the vocabulary of a statesman.

In fact, the Hamas attack is provoking a violent military response from Israel which will inevitably cause many victims among the population, who are effectively held hostage by Hamas. Hamas has always used the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip as human shields in the same way all irregular militias usually do and in particular those jihadists, from the Taliban to ISIS.

The Hamas offensive in Israeli territory was planned perfectly, including the elimination of civilians and very young people. But, it has also certainly prepared itself very well to face the Israeli invasion of Gaza by mining roads and intersections, transforming cellars into bunkers, preparing the territory to defend itself vigorously using the tunnels and underground depots built with the support of Iranian military advisors and Qatari money.

The objective to cause civilian carnage, is so the media can slap the news in the face of public opinion in the West and the Arab world in order to induce the former to pressure Israel to stop or moderate the attacks and the latter to put pressure on their respective governments to stop all relations with Israel.

To achieve this result, Hamas considers Palestinian civilians like Israeli civilians, as well as its own militiamen: nothing more than expendable pawns, paradoxically facilitated by

Israel, where the extermination of its citizens has led to a less attentive approach to so-called "collateral damage" than in the past", among the Palestinian population.

In just one week, Hamas can already claim a partial victory. Saudi Arabia has suspended talks with Israel while other nations that have already reopened relations show impatience with Jerusalem's military response. Better not to forget that among the numerous countries that have expressed solidarity with Hamas are Qatar, Iran, Syria, Tunisia and Algeria. The recent agreement mediated by Beijing which brought back dialogue between Iran and the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf, is creating in the current context, the risk that Tehran and Riyadh will adopt a common position towards the Israeli offensive in Gaza.

This is a scenario that would favour the emergence of mediation between Israel and Hamas by China and perhaps also Russia, focused on the release of at least the 150 Israeli hostages transferred to the Gaza Strip. The position taken by Beijing and Moscow, which unlike the West have not taken a clear stand alongside Jerusalem or expressed explicit condemnations of the Hamas attacks, has led to strong criticism in Europe but seems to have the clear objective of placing the Russians and Chinese in a better placed to act as negotiators in this crisis.

The diplomatic options in Israel's hands, however, are very few. After the attack suffered, the Israelis today must restore the security conditions in the southern regions at all costs and to achieve this objective they will have to wipe out Hamas from Gaza, even fighting house to house at the cost of huge losses (over 260 Israeli troops have fallen so far). Any other outcome of the current military campaign would constitute a military, political and reputational defeat for Israel.

In summary, in order to win, Israel must eliminate the Palestinian jihadist militia once and for all; to win, Hamas just needs to survive.

Looking ahead, Israel must deal with the failure of the project involving the transfer of territories in exchange for peace and which was supported under strong pressure by the United States and Europe. In 2000, the Ehud Barak's Labour government ordered a withdrawal from the occupied security belt in southern Lebanon. Barak did so in exchange for a guarantee that no one would attack Israel from the Lebanese borders. But, in reality Hezbollah took control of the border and, under the pretext that the Israelis had not abandoned the Shebaa Farms, a small plot of land on the border between Israel, Lebanon and the occupied Syrian Golan, continued to strike Israel with ever greater intensity thanks also to weapons, funds and training guaranteed

by the Iranian Pasdaran. Among other things, the Hezbollah militias have positioned themselves in an advantageous position on hills overlooking the Galilee up to Haifa, within range of the Scythian militia's rockets.

The Gaza Strip has already been "Israel's Vietnam" which withdrew from that territory in 2005 at the behest of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a "hawk" who challenged public opinion by also dismantling the Jewish settlements to complete the "Territories in peace exchange" by handing the Strip over to the Palestinian National Authority which lost control of it in 2007, when Hamas eliminated all of al-Fatah followers in combat and with summary executions, giving way to jihadist militarisation to resume the fight against Israel.

The attack by Hamas on 7 October and the resumption of hostilities with Hezbollah, even if for now at low intensity, therefore sanction the complete failure of that project and the "mockery" of those agreements which should have led to peace and which instead have only caused Israel to lose "buffer" regions to protect the national territory, thus facilitating the expansion and strengthening of increasingly aggressive enemies close to its borders.

Israel is therefore faced with a strategic dilemma: conquer the entire Gaza Strip and eliminate the Hamas militiamen, restoring a security belt to defend its southern borders but compromising years of diplomatic work for the normalisation of relations with the Arabs, or limit military raids and allow Hamas to survive, compromising the credibility of its security policy.