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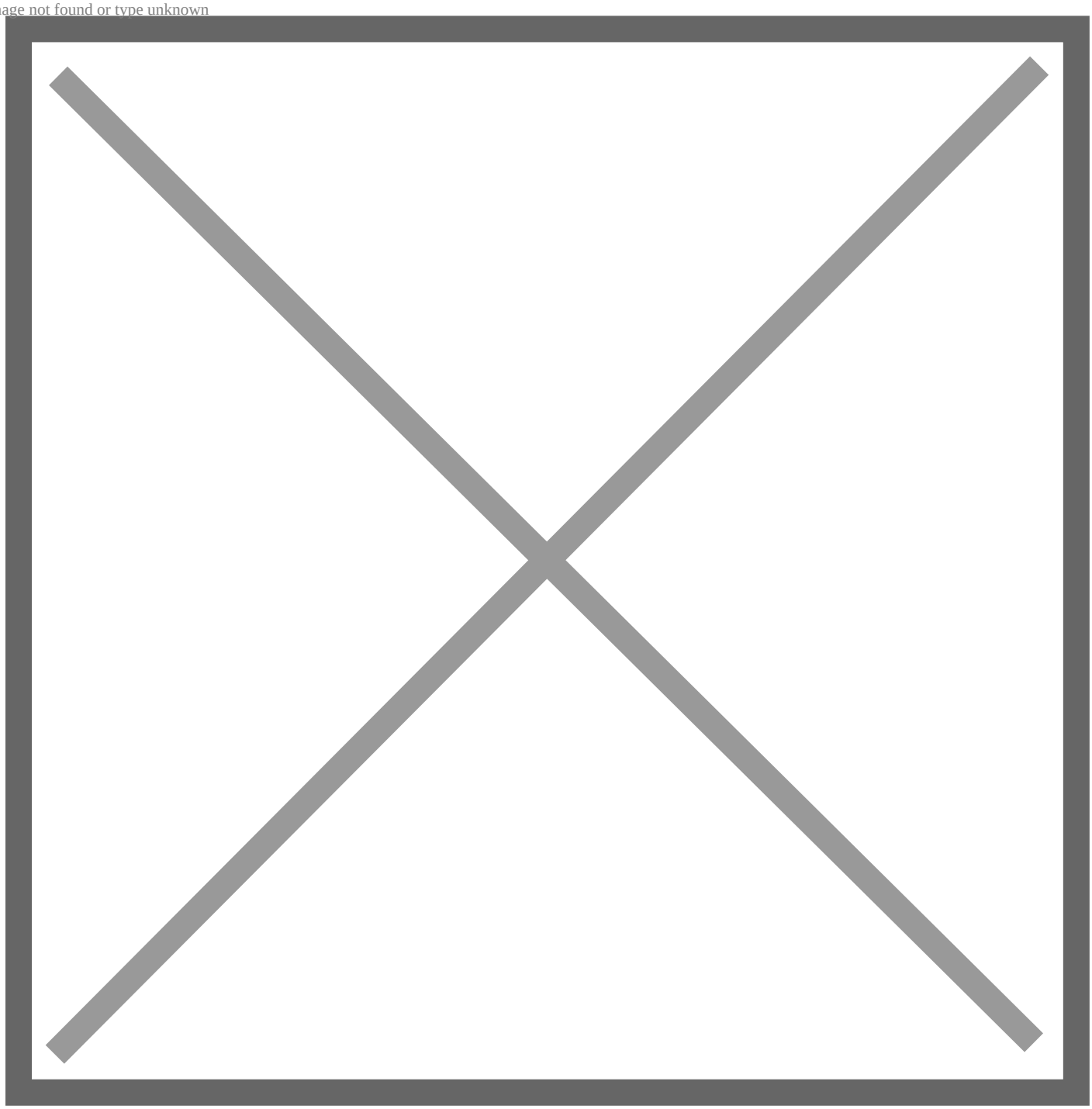

MIDDLE EAST

Israel-Iran, a war that paves the way for further tragedies

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As was easily predictable, Israel's attack on Iran has unleashed opposing factions, whose main focus is their judgement of the Jewish state: on the one hand, those who believe that “the Israeli government is right no matter what, its right to exist is a moral absolute that cannot be limited in any way, and in any case it is the outpost of the West's defence against Islamist regimes that want our destruction”; on the other, those who believe that “Israel should not even exist, it was born on stolen land and does nothing but provoke wars to eliminate other peoples; in short, it is a terrorist state”.
It goes without saying that in the second case, anyone who comes under the Israeli army's sights becomes a victim and earns full political and human support, even if, as in the case of Iran, it is an Islamist theocracy that was criticised until the day before, for example for the oppression of women.

In both cases, it seems pointless to reason, to evaluate the many factors that, even and above all in this case, constitute reality. It is pointless to evoke certain principles of

international and humanitarian law: even in this case, laws and treaties apply to enemies and are interpreted for friends.
In particular, when we talk of Catholics, it is significant that no reference is ever made to the criteria established by the Catechism and the Social Doctrine of the Church for assessing the legitimacy of military action as self-defence. Even more significant is the fact that the words spoken on the subject in recent days by Pope Leo XIV, which refer to those criteria, are quietly ignored.

In the aftermath of the Israeli attack on Iran, the Pope immediately expressed great concern, appealing to “responsibility and reason”. He called for ‘a commitment to build a world that is more secure and free from the threat of nuclear weapons,’ which ‘must be pursued through respectful encounter and sincere dialogue to build a lasting peace based on justice and patience.’ ‘No one,’ he added, ‘should ever threaten the existence of another.’
And on Wednesday 18 June, at the end of the general audience, he made a new appeal: 'We must not get used to war! On the contrary, we must reject as a temptation the appeal of powerful and sophisticated weapons. (...) In the name of human dignity and international law, I repeat to those responsible what Pope Francis used to say: war is always a defeat! And with Pius XII: 'Nothing is lost with peace. Everything can be lost with war.“

These are not moral sermons, but a profound understanding of the reality we are living and what is at stake: 'responsibility' should make us understand the grave risk of military action that could lead to the release of nuclear energy and to the spread of war to other countries: the possible direct entry of the United States, with unpredictable consequences, is a dramatic example of this. And “reason” should make us recognise the illusion of quick and victorious armed solutions to resolve disputes. Not only is history full of hoped-for lightning wars that turned into long and bloody conflicts, but recent events in the Middle East – and not only there, think of Russia in Ukraine – should teach us that the reality on the ground is always more complicated than what is envisaged on paper. And the consequences in terms of loss of life, suffering and hatred are extremely serious.
The path of “respectful encounter and sincere dialogue to build lasting peace” is certainly more difficult and may sometimes necessarily be accompanied by some use of force, but it is the only path that can build.

Getting used to war, or even considering it the only viable option, relying on military superiority – “powerful and sophisticated weapons” – only exacerbates the problems: the example of Gaza is clear. Destroying Hamas is a legitimate goal, but after a year and a half of war, Gaza has been practically razed to the ground, tens of thousands of people have been killed, two million have been displaced and reduced to starvation; while the Palestinian terrorist organisation has indeed lost much of its military capacity, it remains very much alive and has gained further support among the population humiliated by the Israeli army. And the hatred, already at dangerous levels, that has been sown with a heavy hand will make its presence felt for many generations.

Yet even the leaders of countries not directly involved in the conflict – see the recent G7 summit – now seem to see no other way forward than war, perhaps in the belief that the Iranian regime's days are numbered. But the days pass and things get more complicated: Iranian missiles have managed to pierce Israeli defences; to end the game on Iran's nuclear programme, the Fordow bunker site would have to be destroyed, but only US “bunker buster” bombs (weighing 13.5 tonnes each) could do the job: but US President Trump is wavering despite strong pressure to join Israel (he still hopes that Tehran will decide to sign an agreement to renounce its nuclear programme). There is also no sign of the hoped-for mobilisation of the Iranian people and the many opposition forces to the regime to overthrow the ayatollahs.

“No one should ever threaten the existence of another,” said Pope Leo XIV: this is a fundamental principle that was immediately interpreted, quite rightly, as an olive branch towards Israel, given that Ayatollah Khamenei never misses an opportunity to reiterate his goal of wiping Israel and all Jews off the face of the Earth. but it is a principle that also applies to the Israeli government when it plans to remove two million Palestinians from its borders.
Israel's sacrosanct right to exist does not justify the use of any means or the derogation from respect for the divine order. Even the Bible should teach us something: turning our backs on God's law has always ended in tragedy for Israel.