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MIDDLE EAST

Israel-Iran, only prayer can prevent the worst happening

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What will Israel do now? And when? And if, as announced, there will be a harsh response to the pelting of missiles launched on 1 October by Iran on Israel, what other response will come from Tehran? And how will this 'eye-for-an-eye spiral of violence', as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called it yesterday, ever be stopped? These are the questions that analysts, diplomats, and heads of government are asking in these hours with a mixture of concern and helplessness.

It is clear that with Israel's invasion of Lebanon on the morning of 1 October - however limited it may be - the war has escalated and the Iranian attack that arrived in the evening has sanctioned its transformation into a regional conflict with unpredictable consequences. Although Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated yesterday that Iran 'does not seek war with Israel' and that it 'does not want to escalate the conflict any further', no one thinks that the Israeli government will be persuaded by these words to avoid the harsh response already promised, which in turn will call for 'a stronger

response' heralded by Pezeshkian.

For his part, yesterday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a video statement, tried to unite the Israeli population by explaining that 'we are in the midst of a tough war against the axis of evil of Iran, which seeks to destroy us', preparing them for likely sacrifices. Israel's response, however, is not expected to come until there has been coordination with the United States, at least that is what Channel 12 TV reported on the decisions of the security cabinet. The question is to determine the targets to be hit in Iran: certainly strategic military sites, but US President Joe Biden, according to Bloomberg's report, has immediately made it clear that he will not support a possible attack against Iranian nuclear sites, an old pet project of Netanyahu's who considers it the best option to definitively end the game with Iran and its threat to Israel's existence.

Recent military and intelligence successes against Hezbollah - the decimation of its cadres with the pager bombing, the killing of leader Hassan Nasrallah and the destruction of half of its arsenal - have galvanised Netanyahu, whose consensus among Israeli citizens is again on the rise, and seem to be pushing him to step on the accelerator to eliminate all threats to Israel: that 'axis of evil' of which he spoke to the nation yesterday and which consists of the pro-Iranian militias found in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria, Gaza, the West Bank as well as, of course, Iran itself.

However, there are two elements that must be considered and should point Netanyahu to milder counsels. Besides the objective difficulty of keeping seven war fronts open at the same time, despite military and technological superiority, the fact that in the Iranian attack on 1 October, several missiles pierced the Israeli air shield cannot be underestimated. And this in spite of the fact that Israeli intelligence knew the targets chosen by Iran well in advance, as journalist [Thomas Friedman in the New York Times](#) has shown. According to an [analysis by the BBC](#), which studied all the available footage and verified on the spot, the Iranian missiles hit or skimmed three military sites: the Mossad headquarters north of Tel Aviv and the airbases of Tel Nof and Nevatim (the latter, according to Hezbollah, being the base from which the attack against Nasrallah started).

Even if Israel denies that hypersonic missiles were among those used by Iran (which Tehran instead affirms), there were certainly missiles capable of bypassing the Israeli defence. What could happen if, in response to the Israeli attack, Iran started to rain missiles on Israel continuously and not just in an isolated attack of a few hours? Beyond Netanyahu's bombastic declarations, the events of these days show that Israel too is vulnerable, and not only Iran and Hezbollah.

But there is another, more important aspect: even if Israel won a clear military victory, this would not lead to a just and lasting solution for the Middle East, and Israel would no longer be secure. Because in this year, which began with that tragic 7 October 2023 with the blitz by Hamas militiamen in Israel and continued with Israel's revenge on Gaza, as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, said in a 26 September letter to his diocese, 'the Holy Land, and not only it, has plunged into a vortex of violence and hatred never seen or experienced before'. The tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of displaced people, caused largely by the Israeli military reaction, are just the tip of the iceberg. Not only Gaza: if 60,000 people had to move from northern Israel to take shelter from Hezbollah rockets, in Lebanon there are already 1.2 million people displaced by Israeli bombing.

To think that all this will facilitate a solution is pure illusion: hatred will ensure that the militiamen killed will soon be replaced by others, in an endless spiral. Not only: 'Hatred,' Pizzaballa wrote, 'has also found a place in language and in political and social actions. And we must also add that it has already travelled far beyond the borders of the Middle East. Suffice it to think of the violent pro-Palestinian demonstrations throughout Europe and the United States and the disturbing increase in episodes of anti-Semitism. And hostility, if not outright hatred, even among Catholics who are divided into pro or anti-Israel, pro or anti-Palestinian and Islamist supporters.

Therefore, Cardinal Pizzaballa is addressing all of us when he affirms that 'we too have a duty to commit ourselves to peace, first of all preserving our hearts from all sentiments of hatred, and cultivating instead the desire of good for all'. War, with its burden of suffering, violence and bereavement, can never guarantee a solution to conflicts, all the more so in a Middle East where right and wrong are inextricably intertwined.

This is why it is important to adhere to the Patriarch of Jerusalem appeal (and yesterday also taken up by Pope Francis): 7 October, a date 'that has become a symbol of the drama we are living through', a day of prayer, fasting and penance to invoke peace from God, to commit ourselves to be instruments of peace wherever we are,

where the world seems instead to be charging towards total war.