

MIDDLE EAST

## Israel is in a dead end

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When US President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently that Israel is losing international consensus, he implicitly raised two questions that accompany the harsh Israeli offensive in Gaza: one political-strategic, the other ethical.

**It was predictable that after the vicious terrorist attack on 7 October**, Israel could not aim at anything less than the elimination of Hamas from the Palestinian

territories: any other goal would be a defeat. But the more the bombings and ground attacks continue - with their great load of death, destruction, and hatred - the more legitimate it is to wonder what Netanyahu's real goal is, what ideas he has for the post-war period, whether what he is doing is adequate to the goal, and even whether it is legitimate. Eliminating Hamas can in fact mean several things.

**What currently appears to be the case** is that for the Israeli prime minister, the annihilation of Hamas is to be understood in the sense of the physical elimination of all the fighters, since a political option (such as a transfer of the surviving militiamen to another 'friendly' country) has never even been proposed. So far, according to the sources of the Israeli army itself, an estimated 6 thousand Islamist fighters have been killed out of a total of about 30 thousand; and to achieve this result, more than 12 thousand civilians have also been killed, 1.9 million Palestinians are displaced (85% of the population, UN source), and everywhere houses have been destroyed. Of course, it is fair to take into account the fact that Hamas terrorists use civilians as shields, but this does not detract from the seriousness of the balance sheet. And it is not difficult to guess the human - and other - costs of this strategy, assuming it can be pursued to the end. Because in addition to the inevitable international pressure and internal tensions, the Netanyahu government must also reckon with inevitable incidents like the one yesterday in which the Israeli army mistakenly killed three young Jewish hostages in the hands of Hamas, taken for "a threat". The internal repercussions of such an incident are easy to imagine.

**But even assuming that the Israeli army finally succeeds** in driving the Hamas militiamen out of the Gaza Strip at the end of a long war, could it be said that Hamas would be finished? Israel must also consider the multiplication of hatred, in intensity and in diffusion, that a war like this is already provoking: the consensus with Hamas is also growing in the West Bank and more generally, hatred towards Israel is also growing in neighbouring Arab countries, conditioning the process of normalisation of relations that is as vital for Israel's security as the solution to the Palestinian problem. The physical elimination of Hamas fighters in Gaza could therefore turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory in the medium to long term.

**After all, the Hamas attack on 7 October** destroyed the myth of Israel's invincibility, and an international isolation might suggest to some enemy country to take advantage of it.

**Added to this are the uncertainties about the future.** Assuming that the Netanyahu government wins the war its way, what would be the solution for Gaza and

more generally for the Palestinian Territories? The Israeli prime minister in recent days has clearly said no to handing over Gaza to the Palestinian National Authority, judged to be no different from Hamas in its objectives; nor would he accept an international force under the aegis of the UN; nor does he yet intend to govern it directly, apart from the creation of a security strip. In the past few days we have hinted at possible future mediations, but everything is still hypothetical and the future scenarios all to be drawn, including the fate of the 2.5 million civilians in Gaza who are already at the extreme.

**The problem is that** - between the offensive in Gaza, a free hand to the settlers in the West Bank and declarations of fire - Netanyahu gives the impression that he is angry with all Palestinians and not only with Hamas and various terrorists.

**How can the Israeli prime minister think** of gaining any international consensus without a clear goal for the future that contemplates a possible solution for the Palestinian issue along with Israel's security? Even those who defend Israel's right to exist in security find it hard to support the Israeli government's decisions.

**Added to this is an important ethical problem.** The right-duty of self-defence, in this case exercised by Israel, still has limits of proportionality and respect for humanitarian law. It is not a black hole where everything becomes lawful. The use of force is legitimate as long as it does not become gratuitous violence and blind revenge. It is obviously difficult to translate principles on the battlefield, the situation is never black and white, but what we see tells us that the limit of what is permissible has long since been crossed. And this is certainly a factor that contributes in no small measure to the loss of international consensus for Israel.

**This should not be a cause for rejoicing,** because this situation favours at the international level those who would like to cancel the presence of Israel, which instead - it is right to reiterate - has every right to exist; it favours Islamic fundamentalism which, as we have seen in the last two months, has gained many supporters even in the West, especially among left-wing forces, and no one seems to notice this serious threat; it increases instability and conflict in the Middle East.

**This is enough** to hope that Israel will rethink its strategy.