

MIDDLE EAST

Wars and destabilisation, West pays Biden's mistakes

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Iran's night-time attack on Israel employing drones and ballistic missiles, supported by Hezbollah, at the moment appears to be a way for the regime in Tehran to get out of the military and political corner into which Israel had driven it with the raid against the

Iranian embassy in Damascus on 1 April, in which some of its senior figures, including General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, were killed.

The ayatollahs' government was faced with a very uncomfortable alternative. It could not leave the Israeli challenge unanswered so as not to lose face in front of its 'vassals' and allies like Hezbollah, Hamas and Syria, nor the internal nationalist consensus. But, neither could it respond so aggressively as to provoke open war with the Jewish state. An all-out conflict provoked by Tehran would provide Israel with the ideal opportunity to get out of the difficult situation it is in after 7 October: that of having to uproot Hamas from the Gaza Strip while attracting avalanches of 'humanitarian' criticism, albeit generally in bad faith and fuelled by anti-Jewish hatred. And it would recompose the entire West in support of the Israelis, while Russia, focused at the moment on quite other strategic priorities, could not give Tehran anything but more or less 'platonic' support.

The 'course' of the new crisis in a mainly demonstrative action (in light of the well-known efficiency of the Israeli Iron Dome anti-missile defence system), aimed more at throwing the ball back into the court of Benjamin Netanyahu's government, therefore appeared predictable. This does not mean, of course, that the episode is any less worrying, and that the risks of further outbreaks of war in the Middle East area, even serious ones, do not increase in a world political situation that is already very tense due to a well-known series of factors.

The Iranian action takes the form of yet another episode in the now proverbial 'third world war in pieces' (according to Pope Francis' notorious definition), but in a climate in which the individual 'pieces' are getting closer and closer together, increasing the likelihood that a spark will set off a general fire, and that the situation will spiral out of control. The individual open fronts in the crisis cannot be considered independent and randomly side by side, but are evidently united by a complex mechanism of reactions and counter-reactions, so that they constantly feed off each other.

If one looks at it from this point of view, the current new crisis between Israel and Iran appears particularly serious and disturbing. First of all, one should not overlook the fact that the Iranian attack, despite decades of threats, tensions and retaliation, was the first direct act of war by the regime in Tehran against Jerusalem, and thus another 'taboo' in the scenario of Middle Eastern conflicts has been broken with it, opening the way for potentially uncontrollable developments.

Secondly, it is still unclear whether there will be a further Israeli response, and

if so how far Netanyahu will go in continuing the tug-of-war with the ayatollahs. One could speculate that Jerusalem finds it more convenient for its interests to close the dispute here for the time being (assuming there are no further hostile acts on the Iranian side), cashing in on Western solidarity and appearing to be the more 'moderate' party.

But one could also suppose, on the contrary, that the Israeli prime minister, still in search of a reconstruction of his own internal consensus after the terrible snub of 7 October and the hostages never freed, chooses to seize the opportunity to order targeted attacks on Iranian territory, in particular aimed at undermining the Tehran regime's never defused race to build nuclear weapons. In that case, the drift towards a new Middle East war without limits would be difficult to stop.

But above all, the current development of the Israeli-Iranian crisis represents the most merciless and final verdict in history on the foreign policy followed by the United States under Joe Biden's presidency. Tehran's renewed aggression against Israel - in which the endorsement of the Hamas massacre of 7 October, if not its active planning, must presumably be inscribed - is in fact the veritable nemesis of the strategic choice implemented by Biden as soon as he entered the White House: that of repudiating and reversing the line followed by his predecessor Donald Trump in the Middle East.

Trump, as is well known, had undertaken a major diplomatic effort to foster rapprochement between Israel and Sunni Arab countries - first and foremost Saudi Arabia - with a view to mutual legitimisation and joint management of the knots still open in the Israeli-Palestinian dossier, while isolating Iran, considered the main hostile and destabilising agent. An effort that had led in 2020 to the very important goal of the Abrahamic Agreements, and whose next stage should have been a direct agreement between Jerusalem and Riyadh.

Biden, on the contrary, froze the dialogue with the Saudis and resumed, in the footsteps of Barack Obama's strategy, that with Tehran. In this way, he prevented the path of peace undertaken by Trump from being perfected, and encouraged all subsequent acts of destabilisation in the area undertaken by Iran and its allies and emissaries. A disastrous result, the most striking and embarrassing sign of which was the decision not to revoke, after the 7 October massacre, the release of 6 billion dollars of Iranian funds abroad that had previously been decided to favour the normalisation of relations with Tehran.

The no-holds-barred frontal confrontation with Russia in the Ukrainian crisis then further worsened the situation, distancing Moscow from Jerusalem, cementing the mutually supportive relations between the Russians and Iranians, and fuelling the destabilisation of Tehran as a weapon in the hands of anti-Western forces around the world.

In the face of this veritable reverse masterpiece of foreign policy on Biden's part, his renewed proclamation of support for Israel rings false and hypocritical. Just as US pressure on Netanyahu not to continue the chain of retaliation sounds hypocritical. The main culprit for this drift of violence is in Washington. The comparison between the world situation - and the Middle East situation in particular - during the years of Trump's presidency and during the current one is demeaning, because of the rapid, and seemingly unstoppable, degeneration of the international order in the last four years.

And the need for America to return to a firm leadership and balancing role at the planetary level is becoming ever more urgent.