

Versione Italiana

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is defined in many ways, particularly in these dramatic days. However, everyone underlines one characteristic, albeit with different emphases; that it is a conflict which appears unsolvable.

In fact, we could resort to a virtual experiment to support this drastic definition. Put a Palestinian and an Israeli in front of a map of the region and ask them to draw the borders that their state should have. The Palestinian will indicate the space between the Jordan River and the sea, and the Israeli will indicate more or less exactly the same portion of territory.

Put in these terms, the Israeli-Palestinian question would seem to be truly unsolvable. And we would have to conclude that over seventy years of bloody confrontation and four wars (today five), in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 that were waged to decide which name, either Israel or Palestine, the same portion of territory should have all happened in vain, since today we have the impression of finding ourselves at the same starting point.

However, I would like to start with the following consideration; today we are not at the same starting point, but rather in a different and radically new situation. There are at least three good reasons for this.

The first reason stems from the important transformations in recent decades that have profoundly affected all the countries in the immediate vicinity of the conflict area, in particular those surrounding Israel, which have always played an active role in the Middle Eastern controversy.



Benjamin Netanyahu at the front with soldiers of the Karakal Regiment (Photo: Kobi Gideon, L.A.M.)

Let's try to make a brief review. Iraq, after two devastating wars brought by the West, is today a devastated and politically unstable country, with very limited external projection capabilities. Its internal transformation has been impressive: a Sunni bastion against Iran at the time of Saddam Hussein, it is now a country with a Shiite government that looks with complicity towards the ayatollahs of Tehran. For ten years Syria has been involved in an endless war, which has destroyed its economy and society and paralyzed any foreign policy ambitions. A large number of actors, the USA, Turkey, Russia, Iran and others have intervened in the Syrian conflict in various ways, creating a complex powder keg that is always ready to explode. Lebanon is technically a failed state which has exploded at an institutional, economic and social level, much like the enormous explosion that devastated the port of Beirut. What's more, it harbors a powerful army within its borders, Hezbollah, which responds to Tehran. Egypt, a large country which has always served as a political and cultural point of reference for the entire Arab world, has returned to being a harsh and implacable dictatorship after a long and unresolved internal crisis, which has weakened its role in the region. Jordan, surrounded by very serious crises and powerful enemies, is increasingly fragile and uncertain about its future.

I'll stop here, but broadening the picture a little we could continue with Libya, the Saudi-Yemeni conflict, Qatar's ambiguous politics, the Chinese-led rapprochement of Iran and Saudi Arabia and

renewed Iranian activism, not to mention Turkey's surprising new foreign policy posture.



Images after the bombardment of a school in Gaza City

The second reason that has contributed to changing the context of the ongoing conflict refers to an even more important consideration. It is the fact that international society as a whole has profoundly changed, a change so clear and extensive that it does not represent a linear evolution of the last century's history, but is rather something radically different, almost a genetic mutation. Three epochal revolutions - economic globalization, the communications revolution and the transportation revolution - have made states and their civil societies extremely interdependent and interconnected with each other. Today it seems very difficult to identify major sources of conflict that can be defined as solely national or regional. Whether it be crime, security, climate challenges, cyber war, terrorism, immigration, or artificial intelligence, they can all now be traced back to dynamics that affect international society as a whole.

The world of international relations is no longer a world made up of islands, but has become an interconnected and intercommunicating reality, and the conflict in the Middle East is no longer just a dispute between states or peoples for a definition of borders; it has become a global and universal issue.

This naturally leads to a question: why is the international community unable to resolve a dispute that has lasted for seventy years, one which is claiming innocent victims and is a factor of

instability for the whole world?

The answer depends on the way in which the society of states regulates, or should regulate, conflicts within it in the absence of a superior and coercive authority, which does not exist today, despite having been attempted in the past, for example with the United Nations.

Over the course of its modern history, what we call the international community has created mechanisms, sometimes informal and sometimes more structured, which from time to time have been called upon to carry out a function that we could define as regulatory: that is, they had to prevent excessive conflict between some countries from damaging their vital interests.



The Al Quds Open University after an Israeli attack

To stay in more recent history, after 1815 and the Congress of Vienna, for a long period of about a century states regulated their relations, at least in Europe, which was then the world, with what was called “the Entente of the great powers.” Four nations (France, Great Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia), which later became five with Italy, informally regulated international relations, ensuring that conflicts did not degenerate in a manner contrary to their fundamental interests. This system more or less worked until the beginning of the last century, when the outbreak of the First World War marked its end. However, it did not end completely, given that it continued to

exist for years longer, until the Munich Conference in 1938, which was perhaps the last futile attempt to settle a controversy through that old understanding between the great powers. After World War II, everything changed. The so-called bipolar system was built, with two Superpowers, the United States and the USSR, that governed the world. Were there no more wars or conflicts? No, of course wars existed, even if not in Europe. But the interaction of the two superpowers guaranteed a regulatory order: both intervened and stopped their subjects/allies where it was deemed necessary to their primary interests.

This also happened several times in the conflict in the Middle East: in 1956 the Suez war was stopped by the United States, while military conflicts in 1967 and also in 1973 were stopped and their further expansion was prevented due to the intervention of the two Superpowers.

This regulatory mechanism then also came to an end. Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1992, there has been only one superpower, the United States, which for a while believed it could regulate the world on its own, but soon realized that it was not possible. Since then, there have been a succession of armed conflicts: the Balkan wars, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Nagorno Karabak, Georgia and then Ukraine.

Thus at present we lack an international regulatory order, while the world we live in is groping for one and is tending towards chaos. Crises follow one after the other and almost never resolve.

The final consideration to add to the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the presence of a further phenomenon, which has been taking place in Israel since 1996 and in Gaza since 2007: the progressive mixing of political and religious demands in both parties.

In September 1993, a few weeks after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the lawn of the White House. Can Rabin and Arafat be considered moderate political figures, naturally inclined towards dialogue and compromise?

I would say no. Their political history says otherwise. Rabin was a former military man, very tough and obsessed with the search for his country's security; Arafat, who I personally knew very well in my time in Tunis, was a former terrorist who was considered as such for years, and who was also very tough and determined in pursuing the interests of his people. But despite this, both found themselves shaking hands on the White House lawn and recognizing each other as interlocutors.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu among IDF soldiers (Photo: Haim Tzach, L.A.M.)

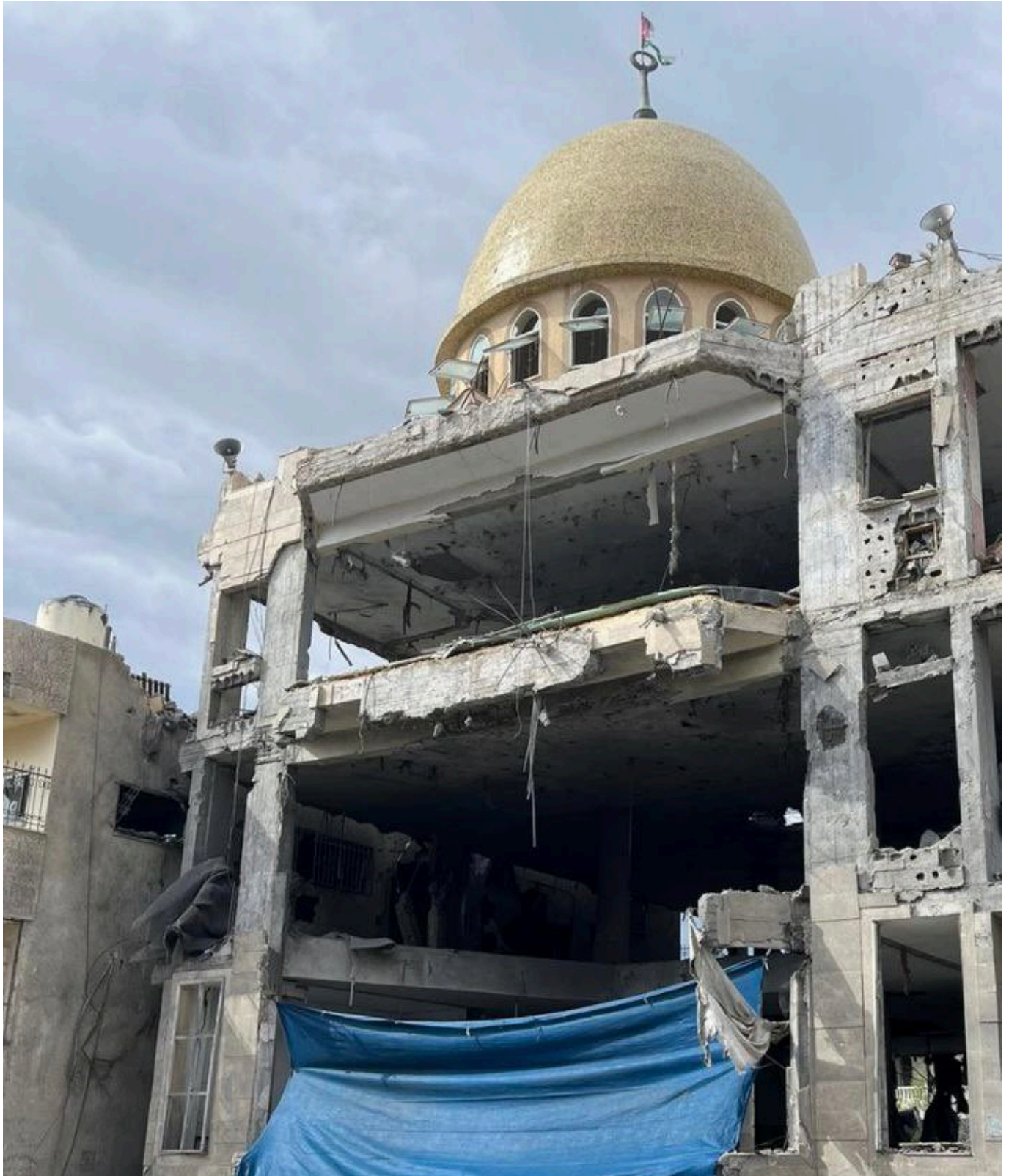
Who could you see in their places today? Benjamin Netanyahu, who believes in force against the Palestinians, in walls and in the physical separation of the two peoples? The prime minister who has political forces within his government that proclaim messianic visions of a Greater Israel and pursue the unrelenting expansion of settlements in the West Bank on the basis of the supposedly divine principle “the more land the better”? Could you perhaps see the head of Hamas, a party that also pursues a divine vision of the destruction of Israel and the expulsion of all Jews into the sea?

No. There is no one today who can take the place of Rabin and Arafat in the photograph that sanctioned the signing of the Oslo Accords. This is because religion has somehow entered the management of power. It has strongly become part of the government of Israel and is symmetrically present in the Hamas movement, inserting so-called absolute interests into the political dynamic which are therefore not compatible with either dialogue or negotiation. Today, the element which is the basis of every negotiating activity is missing: the existence of flexible elements in the starting positions of both parties.

Let's be clear: religion is an important thing for people, both on a personal and collective level. But when religion and power are identified with each other, when political and religious objectives mix, the results in history have always been disastrous.

We Europeans feel a shiver down our spines when we evoke religious wars, sometimes even using this expression to indicate a frightening, relentless conflict.

Religious wars have been a terrible catastrophe in European history, perhaps the greatest suffered by our continent. Consider the Thirty Years' War, which ended in 1648, and the devastation and depopulation caused by this event. It is said that a third of Europe's population died, and it took Europe a century to return to its starting conditions both economically and demographically.



A mosque destroyed by an Israeli missile

What to do then?

Trying to bring what has been said so far into reality, it appears that a preliminary condition is for

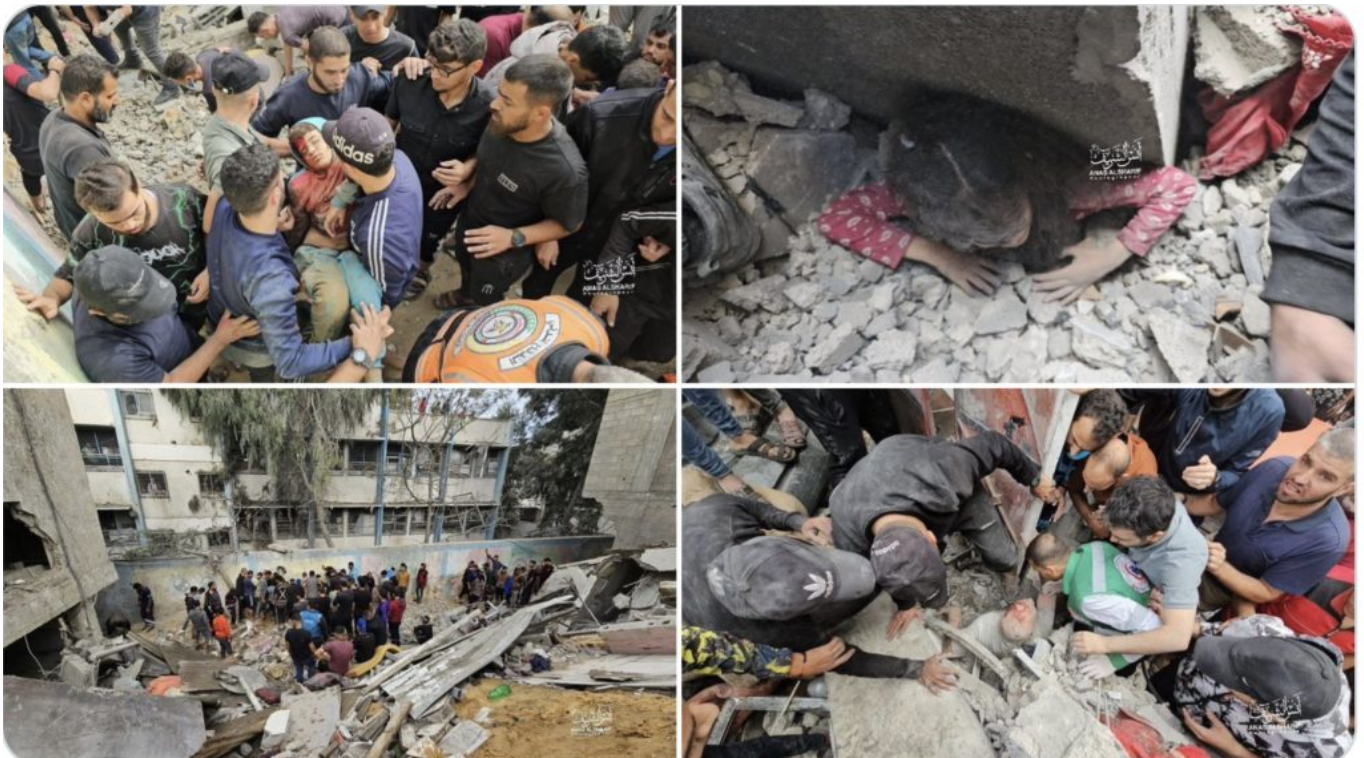
the positions of Israel and Hamas to move from absolute to relative, or at least to open up spaces of flexibility within those positions that are comparable and negotiable. Let religion do its job and politics do the same.

Is this transformation possible with these interlocutors? For Israel I think not. The political path of current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems to me to be over, and not in the best way. For Hamas I don't know; in the past we have seen surprising developments, cases of qualified terrorist subjects who then became full international subjects, such as the PLO itself and the very recent case of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

I conclude with a consideration, or rather with a doubt related to what is happening now in the Middle East, which concerns those of us who are part of the European and Western world.

The doubt is this. Are we in the West really looking at the ongoing conflict with the right perspective, with the eyes of the 21st century, free from stereotypes and prejudices?

Let's think about what happened in Ukraine. One country invaded another - a very clear and sanctionable case of international law. We united Westerners correctly declared our vision of the conflict, provided support to the attacked and sanctioned the aggressor.



Homes in Jabalia, in the north of the Gaza Strip, hit by Israeli missiles.

While doing this we were convinced that Russia would be isolated and that sanctions would bring it down in a few months, ultimately taking it for granted that the whole world shared our vision.

Which turned out not to be true, at least considering the votes at the United Nations where a

significant number of countries, representing sixty percent of the world population, will not vote to condemn the aggressor.

Let's avoid repeating these errors of presumption in the Middle East. After October 7, almost all Western leaders said, in different ways, that the massacre was political suicide for Hamas, that Hamas would lose any authority in the Arab and Islamic world due to the horror of the actions it committed. They also predicted its inevitable political isolation in the world.

However, this is not what is happening. The attractiveness of Hamas has even grown, not only in the West Bank, where it is more understandable, but also in traditionally moderate Arab countries such as Tunisia. Meanwhile, the joint summit between the Arab League and Islamic countries in recent weeks, a rarity in the history of the two organizations, effectively condemned Israel and not Hamas.

In the end I don't know what solution will be pursued to find peace in the region when the shooting stops. But I am convinced that peace, if it ever comes, will be built not against the Arab and Islamic worlds but together with them. We must speak and engage in dialogue with those worlds immediately, because the new balances in the system of international relations which are being laboriously constructed no longer include the West at the center of that system.

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