**Revenge is not always the best counsel**

**Opinion piece by Loukas Tsoukalis published in the newspaper Ta Nea on 14 October 2023**

Before events came along and imposed their own inexorable logic, I intended to write about the European meetings in search of a common denominator in the major challenges facing Europe today. Challenges that mostly transcend Europe's borders, and leaders who are doing their best to survive in a highly volatile political and social context in which politics is gradually being devalued and nationalist and far-right forces are on the rise in many countries. The only consolation may be (is it, though?) that even worse things are happening elsewhere. If you're worried about Meloni and Le Pen, just listen to what elected representatives of the US Republican Party are saying.

We are living in a period of transition, and as the great Italian politician and philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote, in periods of change when the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born, monsters emerge. Let us hope his prediction doesn't come to pass in our own era, too—though the signs are far from encouraging. To be more precise, let us hope that our political leaderships and societies, especially those of the big countries that so often decide for the rest of us, will have the collective wisdom to stand fast against the monsters.

But will they? In Ukraine, Putin pulled the trigger and started a terrible war which he thought he'd win with ease. A miscalculation combined with the paranoid ramblings of the leader of an authoritarian regime becoming more of a mafia state, whom —truth be told—the West had backed into a corner for reasons that had little to do with democratic sensibilities. And now, after nearly a year and a half of war, with hundreds of thousands dead and wounded and untold destruction, it's hard to even imagine how this tragedy could end. Will we get a war that rages on in perpetuity, or at best a precarious truce? Given what we know so far, there is unlikely to be a clear winner; and the tragedy continues.

Now we have another war, this one started by an incursion into Israel of Palestinian Hamas fighters who went on a rampage slaughtering large numbers of civilians. The Israelis suffered unprecedented casualties. And it appears that almost no one expected the attack—certainly not the Israelis, despite their having one of the most effective intelligence services in the world considered to be a model by many and one that strikes terror into their enemies. Apparently, the Hamas leadership had been preparing the attack for a long time, while the Israeli government’s attention was elsewhere. And so, the tragically unthinkable came to pass.

Obviously, we condemn the Hamas attack and the atrocities that set a new wave of carnage in motion. Hamas is considered a terrorist organisation in the West, one led by fanatical Islamists for whom the lives of their own people, and still less those of their enemies, count for little compared to their sacred goal, which includes punishing and destroying Israel. But we must also not forget that desperation breeds violence, and that several million Palestinians have been living in miserable conditions under occupation in their own country or in exile for decades. As for the Gaza Strip, it is a tiny enclave in which some two and a half million people are crowded together under the military control of fanatics with guns within and blockaded by Egyptians and Israelis without. Illegal Israeli settlements continue to mushroom in the West Bank and international condemnation is obviously an ineffective deterrent, while not solving the Palestinian problem is (was?) a widely accepted solution. Or at least that's what those who choose to turn a blind eye wanted to believe.

The Netanyahu government with right-wing extremists, religious fanatics and racists has deeply divided Israeli society, a society that has achieved true wonders in the economy, technology and the arts, yet a society, too, where true democrats have begun to feel like a minority under threat from their own people. The formation of a government of national unity may mean a temporary truce at home, at least while the war lasts.

It is highly likely that the prospect of an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which the Biden administration was pushing for as a follow-up to the Abraham accords that Israel had already signed with other Arab countries, was the catalyst for the Hamas leadership's decision to start a new war, possibly with support from Iran, though tangible proof of this has yet to come to light. The Saudi-Israeli agreement will now most likely be shelved. But we now face the perilous prospect of the wider region of the troubled Middle East bursting into flames. Multiple powers from beyond the region are involved, and each has their own agenda.

Such an escalation must be avoided at all costs and the war ended as soon as humanly possible. This should be the main concern of anyone with a genuine interest in peace and stability in the region: first and foremost, the United States which has always been Israel's ultimate protector, but also Europe, sadly hesitant and divided as it sometimes sadly happens when faced with major international crises. Americans, Europeans and everyone else needs to remember, too, that peace and stability cannot be achieved in the long term without a just solution to the Palestinian problem. Razing the Gaza Strip to the ground and causing the death of a few thousand more people, including Hamas members, clearly isn't the way to a solution. Revenge is not the best counsel in human affairs, still less so in international relations. We should learn something from the history of the Middle East, although many still refuse to do so.