**Which side of history do we choose to be on?**

**Opinion piece by Loukas Tsoukalis published in the newspaper Ta Nea, 3 December 2023**

The horror of the slaughter that followed the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October has been followed by the decimation of the population of the Gaza Strip by Israeli bombs and a ground invasion aimed at punishing and wiping out the Palestinian organisation. The Israelis talk of self-defence and just punishment, the Palestinians and a large part of the Arab world of genocide. While the UN and international organisations call for a ceasefire and respect for at least the most rudimentary rules of war vis-a-vis civilians, international conventions are being ignored yet again. And the cycle of unspeakable violence continues.

When Hamas decided to organise such an attack with so many victims and the atrocities that accompanied it, it should have known from previous experience that Israel would respond with asymmetrical violence. It was opening the gates of hell and was probably well aware of what it was doing. It certainly succeeded in bringing the rapprochement between Israel and Arab nations (Saudi Arabia, in particular) to a (temporary?) end—a rapprochement that had proceeded to that point without any prospect of a meaningful solution to the Palestinian problem. For days now, the people of the Arab world have been watching the bombings on Al-Jazeera, and they are seething with rage. Arab political leaders cannot ignore their people's anger, however much they may want to and however authoritarian they may be—and they are, very. A lot of people beyond the Arab world have also remembered the Palestinian issue again.

In this respect, it is quite likely that Hamas will achieve its primary goal. And Israel's Netanyahu government is helping in its own way. It has promised to wipe Hamas off the face of the earth and is prepared to raze Gaza to the ground to do so, sacrificing many thousands of human lives in the process. For Hamas, any of its own people killed in battle against the enemy are martyrs, while the lives of Jews apparently do not count. But do Palestinian lives count for more in the minds of members of the Netanyahu government? Judging by the policies Israeli governments have been implementing for years in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, probably not. And herein lies the big mistake of Israel's far right and nationalists, who believed—and apparently still do—that the law of the strongest will prevail at the expense of the fundamental rights of millions of Palestinians who have lived under occupation for decades, or in the open prison that is Gaza.

I think they are committing a huge mistake, if not a crime with long-lasting repercussions. It will be very difficult to make Hamas disappear. Besides, the Israelis tried something similar in Gaza and Lebanon in the past without success. The oppression inflicted by the occupying army and the settlers, coupled with the desperation of their victims, leads to violence. And well-intentioned or otherwise objectors should not rush to tell us we are justifying the crimes of Hamas. Because that is obviously not the case. I mean, how could anyone with any conscience whatsoever do that? But condemning Hamas is not enough. After all, these are not just individual crazed terrorists. We must try to understand why Palestinian society produces terrorists and many others whom Israeli governments have collectively branded "terrorists" down the years. Without underestimating the responsibility borne by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, did we honestly expect democracy to flourish and responsible political leadership to emerge under the conditions that Palestinians have been living in for decades? And it's not as if Israeli governments have been seeking a responsible interlocutor on the other side. They have been doing exactly the opposite for years.

Israel's real friends should remind them constantly of this harsh truth, instead of turning a blind eye or restricting themselves to tepid condemnations of the policy implemented by the current prime minister in particular, the primary component of which has been the continuous expansion of settlements in the occupied territories and increasing violence against their Palestinian inhabitants. Because real friends share unpalatable truths with you precisely when you need to hear them. Those who disagree with the extreme right-wing nationalist turn in Israeli politics that has fed the vicious circle of violence are not anti-Semites as they have been collectively accused of being.

That responsibility should be undertaken primarily by the United States, which—with all the military, financial and diplomatic means at its disposal—is Israel's ultimate protector. Though they haven't always used them wisely. The Biden administration supports Israel, too, but it is also trying to hold the Netanyahu government back from the sort of unbridled vengeance that could set the entire region aflame. I'm not at all sure it will succeed in this goal. The war between Israel and Hamas is probably more dangerous for world peace (and the global economy) than the war in Ukraine.

As the bombardment of Gaza continues and the dead keep piling up, the West will increasingly be accused of hypocrisy by the Arab and Muslim world, but also by the so-called Global South. The signs are clear to see. They are also reflected in the resolutions passed by the UN. You cannot have two sets of measures and rules, condemning the Russian bombing and mass murder of civilians in Ukraine but maintaining a demure silence, or limiting yourself to anodyne statements, when it comes to the Israeli bombings of Gaza. A situation in which the West might find itself confronted by the rest of the world would certainly bode ill, though it is far from unlikely now.

Poor Europe is divided and helpless, struggling to find the words in its joint communiqués to cover up its internal disagreements. In any case, it has limited itself for many years to providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians and assisting with infrastructure projects which not infrequently end up being bulldozed by the Israeli army. Europe lacks the courage to take serious initiatives.

You may say that all of the above is incompatible with Greece's strategic alliances or with the relentless logic of Realpolitik bearing in mind the asymmetrical power of Israel and of the superpower that supports it. But I do think it is not always wise to blindly accept what we are told or promised. Shouldn't we sometimes be those good friends who help get the unpleasant things heard? I will also retain my reservations about Realpolitik, if I may, and the logic of asymmetrical power in an era in which the geopolitical tectonic plates are in violent flux. And let it also not be forgotten that some of the greatest crimes in history have been committed in the name of Realpolitik. So, really, which side of history do we choose to be on?