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Judged by the cold logic of Realpolitik – no space left for any other

The US-Israeli attack on Iran has opened Pandora's box yet again in the wider Middle East region. It's hard to see how it is going to be shut again, let alone when. But until it is closed (temporarily?), the human casualties will continue to mount up as will the wholesale destruction, and fresh wounds will further weaken the already battered body of international legitimacy. A perpetual cycle of violence has gripped the Middle East for decades, the product of ethnic and religious conflicts with deep roots, exacerbated and amplified by the interventions of the Great Powers. The region is rich in History and hydrocarbons, and that has proved an incendiary mix.

The official statements tell us the aerial campaign launched against Iran by President Trump's United States and Prime Minister Netanyahu's Israel seeks to topple Iran's tyrannical theocratic regime, to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, and to dismantle Iran's formidable arsenal of ballistic missiles and drones. The success of the operation will be judged by its outcome. As for the legitimacy of the attack, it is apparently left to a few romantics (and starry-eyed idealists!) to continue talking about such things. It is typical of the times in which we live that most governments in Europe have largely avoided raising the issue of legality.

There can be no doubt that President Trump has taken a massive gamble in aligning himself with Netanyahu's hard-line stance once again. For the Israeli Prime Minister, there is far more to gain than to lose in crippling an (erstwhile) formidable adversary who commands a network of regional proxies. As long as Israel's losses remain limited, that is. As for the US, the success of the operation is far from a foregone conclusion, while the collateral damage is already mounting up.

Iran is a big country and the (truly nasty) regime is deeply rooted, well-organized and heavily-armed. It will not fall easily, but even if it does, its collapse is more likely to be followed by chaos or civil war than a democracy that respects human rights and has friendly relations with the West. There is no organized opposition at home and no obvious successor (the son of the former Shah does not present himself as a credible contender). Iran's history is also unlikely to help when it comes to relations with the West, the US and Britain in particular given their earlier interventions in Iran's political affairs, even during periods of democratic rule, not to mention the long history of sanctions.

The relatively recent past has shown us that attempts to effect regime change through external military interventions very rarely succeed, even when the intervening states

deploy troops on the ground rather than relying solely on bombers, missiles and drones. One simply needs to recall what happened in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also earlier in Libya. Venezuela is a special case that offers no easy blueprint elsewhere.

In the face of an existential threat, the Iranian regime, even in its decapitated state, is striking out indiscriminately where it can, targeting neighbouring Arab allies of the US—states that had made significant efforts to avert an American-Israeli strike by investing heavily in the continuation of US-Iran negotiations. Precisely because they foresaw what lay ahead for them otherwise. Now they are paying a heavy price which seems unlikely to be limited to the short term.

"Let my soul die with the Philistines" could well be how the remnants of the Tehran regime respond to massive attack from abroad, and it would be a disastrous mistake to rule out such a suicidal escalation. For as long as they still have the weaponry at their disposal, at least, though they also have proxies in other countries to carry out terrorist or other attacks on their behalf. So, the longer this undeclared war continues (which lacks the authorization of the US Congress), the greater the cost to the US and its allies, as well as to the world economy at large.

The verdict on the US President's extraordinarily high-stakes gamble will therefore rest solely by its outcome, judged in terms of the cold logic of Realpolitik. Only a few remaining romantics persist in talking about peace and values, international institutions and rules, dialogue and diplomacy. Needless to say, they are getting thin on the ground in an era when increasingly might makes right.

Fearful and indecisive, most of Europe's leaders issue anodyne statements while desperately trying to reduce the risks and costs for their own countries. They are left with little role to play in events or any direct influence over them. The new war in the Middle East is creating further instability while adding new items to an already long list of problems for Europe's governments. It is also drawing the rest of the world's attention even further away from the war in Ukraine.

As for us here in Greece, perilously close as we are to a Middle East in flames, we will have to weigh up any involvement, however indirect, with the utmost care and a cool head. Foreign policy today requires the skill set of a consummate acrobat called upon to walk a dangerously high tightrope without a safety net.

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