

## **Collateral consequences of the war in Gaza**

**Loukas Tsoukalis**

Almost two months ago, I had a conversation with a European professor at Columbia University who spoke to me about the turmoil which the war in Gaza had stirred up in American universities. It reminded him of the student uprisings against the war in Vietnam a few decades earlier, which began at Columbia in New York before spreading to many other universities around the US. I admit I had my reservations at the time: how could American students relate to Gaza in the same way they did to Vietnam, where thousands of American soldiers were killed together with many more Vietnamese? But he went further, saying the university administrations would find themselves in the awkward position of having to choose, on the one hand, between a sizeable proportion of the student body who are demanding action against Israel while the war continues and the only solution to the Palestinian problem in sight is the eradication of the Palestinians and, on the other, the private donors on whom the financial robustness of America's universities depends.

Events have played out just as he said they would. What's more, student mobilizations have spread, now also to several European universities. It is surely not a vast majority of students, but no longer a small minority either. But isn't that always that way? Was it after all the majority of students who took part in the student uprising against the Colonels' dictatorship in Greece?

Students at American universities are protesting against the mass killing of civilians in Gaza and against the stance taken by successive US administrations which have funded, armed and acted as the ultimate protector of the state of Israel, despite the objections they may occasionally raise against the more extreme versions of Israeli policy. Inevitably, there have been intolerant and racist slogans, but the overriding feature of student mobilizations has been their peaceful nature.

Many professors have sided with their students, as have prominent and less prominent Jews both in America and other countries. Indeed, they are often the harshest critics of the Netanyahu government, perhaps because they are less likely than others to be accused of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism certainly exists, as do other forms of racism in our societies. And it must be fought with every means at our disposal. But criticism of the policies implemented by different Israeli governments cannot be outlawed in the name of combating anti-Semitism. Nor can rallies be banned or the appointment of duly elected university professors cancelled because they have expressed their support for Palestinian rights, as happened recently in Germany. Turning a blind eye to a major crime that is being committed today does not absolve you of responsibility for a crime against humanity committed in the past. It was the great Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said, himself a former professor at Columbia University in the past, who said that the worst thing that can happen to you is to be the victim of a victim.

I don't envy or indeed agree with the presidents of American universities who have been called upon to take the tough decisions and ultimately asked the police to intervene, under immense pressure from donors and a Republican right that is calling for heads to roll because they believe that universities have become hotbeds for liberals and leftists, one and the same in their eyes. In the extreme polarization that prevails in the US today, one extreme feeds the other. The woke left of the Democratic Party are trying to restrict freedom of speech in the name of historical injustices and/or of protecting oppressed minorities, while the rabid attacks

of the Trumpist right are reminiscent of McCarthyism. In such polarized conditions, democracy is the loser.

The extremes are also prevalent on both sides at war in the Middle East. "From the (Jordan) River to the sea" is a slogan that implies the monopolization of sovereignty in the region. In this, Palestinian extremists who want to wipe Israel off the face of the earth actually coincide with hard-core nationalists in Israel who dream of inflicting a similar fate on Palestinians. I wonder if those who seek to have this slogan banned as anti-Semitic when it's heard at pro-Palestinian demonstrations are prepared to do the same with far right members of the Netanyahu government. The latter not only say it, but also try to apply it wherever and however they can.

Sensitivity to violence and human rights cannot be one-sided or simply subordinated to the harsh logic of Realpolitik. This applies to both the slaughter wrought by Hamas on 7 October last year and to the ongoing massacre of civilians in Gaza by the Israeli army, of course also to the violence exerted in the occupied Palestinian territories for decades. Hence the vicious circle is perpetuating itself. Despite repeated appeals from Israel's allies, the Netanyahu government seems determined to launch an offensive on Rafah, which will inevitably result in still more slaughter. Its aim, we are told, is to punish and eradicate Hamas. Except that History teaches that the violence of today breeds the militants of tomorrow.

As the war in Gaza continues and the number of victims grows by the day, the collateral consequences of the war will extend much further. The Middle East is a powder keg ready to explode and the Israeli Prime Minister won't stop playing with matches. The West stands accused of double standards in the way it has dealt with the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which has seriously impacted its credibility with the rest of the world. The position President Biden has taken to date on the war in Gaza has increased the chances of his losing the November elections, which is why he is now trying to distance himself more from the Netanyahu government. Democracy and freedom of speech have also been directly affected. We have seen that already in measures taken by some governments and universities. Such measures would have been simply unthinkable just a few years ago.

When the geopolitical tectonic plates are shifting violently and societies become dangerously polarized, it only takes one small spark to set the world alight. And the war in Gaza is no mere spark. In circumstances such as these today, the silence of the many is dangerous, if not outright criminal.

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