يَطِيْبُ العَيْشُ أنْ تَلْقَى حَلِيْمًا
غَذَاهُ العِلْمُ وَالنَّظَرُ المُصِيْبُ
(الجاحظ)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Life becomes more enjoyable when you meet a clement and tolerant individual imbued with knowledge and wisdom.

Al-Jahiz
(Abbasid-era Arab polymath)

TOMORROW
Christopher Phillips on the West's risk of further weakness due to the continued popularity of right-wing populism.

Gaza — genocide and steadfastness

ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: YAN LONG

The Israeli war on Gaza is epitomized by the story of Beit Lahia, a small Palestinian town in the northern part of the Strip. Beit Lahia is a microcosm of Israel's failed war in the Strip: a bloody grind that has led nowhere, despite the massive destruction, the repeated ethnic cleansing of the population, the starvation, and the genocide. Every day of Israel's terrible war on the Palestinians serves as a reminder that there are no military solutions and that the Palestinian will cannot be broken, no matter the cost or the sacrifices involved.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, remains unconvinced. He began this year with more promises of "total victory" and ends it wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges.

Israel's objectives have remained unclear in 2024, although some Israeli politicians have provided clues as to what the war on Gaza is really all about. In January, several ministers, including 12 from Netanyahu's Likud party, took part in a conference calling for the resettlement of Gaza and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. "Without settlements, there is no security," extremist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said.

For that to happen, the Palestinian people themselves, not merely those fighting on the ground, had to be tamed, broken, and defeated. Thus the "flour massacres," a new Israeli war tactic that aimed to kill as many Palestinians as possible as they waited for the few aid trucks that were allowed to reach northern Gaza.

Aside from a few statements of concern by Western leaders, little was done to bring the genocide to an end. Only when seven international aid workers with the World Central Kitchen charity were killed by Israel was a global outcry heard, leading to the first and so far only Israeli apology of the entire war.

Desperate to distract from its failure in Gaza, as well as the northern border with Lebanon, and keen on presenting the Israeli public with any kind of victory, the Israeli military began escalating its war beyond Gaza. This included the strike on the Iranian Consulate building in Damascus on April 1. Despite repeated attempts, which included the July assassination in Iran of the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, an all-out regional war has not yet come to pass.

Another escalation was taking place, this time not by Netanyahu but by millions of people around the world who demanded an end to the Israeli war. A focal point of the protests were the student movements that spread across US college campuses and, ultimately, worldwide.

Meanwhile, the US continued to block international efforts aimed at producing a ceasefire resolution at the UN Security Council. Ultimately, on May 31, US President Joe Biden delivered a speech conveying what he termed an "Israeli proposal" to end the war. After some delay, Hamas accepted the proposal, but Israel rejected it. In his rejection, Netanyahu referred to Biden's speech as "incorrect" and "incomplete." Strangely, but also unsurprisingly, the White House blamed the Palestinians for the failed initiative.

Losing faith in the American leadership, some European countries began changing their foreign policy doctrines on the conflict, with Ireland, Norway, and Spain recognizing the state of Palestine on May 28. The decisions were largely symbolic but indicated that Western unity around Israel was faltering.

Israel remained unfazed and, despite international warnings, invaded the Rafah area in southern Gaza on May 7, seizing control of the Philadelphi Corridor — a buffer zone between Gaza and the Egyptian border that extends for 14 km.

In August, another heart-wrenching massacre took place, this time at the Al-Tabaeen School in Gaza City, where 93 people, mostly women and children, were murdered in a single Israeli strike. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, women and children were the main victims of the Israeli genocide, accounting for 70 percent as of Nov. 8.

An earlier report by The Lancet medical journal stated that, if the war had stopped in July, "186,000 or even more" Palestinians would have been killed. The war, however, went on. The genocide in Gaza seemed to maintain the same killing rate, despite the major regional developments, including the Iranian-Israeli tit-for-tat strikes and the major Israeli ground operation in Lebanon.

Still, Israel failed to achieve any of its strategic goals of the war. Even the killing of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in battle on Oct. 16 would not alter the course of the war in any way.

Israel's frustration grew by leaps and bounds throughout the year. Its desperate attempt to control the global narrative on the Gaza genocide largely failed. In July, after listening to the testimonies of more than 50 countries, the International Court of Justice issued a landmark ruling that "Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is illegal."

That ruling, which expressed international consensus on the matter, was in September translated into a UN General Assembly resolution "demanding an end to Israel's occupation of Palestine within the next 12 months."

Beit Lahia is a microcosm of Israel's failed war in the Strip: a bloody grind that has led nowhere, despite the massive destruction

All of this effectively meant that Israel's attempt at normalizing its occupation of Palestine and its quest to illegally annex the West Bank were considered null and void by the international community. Israel, however, doubled down, venting its rage against West Bank Palestinians, who have also been experiencing one of the worst Israeli pogroms in many years.

The Palestinian Health Ministry stated in late November that at least 777 Palestinians had been killed in the West Bank since Oct. 7, 2023, while hundreds more had been wounded and more than 11,700 arrested.

To make matters worse, Smotrich called for the full annexation of the West Bank. This call was made soon after the election of Donald Trump as the next US president, an event that initially inspired optimism among Israeli leaders, but later caused concern that Trump may not serve the role of savior for Israel after all.

The International Criminal Court last month issued its historic ruling to seek the arrest of Netanyahu and his former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. The decision represented a measure of hope, however faint, that the world is finally ready to hold Israel accountable for its many crimes.

The year 2025 could indeed represent that watershed moment. This remains to be seen. However, as far as Palestinians are concerned, even with the failure of the international community to stop the genocide and rein in Israel, their steadfastness, or "sumoud," will remain strong until freedom is finally attained.

DR. RAMZY BAROUD

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إن القتيلَ مُضرَّجاً بدموعِهِ
مثلُ القتيلِ مضرَّجاً بدمائهِ
(الأمير الصنعاني)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
One who drowns in tears is like one who drowns in blood.
Al-Amir Al-Sana'ni
(17th/18th-century Yemeni religious authority and author)

Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Dr. Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg on how the only way to defuse the West Bank crisis is through ending the occupation.

ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: LUCA DI BARTOLOMEO

Europe's resilience put to the test

ALISTAIR BURT

Europe entered 2024 with some trepidation. War was still raging on the continent for the first time since 1945. The echoes of renewed conflict in the Middle East were reaching into its major cities. The continental economy was limping. A series of elections were imminent, with an uneasy public likely to look for alternatives to mainstream parties. No one was sure who would be left standing at the end of the year.

Only the glorious backdrop of the Paris Olympics held out some promise of relief. But despite the many challenges to be faced, there were hopes that Europe would end the year better than it started it. The run of elections, for national and European parliaments, would allow the public to have their say on the direction of the continent and perhaps usher in a period of stability with which to face the future.

That has not necessarily been the outcome. We are learning that elections do not settle a democracy as they once did. The bitter polarization of politics, encouraged by a relentlessly negative social media, suggests that elections have become mere staging posts of anger in unending partisan political wars. Indeed, just four months after an emphatic win at the polls, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer faced a petition of nearly 3 million signatures demanding another general election.

It has been some year.

This year has confirmed that a rightward, populist move in Europe is continuing and that there is little stability in its two most powerful and significant nations. Provincial elections in Germany and the European Parliament vote in France debilitated both countries' governments. The year ends with Germany marking time until snap federal elections in February after the collapse of Olaf Scholz's government, while a weakened President Emmanuel Macron is perhaps a prisoner of Marine Le Pen and the far right until the next French presidential election in 2027.

Toward the end of the year, another election further disturbed the European mood. For months, there had been widespread speculation about the result of the US presidential contest. For democracies that uphold the peaceful transfer of power as sacrosanct and the best answer to the creep of authoritarianism now stalking the continent, the idea that a defeated candidate associated with an insurrection could return to office was surely inconceivable.

There was a moment, with the stepping down of an almost-certain-to-be-defeated Joe Biden, when hope sprang for European centrists that the gathering momentum of Donald Trump would be halted. Notwithstanding that the policies of Kamala Harris toward trade and conflict in the wider world were barely known, she could not be worse than the fears accumulating around the prospect of Trump 2.0.

On Nov. 5, we learned the truth. Europe was not to deal with a conflicted or disputed outcome this time, but a newly, and substantially endorsed, President-elect Trump, winner of the popular vote and the undisputed master of his own destiny.

Europe's fears were far from fanciful or based solely on the past. In his first term, President Trump had made no secret of his disdain for NATO — the cornerstone of peace and security for Europe against external threats for some 75 years — claiming it to be an expensive insurance policy costing the US much and the rest of the alliance much less. He had threatened those states not paying their way with abandonment and, while his talk had the political effect of making European states look to their own commitments on defense, its wider impact on states close to an aggressive Russia was deeply unsettling.

On Ukraine, his boast that he could end the war within 24 hours led to not unreasonable speculation that this could only be done by some degree of sacrifice from the victim of the conflict for the benefit of the aggressor — the wrong lesson of history for a continent forever scarred by the mistakes of the 20th century.

Comments of those around him are hardly conducive to overcoming those fears. Donald Trump Jr. went on social media to mock the leader of a beleaguered country fighting for its existence to say that President Volodymyr Zelensky was "38 days from losing your allowance."

Europe has to work with Trump and his Cabinet. The strangeness of some of his choices for office must be of no consequence to the professional diplomats and politicians who are working toward the transition of power. They are trying to ensure, as far as they are able, that Ukraine is in the best possible situation it can be for an anticipated negotiation in 2025. It will be an early test of the relationship and the future.

Europe's fears are not confined to defense and security. The economic health of the EU is also not strong, as made clear by September's landmark report on competitiveness from former Italian prime minister and president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi. A tariff war, as threatened by President-elect Trump, is of significant concern.

But the debate about President Trump is moving on. Whatever the views of him may be, there is an awareness that it is no use blaming an incoming US administration for all that needs to change across the European continent. Europe needs to spend more on defense, regardless of who is in the White House. And economic progress, sluggish when compared with the US and China over many years, has to deliver its own prescription for success in 2025. In one telling statistic, Draghi looked at the global investment into artificial intelligence: Of $35 billion poured into AI startups in the first half of 2024, the EU attracted just 6 percent. A tariff war will not help, but Europe has to take greater charge of its own economic destiny in 2025.

This year unsettled Europe further with two unrelated, though not entirely disconnected, phenomena.

Migration to Europe, whether those seeking to make their way without papers across the Mediterranean from the Middle East or being absorbed into workforces and family reunions, is increasingly cited as a driving force behind the resurgent political right. Mainstream politicians struggle to keep up not just with the rhetoric from the right, amplified by aggressive social media, but with their answers of fences and the turning back of boats.

The events in Gaza and Lebanon have produced civil unrest in Europe's big cities, where the identification of large Muslim populations with those suffering devastating bombardment has heightened awareness of their presence and political influence, contrasted with the seeming indifference of European governments. The agony of the Middle East is now being accompanied by an identifiable increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia, dismaying populations unconnected with either community, who are being whispered at by often anonymous sources on social media that their countries are not what they were.

And as if politics was not enough, Europe is increasingly aware that global climate change is not only driving refugees toward them, but that it is also having an impact on their domestic populations. The shock of the violence of the floods in Valencia, Spain, which took more than 200 lives in September, was matched only by the intensity of the anger toward the government and officials, who were blamed for their lack of foresight and response. There is little confidence that such scenes will not be repeated.

But Europe is a resilient continent. Investment is flowing in from friends in the Arab world and beyond to new industries and technologies. Europe's universities remain attractive to the world's brightest and best. It will respond to the challenges to its security and defense. Already, a developing European Political Community includes the EU and those beyond, while Brexit has not prevented London, Paris and Berlin working closely together. Its diplomacy will reach into the conflicts of the Middle East, as a new future for the region is formed that cannot afford the catastrophe of continuing conflict.

Europe may yet use the shocks of 2024 as the springboard to a defiant 2025.

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