

The drama of an oppressed people all along

Kurds, a European challenge

A thousand-years old history of suffering entered the twenty-first century without responses. The silence about Kurdish issue is the greatest shame of the communication era. The war in Iraq saw the occurrence of an embryo of Kurdistan created already ill. But with negotiations for Turkey's entry to European Union, we can no longer pretend not to see the violence over the weak people

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"A Kurd has no friends but the mountains". It is an old loneliness of Kurds, as huge as their tragedy, the one of the greatest nation in the world without sovereignty. If a nation is "a great human family bound together by common origins, language, traditions, regardless of the legal obligation of the state", as the dictionary says, there is a population of about 35 million people who do not have any homeland, and in many cases they still have no right to call themselves with their name, or speak their language.

Predestined victims, who had the misfortune to be born in a part of the world that seems cursed by history, although someone says heaven on earth, according to Biblical sources, it was placed right at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates, and in this region, on Mount Ararat, Noah's Ark landed at the end of the Great Flood.

Middle East. A name that announces news of disasters around the world. The intersection of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and then, to the north, Caucasian regions, to make complicated the mosaic of Empires. There is always an Empire in Kurds' fate, and they are always in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Only refuge, mountains. Sometimes harsh and majestic, often barren and sparsely populated.

Cold and silence, in the middle of the icy winter of 2006. Near the destroyed villages on Turkish side, more mules than cars. Dressed like poor Europeans, men and women of this world look on average 15 years older than their real age. Their faces are carved by pain, fatigue in the hands. Their Islam is not visible, except the head scarf of older women, the ritual of tea, taking off their shoes to enter the house, and sometimes the call of the *muezzin*. The mosques are rare or not very visible; but in return soldiers are ever present, threatening in their barracks built everywhere, at strategic points, on the heights, sometimes with guns in plain view, as if to say: "You are always under fire". Under fire or under control: the overwhelming feeling keeps a safe distance, but it never really leaves you. And perhaps that is why no one seems to come here. Neither journalists nor politicians nor diplomats. It really takes an effort of imagination to imagine that, in a few years, the border of Europe could be here. Europe is the great absence in Kurdish question, and maybe it thinks to be innocent. Or even generous and idealistic, in his repeated appeals for respect for human rights. But things are not this way.

"Kurds continue to play a tragic role, demonstrating the enormous damage that occurred when the Western powers have put their hands", stated bitterly Igor Man, a good reporter for "La Stampa" (an important Italian newspaper, Translator's note), a decade ago. He added: "The extermination of Kurds in installments carried less weight than the oil defense".

Igor Man is right.

The greatest of all tragedies in Middle East is the end of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the Great War, 1914 to 1918.

Winners, France and England, with the support of the United States (Italy counted almost nothing), reshape the world for their own goals.

The ideal tensions, peoples' aspirations for independence, payed lip service by U.S. President Wilson, clash with the colonial greed of old powers, the compromise that emerges is bad, especially for the Middle East, which has to cash up with its deep backwardness.

Independent Kurdistan was born and dies between a peace treaty and the other: the fate of Kurds is

decided by others.

From the agreement of Sèvres in 1920 to that of Lausanne in 1923, Turkey strength changed, revived thanks to Mustafa Kemal, leader and father of new Turkish state: the independent state of Kurdistan, such as Armenia, will remain on paper. True nations are without the slightest sovereignty, whereas completely artificial states are allowed in the new world order.

The most artificial of all is Irak, which has no reason to exist as it was designed. But Iraq has oil, Westerners know it very well at the time, and create the puppet state with a puppet ruler, the old and reluctant King Feysal. Besides Irak, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine are invented, in a more consistent way, all under English or French control. In Iran, Westerns create from scratch the Pahlavi dynasty, faithful servants of foreign interests. New Turkey must be accepted, it does not worry because Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk" advocates with iron fist forced westernization. The game is done, Kurds now live in four different states (which would be more if one includes Azerbaijan and Armenia, fell under the rule of Stalin), Arab aspirations were largely humiliated, the question of Jewish returning in Palestine were totally underestimated. No one talks about democracy, even by mistake: just ensuring the territory control and the oil exploitation.

This wrong masterpiece of diplomacy turns one of the most silent and asleep places in the world, fatalistically resigned to the secular decline of Islam, in one of the most violent areas in the world in the second half of the twentieth century: war and violence for over half a century. Middle East. We are getting old with the problem of the Middle East. But the main architects of the problem, Europeans, are safe enough to afford to think only and always of oil (conversely, the area would be left to its fate for years). Kurds, however, have paid for everyone and more than everyone, even to become victims of themselves.

"The poor colonialism is invariably more ferocious than classic colonialism in its forms and more sinister for its effects". It is the theory of the jurist Ismet Vanly Sheriff, reported by Laura Schrader in her book "Kurdistan Fires". Discriminated and oppressed in Irak, Syria, Iran and Turkey, Kurds are the poorest of the poor, and, needless to hide it, the most backward of backwards. They have nothing in common with Arabs, nor Turks, who want to assimilate them: completely different ethnic group, language, traditions, at best, we can establish a distant relationship with Persians. Religion does not help them: the fact that they are mostly Sunni Muslims means a little. Moreover, even the Islamization was obtained by force, many centuries earlier: the original religion of Kurds was the worship of Ahura Mazda, but followers of the priest of Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) are only the small minority of Yazidis, in addition to traditional Nawroz, millennial celebration of the new year, every March 21, when the fires are lit everywhere in Kurdistan.

For Kurds the tradition is more important than religion: there is no trace of fanaticism, among them, so that Sunni majority has always lived together without the slightest problem with Shiite, Yazidis, Christian and even Jewish minorities.

But if the sense of cultural belonging is very strong, political consciousness, the spirit of national unity, remain at the lowest levels for decades. They do not go beyond the family, the clan, the tribe: the feudal mentality is the real ball and chain of Kurds, who can not quite embrace some form of modernity, playing into the hands of their rulers.

The absence of a ruling class, worthy in the least of this name is still the main problem of this unfortunate people.

A great cause needs a great leader: India independence is hard to imagine without the figure of Gandhi, or South Africa liberation without Mandela.

Kurds, by the division of the twenties, had only two real charismatic leaders: Mustafa Barzani in Irak and Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey. Two different ages, two different states, two alternative routes, both emblematic to understand Kurdish issue today. Also because Kurds mostly live in Turkey (20 million), but the state with the highest percentage of Kurds in the population has always been Irak (25 percent).

Mustafa Barzani was the classic feudal lord, the undisputed leader of his powerful clan, a rebel leader who embodied the courage of Peshmerga warriors, people who never give up, accustomed to face death and every kind of suffering.

When General Kassem in Iraq overthrows the monarchy (1958) bringing to the fore the Baath movement, Kurds oppose to the creation of a strong centralized state, which enhances Arab nationalism (Sunni domain). Each following coup does nothing but exacerbate the attempt to control in an increasingly dictatorial way, the ungovernable state created by the British, arabized Kurds at all costs, even if sometimes they pretend to negotiate and recognize Kurdish minority in unworthy constitutions. The solution is always and only military, up to the attempted genocide of the last official Baath come to power, Saddam Hussein, who commanded in Iraq in a brutal way since 1979.

Barzani, to defend himself in various wars against Baghdad, would accept alliances even with the devil, but until the seventies his main sponsors are the U.S. and the Shah of Persia. Even so, at some point, the party he created in his own image, the PDK, suffers division of "left" UPK. The quotation marks are required, because the ideology is an option, in the Middle East: the new party is simply that of Talabani clan, another powerful Kurdish family, who, seen the military escalation, seeks alliances especially in the socialist bloc.

Useless is still trying to figure out how the Cold War played in the Middle East, because each alliance is reversible. Saddam's attack on Iran of the ayatollahs (1980), makes him friendly to the West in the Eighties.

The weapons of mass destruction are those that USA, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy sell to the Great Dictator, from planes to the mines, through the poison gas, nerve and mustard gas. When it can, of course, the USSR also joins. To test their effectiveness are Iranians on the one hand, and Kurds on the other. But Saddam's cruel megalomania could not remain without consequences: the invasion of Kuwait is the greatest "gift" given to the U.S.A., and even Kurds.

The West becomes virgin again in a moment, and for the first time Kurds (after yet another mockery of 1991 uprising, crushed by Saddam still in the saddle for some time) are on the winning side, almost independent, liberated from their more ferocious persecutor.

It is not clear, however, who must command, between Barzani and Talabani clans, or if you prefer, between PDK and UPK, and before reaching an agreement, the two factions feel good to make a civil war, from 1992 to 1997.

But at the end there is glory (and oil) for all: the more diplomatic Jalal Talabani became president of the new state of Iraq, Massoud Barzani (son of the legendary Mustafa) controls his fair share of territory and he speaks without hesitation of independence of Kurdistan.

Forget about democracy, and development: Iraqi Kurdistan, one of the ugliest places in the world, is a militarized state that lives in traffic of oil (almost all destined for the black market), with widespread corruption that allows the money run. For people who have always had to struggle for survival, it is already much: fervent allies of Americans (but only because enemies of their enemy, no one has any illusion about their true intentions) Iraqi Kurds are "more realist than the king", and no one believes in the beautiful words spoken at the official level, no one dreams of living in a democratic and federal Iraq: the important thing is to have control of the territory and protect themselves from any threat.

Probably only one third of the citizens voted at the referendum on the constitution, but the cards full of "yes" were filled by the cops, to the delight of Western media, which in fact are seen very rarely in these parts. *Hic manebimus optime*, ("we'll be fine here"), everyone seems to say, except a progressive minority, gathered around the third Kurdish party, the almost unknown PDCK. A 30 km long line of tankers and trucks drives you to the other side of Kurdish planet, leaving no doubt about the type of bond that links Turkey to Iraq, or, in other words, the Middle East to Europe.

The difference between Iraqi side and Turkish one is evident, as this is the most unlucky area of Turkey, and it becomes even clearer when you reach the city of Diyarbakir, which is just the "capital" of Kurds of Anatolia. Here, in fact, Europe does not seem so far away, at a superficial glance. The standard of living is not lower than that of some Eastern European countries (but also of deep south Italy), judging from houses, hotels, shops and from clothing.

In Turkey, Kurdish issue has a lighter appearance, quite separate from Iraqi complicated plot,

delightfully Middle Eastern.

In Turkey, Kurds had somehow internalized the contempt and marginalization. For decades they were accustomed to be pointed as "mountain Turks," second-class citizens of the sacred state forged by Kemal Ataturk.

The army is the pillar on which the nation is founded; the guarantor of national unity and secularism of the state (which basically meant converting Muslims to nationalism, make them statist patriots, so the good Muslim is above all a Turk).

Political pluralism, freedom of expression, individual rights have always been accepted only when they did not damage the established order. As soon as one perceived an even cultural threat, harsh repression came. One could also be called Nazim Hikmet and be one of the greatest poets of the world: eventually, what remained was the jail or exile for those who even dared to have doubts on the monolithic system created by the Father of the Homeland. And when the politicians wandered from the subject, the army directly intervened.

But Turkey, a NATO member since 1952 and a watchdog of the United States in its region, had permanently parted from the Middle East. And that is why its contemporary history is decidedly more influenced by what happens in Europe. The seventies were turbulent years here, and the revolutionary currents that crossed the Old Continent have shaken a country that was slowly changing its social and economic aspect. It is in this context that Abdullah Ocalan is trained, a son, as many poor Kurds, of a peasant family in the area of Urfa, a political science student at the University of Ankara.

Ocalan joins the movements of the extreme left, and he knows very soon prison and torture, which was and is common practice in Turkey. In his view, what is lacking to his people is a real ethnic and class awareness. If the external enemy is Turkish, nationalist and militarist, state, the interior one is the feudal, hierarchical and male dominated mentality, of which Kurds have to free.

At the end of 1977 he founded the PKK, Marxist-influenced Kurdistan Workers Party. The activity of the first year is only political, but in Turkey, the conflict between extremists of left and right, "Grey Wolves" (which often act as the long arm of the secret service), is very hard.

In September 1980, soldiers led by General Evren effectuate a coup: they want to restore order in the country and re-establish their supremacy, which will be reaffirmed by the constitution in 1982, still in force. It is clear that behind the army there is a whole social bloc: according to the professor of social sciences Server Tanilli, "Turkish bourgeoisie to impose its brutality attacking democracy, has always used two methods: the hostility to communism and hostility to Kurds. It had prevented the political, economic and social claims charging them as communism, and the national democratic demands of Kurds on charges of separatism".

In regime information, Kurdish and communist become synonymous, although the PKK, when it decides to turn to armed struggle in 1984, relies on a few thousand militants, and it is perhaps better known in Europe than in Turkey.

But the policy of brutal obtuse often absurd repression, systematically implemented by Turkish state, makes PKK the true Kurdish party and Ocalan the national hero. In Diyarbakir and its surroundings you will not find anyone willing to ignore the unconditional support to the PKK and its leader.

It is a fact that Europeans should have in mind. From some years on, the PKK has been listed as a movement of "terrorists", then you must report to a nation of "terrorists". Obviously it is not the case, and it is not at all difficult to understand the reasons for Kurds, who obviously are not a bunch of fanatics or extremists.

The true identity of Kurds is the collective suffering. Hardly you can find a family that has not lived directly or indirectly the incredible oppression of Turkish police and army, the only true terrorists of this tears and blood story, which is not over, even after the arrest of Ocalan and the period of latency of the PKK guerrillas (now called Kongra Gel), even though we are no longer in the dark years of civil war.

Being Kurd means being persecuted, even for absurd reasons. And all this without arousing solidarity, or perhaps the pity of anyone. The thirty-year silence of the western media is simply

shocking.

But Kurds know that the tanks that have destroyed their homes are imported from Germany. They know that European nations have for years continued to do booming business with Turkey now knocking at the doors of European Union. They know that millions of Europeans come every year to visit the beauties of the country, and villages that are sometimes a few tens of kilometers far from injustice, and violence.

No one today, even Ocalan, talks about independence. One speaks only of democracy, freedom of expression, autonomy and protection of minorities. And it is the same problem posed by Turks, suppressed by the police, tired of the protection of an army which is a real caste of privileged people, held down by heavy state bureaucracy, largely inefficient and corrupt, which is yet another burden inherited from Kemalist state.

In short, we talk about what Europe should really be: a political reality in which peace and democracy have exorcised the ghosts of nationalism and militarism, have replaced the police state with the rule of law, have learned the tragic lesson of the Second World War.

Many people have forgotten it, atrophied by the ethics of profit, which hypocritically compares capitalism with democracy. This is why Turkey's entry is a crucial step for the future of Europe. For this reason, Kurdish issue is absolutely an European challenge.

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