

## 01.10.2014 Middle East: The time has come for the Kurdish people

The jihadist eruption in the Middle East has fuelled the tensions and threatens to export anti-Western terrorism to all four corners of the earth. In the chaos generated by the US intervention in Iraq after the September 11 attacks, the Kurds now embody the values of resistance to barbarism. There is no doubt that this key role in the fight against Islamic State will open up new political prospects for them.

The necessary wisdom of governments seems to have deserted the elites who were in strategic positions in the conduct of the world's affairs around the turn of the century, not least in the United States during the Bush years, as he tried to redraw the map of the Middle East by force by threatening a military campaign to install a new power in Baghdad. Since then, like an out of control car running downhill, the actions of the world in the Middle East have represented a high-risk strategy.

Islamic State, which has seized control of a whole territory between Iraq and Syria, has introduced an entirely new factor. How can we manage this new type of state which eludes any international dimension? It goes much further than the Afghanistan of the Taliban, no less Islamist, but capable of working in the international sphere, like Iran in the 1980s or Libya under Gaddafi. These were 'terrorist states', it is true, but they were legally constituted states nonetheless. It was possible to identify representatives, and even if conflict prevented any dialogue, exchanges could take place through the United Nations. The same goes for North Korea, which can be influenced through Chinese diplomacy. But all the bridges have been cut with Islamic State, which has taken control of vast Sunni areas in the Middle East.

The ethnic cleansing of Christian and Yazidi minorities that have occupied these areas since time immemorial renders this regime even more odious, and much more problematic. It has made its nest within a helpless Sunni population, stigmatised for its long monopoly of power under Saddam Hussein to the detriment of Shi'ite and Kurdish groups. Its sudden and brutal experience of marginalisation encouraged support for radical Islamists, either from complicity, or for protection against the new dominant power supported by the United States, or to enact vengeance. No doubt all of these motives were present at the same time.

The regular Iraqi army, resented as an army of occupation, was put to rout, leaving sophisticated weaponry in the hand of the insurgents. Taking control of active oil wells and a whole hidden network of international trade developed during the embargo on Saddam Hussein, Islamic State has been strikingly effective, pressing its military advantage to the gates of Baghdad and attacking the Kurdish territories, initially with considerably superior arms.

In this completely topsy-turvy region of the world, Kurdistan now appears to be a force for stability, whereas the Kurds were until recently pariahs sacrificed by the international community, in Iraqi Kurdistan where they were gassed and repressed by Saddam Hussein, in Syrian Kurdistan where they were deprived of all their rights, including identity papers, and in Turkey where they are regularly imprisoned for their struggle for national freedom against the ultra-nationalist regime in Ankara, yesterday obedient to Western militarism, now under the banner of 'moderate Islam'.

But no war can be won without soldiers on the ground, and the Peshmerga in Iraq, the PKK in Turkey and their Syrian counterparts, hardened by decades of resistance to the post-colonial dictatorships in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, are now the sole credible bulwark against the fanatical forces under the flag of Islamic State.

The Kurds are welcoming persecuted communities fleeing their home regions, and they are providing a credible defence against the advance of Islamic State forces. For some weeks, with inferior equipment, they folded when confronted with the heavy weapons used by their adversaries, while the international community, continuing a decades-long pattern of solidarity with Turkey, deprived them of logistical support. Since then, air strikes have relaxed the stranglehold and weapons delivered at last have given renewed strength to their armed forces. Much more militarily credible than the Baghdad regime's armed forces, rejecting any religious extremism as the Kurdish combatants engaged on the front show, they are themselves Sunni Muslims who are in a better position to enter into dialogue with the civilian populations than the Shi'ite soldiers of the Iraqi leadership.

So they are today the key players in any attempt to regain mastery of a situation which has escaped all control. They will know how to get their just political rewards, not least in Turkey.

The sun will rise at last for the Kurdish people!