

21.9.2016 Kurdistan. A complex and contradictory situation.

Things are constantly changing in the conflict between Daesh and the rest of the world in the Middle East. Except the fact that the “rest of the world” is moving in contradictory and sometimes conflicting directions. In this ever-shifting tangle of alliances, the Kurds are playing out the future of their nation.

For Kurds, engaged in total war against Daesh in both Iraq and Syria, the coming period is of historical importance. They need to persuade the international community of the reality of their nationhood if they are to emerge from a century-long denial of their rights. Since the end of WWI, after their status as an independent State was first incorporated into the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 and then overlooked in the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, the Kurdish people have been fighting for their political autonomy in Iraq, in Syria and in Turkey. Experience has taught them that international agreements are traps, and that their nation can win the war but lose the peace negotiations that follow.

In Syria, Iraq and Turkey, the Kurds have fought hard against the ruling powers before being pushed back. They did so in Iraq against Saddam Hussein, who suppressed their revolt, gassing an entire village and killing 5,000 civilians in Halabja in 1988. Profiting from Saddam's fall, and with the support of America, Iraqi Kurdistan enjoys complete independence and acts as a quasi-State with its Peshmerga army, which was initially the only force to challenge Daesh in Iraq and which is still the force best prepared to organise the retaking of the territory seized by Islamic State, in particular around Mosul. But the existing Iraqi state, led by Shi'ites from the south of the country, refuses to acknowledge the new frontiers of Iraqi independence, not least in the oil-rich Kirkuk region. Taking Mosul back from Daesh is subject to the resolution of this tension between government and Kurdish forces.

The other major area of Kurdish settlement is Turkey, where the PKK has organised a national liberation movement which now extends well beyond its armed wing and has established a very strong democratic presence. The Kurds have even succeeded in sending 80 members of parliament to Ankara, shaking the Erdoğan government which is establishing a new dictatorship in Turkey.

In the fight against Daesh, the PKK and its Syrian equivalent the PYD have written a page of history in Kobani, the first town to be saved from the spread of Daesh by its own efforts at resistance, despite the passivity of the international community, muzzled by a Turkey obsessed with the risk of Kurdish separatism. Since Kobani, the Syrian Kurds, supported by the PKK, have liberated Yezidi territory and are seeking to consolidate their lands along the Turkish border, with air support from the international community but against the raids by Turkish tanks that are bombarding their positions. For the new Turkish power, the enemy is the PKK more than Daesh.

Finally, the power of Damascus and Bashar al-Assad has been shored up by Russian intervention, giving Vladimir Putin a new role in the region and in Syria in particular. So it was the Americans and Russians who negotiate a cease-fire agreement between Damascus and the Syrian opposition, and who are trying to assemble forces against Daesh.

To influence the local scene, the Russians have obtained the support of Turkey, and it is certain that the price of this support was Moscow's solidarity against the Kurds.

For the Kurdish people, therefore, the situation is complicated and contradictory. Their traditional supporters in Russia have abandoned them and entered into an alliance with Turkey. The United States, their ally in Iraq, has promised Turkey to limit its support for the Kurds to Iraq. Ankara has acquiesced in this and has even negotiated agreements with Kurdish

leaders in Iraq, to the detriment of Turkish Kurds led by the PKK. Relations between Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish groups are very strained in consequence.

On the ground, the PKK's area of influence in Syria is threatened by the Turkish army, protected by its alliance with Russia, while repression is in full flow in the Kurdish territories of Turkey. Against this difficult background, the Kurds deserve all our solidarity, in the name of the solidarity that we naturally feel with all peoples fighting for their rights. And also because a genuinely democratic space is emerging in Kurdistan, where a people are thriving on freedom, not least in advancing the status of Muslim women in spectacular fashion. The Kurdish people are the anti-Daesh, not simply on the battlefield but also, and most significantly, in terms of ideas.