



THE GAZA ISSUE AND THE IRANIAN POLICY OF DESTABILIZATION

When dealing with the latest crisis between Israel and the Gaza Strip one would be tempted to decide before hand who is right and who is wrong, whether we should look at cause or effect and if action and reaction are justified. Merely looking at the timeline of provocations could lead us to wrong, if not superficial, judgements in an issue – as the Palestinian one is – that has been ongoing for over 60 years and in which all sides have their portion in the right and in the wrong.

The Italian Foreign Minister probably was victim of such a naïve approach when he defined the missiles launched from Gaza as "an act of terrorism". The killing of the chief of the Izzedine al Qassam Brigades, Ahmed Jabari, was instead labelled as an "elimination". Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, probably due to his past posts as ambassador to Israel and to the United States, took a stance in a very complicated issue and could have been victim of what psychologists call "the Stockholm syndrome". His statements could be justified if the Italian FM was trying to evaluate the problem in the light of national institutional policy; he should instead have been more prudent if he meant expressing an assessment on the facts. Being a high ranking diplomat, inadvertently now a Minister, should teach how to avoid using inappropriate wording.

The same can be said for Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi when, at the beginning of the crisis, he defined Israeli operations as "an aggression against humanity". Or for Turkish PM Recep Erdogan who made similar statements. Or for Libyan Foreign Minister who has accused Israel of terrorism and of "criminal acts". Many others just like them have used the opportunity given by the conflict to express opinions rather than trying to propose or impose a solution to an endless problem.

Because in the Middle East nothing is black or white, but everything is gray. And those analysts that try to evaluate events risk having a color-blind vision of facts splashing out valuations and taking sides. To say what is right and what is wrong in a 60 years long history is an impossible task. Judging such a complex problem does not help the path of truth. If a fair judgment of facts is difficult in the Middle East, so is trying to find the crux of the agendas fueling the crisis. This is because there are so many actors at play and it is hard to understand who is contributing or gaining from instability.

Today the temporary worsening of the military conflict between Gaza and Israel cannot be attributed only to the unresolved Palestinian issue, but is the result of a world, the Arab one, that is changing, of a region swept by tensions and instability, of widespread Islamic fundamentalism, of an international community incapable of producing or imposing solutions, of Israel that under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu has not allowed any margin or room other than for shows of force. And by doing so the issue is not solved, but delayed over time with more deaths, more hate, more need for revenge and suffering.

As has happened until now, the Palestinian issue is solely the litmus test of everything else that is taking place in the region and, as has happened in the past, it could become the spark that will set the Middle Eastern powder keg alight. Several countries in the Middle East have appropriated the

Palestinian issue as a flag to wave, a just cause to exploit and then use for their own purposes. Surely not to find a solution.

It wasn't a difficult prediction to think that the Syrian crisis would have spilled over its borders into other crisis zones. In the Middle Eastern Pandora's box there is a close interdependence between causes and effect and, above all, there is a strong link among the different crisis in the region that share a common denominator of instability.

When one of the political or social pieces of the puzzle on which the unstable equilibrium of the area is based on is modified, negative effects automatically hit other ongoing problems. And there are today several regional actors gaining politically from the destabilization.

We should thus ask ourselves: who has gained or lost from this new crisis before the deal brokered by Egypt and the United States on November 21 2012?

Israel: Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who will face elections on January 22 2013 and is allied with the extreme right wing parties, has shown his resolve and having used the military option has surely brought him electoral consensus. The same can be said for the expansion of Jewish settlements in the areas still under negotiation with the ANP (Palestinian National Authority). Talks aim at forcing the counterpart to accept the creation of a Palestinian entity resembling the South African Bantustans. But the initial tactical gain is lost in the long period. Once again the ANP's will to negotiate has been delegitimized in favor of the most extremist stances in the Palestinian galaxy. Even worse, Hamas does not have the absolute control over Gaza anymore since radical Salafist groups as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Tawid wal Jihad, Ansar al Sunna, Jund Ansar Allah and Jaish al Islam have taken over. The latest crisis, sparked by the killing of a Hamas military commander, did not see the latter responsible for the escalation. Nevertheless, Hamas, thanks to the new clash with Israel, has gained a new international status.

There is also the issue of the asymmetrical warfare, linked to the disproportion between the Israeli military apparatus and the Palestinian one. A disproportion that determines a high toll of war victims. The operation "Cast Lead" in December 2008 ended after 20 days of war (including bombardments and the land invasion) with 1400 Palestinian deaths and 13 Israeli ones. The majority of the Palestinian victims were civilians. This time around, with only a week of conflict, there have been 156 Palestinian deaths (whom 36 children) and about 1400 wounded, opposed to 6 Israeli deaths and 250 wounded.

When Israel decides to wage a war, it often underestimates the impact the military disproportion has on global public opinion (and the vote at the UN General Assembly on November 29 2012 recognizing the Palestinian's "non member observer state" status is there to prove it) and on the resentment cultivated by those suffering from the bloodshed. This is the so-called image loss. Gaza has such a high population density that any bombardment will exceed the 3.14 rate of collateral damage in the ratio between legitimate targets and civilian deaths that is usually considered acceptable by Tel Aviv. However, the truce leaves the Palestinian issue unsolved (and none of the negotiators, UN included, has attempted to tackle the problem).

One of the Israeli military gains on the field has been the testing of the "Iron Dome" anti-missile system (produced by the Israelis with the cooperation of US firms), that has eliminated 90% of the missiles launched from Gaza. This is a test that could be useful in case of a raid against Iran and a potential missile retaliation by the Ayatollah.

Hamas: the Hamas leadership, only partly responsible for the military escalation, is once again recognized as a negotiating partner. Despite being surpassed by extremist factions, Hamas is still an essential international interlocutor. The Palestinian Authority has temporarily lost its legitimacy,

silent witness of a new Palestinian drama. The ANP has regained some credibility when it turned down the US request to postpone/block the vote at the UN General Assembly (a stance backed by Hamas and that could lead to a reconciliation between the two groups). During the crisis there has been a cortege of Arabic Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Strip, including Turkish FM Ahmed Davutoglu. And this is another element in support of Hamas, whose signature on the truce has avoided offering more room to those extremist fringes undermining its leadership in Gaza. The overall picture fits the logic of the current Israeli government that will not give in to Abu Mazen's requests and actually prefers dealing with an organization, Hamas, that does not want to negotiate.

Palestinian National Authority (ANP): the prestige gained by Hamas during its last confrontation with Israel has proportionally downgraded the PLO and Abu Mazen. Fortunately, the vote allowing Palestine to become a UN observer state – a diplomatic initiative strongly pursued by the ANP – has rebalanced the relationship between the two souls in the Palestinian community: the secular and moderate (PLO) and the religious and radical (Hamas). But the ANP also faces internal dissent as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and its Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades supports Hamas' Izzedin al Qassam Brigades.

Egypt: when hostilities broke out, it wasn't clear what role Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi could have or wanted to play and, above all, which side he would have decided to pick in the attempt of brokering a deal between Hamas and Israel. Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood has instead been capable of playing a qualified negotiating role (still under US pressure, whose relevant financial contributions still support the country) that has gained them renewed credibility in the West, in Israel and in the Arab world. The circumstance could not be taken for granted following the signals coming from the new president in office in Egypt and the notoriously strong links between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Cairo has obtained a truce, it has avoided its partner Hamas a certain military defeat, it has not signed any binding agreements (and will thus continue to supply the Strip through the tunnels) and will continue to close its eyes on the arms trafficking across the Sinai (where the Iranian Fajr 5 missile came from after a triangulation from Sudan and Lebanon). Egypt will hence continue to practice what is usually called in the muslim world, but mainly in the Shiite one, as the "taqyya" (ambiguity or concealment).

Iran: the crisis in Gaza has also played in the hands of Tehran, probably the first hidden sponsor of this new situation. It is reasonable to think that the crisis could have been lead by Iran aiming to gain from the increased instability in the region. The circumstance would have been particularly appreciated if it also impacted Israeli security. For some time now there has been direct or through Hezbollah political and military tie between Hamas and Tehran. Iranian missiles in Palestinian hands confirm this. Had the crisis lasted longer, and this is what Iran hoped, it would have turned away the Israeli menace against the Iranian nuclear program and would have weakened the Jewish State. It is instead probable that the suspension of the Israeli land operations in Gaza was dictated by the need to focus on Iran and it is also possible that the United States could have convinced Tel Aviv to give up the attack in exchange for some form of military support on the Iranian front. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain why a seasoned politician like Benjamin Netanyahu has decided to suspend a military operation that had the support of 70% of Israelis.

Turkey: Recep Erdogan, who landed in Cairo when hostilities began, meant to push his neo-ottoman policy even further. However, due to his awful relationship with Netanyahu, he was not able to play any role in the mediation. Stripped of his role, the Turkish PM produced a series of statements in favor of Hamas. After the contrasts with Syria, Turkey felt the need to regain consensus in the Arab world. It is striking to note the Turkish support to operation "Cast Lead" against Gaza in 2008 and its critical attitude towards Israel today.

U.S.A.: the US mediation has had a great impact. Following the Arab Spring, this was the first test of Barack Obama's support to new Arab leaderships. During the presidential campaign Obama had been criticized for his foreign policy. But facts have proven him right. Hillary Clinton has been very

effective (and this could turn out to be useful four year from now when – as it seems – she will run for the Presidency) thanks to the new diplomatic approach in Washington. The not so friendly relationship between Benjamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama could offer the US Administration the credibility to play a role in the Palestinian issue.

THE IRANIAN PLOY

As we have underlined, the new crisis between Israel and the Gaza Strip is connected to other regional hot spots, all inevitably interconnected among them. As in a role game, in the Middle East every controversy doesn't run out in a direct confrontation, but usually involves several other actors and countries.

The far reaching hand of Iran is surely present in the Gaza crisis: not only through the supply of the Fajr 5 missiles, but also because the Jihad Islamyah – now associated to the Salafists and to people linked to Al Qaeda – is answers directly to Tehran. As previously stated, the Iranian interference in the Strip is part of a wider destabilization scheme. Iran today faces both the Israeli menace against its nuclear programme and the foreseeable loss of an historic ally such as Syria.

While attempting to divert international attention from its nuclear ambitions to other areas in turmoil and while trying to open more fronts for Israel, Tehran is applying a "the worse the better" tactic. That is, more crisis arise, more potential menaces surround Tel Aviv, the better Iranian interests and security are safeguarded.

In the Ayatollah's dangerous and destabilizing game, Gaza is only part of a wider scheme applied on the countries neighboring Israel. With the exception of Egypt and Jordan, Iran has targeted Gaza, Lebanon while supporting Syria.

On October 19 2012 in the country of the Cedars the Lebanese General Wissam al Hassan, chief of Police intelligence, was killed in an attack in Beirut after having survived a previous attempt on his life in April. Linked to Rafic Hariri (the former Lebanese PM probably killed by Syrian hit-men in an attack on February 14 2005) and to his son Saad, Hassan was renown for his hostility with regard to Syria. Wissam lead a faction uniting Sunnis and Walid Jumblatt's Druses against Damascus. Wissam al Hassan had been accused of having facilitated the transit of weapons to Syrian rebels via Lebanon. It is a plausible suspicion that there was a Syrian mandator, Hezbollah executors and Iranian minds behind the attack on Hassan. In August Wissam al Hassan had arrested the former Minister of Information, Michel Samaha, accusing him of having smuggled large quantities of explosives into Lebanon.

To the Syrian-Iranian plot we have to had Tehran's own moves: on October 6 2012 an Iranian drone was shot down while flying over the Negev desert not far from Bersheva. It had been launched by Hezbollah over Israel. The Shiite Lebanese group has recently installed, with Iranian support, a cyber warfare central in the outskirts of Beirut. Given its variegated social and religious articulation, Lebanon is a fertile ground for anyone attempting to destabilize the region. So far, the UN mission UNIFIL in the south of Lebanon has avoided that the frictions between Hezbollah and Israel turn into a war. It is no news that the Hezbollah are totally submitted to Iranian interests, but information obtained supports the idea that, in the short term, there could be a leap forward in this relationship.

On September 16 2012 the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, General Mohamed Ali Jafari, has announced the deployment of the Pasdaran on Lebanese soil. They had already been identified fighting alongside Bashar al Assad's troops against the rebels in Syria. If they were to deploy in Lebanon it would mean opening a new armed front with Israel.

As far as Syria is concerned, Iran is once again interested in overlapping the crisis in Damascus with its controversy with Tel Aviv. In the early days of November mortar shots were fired from

Syria against Israeli posts on the Golan heights. Their response was the launch of a Tammuz rocket. This could have simply been an accident in the context of the civil war raging in Syria. Or it could have been the deliberate attempt – with the Iranian blessing – of widening the fronts in the interest of both Damascus and Tehran:

- Bashar al Assad is hanging on to power on the basis that his fall could have a negative impact on the stability in the Middle East. If the Golan heights were to enter the equation, the issue of the Druse community living across the borders would be relit. And Syrian Druses support Assad.
- Iran, on the basis of its "the worse the better" policy, is in favor of any hotbed at the border with Israel.

AN EASY PROPHECY

At the end of the new round in the conflict between Israel and Hamas both parties claimed victory. If there is a winner, this is common sense that prevailed over vain ambition and antagonism. Hamas has declared the date of the truce as a national holiday and "victory day". This is only part of the rhetoric because wars, whether they begin or finish or – as in this case – are postponed, only cause a series of useless deaths on both sides. Because the underlying issue, a solution for a Palestinian State, has not been solved. Fire will burn under the ashes until the next time. Tensions will grow again in the Middle East and the Palestinian problem will explode once again. The Palestinians are a flag to wave when needed by Arab regimes. Sometimes it seems as if everyone wants the issue to stay the way it is in order to continue waving that flag. Today it's Iran's turn. Before them it was the countries of the front of the refusal. Tomorrow it could be somebody else.

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THE KURDS: A PROBLEM WITHIN A PROBLEM

The Kurdish problem – a people with their own language, traditions, culture and a strong ethnical identity – has continued without political solutions for many years amidst the uncoincidental general disattention of those countries, Western and non, that do not want to get on Turkey's bad side or that simply do not want to add to the instability elements of a region that is marked by civil wars, social instability and by a rampant Islamic fundamentalism.

The Kurdish issue begins with the fall of the Ottoman empire and with the subsequent treaty of Se'vres (August 10, 1920) with which the empire was dismembered. This treaty suggested the possibility of tutelage for minorities (such as the Kurdish) for whom the League of Nations envisaged the constitution of autonomous states (articles 62-64 of the treaty). The successive victory of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's nationalists in Turkey immediately slowed down the development of the Kurdish irridentism. The Turkish back-tracking was later ratified by the treaty of Lausanne (July 24, 1923) which indissolubly cancelled the grants awarded to the Kurdish just three years earlier. From that moment until the present day, the Kurdish problem has not been treated anymore like a political issue, but rather like a problem of public order, security and fight against terrorism.

Geografically divided between Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, the history of the Kurds was characterized by persecution, exploitation, pseudo-negotiations of pseudo-autonomy and social marginalization. The answer to all of these has often been terrorism on the part of the PKK (Parti Karkerani Kurdistan, "Party of the Kurdish Laborers") that was founded as a political party in 1978 (a mix of Marxism and nationalism) but slowly transformed, through protests and sabotages, into an armed organization in 1984.

The transformation of this movement into a terrorist organization has on one side emphasized the Kurdish demands in the minds of the world's powerful, but on the other side it has reduced the PKK's credibility and turned the issue into a mere security problem, thus disregarding the motives for the PKK's behavior. The same bloody path has been chosen by other peoples in search of justice such as the Palestinians, but for the Kurdish it has not produced any acknowledgement.

The Kurdish issue in the single states

The main obstacle to the union of the Kurdish community in demanding autonomy has been the division of their peoples in four different countries. This has had an impact on the priorities and approaches to the issue of independence.

The Kurds in Sirya have been associated to the regime and protected by it. Similarly to the other minorities in the country, they have been granted privileges but have also been instrumental in creating an anti-Turkish feeling when the regime in Damascus found it convenient. Today the Kurds of the PKK fight prevalently on Bashar al Assad's side not so much because they believe in his cause (they are Sunni like the majority of the country, while the regime is Alawite) but because of their hostility with regards to Ankara.

Kurds in Turkey have been the object of persecution and marginalization. Turkey has not granted them any form of self-determination or cultural identification. This is why their fight is mostly an

armed one in juxtaposition with the Kemalian military nationalism of Turkey. The Kurds fight to obtain rights, but also for survival. The PKK and the Turkish authorities have been the object of reiterated condemnations because of their reciprocal brutality.

The Kurdish minority in Iran, which is located mostly along the border with Turkey, is tolerated by Teheran and left alone so long as an intervention is not justified by military attacks or other public disorders. The Iranian Kurds co-exist with the regime which allows them a certain degree of autonomy.

The Kurds in Iraq, after the fall of the Baathist regime that had fought and persecuted them, are now enjoying a great deal of freedom with regards to Baghdad. This freedom was not granted them but conquered by them during their fight against Saddam Hussein. This circumstance gives them the de facto possibility of creating their own state. There are however leftover contrasts between Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurdistan on the issue regarding the oil fields present in the territory under Kurdish jurisdiction.

Altogether Kurdish claims encompass support for a regime, armed struggle, co-existence, and hope for a properly own state.

The Party of Kurdish Laborers (PKK)

The history of the PKK is intertwined with the Turkish and Syrian events. Like all the other irridentist movements of the 1970's, the PKK is founded on a Marxist inspiration. Initially it was a political party, although with an extremist tendency (demonstrations, strikes, pressure on the Kurdish members of the army so that they resign). This configuration remains unvaried until a coup d'etat brings the Turkish military to power. From this moment on (September 12, 1980) all parties are dissolved and this gives the PKK, headed by Abdullah Ocalan, the opportunity (or the need) to move underground. The new military authorities in Turkey use the hard way. They sentence Kurdish militants to death, thus receiving terrorist attacks in return. It is a spiral of violence and a fight with no quarter that leaves the PKK in political isolation with regards to the other Kurdish parties in the region that share their objectives and claims: The KPD (Kurdish Democratic Party) and the KPU (Kurdish Patriotic Union) in Iraq, the PJAK (Party for the Liberation of Kurdistan) and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan in Iran.

This war has produced at least 40.000 dead to this day.

The PKK used bordering territories as bases to fight the Turkish army: sometimes in Iraqi Kurdistan, rarely from the Iranian side. Most of all from Syria. Damscus had ongoing border disputes with Turkey and was worried by the unilateral decision by Ankara to build a great dam on the Euphrates river. The result was that the armed confrontation spread instability not only in Turkey, but in the other bordering countries as well.

Ocalan, also known with the battle name Apo, had found refuge in Syria. The Turkish pressures and threats had forced Damascus to expel him in 1998. After spending some time in Russia and in Italy, Abdullah Ocalan had fled to Kenya for fear of being extradited and had found refuge in the Greek embassy of Nairobi. Yet Athens wanted to get rid of him too, so during his transfer to the airport in order to reach a safe-haven elsewhere, Ocalan was captured and handed over to Turkish

authorities.

Since 1999 he has languished as the only detainee on the island of Imrali in a regime of isolation and precarious health conditions. His death sentence was turned into a sentence to life in prison. Yet his group continues to carry on the armed struggle.

The PKK is listed in the US Department of State black list since August 10, 1998. It appears in the “Terrorism act 2000” approved by the UK parliament and confirmed in December 2011. It is listed among terrorist organizations by the European Council (as of June 26, 2012), by Australia, Canada, Ireland and, of course, by Turkey. The inclusion of the PKK among terrorist organizations has not helped in finding a diplomatic solution to the Kurdish problem through a negotiations table or an international mediation. The PKK was judged solely by its actions (which it enacted only on the basis of its claims) and not by the claims themselves which could have provided some justification for the terrorism. The Turkish position has been supported, for interest or acquiescence, thus leaving no room for alternatives to the armed struggle.

The Kurdish claims have been upheld by another, more political, group: The “Koma Civaken Kurdistan” (“Community's Union of Kurdistan”), previously called “Koma Komalen Kurdistan” (“People's Conference of Kurdistan”). This group is in practice the political arm of the PKK and as such many of its members are presently imprisoned.

Kurdish numbers

There is no exact data on the numbers of this community because the countries in which they live have no interest in quantifying the Kurdish community's weight in terms of numbers.

In Turkey the Kurds' numbers should sway between 12 and 16 millions over a total of 75 million inhabitants and should be concentrated in the south-east part of the country.

In Iran there are an estimated 7 million Kurds, most of whom are Shiite.

In Syria the Kurds are the most numerous ethnic minority. They are c.ca 2-3 millions and are concentrated mostly in the north-east of the country.

The Iraqi Kurds are anywhere from 4 to 6 millions.

If these numbers are correct, the Kurds in the Middle East are a total of c.ca 30 million to which must be added the numbers of the diaspora that have escaped cyclical persecutions in all of the above countries.

All in all, the Kurdish community is one of the most numerous ethnic groups in the world without a state to call their own.

The Iraqi case

With the fall of Saddam Hussein that had persecuted them and with the new leadership in Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds have conquered a good deal of independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. This independence,

although not sanctioned by the Baghdad government, is factual and very concrete. The two main Iraqi Kurdish movements, the KDP and the KPU, have clashed against each other in the past because of the struggle for power of their two leaders, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. Now they are brought together by the common objective of an increasingly independent condition.

Barzani is President of the Region of Kurdistan since June 2005 while Talabani is the President of the Iraqi Republic since April 6 of the same year. Talabani's designation, surely favored in part by the excellent relationship that he has with Iran, certifies the will of the Kurds to gain independence through secession and the creation of a Kurdish state, yet only – this is the subtle diplomatic game being played - when the political conditions allow such a breakaway.

This diplomatic subtlety has made it so that Turkey, traditionally contrary to any independency claim by the Kurds (the Iraqi Kurdistan could have been a dangerous precedent to be imitated at home), has instead developed tight economic ties with this region.

Iraqi Kurdistan has its own government and an army of Peshmerga that were never englobed in the national army, as demanded by the Baghdad government. It administers social life in the region independently, guarantees security and exploits the extraction of oil, thus developing a strong financial independence. It is a de facto state within the state.

In March 2012, during a public speech, Massoud Barzani hinted to the nearing of such a historical goal, yet as both Barzani and Talabani know, it will not take place without the consent of bordering states, Turkey above all others.

The Syrian case

Since July this year, especially for military reasons, the Syrian authorities have given Kurds military control over the north-east part of the country that is inhabited prevalently by Kurds. This has allowed the regime to employ their military elsewhere in the country. Syrian Kurdistan is presently under the control of several Kurdish political entities affiliated to the Democratic Union Party (PYK), also considered to be the political arm of the PKK in Syria (lately they have been accused of receiving arms and money from the Iranian Vevak). In fact there have been two events detrimental to Turkish interests: the creation of an independently administered Kurdish territory (that could spawn independence claims or future secessions) and a tie between this territory and the armed struggle that the PKK carries out on Turkish ground.

Yet that which worries Ankara most is the re-appearance in this enclave of another extremist group, the “Acilciler” (name which means “the urgencies” and which is inspired by a manifesto published after the 1980 military coup d'etat). The Acilciler is also known as the “Popular Turkish Liberation Party/Front” (THKP/C) and is headed by Mihac Ural, a terrorist on the run from Turkish authorities. Ural has ties to the Syrian secret services and is operative in the Turkish province of Hatay (from which derives another name for the group, the “Liberation Army of Hatay”). The group has 5-700 armed militants that could be used to support the PKK in operations against Turkish armed forces. The PKK and the Syrian Liberation Army have already clashed in the suburbs of Aleppo.

The present situation and the outlook for the future

The evolution of the Kurdish issue and obtaining independence can follow two alternative paths:

- the armed struggle, as the PKK carries out.
- a diplomatic solution

The choice of one path rather than the other will be conditioned by the situation in the region because, as is now clear, the issue is tied to the evolution of the situation in each of the states where the Kurds dwell. It is not a national problem, but an international one.

Because of Turkey's unwillingness to recognize the existence of the Kurdish issue and thus its unwillingness to find a solution for it and faced with the rigidity of the PKK, which sees the territorial approach as inescapable, what is happening now in Syria and Iraq could make room for further options. This will be possible if that which happens in those countries is regarded by their Kurdish populations as an opportunity and not as a payback.

The meeting held by Iraqi Kurdistan President Barzani and Kurdish Syrian factions in Erbil in July – and the mediation effort thereof – is an important step ahead. Some factions had taken the side of Assad, others had sided with the rebels. The meeting was held to avoid that the Kurdish movement's synergies be lost in the meanders of the Syrian civil war. It was an effort to unite the community regardless of their national specificity under the umbrella of the Iraqi Kurds.

There is a second event that confirms the political importance of the Iraqi Kurdish group: in the beginning of August the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu had met in Erbil, through the good offices of Barzani, the same Syrian Kurdish factions (exception made for the PYK) expressing the Turkish hostility with regards to any form of independent Kurdish entity within Syria.

Even though divergences between the Turks and Kurds persist, these attempts at dialog give the idea that a diplomatic solution could be sought. Also because in the past months the military activities of the PKK have grown exponentially.

Yet the issue involves another, less visible, national entity: Israel.

Tel Aviv has quite good relationships with Iranian Kurds, and excellent ones with the Iraqi Kurds. This because these communities have fought against their respective central governments which were enemies of Israel. They have thus obtained Israel's liking (and practical support; in the past Israel had provided military assistance for Barzani). Furthermore, the Kurds never expressed the arab-muslim rhetoric with regards to the existence of Israel, being completely dedicated to their own existence and survival.

Kurdish Hebrew communities have always been particularly protected in Iraqi Kurdistan. The fact that the Kurds are now a problem for Turkey – once the ally of Israel and presently strongly critical of their policy – is another favorable circumstance for Jewish policy (even though at the time of Ocalan's arrest in Kenya, Israel was accused of having given the information to the Turkish secret service MIT).

In the Middle East alliances and strategies often develop not because of political likeness of the parts, but on the pragmatic cynicism of the moment. The recurring slogan is that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The creation of an independent Kurdish entity in the Middle East would, in the eyes of Tel Aviv, weaken the Arab nations in those areas where the Kurds live, and provide Israel with a potential ally untouched by the rampant Islamic fundamentalism. Presently (apparently) the relationship between Israel and the Iraqi Kurds has cooled down substantially because of Israel's hostility with regards to the Iranian nuclear program. This creates relational problems because Iraq has yet to find a balance in their relationship with Iran (Iraq's primary ally). In his April trip to the USA, the Iraqi President Massoud Barzani had avoided meetings with the American Jewish community. Yet word has it that Israel would have bases located in Iraqi Kurdistan from which to monitor Iran.

As we've mentioned, that which will happen in the near future will influence developments and consequent possibilities to find a solution to the Kurdish problem. There is the Syrian civil war, the confrontation between Iran and Israel, the recurrence of the Palestinian problem and the precarious political balance in Iraq. In this context, the instability derived by the lack of a solution to the Kurdish problem can be added to the instability that already reigns in the region, thus becoming a problem within a problem.

POLISARIO'S UGLY METAMORPHOSIS

The history of the POLISARIO front (acronym for Frente Popular de Liberation de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro) is one of those African tales that begins with a war for self determination and independence (obtained after over a century of Spanish dominion). It continues through the occupation suffered from a neighboring country (the Moroccan Green March in 1975) and the struggle turns into a fight amongst regional (Morocco versus Algeria) and neo-colonial powers (France against Spain). The issue of Western Sahara will go on forever thanks to the inertia of a poorly lead negotiation under the careless eye of a notoriously ineffective organization (UN's MINURSO). The Saharawi's fight for independence is now confined to a few refugee camps in south-western Algeria where survival depends on international pittance and what was once a dream is now mere destitution.

Today the POLISARIO is at its last stage: the organization representing a righteous cause has turned into an anti-democratic one party system (and will probably remain as such until a very unlikely independence) under the unrivaled reign of a President that has been in office since 1976 (Mohamed Abelaziz was re-elected for the 11th time in 2011 with 96% of the votes) with a plethora of corruption and nepotism. Unfortunately Africa is a continent where the meaning of justice, the search for democracy and the struggle against rampant poverty are rare and not overriding phenomena. Hence, the Saharawi issue remains unreported.

What should have become an independent country – emphatically called Saharawi Arabic Democratic Republic (RASD) – is today a virtual State with a population of approximately 200 thousand people living in four big refugee camps along the Algerian border. Their names refer to the Western Sahara territories that were never conquered or ruled (Laayoune, Awserd, Smara, Dakhla). Two smaller settlements are named after the date of the declaration of independence (27 February) and the capital of Western Sahara (Rabouni). Western Sahara is a former Spanish colony 266 thousand square kilometers large with an estimated population of 1 million people. The portion currently controlled by the RASD is 15-20% of the entire territory.

Its people are not a people because of the UN's marvelous intuition – born out of French and Moroccan pressure and lobbying – of subjecting the destiny of the area to a referendum on self-determination that stumbled on the recognition of who is a Saharawi and who is not (and could hence take part in the vote). In a country inhabited by nomads, with low literacy rates and where a civil registry has never existed, the compilation of the list containing the electoral body was left to the parties; both Morocco and RASD have constantly expressed contrasting views that have blocked any progress in the negotiations (the resulting stall was also caused by the increasing Moroccan migration – part of a government strategy – into Saharawi territories).

The picture of the Saharawi issue is the same as it was 30 years ago: Moroccans occupy Western Sahara undisturbed and use the iron fist, they exploit the phosphate mines and the oceanic fishing reserves (that have been the object of specific deals also with Europe) over the 1100 km of a particularly rich coastline. On the other hand, the Saharawis live in refugee camps and have given up their traditional nomadism and their land. Even though the RASD has been recognized by the African Union (and thus Morocco is not part of the continental organization) and by around 80

countries around the world, it cannot still act or feel like a State.

HISTORY TURNS FOR THE WORSE

It is not clear what the main cause has been: the frustration of a broken dream, the desire to live new adventures away from the motionless refugee camps, economic difficulties or, even worse, the contagion from Islamic fundamentalism dominating over the sub-Saharan belt. Or maybe the hope that extremism could lead to a better future.

If the cause is unclear, the effect is known: an increasing number of Saharawis in northern Mali and in the ranks of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) dedicating their efforts to banditry, extortion, kidnappings and drug trafficking to finance Islamic terrorism. Whatever the reason behind the move towards AQIM or to other criminal activities in the region, this is a potentially dangerous social phenomena.

It is one of the reasons that has led Mali, around 2 years ago, to back down from its recognition of the RASD and to criticize Algeria, that hosts and finances the POLISARIO and who, since 1991, is terribly susceptible to any spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Maghreb. The circumstance of a potential alliance between the Saharawi Front and Islamic terrorism highlights two major dangers: on one side the military manpower of Al Qaeda in sub-Saharan Africa would be strengthened and, on the other, terrorism could be exported to Moroccan controlled portions of Western Sahara.

Cases involving Saharawis in both these activities are on the rise. The kidnapping on October 23 2011 in Rabouni of an Italian humanitarian worker, Rossella Urru, and of her two Spanish colleagues and, a month later, of two French nationals were both undertaken by Saharawis connected to AQIM (and/or its splinter group MUJAO, Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa) who then controlled the negotiations that led to the release of the hostages (July 18 2012) and to the payment of a ransom (in the Italian case).

As early as 2003 police in Mauritania had arrested a Saharawi for theft of explosives on behalf of the then Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (that was later renamed AQIM). A few months later, always in Mauritania, a terrorist recruitment cell was discovered. In 2005 news emerged of Saharawis fighting alongside the Salafists. The circumstance was confirmed by terrorist attacks in 2006 (in Algeria) and in 2008 (the failed attempt to kill the Israeli ambassador in Mauritania and the attacks in Niger). In December 2010 a network of cigarette and drug traffickers was dismantled in Tindouf. These are all signals of an increasing social desegregation. Today around 80 to 100 tons of cocaine are smuggled through the Sahel and the Saharawis are an active part of that business.

The Saharawi leap to Islamic terrorism is only a recent phenomena and has also been caused by other concurrent events.

The first factor is basically financial: Gaddafi's Libya, together with Algeria, was one of the main financiers of the POLISARIO. The dictator's fall and the civil war that followed have struck the cash-ridden funds of the Front. To this we have to add Algeria's growing uneasiness towards Saharawi involvement in terrorism that has led – at least for now – to an increased control over the refugee camps, but that could also turn into a cut in financing. If Algeria were to withdraw its

support to the Saharawis there would be no more hope for their demands.

The second factor is the flow of arms that has flooded the sub-Saharan belt following the Arab Spring and that has favored the Tuareg uprising in northern Mali. These two elements have created a geographical space for illegal traffics and associated terrorist events. Lastly, several Saharawis were filling the ranks of the mercenaries that fought alongside Gaddafi's loyalists and who then fled Libya and resurfaced in northern Mali. According to sources in the new Libyan authorities, at least 500 Saharawis were captured by rebels during the conflict.

In the wider regional chaos and turmoil several Saharawis have picked the opportunity to shift sides (given the stalemate in the struggle for self-determination) and to find new sources of revenue (banditry, illegal traffics, kidnappings). On the other, we should also consider that Saharawis are nomads and are likely to sympathize with Tuareg claims and – a factor that should not be underestimated – they are capable of living in northern Mali's desert. The journey from the camps in Tindouf to Mali does not meet any geographical difficulty nor border control.

To date there aren't any reliable figures on the number of Saharawis fighting for Al Qaeda. In 2009 they were estimated around 60 to 80 individuals. The figure could now be four to five times greater. As happens with other non-sedentary communities, the Saharawis are often confused with Mali's indigenous Tuareg (Berabic Arabs) and Mauritania's Moors, but their language, the Hassanyah, makes them identifiable. Saharawis were already part of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and of Droukdal's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, both of whom then merged to form AQIM in 2007. Some of them have also held leading roles in these organizations.

Just like other sub-Saharan nomadic communities, traditional Islam has never been fundamentalist. This was true especially for older generations, but their world is now under attack from the influence of Salafists. Islamic extremism was spread by Saharawi students enrolled in Algerian universities during the days of Madani's FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) and/or by those indoctrinated by the propaganda of the Saudi Theological Institute in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott. Those ideas were then imported in the mosques in the refugee camps. Regional upheavals have done the rest.

THE LINK BETWEEN THE INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE AND TERRORISM

The transhumance of Saharawis in the ranks of sub-Saharan terrorists groups has had consequences on POLISARIO's independence claims. For young generations the Saharawi cause is not as attractive or perceived heralding any appreciable result in the near future. This inevitably leads the youth to adhere to other ideologies or struggles.

A first element the unfading President Mohamed Abdulaziz should evaluate is his people's disaffection to the Front and its fight. This has lead the POLISARIO to a policy shift. During the last Congress of the Front that took place in Tifariti in December 2011 (where Saharawis from the camps, the Diaspora and the occupied territories met) the option of returning, after almost 20 years of useless UN lead negotiations, to an armed struggle against Morocco was put to votes. Apparently the majority of delegates voted in favor.

This does not mean the POLISARIO currently has the military capability of confronting the

overwhelming Moroccan military forces (15/20 thousand scarcely equipped men against an army of 150 thousand Moroccans). But it surely serves the purpose, at least in the eyes of the Front's leadership, of reviving the nationalist struggle for independence. In practice, it is a means of addressing the frustration and will to fight of all those Saharawi youth now leaning towards fundamentalism.

POLISARIO's interventionist stance could theoretically deprive terrorism of some men, but could also backfire: the Saharawi struggle could become attractive for regional Islamic terrorism. And if this were to happen, it could yes have some positive effect on independence claims, but could also negatively impact the three countries neighboring Western Sahara: Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco. These are all countries that were lightly brushed by the Arab Spring.

The Tindouf refugee camps have been the ground for the recruitment of terrorists for a while.

POLISARIO's return to war can only be avoided by a new round of negotiations that will put the current status quo into question. Morocco has no intention of allowing for Saharawi independence (Rabat is available for some form of autonomy under the crown), discussions over the referendum on self-determination are blocked by vetoes and by the United Nations' lack of resolve, even though they are lead by a US official (Christopher Ross, before him it was the turn of former US Secretary of State, James Baker, and in the future it could possibly be Colin Powell). There is basically no negotiated solution in sight. From this perspective, the Saharawis are a people without a future, citizens of a State without sovereignty.

The present is also dim, as reported in Amnesty International's yearly reviews. Abuses on the population, restrictions to freedom of expression/association, detention and torture, violations of human rights, individuals gone missing are all recurrent in the territories under Moroccan occupation. The same happens under the POLISARIO where abuses are against dissidents and on some war prisoners.

As opposed to Kurds, Armenians or Palestinians, the POLISARIO has never resorted to terrorism in its struggle. Their military actions have always been addressed against military objectives (facilities or Moroccan troops) and have tried to avoid the involvement of civilians. It is thus a paradox that such a movement has become one of the sources feeding north-African terrorism.

Regardless, rumors have it that young Saharawis are initially contacted in the refugee camps and are then taken to northern Mali where they immediately receive a four thousand euro bonus before being taken to the AQIM and MUJAO training camps. Following their training they are supplied with weapons and assigned to one of the Emir's katibahs (battalion).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ISLAMIC TERRORISM

The Saharawi issue is the classic example of how many opportunities and room there is for Islamic terrorism in the African continent every time rights are neglected, poverty is rampant and abuses are widespread. If terrorism is now concentrated in the south of Algeria, northern Mali, northern Nigeria and Somalia, it could soon extend to other areas:

- in Western Sahara thanks to the Saharawis,
- in Mauritania where a poor country is under a military dictatorship

- in Niger, that shares with Mali the same conflict between the Tuareg and central authorities
- in Chad, whose dictator/president Idriss Deby reigns since 1990 against an opposition lead by the local Toubou Tuareg chiefs

The list could continue forever following the logic of cause and effect in the spreading of terrorism in Africa: Deby is part of the Zaghawa tribe that has lead the uprising in Darfur against Khartoum... Chadian opposition bases are in Benin and Burkina Faso... Burkina's president Blaise Compaoré has been ruling undisturbed since 1987...