



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

There is an elephant in the room in the Middle East that will resurface once the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are over: the Kurdish issue. It is ever present in Turkey, where the Kurdish uprising is ongoing; it will be in Syria, where Kurdish militias are playing a key role in the fight against ISIS; and it has been dominant in Iraq over the past decade, where Iraqi Kurdistan is a de facto State within the State.

The origins of the problem

The Kurds are an ethnic group with its own culture, traditions and language. They are mainly Sunnis, although there are Shia minorities in Iran and Azerbaijan. They originate from the Middle East. There are about 30/35 million Kurds worldwide mainly scattered across Turkey (15/16 million, around 15-18% of the population), Iraq (5/6 million), Iran (6/7 million) and Syria (2/2.5 million, accounting for roughly 10% of the population). The exact demographic figures are unknown as several countries don't want to keep a precise count to prevent unrests. The issue is that they are a people without a country. Except for Iraq, they don't benefit of any form of autonomous rule.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the Sykes Picot secret agreement (1916), followed by the Sèvres Treaty in 1920 divided the Middle East along British and French spheres of influence. This initially meant the Kurds could have foreseen a country of their own. But three years later, the Treaty of Lausanne gave in to the pressure from Turkish nationalists that were against the project and had begun transferring non-Kurdish people in Kurdish territories. Ever since, the Kurds have been discriminated and persecuted in the new-born countries, fueling both resentment and demands.

They were persecuted by the Assad regime in Syria where they had no voting rights; by Saddam Hussein who pushed for a genocidal agenda; they are under strict control and marginalized in Iran; they have been persecuted by the Turkish government for decades, Kurdish areas are a de-facto war-zone and anyone allegedly supportive of the Kurds is prosecuted or arrested in the name of the "fight against terrorism", be they MPs, journalists or activists.

The Kurds in Turkey

Over the years and until the present day, the repression orchestrated by the Turkish government against the Kurds has pushed this minority to embrace an armed struggle that has turned into terrorism against the authorities in Ankara, mainly targeting the military and security forces.

The main group is the Kurdish Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK), a paramilitary formation created in the '70s that, at least until 1999, was of marxist-leninist inspiration. Until 1984 the PKK fought a political battle, had representatives elected in Parliament and then decided to pick up arms. Over the last 30 years the PKK's armed struggle in Turkey has had highs and lows, causing an estimated 40 thousand deaths.

The PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was arrested in Nairobi in 1999 and was then extradited to Turkey, where he has since been held in solitary confinement on the Imrali island. Ocalan played a role in the secret talks with the government in Ankara that went on from 2008 until 2013, when the PKK announced a truce. The move could have envisaged greater autonomy for Turkish Kurds.

However, the talks and the truce were unilaterally violated by president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in July 2015. The bombing of the PKK bases in northern Iraq were dictated by domestic policy needs: Erdogan's AKP had failed securing a majority in the June 2015 elections, which had seen the pro-Kurdish HDP enter Parliament for the first time. Stirring up the Kurdish conflict once more with the nationalism that followed allowed the AKP to reach a majority in the November 2015 early elections. Who cares if a political victory was scored at the expense of a portion of the Turkish population and has since pushed the country towards a democratic involution that led to the failed coup in July 2016?

Ankara labels as "terrorist" any form of opposition, whether democratic or not, to the regime. The lifting of the immunity for the MPs had allowed the judiciary – strictly under government control after the failed putsch – to indict and arrest several members of the HDP. The same happens for those members of civil society that denounce the growing authoritarianism of the government, or the permanent state of emergency that afflicts Kurdish-majority areas in Turkey and grants the government in Ankara the power to remove local municipalities on grounds of "terrorist support". However, there is no evidence of ties between the HDP and the PKK, if not their common fight for Kurdish rights.

The return to hostilities has led the PKK to carry out a series of deadly attacks on Turkish soil against government or military targets. The group's base is in Iraq: in Qandil, where the HQ is located, and in the Yazidi areas of Sinjar. Qandil also hosts Iranian-Kurdish militias from the PJAK and is often the target of Turkish and/or Iranian air strikes. The PKK's presence in Iraq is the result of the 2013 deal and of Masoud Barzani's availability to host his Turkish counterparts. Instead, the base in Sinjar came about after Kurdish support to the Yazidis when they were under attack from the ISIS. Joint Kurdish-Yazidi militias now patrol the area. Following Turkish threats, US pressure and facing growing Iraqi hostility, one of the PKK's leaders, Murat Karayilan, has recently said his group is willing to withdraw from Sinjar.

The fresh wave of violence in Turkey has also fueled the growth of an extremist Kurdish faction: the TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons). The group had refused to participate in the talks with the Turks back in 2004. They have now claimed responsibility for some of the biggest and more gruesome terrorist attacks outside of Kurdish-controlled regions.

The Kurds in Syria

The civil war in Syria has allowed Kurdish Syrians to liberate themselves from the persecutions of the regime and obtain an autonomous territory. Their umbrella group is the YPG (Popular Protection Units), which is the armed branch of the PYD (Democratic Union Party). Founded in 2003, until 2011 the PYD fought an underground struggle. When the war broke out, they emerged as one of the key groups in the fight against the ISIS and kept at large from fighting Bashar al Assad. By doing so, the Kurds have now control over a stretch of land in northern Syria and at the border with Turkey which has been renamed Rojava, the west, also thanks to US military support. The Kurdish fighters, an estimated 20 thousand men, lead the Syrian Democratic Forces, currently fighting their way to the caliphate's "capital" in Raqqa. Also fighting with them are the female units made up of Kurdish Syrian women, the IPJ (Female Protection Forces).

Turkey considers the PYD, a leftist, Kurdish and armed group, a terrorist group much like the PKK. Ankara's rhetoric pushes for the blacklisting of the YPG, a thesis which was not, at least until now, supported by Washington that still considers the Syrian Kurds a key ally.

The Kurds in Iraq

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi Kurds have obtained a de-facto independent administration of their region. They have their own military – the 90 thousand Peshmerga have not been integrated in the Iraqi army, and just like the Syrian Kurds, thanks to US military support they have shown to be the most efficient forces in the fight against the ISIS. While there is growing unrest in Iraq, Kurdistan is an oasis of peace.

Iraqi Kurds are politically split between the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) led by Masoud Barzani, that rules over Kurdistan, and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) run by Jalal Talabani, former Iraqi president from 2005 till 2014. The competition between the two parties has seen an infighting that sparked an all-out conflict between 1994 and 1998. In political terms, Barzani is a good friend of Turkey, while Talabani is closer to Iran. The close relationship with Ankara – that postulates the hostility against the PKK and, as a consequence, the PYD – is dictated by close bilateral ties, rich trade deals and oil sales.

In the future, Kurdistan's autonomy can only be extended to other territories currently not under Kurdish control. The one missing policy target is the takeover of Kirkuk and its vast oil reserves. Facing the opposition from the Shia-led government in Baghdad, the Kurds claim the city that once was predominantly Kurd and that Saddam Hussein flooded with Arabs. The Kurds presently represent less than 20% of the population of Kirkuk, while around 600 thousand barrels per day exported to Turkey are good enough reasons to try to control the city.

Iraqi Kurdistan is facing economic problems and a huge public debt, around 22 billion dollars, owed mostly to Turkey. In the middle of December 2016, PM Nechervan Barzani hosted a conference on the independence of Kurdistan in Dahuk and invited Kurdish delegations from neighboring countries. During that meeting he openly talked about secession, but linked any move to previous talks with Ankara and Baghdad. The Kurdish

PM also extended an olive branch to both the Turks and the PKK, offering to mediate between the two.

The Kurds in Iran

Iranian Kurds also have a long history of struggle aimed at obtaining independence or autonomy. The PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party), a marxist organization, has fought against the regime in Tehran until 2004. Active on the border with Iraq, it is blacklisted by the United States for its affiliation to the PKK. Its armed branch is known as the YRK (Eastern Kurdistan Defense Units). As has happened elsewhere, the Iranian regime has crushed every insurgency, but not with the same brutality as in neighboring countries. Tehran is against any form of Kurdish autonomy.

The future

Now more than ever, the Kurdish communities across the Middle East have a greater chance of their demands being heard, if not solved. If independence is not an option, greater autonomy and rights are. Any further delays could fuel more unrest in the region. The biggest obstacle to Kurdish requests is Turkey's opposition to any development towards greater Kurdish rights both at home and in neighboring countries. Ankara remains the strongest military power in the region and will have a say in the future assets of the Middle East.

The divisions among the Kurds is another issue. The pro-Turkish stance of Iraqi Kurds is in opposition to the hostility displayed by the Syrian and Turkish Kurds. The fact that Iraqi Kurdistan is a semi-independent entity goes against the legitimate interests of other Kurdish minorities in other countries. This also implies that there will never be a one-size-fits-all solution to Kurdish demands. One has to wait for the end of the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and against the ISIS to foresee the future. What is very likely is that, once again, external players will decide the fate of the Kurds.

THE NONEXISTENT PALESTINIAN STATE. A NEW INTIFADA?

Israel is a militarily strong country, the strongest in the Middle East; it is unrivaled in its region and is backed by the financial and political support of an international Jewish lobby and by the technical-military cooperation of the United States. On top of all this, it owns 80 nuclear warheads.

All of these elements prevent Israel from seeking a negotiable solution to the Palestinian problem. A strong nation doesn't negotiate, it dictates conditions and is not willing to allow concessions. Politically speaking, this approach also the current expression of one of the most extremist governments we've seen at the helm of Israel.

On the opposite front there is a varied Palestinian community that suffers the situation of subjection with frustration and nurses feelings of revenge; a community that feels defrauded of a right sanctioned by various international resolutions (which were never applied) and watches helplessly as the arrogant occupant works at the daily erosion of any room left for negotiations. The settlements in the occupied territories are, of course, the instrument through which such room is being eroded.

In the Palestinian front there are two opposing trains of thought: there are those that would like to continue to negotiate and those who believe in the armed response.

The lesser the room for negotiations, the stronger the latter group will be. If one doesn't negotiate, one fights.

A worsening situation

This is the state of play in Israel and in the occupied territories today. It is, of course, short-sighted to think that prevarications can solve a 60-year-old territorial feud. It is short-sighted to think that by winning back Palestinian territories one could obtain that which is not conceded in negotiations. Unfortunately, the co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians is tainted by mistakes on both sides.

It is a social and political cocktail that could explode with the advent of Donald Trump at the presidency of the United States. Even the so-called international brokers – the countries that can force the parts to sit around the negotiating table – are not impartial anymore. And since it seems to be the same with Trump, then in the eyes of the Palestinians there is really no social alternative left but terrorism.

In addition to all this, the United Nations come out of the contest as a club for chit-chat while it is not clear what other international institution could host and guarantee negotiations in its stead. The UN is often regarded as a useful institution when it vetoes the resolutions that we dislike and becomes irrelevant when it decides against us.

The other wars

So far the Palestinian problem has been overlooked internationally due to a number of other emergencies in the region. The ISIS and its crumbling Islamic State; the civil war in Syria; Kurdish terrorism; Erdogan's about-face politics and the failed coup attempt in Turkey; the war in Yemen; the crawling conflict between Shiites and Sunnis; the

confrontation between Iran and the Gulf nations; all of these elements have drawn the attention of international politics and have diverted the attention and interest of the international public opinion from the Palestinian plight.

Israel has used this state of distraction to continue its policy of expropriation of Palestinian territories and the consequent construction of the settlements in areas that should be dedicated to the edification of the Palestinian State.

Yet the history of the Middle East teaches us that nothing is lasting in the region. Crises overlap and elide each other; alliances last the span of a shared interest and then dissolve; friends and foes are interchangeable.

If the relationships of strength were to be measured with today's parameters, the chances of the Palestinians actually obtaining their own State would be close to zero.

Gaza - where the armed approach prevails - is reduced to a military enclave surrounded by Israel and especially by Egypt, which used to guarantee the military and political survival of Hamas' claims. The Palestinian National Authority, under the feeble guidance of Mahmoud Abbas, can neither put together the international lobby needed to back the Palestinian expectations, nor adequately confute provocations and prevarications against their interests. The PNA is experiencing intestine political feuds and scandals that cripple the internationally recognized claims of the Palestinians.

Israel and the US

Relationships between the US and Israel have gradually worsened during Obama's 8-year stretch at the helm. From the initial confrontation on the solution to the Palestinian problem to the inconsistency of the negotiations with inflexible Israel; in time, the contest between Obama and Netanyahu has moved to a personal level. The latter served a number of institutional and political 'improprieties' to the US President (both by attempting to hinder the ratification of the nuclear treaty with Iran and by appealing directly to the US Congress and to the Republican opposition in the United States).

In the light of all this, the recent US decision to abstain from voting a UN resolution to condemn the building of new settlements in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel is understandable (In the past, the US would have vetoed such resolution). The decision to abstain – not veto - is probably also the product of the contest between Trump and Obama regarding international policy, ranging from the relationship with Russia to that with Israel. Trump (and the designated Ambassador to Israel) have promised to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thus sanctioning the Israeli claims on the city.

Presently, the overall situation is seemingly favorable to the nationalistic stance adopted by Netanyahu: the advent of Trump, his clear support of the Israeli claims, the delegitimization of the UN (which has always been an obstacle to Israel's expansive intents) and perhaps the fact that many of the regional actors don't seem to be able to counter the decisions of Israel or support those of the Palestinians.

Yet in foreign policy the forcing, unfair and insolent behavior that Israel can adopt today could backfire against its interests tomorrow, both on political and diplomatic levels. And this is not only true of the Palestinian issue, which is subject to the credibility of Israel in

the international context and to its contractual power. Israel knows full well that the international public opinion is generally not favorable to its claims.

Meanwhile, the converging interests of Trump and Netanyahu have produced a clash with France and the UK, which ended up voting for the UN resolution to condemn Israel's settlements.

Israel and Russia

Netanyahu underestimates the fact that Russia is gaining weight in the Middle Eastern theater. And Russia has always sided with the Palestinians. Once the Syrian issue is solved (in Russia's favor, of course) and the ISIS is defeated, Moscow will be able to condition decisions and alliances in the region more-so than the United States.

The fact that Trump and Putin agree on many issues today should not reassure the Israeli Prime Minister. There will come a time when the two superpowers will get on a collision course because the interests of one cross those of the other amid the contest for world hegemony that divides them.

The relationship with Russia is paramount in the perspective of a new order in the Palestinian issue. The war in Syria facilitated the security agreements between Tel Aviv and Moscow which served the purpose of avoiding incidents between the two armed forces. Israel has thus been able to deliver aerial raids on Hezbollah targets in Syria, even in the presence of the Russian army (the air strike against the Shiite Zahara and Nubl training camps in August and against the Mezzeh airport in November 2016).

The two countries – Russia and Israel – have maintained diplomatic relationships for the past 25 years. Putin and Netanyahu get along just fine (Israel recently abstained from supporting UN sanctions against Russia) and various ministers in the Israeli government (including the Defense minister) speak Russian. Yet it is but a momentary tactical convergence; a wedding of convenience, not of love. The two countries are destined to return on opposite sides of the barricade sooner or later.

The future is uncertain

On top of all this, there are the proxy wars. After Syria will be pacified and subdued – as it was in the past – to Russian interests, the Palestinian diaspora and the more intransigent Palestinian factions, which were supported by Assad, will have more time on their hands to fight Israel. And although their numbers were limited this far, in the future, the frustration of the population living in the occupied territories will produce numerous new recruits.

In addition to this, there are the Hezbollah militias that are currently fighting for Assad. These combatants have amassed military experience that will come in handy in their future confrontation against Israel. It is a well known fact that, behind the Hezbollah, there is the hand of Iran.

The Hezbollah demonstrated in 2006 that they are the only military force that can create trouble for Israel.

One could object that the strength and capabilities of the Israeli army could easily overpower the Palestinian factions and the Lebanese Shiites, but the scenario we speak of is not that of a conventional war but rather an asymmetrical warfare coupled with terrorism;

a crawling war of attrition that could in no way guarantee peace and security for the Israeli state. Insecurity will be the price that the Israelis will pay if the issue remains unsolved.

There shall be no accord

In the light of what we see today, there exist no margin for a negotiated agreement between the parts at war. Israel has no desire to negotiate because the outcome of such negotiations would inevitably be the birth of two distinct States, as stated by the UN resolution of 1967, and a territorial concession on the part of Israel.

In his last electoral campaign, Netanyahu stated that there would be no Palestinian State under his rule.

But what alternative solutions are there, apart from the Bantustan/apartheid option that the Palestinians will never accept?

Security in exchange for a Palestinian State?

Is it a feasible solution? Yes, if there is a political will to negotiate on the part of Israel. Yes, if the Palestinians make room for the security needs of their counterpart.

The only solution is a compromise that is acceptable by both parties.

The terrorist attacks

The latest attack in Tel Aviv is dated January 8 and was carried out in a manner that is typical of the ISIS (a truck that plunges into a crowd of people, like in Nice and Berlin. But the same is true of the previous attacks at a market on June 8 and at a bar on January 1st 2016). It is but a first taste of what could come. Netanyahu immediately blamed the ISIS for the attack, perhaps in an attempt to put the Palestinian claims on the same level as those of Al Baghdadi's ruthless militias.

There is certainly a collusion of intent and an operative resemblance between the two 'wars'. Hamas is, after all, the faction of Palestinian combatants that is closest to Islamic extremism. But the Palestinian problem is antecedent to that of the ISIS and has its own reasons and dynamics.

Unfortunately, if there will not be room for a negotiated solution, the only option left to the Palestinians will be that of the armed fight, of terrorism.

There was a first intifada in 1987, a second one in 2000 and a third in October 2015. Maybe a fourth intifada is due, the fight escalating from stones to knives to trucks.

Netanyahu's policy is conditioned by the coalition that he presides within his government. Netanyahu's Likud party (which he transformed to embrace more extreme positions) is the ally of extremist and nationalist parties such as the Bayit Yehudi, Shas and the United Torah Judaism and as such needs to support extremist stances and polarize the concept of security itself.

Weapons of mass distraction

Netanyahu is currently fighting a battle for his own political survival as well. He is faced with accusations of corruption (illegal funding for his campaign) and has to stand trial for them. He knows full well that in Israel even former Presidents can be landed in prison, as

was the case with Moshe Katsav and his predecessor, Ehud Olmert. During his previous mandate in 1996-99, Netanyahu was investigated for receiving gifts and for spending public money for his own, private, expenses.

His rigidity with regards to the Palestinian issue is on the one side a weapon of mass distraction and on the other a way to win the solidarity of the political parties that support his leadership. Netanyahu is currently trying to turn the investigation on his spending into an example of political persecution against his public persona. Unfortunately for the Prime Minister, there exists no parliamentary immunity in Israel.

The circumstances above all concur to make the solution to the Palestinian problem harder to find.

As for Hamas, it has been sensibly weakened by the siege on Gaza and by the population's poverty. These factors, coupled with the brutality of Hamas' militants have lessened support for the organization. A crawling intifada could be useful for Hamas because it would distract the population from their daily difficulties.

The Pope's appeal

Pope Francis' January 2017 statements also confirm that the Israeli-Palestinian situation is worsening. The Catholic Church, which is very interested in what happens to the 'holy land', launched an appeal to facilitate the reprise of dialog that can lead to a solution and guarantee the co-existence of the two people. A stable and enduring situation of peace.

The most significant passage of the Pope's statements is a plea to the parts to prevent the fighting from becoming a habit; something that they cannot live without.

A UN resolution following the war of 1967, the Oslo accords in 1994 (and an infinite series of initiatives, mediations, etc.), the existence of two distinct States, all of these have remained but words typed on a sheet of paper. The parties at play are partially to blame for this, as are the countries that couldn't or wouldn't let these accords be applied.

Impunity makes a solution harder to find

The parties at war are convinced that any decision arising from the international community has no binding value; that the UN is not influential and that there exists a sort of international impunity for their crimes.

Recently there has been talk of a new PLO initiative for a three-year agreement. There is a possibility that it could produce something worthwhile only if Palestine accepts to let the settlements be and if Israel accepts to restore these settlements to the Palestinian jurisdiction.

France will also kick-start a new Peace Conference with a wide international presence.

But it seems useless to organize negotiating tables for parties that do not wish to negotiate or to sign agreements between people who don't plan to respect them.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE MUJAHEDIN-E-KHALQ

If we were to look for a movement that sums up all the volatility, inconsistency and unpredictability of the Middle East, one would point to the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK – People’s Mujahedin) in Iran. Since their founding in September 1965, the paramilitary group has taken part in every conflict across that Arabian peninsula. They started off by fighting against the Shah and supporting Khomeini, they then clashed against the ayatollah’s regime alongside Saddam Hussein in the war against Iran and until the Iraqi dictator’s downfall in 2003. When the Shia rose to power in Baghdad, they managed to obtain US protection, which meant they disbanded their military units and also avoided being exterminated.

In September 2012 the Mujahedin were de-listed from the terror list at the US Department of State. They had been added in 1997 and their cancelation was the result of intense lobbying in Congress. Their fighters, confined in military bases in Iraq, were gradually relocated across the globe. Their main base is in the United States, where their leadership lives, while many others reside in France. In March 2016, during a visit to Tirana the US Secretary of State John Kerry thanked the Albanian government for opening its doors to about a thousand Mujahedin.

Is this the epilogue of the history of the MEK? Probably not, they could still come in handy. A lot will depend on the future relationship between the US and Iran. Although not a paramilitary group anymore, the MEK is still the most efficient armed opposition to Tehran out there. They could go back to doing the dirty work they did in the past. It is not a coincidence that both the CIA and the Mossad have supported the Mujahedin’s rehabilitation. Their network of contacts on Iranian soil was and is still very useful. Some of the Iranian scientists involved in the nuclear program were allegedly assassinated by MEK cells supported and trained by the Israelis.

A marriage of convenience

It would be otherwise difficult to understand why the MEK, whose 40 years of armed struggle has led to the killing of several US citizens – a circumstance the group denies and blames on a radical splinter faction called Peykar – and attacks on US companies (Pan Am, Pepsi, General Motors), has now obtained the support from Washington. Back in the ‘70s the MEK was just like any other marxist group carrying out attacks against the imperialists; they were also among the supporters of the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. For a long time they even opposed the “Zionist entity” and fought against the State of Israel.

However, the MEK represents the sole armed opposition group to the Iranian theocracy and this has led to a whitewashing of their past deeds. There is no room for ethics, feelings or resentment when intelligence interests are at stake. The Mujahedin have been capable of switching sides at the right time, offering their services to those who are hostile to the current Iranian leadership. Given his opposition to the nuclear deal with Tehran, it is likely that under Donald Trump there will be fresh job opportunities for the MEK: acts of

terrorism and/or attacks on Iranian soil. After all, the Mujahedin were among the most vocal opponents to the negotiations in Switzerland on Iran's nuclear program.

A terrorist history

After their initial support to the Khomeinist revolution, since 1981 the MEK has targeted high profile members of the Iranian theocracy. According to some estimates, they are responsible for as many as 15 thousand deaths in Iran, including president Mohamed Ali Rajaei, prime minister Jawad Bahonar and 27 members of Parliament.

When they moved to Iraq, the MEK's armed branch – the so-called National Liberation Army – was a powerful military tool. Saddam Hussein provided Iranian dissidents with heavy weaponry, money, garrisons and barracks where they could live and train. They were to all effects a small army. A paramilitary force that not only fought the Iranian army, or carried out attacks against the regime, but also fought for Saddam Hussein, crushing Shia or Kurdish rebellions at home in 1991. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, the MEK could count on two thousand pieces of heavy weaponry, including tanks, armored vehicles and artillery. Although naturally diffident, it seems Saddam Hussein trusted the MEK more than his own army.

When the regime fell and the group's fighters were confined in the Ashraf camp at the border with Iran and in other three camps in Iraq, the MEK managed to remove its obscure past and highlighted its positive role in the armed struggle against Tehran. This move granted both their physical and political survival as they rebranded themselves as freedom fighters and not terrorists-for-hire hosted by a ruthless regime. A romantic return to the origins of the movement when the Mujahedin were called "Holy fighters for the people of Iran".

A family leadership

This metamorphosis was possible thanks to the movement's leader: Massoud Rajavi and his wife Maryam, whom he married in 1985 and that has been named co-leader of MEK in 1993. The Rajavis handle the MEK as if it is a firm. Their management skills have turned the group into a cult of personality. It is sufficient to point how Massoud Rajavi has been declared missing since 2003, and his wife has taken over MEK although there exists a so-called Parliament in exile known as the National Council of Iranian Resistance. Maryam Rajavi now lives in the US with her two sons.

Back in 1981, when he started fighting against Khomeini, Massoud Rajavi went in exile in France in hopes of obtaining asylum. But at that time the French wanted to cash in their support for the opposition to the Shah and had just obtained Iranian help in freeing a number of nationals kidnapped in Lebanon. Rajavi was thus labelled a terrorist and fled to Baghdad, where Saddam Hussein was receiving US support in his fight against the ayatollah's regime.

The Rajavis have also set up an efficient propaganda machine that markets a positive image of the group. The MEK has opened offices in several capitals across the world: London, Ottawa, Canberra, the European Parliament and even in the Middle East. The

Mujahedin have abandoned their marxist ideology in favor of a unique objective: the toppling of the Iranian regime. And to do so they rely on a number of structures, associations, committees around the globe that portray their fight against the Iranian theocracy as a common goal of different groups.

Who supports the MEK?

The MEK has convinced Congress to erase them from the Black List at the US Department of State and, when the time came, to evacuate its disarmed fighters in Iraq on humanitarian grounds. In fact, in 2003 the MEK signed a cessation of hostilities with the US army that allowed them to retreat in the Ashraf Camp without handing their weapons in or surrendering, although at the time they were to all effects still a terrorist group. The US granted them a “protected persons” status under the Geneva Convention and funded UN agencies with 20 million dollars for their repatriation or relocation. The EU erased the MEK from its terror list in 2009.

More recently, the MEK has tried to convince Congress that in order to defeat the ISIS one first had to topple the Iranian regime. Their surprising thesis pointed to non-existing links between Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Tehran. A series of unfounded statements that reached US senators and deputies nonetheless. In Europe instead the MEK uses a series of arguments that can connect with local public opinion: human rights violations, torture and death penalty, discrimination against women, lack of religious freedom and the MEK’s non-violent struggle (post-2003, that is).

The Rajavis and the MEK have the capability of always being on the right side of history, they have erased their terrorist past and point to how useful they could turn out to be in the future. But such a vast international lobbying activity has a cost which cannot be sustained without the external support of actors whose identify can be easily guessed. Donations from wealthy Iranians abroad, or the availability of the assets that were once frozen cannot cover the millions of dollars of campaigning to achieve a target – the toppling of the ayatollah’s regime – which still seems extremely remote.

We know that the 10 thousand or so fighters that stationed in Iraq have been disbanded. The MEK’s military units are no more, the camps closed and the combatants scattered across the world. Yet, there is an information network of operating cells still active inside Iran. This is basically the MEK’s main selling point to the West. MEK informers were the ones that allegedly broke the news to the CIA, and probably the Mossad, of the Iranian uranium enriching activities to produce a nuclear weapon at the Natanz plant as early as 2002. At that time they were still under the wing of Saddam Hussein. In other words, the MEK worked for the Iraqi dictator, the US imperialists and the Zionist entity at the same time. A double/triple game that shows how astute Massoud Rajavi was, as he was preparing to switch sides once more.

Given the ongoing conflict between Sunnis and Shia, the MEK could find more clients in the near future. Saudi Arabia and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council are top of the list. The Saudis have allegedly increased by ten-fold their financial support to the MEK in recent years. The use of MEK cells in the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran was

confirmed by the presence, in July 2016, of the former chief of Saudi intelligence, Turki al Faisal, at a conference in Paris hosted by the MEK and possibly financed by Riyadh. During that meeting, Faisal referred for two times to the “late Massoud Rajavi”, creating havoc in the wife-leader of the movement and in all those who want to continue covering up an open secret.