

The tormented history of the Kurdish tribes made of promises and betrayals

We return once again to the vicissitudes of the Kurdish population, but these would be incomprehensible if we did not put them back into the more general question of the Middle East and the war waged on a world scale by the great imperialist states, the United States, China and Russia, in the conquest of the markets. The history of the Kurds is that of the peoples who fail to make their place in history, and are completely dependent on the most powerful nations. Their only way out was and remains to rebel against the oppressor, seeking help from the highest bidder, thus building their long history of promises and betrayals. Already during the confrontations between the Ottoman and Persian empires for the control of the Middle East, the Kurdish princes chose their camp according to the balance of power, and not always on the same side. In 1514, the Sublime Gate definitively fixed its borders with Persia, but the Kurdish rebellions did not cease, and were regularly defeated. Ahmede Khani, poet, astronomer, Sunni and Kurdish philosopher, wrote in his famous *Mem and Zin* in the 17th century: "God did thus: He placed the Turk, the Persian and the Arab above us. I am astonished at the fate God has reserved for the Kurds (...) How is it that the Kurds were deprived of the world empire and subjected to others? Turks and Persians are surrounded by Kurdish walls. Whenever Arabs and Kurds mobilise, it is the Kurds who are massacred. Always divided, in discord, they obey neither one nor the other. If we were united, this Turk, this Arab and this Persian would be our servants". So here we are before a people who could never build an empire, nor in the 19th century a nation, but who to this day seems to persevere in this project.

The political upheavals of 1908 with the conquest of power by the CUP (Turkish Youth Union and Progress Committee) in Istanbul, and the outbreak of the First World War, gave the Kurds hope for a change. But the end of this war marked another stage in the tormented path of the Kurds. The political project of a unitary and autonomous state was born at the end of the 19th century, under the Ottoman Empire and developed largely in the years of the First World War. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the filthy division of its spoils among the victorious imperialist powers did the rest. The Empire was divided into different states linked to one or other of the winning countries. Faced with the resistance to dismemberment, led militarily by the Turkish Mustafa Kemal, and then with his fierce nationalism which excluded all minorities (Armenians whose massacres had begun as early as 1915 and in which Kurdish and Assyrian tribes participated, Greeks) most often manipulated by the imperialists, it was perfidiously promised - based on the pseudo humanism of the American President Wilson and his "right of peoples to self-determination" - a land for the Kurds who, as early as 1921, were fighting over Anatolia with the Turkish nationalists. And then they were abandoned with the alignment of the European powers at the time of the treaty of Lausanne of 1923 on certain "vital" requirements for the new Turkey of Atatürk and according to the strategic and oil interests to be shared between the winners. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Kurdish populations in the Middle East were thus artificially divided between four nations - south-east Turkey, north Syria, north-east Iraq and west Iran - which were opposed to each other for the control of the region that the imperialist powers such as France, Great Britain and the USSR were also fighting for; villages, families, tribes, caravan paths and herds were separated by barbed wire barriers. The Kurds tried many times to rebel, and were victims of fierce repressive policies, the settlement of Arab populations in Kurdish populated areas and the deportation of Kurds to Arab areas, and many of them were forced into exile. In Syria as in Turkey, the Kurdish language was banned, the names of the cities were arabized. Their separation on four different nations and thus their continuous revolts were to transform them into a "diplomatic" and military instrument, usable by the competing nations and by the imperialist countries which dominated the region. That is, a means of pressure and bargaining in power disputes between all these nations with divergent interests: a government encouraged one of the nation's Kurdish groups to fight in revolt, and when the "diplomatic" goal was achieved, the promise to help the Kurdish side "free" itself from its yoke was forgotten. In 1918-24, the English used Sheikh Mahmoud (clan leader in present-day Kurdish Iraq) and his autonomist dreams in Iraq, in the question of Mosul, rich in oil and cereals, that Turkey was also a brigade, then they got rid of it when Mosul returned definitively to Iraq, under the ferule of their protégé, King Faysal, by the treaty of Lausanne in 1923. In 1918-22, in oil-rich Persia and the English were fighting with the Russians, the powerful Kurdish tribal leader Simko rebelled with the help of Turkey but was assassinated by Persian soldiers in 1931. The same year, the Barzani clan, with the brothers Ahmed and Mustafa, took over from Mahmoud and regularly organised revolts against the Iraqi monarchy which fought them with the help of the British. The two brothers had to flee to the northern part of Iran in 1945, then at the hands of the Soviets (current Azerbaijan) who supported them in the creation of the Kurdish republic of Mahabad, capital of Iranian Kurdistan, quickly overthrown by Iranian troops after the withdrawal of the USSR following the Yalta agreements. The Barzani brothers were able to flee to Moscow. The Kurdish Democratic Party or PDK, then proclaiming itself Marxist-Leninist, was founded in 1946 under the presidency of Mustafa Barzani. In 1924-37, a series of Kurdish revolts broke out in Turkey, which were harshly repressed with the help of Persia (where there was also a Kurdish revolt) and Russia (in Baku, Soviet Azerbaijan, a Kurdish revolt had also broken out).

As early as the 1950s, after a series of defeats and repressions, the Kurdish movement as a whole turned to attempts at recognition by the states to which they belonged, changing alliances according to the power relations between nations and sometimes fighting between Kurdish groups. In July 1958, Barzani's fighters, who had returned from Soviet exile, supported General Kassem's coup d'état in Iraq, pro-Nasserian and supported by the USSR, which promised them an autonomous Kurdistan. The Kurdish militias allied to those of the Iraqi (Stalinist) CP participated in a violent repression of a revolt of the Turkmen population in Kirkuk, then in the repression against the Iraqi CP alongside Kassem's army! But all these reversals of alliances did little to relieve the Kurdish populations and very quickly Arab nationalism broke collaboration with the Kurds in the early 1960s. Syria's aspirations to build an "Arab belt", and Iraq's aspirations to take the lead in the Arab world, as a consequence of the birth of Nasser's RAU (United Arab Republic) in Egypt, disrupted the Arab-Kurdish balance with the outbreak of the five Kurdo-Iraqi wars between 1961 and 1975 when the Iraqi Kurds of Barzani were supported by the Shah of Iran, supported himself by the USA in struggle as the English against Soviet imperialism. Syria, which had broken with Egypt, joined the Iraqi government and began an anti-Kurdish campaign. For Iran, it was a question of fighting Arab and Turkish expansionist ambitions, and for that the Shah materially supported the Kurdish guerrilla in Iraq led by Mustafa Barzani, who passed from the Soviet camp to the Anglo-American camp. He got rid of his "left" wing led by Talabani in 1964. In 1967, Barzani's troops participated in the repression of the Iranian Kurds alongside Tehran's troops! In 1970, Saddam, in order to overcome the Kurdish resistance, concluded a pact with Barzani's KDP, some of whose militants participated in the Iraqi government until 1973, against a promise of autonomy that he obviously did not keep; very quickly Saddam Hussein betrayed the pact and the repression against the Kurds resumed. Barzani, supported financially by the American and Israeli governments, returned to the Iranian camp. But at the OPEC agreements in Algiers in 1975, Iraq abandoned in Tehran the Shatt-al Arab estuary, the object of incessant conflicts with Iran, which in exchange abandoned its support to the Kurds of Barzani. The joint Iran-Iraqi anti-Kurdish repression caused the deportation, exile and death of thousands of civilians. Barzani went into exile this time to the USA where he died in 1979.

Talabani back in Baghdad then announced the creation of the Kurdish Patriotic Union or UPK with the support of Saddam Hussein, hoping to take the place left empty by Barzani and the Iraqi CP in Iraqi Kurdistan ! As early as 1978, clashes broke out between the influential UPK in southern Iraqi Kurdistan and the influential PDK in the north, whose direction passed to Mustafa Barzani's son, Massoud. The latter joined the Iranian movement of 1979 orchestrated by Ayatollah Khomeini who supported him in his struggle against the UPK which was then supporting Baghdad. In 1980 the terrible Iraq-Iran conflict began. During the years of the long Iraq-Iran war, the Kurdish parties reorganized and controlled vast mountainous territories in Iran and Iraq, despite massive chemical bombardments against the Kurdish civilian population by the Iraqi army. In 1987, the KDP, the UPK, which was not by a flip-flop, and the PCIrakian formed a front joining Iranian forces to fight against Saddam Hussein's regime, while the Iranian Kurdish parties sided with Iraq. Saddam took revenge by orchestrating in 87-89 a real Kurdish genocide which provoked no protest from Western governments !

The end of the first Gulf War in 1988 had negative effects for the Kurds, causing the exodus of Kurdish leaders and guerrillas to the West. The attempt at negotiations between the mullahs in Tehran and the autonomous Iranian Kurdish parties which during the Iran-Iraq war took sides for Iraq ended with the assassination in 1989 in Vienna by an Iranian commando of three main Iranian Kurdish leaders. The same year the USSR collapsed and the USA went to war against Iraq which had invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The Iraqi army routed completely, but the Americans were careful not to overthrow the Iraqi tyrant. The Iraqi population, joined by deserters of the army, rebelled against Saddam, encouraged by President Bush. As early as March 1991, when the cease-fire had just been declared between the USA and Baghdad, the insurrection began in the south of the country around Basra, then extended to all of Iraq. The insurgents asked the Western coalition for help, but to no avail, and Iran dared not intervene. American generals even allowed Saddam's elite troops to use helicopters, heavy artillery, and chemical weapons against southern cities. All the bourgeois armies sided against the proletariat in arms!!

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the uprising had spread to all the cities and councils or soviets arose in the places of work, in the districts, organized by small groups (Communist Current, Workers' Perspective which in 1993 formed the Workers Communist Party of Iraq), quickly meeting the hostility of the UPK and the PDK. Having subdued the insurgency in the south, Saddam Hussein's troops went on the offensive in Kurdistan on 28 March, bombarding terrorised Kurdish populations trying to flee with chemical weapons. It was only on April 16, after the work of "cleaning" Iraqi troops, that the American army decided to intervene and created a "security zone" (air exclusion zone for Iraqi aviation) in the Kurdish zone! The March 1991 Iraqi insurrection, which was crushed in blood by Saddam Hussein's troops, helped by Western allies, did not raise protests from Arab countries concerned about the spread of the movement, nor from Arab or international leftist parties that supported the hypocritical message of liberation of the country proclaimed by Western imperialists.

Under the aegis of the American winners, elections were held in 1992 in Iraqi Kurdistan and the KDP won over the KUP. A regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan was created while supporters of the two parties tore each other apart until 1998 causing the death of 4,000 Kurds, the UPK supported by the Iranian regime of Khomeini (in exchange, he had to fight against the Iranian Kurdish opponents) and the KDP by the USA and Turkey (in exchange, the KDP had to fight against the Kurdistan Workers Party or Turkish PKK). Then in 2003, the Kurdish parties united again to support the US troops against Saddam Hussein. They were "rewarded" by the American occupier with the adoption of an Iraqi federal constitution officially recognizing the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurdistan, a position of president in the Iraqi government for Talabani (UPK) and that of president of the Iraqi Kurdistan autonomous region for Barzani (PDK). This autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan which borders Turkey and Iran constitutes an economy based on the oil rent obtained grâce for exports to Turkey and Iran, and Barzani's authoritarian and clientelist regime ensures "social peace". The American administration holds there a major strategic pawn, effective mercenaries, which it can exploit in its Machiavellian negotiations with the central government of Baghdad, or Turkey (the headquarters of the PKK is now in Iraqi Kurdistan), Iran, Syria. The lamentable history of the Kurdish factions, made of alliances and betrayals is however not closed!

The four Kurdistan(s) and their autonomist ambitions participate in the Machiavellian game of the opposing imperialist powers

Kurdistan is a mountainous region that covers about 550 000 km² (like France) straddling Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq. So far, 4 "Kurdistan(s)" can be distinguished.

The first is Turkish Kurdistan (south-east Anatolia), rich in water (Israel hopes a lot (1)) and oil it covers 210 000 km² with 10 million Kurds or 14% of the Turkish population. This region is marked by the actions of the armed autonomist movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK, formed in 1978, of "Marxist-Leninist" obedience until 1994, and linked to Russia, and the Kurdish population is represented by different parties in the Turkish Parliament (80 deputies during the 2015 elections). Its founder Öcalan Abdullah launched his separatist guerrilla in Turkey in 1984 by setting up his headquarters in Damascus, where the Assad dictatorship used it to threaten Turkey and quadrillate the Syrian Kurdish population, and this until 1998 indeed Turkey threatened to intervene in Syria if Damascus' support for the PKK continued. On that date, the Syrian regime changed tactics and fought the PKK. Öcalan has to flee but he is kidnapped by Turkish services in 1999 and is now detained in Ankara prisons since 1999.

The influence of the PKK extends to the 4 Kurdistan(s) and the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. The PKK's armed struggle against the Turkish government has gone through hard times (more than 4,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed by the Ankara regime), and the organisation is on the list of terrorist organisations in many countries (USA and European Union). The PKK recruits militants in the four Kurdish areas of the region and therefore has a network of commands in each of these areas. This party was financed, armed and supported by the USSR then more discreetly by Russia and Syria of Assad which served for a long time as its rear base. But financial and material aid was provided by the USA and Israel. Much of its resources also come from heroin trafficking. Since 2003, he has organized military bases in northern Iraq in the Qandil Mountains, "tolerated" by the Barzani regime. Peace negotiations have been undertaken since 2006 between Ankara and the PKK with several ceasefire attempts. But the Erdogan government broke the peace process in the summer of 2015 during a change of tactics and its priority objective is to get rid of the Kurdish threat on its territory and borders.

The second is the Iraqi one in Erbil, in northern Iraq, which covers 74,000 km²; it has 4-5 million Kurds (20% of the Iraqi population) as well as Arab populations deported there by Saddam Hussein's ethnic cleansing policy. This region is largely autonomous from the central power of Baghdad, thanks to the American intervention of 2003; the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan or KRG is recognized by the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 and by the international community. France opened a consulate there in Erbil in 2007, after that of the Russians, followed by many other nations. Led by Massoud Barzani, leader of the PDK, the now indefectible ally of the USA, the regime is authoritarian and relies on clientelism. For several months now he has had to face a powerful wave of protests, against the background of non-payment of civil servants' salaries and accusations of corruption. Indeed, after having experienced a period of economic prosperity at the end of the 2000s thanks to its hydrocarbon resources, by positioning itself as a trade crossroads between Europe and Turkey on the one hand, and Iraq and Iran on the other hand, Iraqi Kurdistan entered into a serious economic crisis in 2014. The drop in world oil prices, the war effort against Daech and the reception of displaced persons and refugees have caused a major recession in the local economy. Austerity measures on an unprecedented scale were implemented in February 2016.

It has its own army, the "peshmergas", equipped and financed by Washington, and it sells its oil, without always having the agreement of the central state, mainly to Turkey, and also to Iran. Indeed, since the late 2000s, there has been a spectacular increase in economic relations between Turkey and the

authorities of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, who are also turning to Iran, but also to Israel for its military technology. A beautiful game of fools!

Iraqi oil is found in the Kurdistan region around **Kirkuk**, and in the **Basra** region in the south with refineries near Kirkuk and Baghdad. The pipelines leave Kirkuk or Erbil (north of Kirkuk) to go one to Turkey, the other to Syria, the third extends to the Persian Gulf via Baghdad. As early as 2014, Erbil began supplying oil to Turkey, but the pipelines in Turkey were sabotaged in August 2015 by the PKK as soon as the peace negotiations between Ankara and the PKK came to an end. On the other hand, the pipeline to Syria was abandoned with the emergence of the Islamic state and civil war in Syria. An agreement has been under way since 2014 for the construction of an oil pipeline from Iraqi Kurdistan to Iranian refineries; Tehran must play skilfully not to hurt the Iraqi Allied government. For years, Kurdish oil was transported by truck to Iran, as it was to Turkey.

The third Kurdistan is in Iran with an area of 30,000 km², populated by 7 to 10 million Kurds, or 10% of the Iranian population. They are subject to fierce political control by Tehran, with several executions of Kurdish opponents every year, and remain the only Kurds forgotten by the international community, because they are not very useful for current imperialist strategies. In 1946, the Iranian Kurds had proclaimed their independence (the brief Republic of Mahabad), encouraged in this by the USSR which was to quickly abandon them in exchange for their participation allowed by the USA on the exploitation of Iranian oil ! It has no political or administrative autonomy. The Kurdish parties are very divided and the main leaders have mostly been assassinated: Komala, "communist" whose members have been refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1984, the democratic party of Iranian Kurdistan PDKI (whose leader Ghassemlou was killed in 1989 in Vienna during negotiations with Tehran), the party for a free life in Kurdistan, Iranian branch of the PKK founded in 2004. It should be noted that Barzani and the PKK banned the Iranian Kurds from participating in the anti-Daech front by sending fighters to Kirkuk, while Barzani received in December 2014 on an official visit Mohammad Jafari, Iranian commander, one of Ghassemlou's supposed assassins, a real affront for the Iranian Kurds!

The fourth is Syrian Kurdistan (Syria has 800km of border with Turkey) or "**Rojava**" (which means west in Kurdish) which in the middle of the Syrian civil war declared itself autonomous with the support of the Western and Russian powers. The Kurdish populations of Syria occupy three separate enclaves along the Turkish border which constitute the natural extension of the Kurdish territories of Turkey and Iraq: the Cizre region, three quarters of which are under the control of Kurdish tribes and which has rich oil deposits, the Kobané region which is an agricultural region, and the Efrin region. The Democratic Union Party or PYD, created in 2003, is controlled by the Turkish PKK; its armed wing, the YPG, or People's Protection Units, is formed in 2011. He participated in the Kurdish uprising of March 2004 with other Syrian formations, which was repressed by the Baath regime with a real massacre of Kurdish civilians in the Cizre region. Damascus has always affirmed its hostility to any Kurdish autonomy. The Syrian Kurds had not acquired any fundamental rights; some were even deprived of civil rights. Today in 2016, the PKK-PYD has returned to Bashar's arms and Moscow is the first country to have hosted an office representing the PYD (as a non-governmental organization), with the Russians providing large quantities of weapons to the YPGs, who are also receiving US support.

Kurds outside Kurdistan

Cultural Kurdishness and Kurdish nationalism are widely maintained by communities abroad and by the governments that have welcomed them. Kurdish cultural centres in Sweden, and in other European countries, websites, build deterritorialised places of memory and perpetuate Kurdish nationalism. In Europe, the Kurds have obtained recognition of cultural autonomy since the 1970s and 1980s and have more resources abroad than in their countries of origin. They have acquired legitimacy as a "stateless nation". Kurds are estimated to number around 6 million abroad (Europe: 500,000 in Germany out of more than 2 million Turkish citizens, 7,500 of whom are PKK militants, and the USA).

Today, in the midst of the chaos of the Middle East, when nations born in 1920 disappear in atrocious civil wars, when massacres follow massacres, bombings and destruction continue, when civilian populations suffer the heaviest tribulations, the call of the Kurdish nationalists is still a powerful lever enabling the various Kurdish factions, political and armed, to recruit among the Kurds of the Middle East and those of the diaspora, and to participate in the civil war. Even today the Kurdish groups, regularly animated by fratricidal struggles, still serve the interests of the imperialist powers, which for more than a century have not skimped on promises or betrayals.

In a context of global confrontation between the great imperialist powers of the US, China and Russia, to conquer strategic energy or military markets, essential to the survival of their economies, small nations and ethnic or religious groups have no other alternative than to serve as mercenaries for one or the other, or even several at a time. And when we talk about ethnic or religious groups, we are always talking about bourgeois clans that try to defend their "small" possessing class interests, always on the back of

the population they claim to represent. Only a regenerated proletariat, organized economically in trade unions and politically in a class party could finally shed light on the real struggle at issue: that of class struggle, with a view to overthrowing the ruling class - the industrial, commercial and landed bourgeoisie - which lives from the exploitation of the proletariat and the small peasantry.

As we wrote in our article of 2013 entitled "The instrumentalization of the Kurdish question by the imperialists": **The only way out of the Kurdish drama is that of class struggle and not of autonomy!**

"All the states of the Middle East, which stem from the imperialist division of the Ottoman Empire, are not nations in the historical sense of the term, but products of circumstances, worked by antagonistic forces. The different peoples that make up these states could have lived more peacefully in a federal state on the Swiss model, but imperialist lusts and regional rivalries between states judged otherwise. Today all these modern states and nations are called to disappear, to be carried away by the revolutionary turmoil, just as the earthquake overturns the hen houses. If the formation of nations had a role in the history of the development of productive forces in the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, this phase was definitively closed with the independence of the last African states during the 1960s. "The Kurdish proletariat, just like the Turkish, Palestinian, Chechen, Tuareg proletariat, has nothing to expect from the national question, from the most often improbable creation of a state, which if it is founded becomes, as is the case of the Palestinian state or that of Iraqi Kurdistan, the instrument of its own bourgeoisie. Their bourgeoisie was born reactionary, and is incapable of any progressive action, as the whole history of Kurdistan shows; The whole history of the Kurdish bourgeoisie and its nationalist parties that have become clientelist organisations, even mercenary brigands, is nothing more than a succession of manoeuvres, temporary alliances followed by betrayals, ignominies and massacres perpetrated against the Kurdish proletariat. Once in power, these bourgeoisies, supported by other states or imperialist powers, oppress, just as much as the "external" enemy, the proletariat of Kurdistan, be it Kurdish, Arab or Turkmen! The only way out is to join the proletariat which has no nation to defend, no homeland to cry for, no race to protect, no common goal with the bourgeoisie which now remains its inevitable enemy. Its destiny is to organize itself in trade unions and a Marxist party, independent of all bourgeois and national movements, and thus to resume the glorious path of class struggle.

(1) Relations between Turkey and Israel have normalised for several years. Israel invests in the Turkish economy, military technology, and is also a major investor in Iraqi Kurdistan.