

The Lost Decade

Joan Roura. Journalist, Televisió de Catalunya, Spain

The first decade of the 21st century has been marked in the international context by the attempts at re-colonisation of the Middle East by western powers, which have maintained countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Palestine or Israel in permanent social and political instability. The reason is clear: these countries have indispensable resources for the world economy and their geostrategic situation is primordial. Western military interferences have led to the establishment of theocratic governments contrary to democratic reforms, such as in the case of Iran; the strengthening of resistance groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah and the expansion of fundamentalist religious groups such as al-Qaeda. The endless conflict between Israel and Palestine, perpetuated by the alliance between Israel and the western coalition formed by the Quartet, must be added to these realities.

When I was asked to write an article about the first decade of the 21st century in the Middle East, the first thing that came to mind was the phrase attributed to Mullah Omar. Besieged in Kandahar (Afghanistan) in the autumn of 2001, after the ominous 11-S, the leader of the Taliban is supposed to have said: “You may have the watches, but we have the time.” Watches, of course, would be unnecessary if time did not exist. Machines do not replace ideas. Noise, whether in the form of canons or statements, does not make politics.

This has been the decade of noise, ideological adventures and regional wars. From Palestine to Afghanistan, including Iraq and Lebanon; from Camp David II and the second Intifada to the Iranian nuclear programme and the political initiatives to democratise the region or rather to re-colonise it. The most lethal decade despite the great promises. The ten years of the most sensational or rather most sensationalist journalistic headlines but without any real change in the field. From Gaza to

Kandahar. From Riad to Beirut. Hundreds of thousands of dead, mostly civilian. Many undeclared wars. But no improvement for the 500 million people who have suffered them.

In short, in the Middle East there is not even one more democracy. The only free elections, by universal suffrage, internationally examined as no other in the world – that is, the Palestinian elections of January 2006 – were cancelled de facto by the so-called international community because the citizens called to the ballot boxes had not voted the way Israel wanted and gave power to the Movement of Islamic Resistance, known by the acronym of Hamas. A vote of anger against a failing peace process.

In Iraq, when writing this article, seven months after the legislative elections, there is still no government. Amnesty International reports that torture is systematic and generalised in its prisons and police stations. Attacks continue after the withdrawal of the American combat troops. The influence of the Iranian theocratic regime is increasingly decisive.

Washington has replaced its troops in Afghanistan but Hamid Karzai, former associate of the CIA and considered a pro-western president, overturned the ballot boxes in 2009 to renew his mandate. Now he is seeking an agreement with the Taliban while his brother controls the most profitable business, the trafficking of opium, according to several local journalists who risk their lives to report the situation.

In Iran, the conservative ayatollahs who hold power are pleased with the situation in the neighbouring country. The fall and execution of Saddam Hussein has opened the door, mainly Shiite, of Iraq to them, through local religious parties that enjoy great hegemony. The American failures in the region make them feel stronger. In 2009 they forced a second mandate of their Iranian candidate, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who won fraudulent elections at the expense of thousands of democrats who had paid for their protests with prison or the scaffold.

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In Lebanon, Hezbollah continues to arm itself despite the deployment of 14,000 UN soldiers, of whom one thousand are Spanish, and whose mission is to avoid this rearmament. Hezbollah, the incombustible ally of Teheran, shamed the Israeli army in the 2006 war and is becoming stronger. Even the Lebanese government of Saad Hariri, considered pro-western, needs this organisation to avoid a new civil war.

In Israel Benjamin Netanyahu's right wing governs with the essential support of the most radical parties in the history of the country.

Some overtly propose segregation, apartheid. Others even suggest the annihilation of Palestinians. Meanwhile, the European Union and the United States are extending the trade agreements appealing to another daughter of the decade, the *nasciturus* Road Map, a colonial document which seeks to put at the same level the Israeli occupants and the Palestinian occupiers. The authors are the United States, the UN, the European Union and Russia.

Photoshop Policies

As a graphic paradigm of all these fictional policies, the lie published in the form of a photograph in the most widely-read newspaper in Egypt, clearly pro-government, *Al Ahram*, stands out. In an infantile but symptomatic way, the newspaper published a picture of the apparent last hope of peace between Israelis and Palestinians: the Washington Summit of September 2010, in which President Obama managed to bring together the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian President under the auspices of King Abdullah II of Jordan and the Egyptian *rais*, Hosni Mubarak. In the actual photograph, Mubarak appeared in third place. But, Photoshop enabled some appreciative journalists to place this president for life in front of the host.

This anecdote is a vulgar but real symbol of the career that has been established by pretending to get the delayed peace process back on track, which has caused damage during the first half of the decade that is difficult to repair. The policy of gestures, image and camera tricks cannot change the perception of the Middle Eastern peoples, who see in this decade a return to colonial times.

Beyond literature, there are three photographs which ended with the hopes placed in the region after the Cold War, in the 1990s. We present them arranged in chronological order.



Ariel Sharon at the Esplanade of the Mosques, September 2000 (Brian Hender/Getty Images News).

They are not comparable, but they are real, and have demolished hopes for peace in the short term, maybe even in the medium term.

Photo 1

We start with the fair of the century and the millennium. Let us go to Jerusalem, in September 2000. Ariel Sharon, the leader of the Israeli conservative opposition, uses the failure of the Camp David II summit, backed by Bill

Clinton, between the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the Palestinian President, Yasir Arafat, to decide a peace process which he had repeatedly stated he did not believe in. Sharon inflamed Jewish-Israeli nationalism and challenged Palestinian national aspirations by visiting the Esplanade of the Mosques, for the Jews the Temple Mount, in the midst of the crisis. He had the elections coming up in three months in the bag. The outbreak of the second Intifada the day after the visit facilitated his very simple electoral discourse. In his own

words to this journalist: “An agreement with the Palestinians is not possible. Either we win or they win.”

Photo 2

Faith in the war, in winning it by terrorising the enemy. Here comes the second photograph. That day the number of people who died was approximately the same as in Palestine during the riot, but in a single day and in the capital of the West, New York. In the midst of the indiscriminate offensive of Israel against the Palestinians, and of the Palestinian Islamists against Israel through suicide attacks, another character who seeks to promote himself at the expense of the dead appears in prime time. Osama Bin Laden enters the dining rooms of all homes through the most widely covered attacks of all times. It is 11th September 2001. Everybody recalls what they were doing that day at nine am, New York time.

Photo 3

A USA flag, stars and stripes, covers the face of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Farduz Square in Baghdad. It is April 2003. It was not the biggest statue of the dictator, but it was in front of the hotels (and the cameras) of most western agencies and media: the Sheraton and the Palestine. Baghdad was burning everywhere (sackings, fires, crimes, rapes), but the world repeated what the White House said: that the war was won and the fighting had ended. However, they had only just begun. Hundreds of thousands of people would die. Most, of course, were Iraqi civilians. Just as civilians were the majority of dead Palestinians, and those who died in New York. But they, at least, have public names and surnames. Memorials. And they are remembered every

year in Ground Zero, on 11th September, live throughout the world.

Cynicism without Frontiers

The barbarism of 11-S generated a wave of solidarity in the Middle East with the United States without precedents since Eisenhower prevented the first Israeli occupation of Sinai in 1956. Teheran, Gaza, Damascus, the whole of the Maghreb were on the side of Bin Laden's victims. The invasion of Afghanistan against the Taliban regime received the support of the United Nations. It legalised it. The rupture came the following year, in 2002, when it became clear that the Afghanistan war was only the aperitif of the big meal that the American neocons wanted to eat after the man they voted into the presidency: George W. Bush. The main menu was the whole Middle East, which holds 60% of oil resources in the world.

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Bush and his ideologues – Richard Perle, “the prince of darkness”, pro-Israeli lobbyist; and Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld from the Pentagon – had already made the United States a global empire, the gendarme of the world. It was written in all the literature-fiction produced by the most famous of the conservative think tanks, the Project for the New American Century, in 1997; that is, four years before the 11-S attacks.

What did they propose to do? The chimera of converting Washington into the Rome of the 21st century. All these ideologues, from the Reagan administration, sought control of the world through domination of the energy resources. Therefore, the Middle East had to be



Statue of Saddam Hussein, Baghdad (Gamma/Rapho/Contacto).

conquered. They wanted to complete the work started by Bush senior, who did not dare to occupy Iraq during the first war of 1991. They needed an excuse, and Bin Laden offered them 11-S. But it was only this: an excuse. The whole world knew that Saddam Hussein had no link with the Islamists of al-Qaeda, posed no threat to the world more than to the Iraqis themselves, repressed by his tyrannical regime.

“Let’s put it simply,” said Wolfowitz in a speech in Singapore just after the start of the occupation of Iraq. “The most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is that, economically, in Iraq we have no alternative. The country is swimming in a sea of oil.” This cynicism without frontiers, which they themselves attempted to camouflage under the name “axis of evil”, has ended by ruining the credibility and the finances of the United

States and, by extension, of everything we call the West. We have changed centuries, but the one we are beginning will not be “the new American century”.

The Iraq war was an unnecessary adventure. But it has cost around a billion dollars, which has been paid out of the public funds to the oil companies, the military-industrial complex and the private security companies – that is, hirers of mercenaries. All of them are real powers that facilitated in their day the White House with the change from democrats – Clinton, Gore – to Republicans – Bush junior, Cheney. Despite everything, they have not managed to re-colonise the Middle East. There is no power that can maintain as vassals those 500 million people who call for change. Another approach is necessary, beyond neo-colonialism.

The first decade of the 21st century, in fact, could be considered the last of the last century. It was said that the 20th century had ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but this was not so. Moreover, people spoke of the change produced in 2001 with the attacks of 11th September, but this is not true either. The century, or at least the balance of powers, is changing right now, with the wilful, ideological, neo-colonial response which has left without economic funds – in Iraq and Afghanistan – and without political arguments – in the Middle East – those that sought to conquer a vast world by a single power. They were simply inheritors of the Cold War, and their breakdown happened in the Middle East. Specifically, at the core all problems, at the epicentre of all the humiliations, in the conflict that generates an unsustainable dynamic between the fanatics of the conquest and the resistance. In this small space that was called Palestine and now is called Israel and the National Palestinian Authority.

The Third Intifada

The third Palestinian revolt has already started in the shadow of the Israeli wall, condemned by the UN because it interferes with the frontiers of 1967 on the West Bank, under two hundred illegal settlements that seek to protect this enclosure, alongside the 300,000 colonists who live there (more than half a million if we add those of East Jerusalem). Behind all of this, surrounded by the bases of occupation, the Palestinians protest in silence. A deafening silence on the solution of two states. It is no longer a street issue. There is increasingly less talk about it in the cafés of Ramallah, in the shops of Belen, to say nothing of the workshops of Nablus or the quarries of Hebron. In Gaza they stopped believing in it a long time ago. Once again, the watches and time. The watches began a

countdown in Oslo. The peace process, the two states, was possible. Time, from the very start, will stop the watches and begin to run back to the start of the conflict: 1948, 1947, 1946, in favour of those who want a two nation state, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. Some of them are in Israel; in the occupied territories, they are already clearly the majority.

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The last leaders who perhaps believed in the process that started in Oslo in 1991 have also died. And with them, the process itself. The first case was that of the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated by a Jewish colonist in 1995, just when it seemed he had understood that the survival of Israel as a Jewish state involved applying the resolutions of the UN Security Council. These resolutions demanded that Israel withdraw to the frontiers of 1967, on the other side of which a viable Palestinian state would be created that would give to Israel the approval of the other Arab states.

Then it was Arafat, the Palestinian president, who died after nine years of a savage siege by the Israeli army on his residency in Ramallah. With him fell the last Palestinian leader, at least until now, capable of agreeing a solution to the conflict based on the two states. Two years later, his historical party, Fatah, lost the legislative elections to the Islamists of Hamas. His successor, the current President Mahmoud Abbas, negotiates without a mandate – given that it has already expired –, without popular support, and with divided Palestinian territories since Hamas rejected his authority in Gaza in 2007.

It is not surprising that the last episode of this peace process, which started in Washington in late summer 2010, does not have popular or media credibility. You only have to look at the protagonists. Abbas has no power. Netanyahu does not want and is not able to stop the construction of settlements that have tripled since 1992. And Obama, the mediator, clings on to an improbable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to try to minimise the damages he will suffer in the mid-term elections in the United States. A real Camp David III after the last democrat also failed attempt by Bill Clinton in 2000. However, the actors today are even weaker.

Not for nothing the first months of talks have been exhausted by an issue that before was not even disputable: Israel must stop the illegal construction in the occupied Palestinian territories. The nine month moratorium ended on 26th September 2010. Since then, Netanyahu has not stopped the colonists, Abbas is threatening to leave the table and the Obama administration is seeking “constructive solutions” that allow Israel to adopt “painful decisions” now that there is a “new opportunity for peace.” They have not even renewed the language. It is that of the lost decade. The watches have stopped. But time, of course, goes on.