

DARIO'S DIARIES: A PASSAGE TO KURDISTAN

Thursday 19 November 2015: Erbil

Departure to Erbil, Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, Iraq, where L., from University of Tor Vergata, and I will hold three trainings for medical doctors in the frame of a pilot cooperation project.

The project for Kurdistan Region Health Monitoring and Epidemiological Surveillance System is coordinated by University of Roma Tor Vergata, Dept. of Biomedicine and Prevention with I-PRO and EuResist Network as partners.

Due to difficulties related to the recent attacks in Paris, the camera operator cannot leave with us. We have to find a solution on site.

At evening, in Erbil, we meet a local TV producer, the owner and CEO of Babylon media. We are received in a palace with the walls in the frame of ancient Babylon, with corridors 50 meters long and a private studio of 60 square meters, full of delicious sweets and drinks.



Friday 20 November

Today is Friday, all offices are closed.

All day long inside the hotel to prepare the course material for the next days and finalise the arrangements with local organisers. Thanks to the friendly commitment of F., medical doctor at Erbil Hospital and our focal point here, one by one all problems are solved.

At mid day I realise that outside the hotel a marriage is going on, with all men in stylish and colorful traditional dresses - one single solid colour garment, which is made up like a shirt which continues into trousers with the snort, and a colorful silk band at the waist, and women in long white dresses embroidered with beads and colored diskettes that seem stoles of seventeenth century cardinals, loose hair with henna, playing handclaps and acute throat shouts as those of Bedouin women.

Obviously this is a Christian marriage, as we are in the Christian quarter.

Afternoon, the streets fill with people. A man is preparing roasted nuts into the basket of a washing machine



Saturday 21 November: from Erbil to Dohuk

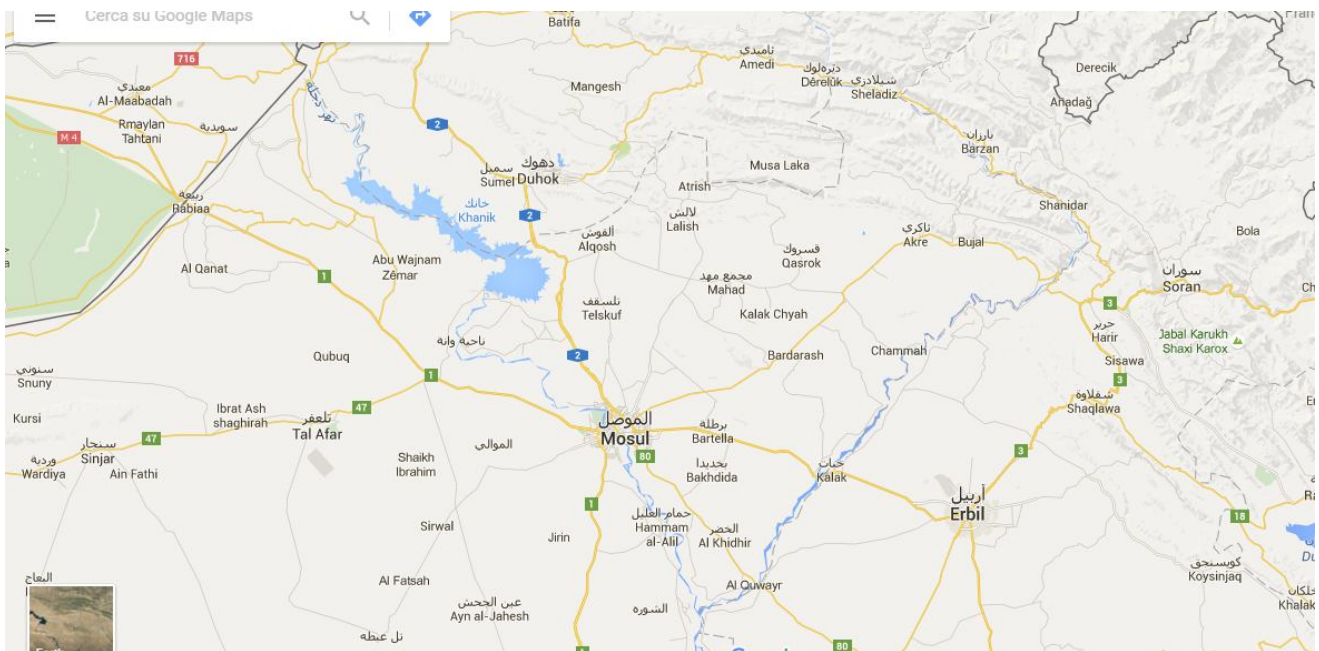
Usual panoramic dawn on the desert and on the city airport.



Soon F. and the driver reach the hotel; the morning program is still to work on the meeting organisation. One of the problems is that many more doctors have registered than we had reckoned: 150 in Dohok, and 240 in Erbil and 300 in Sulaymaniyah, almost 700 against 450 that we planned.

At 12 we leave, aiming to get to Dohok at 16.

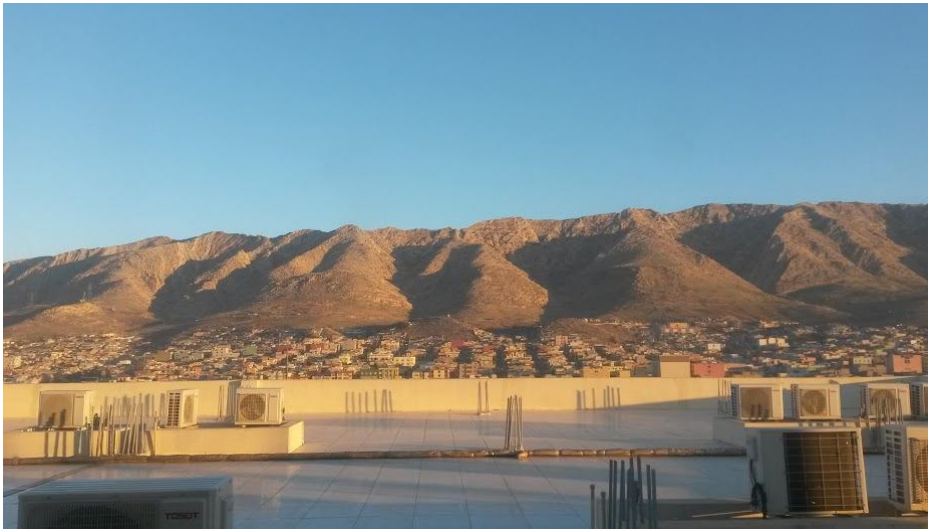
From Erbil to Dohok the fastest way would be via Mosul, but of course this is not possible as Mosul is in the hands of the Islamic State. Instead we pass the Zad River at Kalak and then we proceed up to Bardarak. On the map it seems a narrow path but now this is the road that connects Iraq with Syria, with Turkey, with the Lebanon, where every day hundreds of thousands of cars and trucks pass, with a checkpoint every 50 km. They are making it a large 7 lanes highway in the blink of an eye.



I learn that Mosul is divided in two parts by the Tigris River, on one side is the Muslim and modern part, on the other side is the Christian and ancient site of Ninive.

Duhok is in the mountains, in a wide valley, fertile enough. To get there you cross a fairly fertile region, which is that of the river Zab or Zad, with wheat fields just plowed, and then a vast desert rocky area, until you reach the entrance of the valley in beautiful mountains, rock and clay.

The city is at 1800 meters, it has about 1.5 ml of inhabitants, of which 500,000 refugees in the largest refugee camp of Kurdistan. It is an Assyrian city, powerful early as 2,500 BC. The temperature ranges from 25 degrees in the day to below zero at night. I saw nothing of probably existing Assyrian antiquities, perhaps in a bunch of shacks there are the foundations of 4 millennia ago buildings. In Erbil it was just like this, that a



UNESCO sign on a ruin was used as a roundabout for cars.

Sunday 22 November: the Peshmerga

The training in the morning goes very well. L. holds two modules, one on Epidemiology and ICD10 and another on Surveillance. I hold one module on IT for data collection and the specific platform we adopted here.



When we are ready for our trip back to Erbil, strange noises and a lot of confusion call us outside: the main road is full of people who make carousels with cars, women and kids are dancing. General Barzani is coming from the prise of Sinjia – Shingal to the IS, realised on November 13. After a while, a long tournament of jeeps and trucks arrives with hundreds of Peshmerga greeted by the crowd. They are waving PDK flags, not Kurdish flags. And finally the big armoured jeep of Barzani, covered with flours and followed by kids trying to look inside.



But Barzani does not come out of the car and keeps the windows closed: is he really there?

At the TV of the restaurant we see him coming out of the car to greet the crowd, just after Tohuk. May be the city center was not safe enough for him...

Following the passage of Barzani the road to Erbil is blocked by the most tremendous gorgeous horrible traffic jam I have ever seen. The cars overflow from the paved road in the sandy track to form 10, 12 car lanes. We get five hours to reach Erbil.



Monday 23 November: air space closed

Russians have called for the closure of Kurdish airspace today and tomorrow to avoid disturbing their flights going to bomb ISIS in Syria.

We hope, we hope, that they won't prolong the thing - my flight back is Thursday night.

The official news sounds:

"We have been informed by Baghdad to halt the flights because of Russian jets attacking Daesh (ISIS) in Syria. This is for the safety of travelers," Talar Faiyq, head of Erbil International Airport, told Rudaw late Sunday. She said all flights were halted for Monday and Tuesday and will not resume at least until Wednesday.



Kurds here are quite upset because the decision has not been discussed with them. But they will keep calm, what can they do? Kurdistan is a region of Iraq with the ambition to become an independent country. It is most likely this what keeps the two main parties/families, that of Barzani, the PDK, Kurdistan Democratic Party, and that of Talabani, the PUK, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, tranquil and almost in peace. They are finding a way to cooperate without clashes, and agreed to prolong the mandate of the President Masoud Barzani of two years, although not yet officially, to rule the passage.

Meanwhile, we check the room for the course in Erbil. S., the sales manager, welcomes us. The room is too small for the 240 doctors who signed up and she helps us to find a solution. S. is a brunette girl with long hair, smiling, kind, hard. F. finds her extremely beautiful.



We find a suitable room in another luxury hotel and after long negotiations we determine the price. It's clear that the money that we brought will not be enough. We hope they will agree to be paid by bank transfer, it is not obvious here because the banks make a lot of fuss and pay with months of delay.

Even today we missed the opportunity to visit the ancient citadel.

The football playground in front of our hotel fill with people playing football. It is in the middle of the refugee camp, formerly made by tends and now by nice containers.

Evening dinner at F.'s house, with his wife A. and their 2 years son. The house is not big, full of sofas. A. has prepared hummus, two salads, taboulè, lentil soup. She loves cooking, says. A. has a PHD in psychology, has studied some months in Turin and understands Italian. Now she works at the University. After the appetizers come the main courses: marvellous Biryani rice, a Persian dish, meatballs, roasted chicken, salmon with herbs and stewed vegetables. And to finish a cream with pistachios!



Tuesday 24 November: international crisis

The Turks have shut down a Russian jet.

Putin is furious.

The Kurds here are very concerned. It has happened at around 200 Km from here, 70 Km from Tohuk, where we held the course the day before yesterday and where we saw Barzani to pass by.

I find on the internet that already on the 23rd there was a news about the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu who stated: "If necessary, Turkey is ready to intervene in Syria to protect the Turkoman minority."
http://www6.ansa.it/ansamed/it/notizie/rubriche/cronaca/2015/11/23/siria-turchia-pronti-ad-agire-per-proteggere-turcomanni_a0630f50-5cce-43f1-a743-3a5ef29ee7f7.html



We work all the day long to prepare the course of tomorrow. At 1:00 we have lunch with A. and finalise the schedule of the interventions. Soon after that, we go to check the hall with the cameramen. There are a lot of problems with the microphones. We need three times back and forth with Babylon studios.



In the afternoon, as always, the streets fill with people.

At 20:30 I go out for a walk.

I understand that here they consider Europe, more than the US, more than Russia, the country with no corruption, where your destiny it is not decided by the family where

you are born, where the society is not managed by the families...

Back in my room I see the CNN video “Long Road to Hell” on the war in Iraq as an admitted mistake by American administration. I see Tony Blair making qualified apologies about the war 12 times.

Wednesday 25 November 2015: checkpoints

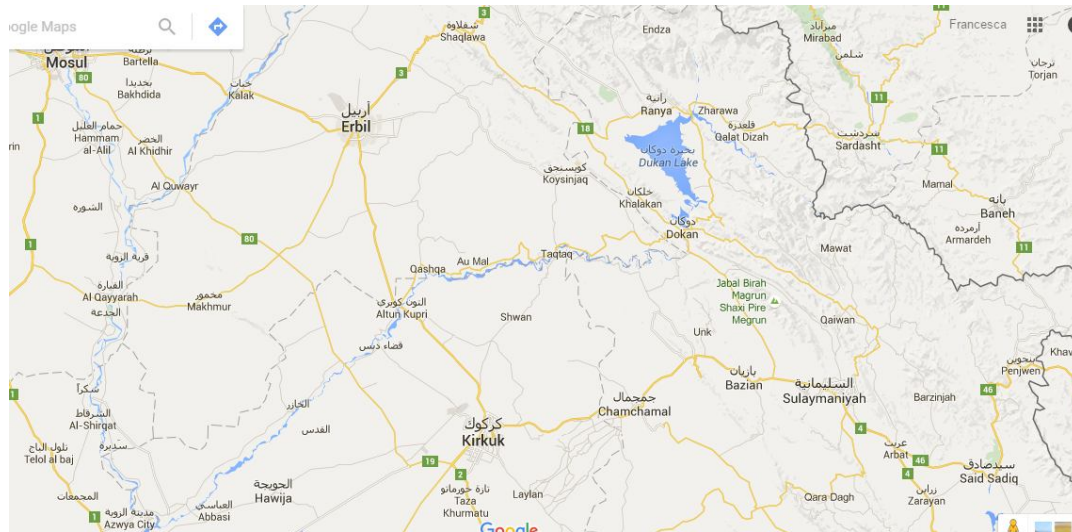
The course is a success. They come the Health Minister, the Italian Consul, the Planning Ministry Director a lot of TVs and journalists, 180 participants. Our presentations, after the fine tuning following to Dohuk, are perfect.



Later, I find an article about the Italian consul who teaches to swim to the children in Erbil http://www.ilfoglio.it/piccola-posta/2015/09/04/insegnare-a-nuotare-a-erbil_1-vr-132402-rubriche_c296.htm



At 3 PM we leave for Sulaymania. Out of Erbil we are soon in a landscape of Crete Senesi, on a larger scale. Small rivers, the lake of Dokan, large plateaux cultivated with wheat.



Very beautiful, very fertile. R., our driver, comments that it is a pity that people are living agriculture as they all become state employees. The economy now is based almost exclusively on oil. Along the road towards the mountains that separate Iraq from Iran we see some primitive autogrills, few fruits and vegetables stands, a magnificent sunset.

Checkpoints as always are very frequent. We have to stop the car with the windows open. Soldiers look inside and ask:



“Kurds or Arabs?”

R. replies: “Kurds and Italians”.

They check inside to see if the answer is believable, and so far, they have always said: “You go”.

R. says that if there is an Arab, then they stop the car and frisk or ask for the documents.

F. tells us laughing that to avoid giving rise to doubts he cut his beard.

R. instead has it, but his accent shows that he is non-Arab. He is Chaldean, like F., and used to live in Shaklaw, in Kurdistan, where they arrived many refugees from Syria and from Mosul area, most

of them also Chaldean Christians. With one of these he got married and they now work in Erbil. He helps us in his spare time and is very precious for us.



At a checkpoint a soldier who cannot read wants us out of the car but F. is able to convince him: they are Italians, they are helping us, let's help them.

Sulaymaniyah is a big rich city surrounded by mountains. After dinner I take a walk along the highway, with the moonlight

reflected by the mountains of the ancient Media. It seems that the flight space is open again.

Back in my spacious room I read an article on Limes about the Turkish attack as a message to Europe not to ally with Putin <http://www.limesonline.com/il-jet-russo-abbattuto-dalla-turchia-e-un-messaggio-a-putin/88127>

Thursday 26 November 2015: Dawn and sunset in Suleymaniyah

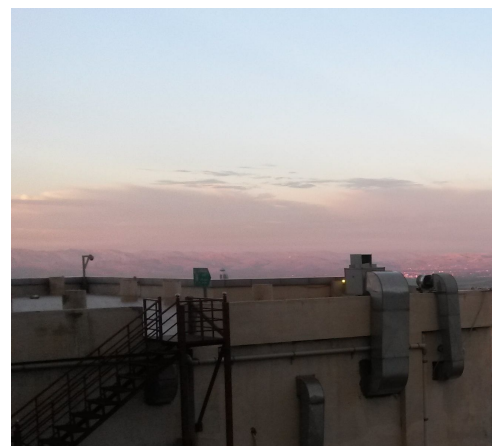


A poignant dawn strikes me from the window.

Suleymaniyah is already awake. It's a fast growing city . It is from here that Mahmud Barzanji the first started the independence movements against the English in 1919 and since then the city is known to be particularly proud and ardent for independence. It is the only province ruled by PUK, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the party founded by Talabani.

Here they speak "Sorani", the central Kurdish and people tell me that it is quite different from Kurdish of the north, so that a non cultivated Kurd from Sulaymaniyah and a non cultivated Kurd from Dohuk hardly understand themselves.

The impression is that this province is richer, people work a lot and is well organised.





The hotel is luxurious, it resembles a modern shopping center.

The set up of the course is easier, may be we have more confidence now but we also got a lot of support from the hotel personnel and from our local focal point: ten young medical doctors have been appointed to help us.



The course is packed with 220 participants, half of which are women, mostly dressed in western fashion, few in miniskirts, all medical doctors. Local and central authorities, the usual journalists and TVs.

Certificates of participation are delivered by roll call.



Then, as rapidly as possible, way back to Erbil. Tonight I have the flight to Istanbul and to Rome.



Along the way we stop to buy pomegranates. Kurdistan is among the main producers in the world



In Erbil we miss the patisserie of Abu Afif. They will freeze me out pretty hard at home when I'll arrive without sweets!

