

From Busto to Baghdad, the experience of Matteo Colombo

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“There are all of them in Baghdad: there are the Sunnis, the Shia, the Kurds and ISIS. We can not go for a walk alone and, furthermore, the government has difficulties to keep control of the capital.” **Matteo Colombo, who is from Busto**, talks about his Baghdad where he has been the financial responsible for the **Personnel and the Safety of the International Red Cross for four months**.

He went to the devastated Iraq for Christmas and tomorrow he will return in the Middle Eastern country to continue his job. Before leaving, he held a conference in the **Quadrifoglio Association in Via Lodi, in Borsano**, to tell us what is happening in that part of the world.

“ISIS is also present in the capital but it doesn’t show the images of the Islamic State and it doesn’t attack openly. **People feel its presence even though they don’t see it**,” says Matteo, who has already seen several sceneries of poverty, war and devastation at the age of 37. He has been **in Mali, Cameroon, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Congo and Yemen** before landing in Iraq, “The Iraqis are really scared, they don’t leave their homes for fear of being killed. The city is full of checkpoints, every 200 metres, which subject citizens to time-consuming checks with uncertain results. The Red Cross is in charge of visiting convicts in prisons, maintaining the water supply network and helping war wounded people with two buildings in which prosthesis are provided,” he says.

Daesh is situated at a few kilometres from Baghdad; in Ramadi and in Falluja is waving the black flag. Everyone fears the ISIS, but the Red Cross is obliged to keep an absolute neutrality position and to deal with the groups who are at war at the same way, “what we are seeing is the extremely difficult situation in which all the country is. Ironically the safest areas and in which there is a minimum level of State are the one under the Islamic State control which can guarantee education and health, contrary to which is happening in the areas under the Iraqi State, which is unsteady and tore apart from the conflict between Shiites and Sunnis for the power,” he said.

Matteo says also about the rebellion revolt which are always taking place inside the caliphate and he mentions the uprising of women who asked for more rights by showing their disapproval, “the answer of Al Baghdadi was a fatwa in which, among other things, said that a man can’t go to bed with a woman and with his daughter”.

The paradoxical situation is also that of the most important oil site in Iraq which ISIS had repaired, but that it hasn’t decided to reactivate yet, “they fear that it could end up in the hands of the loyalist army and it could benefit the government that they are fighting.”

Matteo Colombo described the regional situation with the presence **in the north of the Kurds** who are supported by the Iraqi government only in an anti-ISIS function, **in the south of the Shiites** and in the centre and **in the north-west of the Sunnis**. The execution of the **Shiite Ayatollah in Saudi Arabia** and the consequent reaction of the Iranians and the whole Shiite world overheated even more the spirits: “In the last days three Sunni mosques have been attacked in Iraq, and this can be the prologue of an escalation that we don’t know where it can lead. In the Red Cross we have Sunnis and Shiites who work side by side, but if this escalation won’t stop, also the pacific coexistence of the two big Muslim families in Baghdad might be affected by it,” explains Matteo. But the thing that strikes the most is the

resignation of those who live there: “They know to be in war since ever and they don’t think it will end soon. They experience all this with resignation”.

There were a lot of curiosity of the people present in the room who asked numerous questions both about the geopolitical situation of the area (*Matteo is graduated in international relationships, editor’s note*) and about the culture and the religion of the Iraqis. Matteo did not avoid the questions and gave answers to an audience who demonstrated to be thirsty for knowledge and they couldn’t and didn’t want to be satisfied with what the media report.

di Translated by Puppi, Vanzini & Bogni (Reviewed by Prof. Robert Clarke)