



Ελληνική Εταιρεία Γεωγραφικών Μελετών  
«Ο Στράβων»

## **SYRIA – THE FALL OF A BUFFER STATE**

The author of this article is not a specialist on Syria, nor on the religious communities living in the area of the former French mandates of Syria and Lebanon.

He has been thrilled since his adolescence by Syria's ethnic diversity, its Hellenistic heritage, its contribution to crystallization of Christianity, Syrian space having been a theatre of war between Rome/Eastern Rome and Persia, a palimpsest and a crossroads of civilizations. In the penultimate high school class, he has even drafted an essay entitled "Syria between Arabs and Byzantium". Our Constantine Cavafy, born in Alexandria but poetically living in the Hellenistic era of the Ptolemies and the Seleucid rulers of Syria, immersed us in the immense space of this historic entity encompassing Damascus and Antioch, Emessa and Apameia, Commagene and Osroene of northern Syria, now within Turkey's frontiers.

Sykes - Picot agreement of 1916, sealed the fate of Syria and Mesopotamia. Syria, with borders drawn 1923 in Lausanne, fell under the French, Damascus, first capital of the Moslem Khalifate, becoming the cradle of miscarried modern era Arab nationalism.

The Greek Orthodox Syrians, survivors of the Hellenistic era and Byzantium, under the auspices of the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch, constitute to this day the largest Christian community of multi religious - primarily Moslem Sunni - and pluri confessional Syria.

The fall of secular, religiously tolerant, modernist, Arab nationalist regime of Baath (: Resurrection), opens vistas of a new chapter in history of Syria, the entire Middle East, the Arab nations, last but not least the fate of Christianity in the lands of its foundation.

Overthrow of rigid Assad dictatorship cannot be received only with joy, as victorious insurgents are guided by violent Islamist forces, Al-Qaeda/ Al Nusra remoulded as HTS rebels.

Scepticism and reluctance are in order. The European Union, not a customary geopolitical actor, after the initial exaltation for the breath-taking developments in Syria takes a credit for carefully assessing sanctions lifting.

Democracy is a framework for governance not easily to be planted on the arid Syrian soil and the new rulers, supported by antagonistic extraneous powers eager to get rid of Iranian influence, have yet to generate trust about their intentions.

In the light of the above, the initiative of the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, to venture to Beirut, in demonstration of support for the battered Lebanese people and of solidarity with our Greek Orthodox - and Arabic speaking kins in Syria and Lebanon is worth praising. More needs to be done on the part of Greece, the other Orthodox Christian nations and the European Union as a whole.

### **The Kurdish factor**

Syrian Kurds have a proven battle record since the outset of the dismal Arab Spring and the onslaught of ISIS under the eye of regional states and a part of the international community. Their defence of Kobani in 2014/2015, in the face of ISIS siege, is a real Missolonghi of the 21st century. The de facto autonomous entity of Rojava, astride the Euphrates River, is an island of co-existence of various ethno-religious groups, interacting under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Council and the protective shield of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Now this bright part of Syria, being the primary but not the only motive of Turkey's involvement in Syrian affairs and of their energetic support for the revamped Al Nusra/HTS, is hard pressed. Credibility of USA and Israel, both undeclared allies of the Syrian Kurds, is at stake. Or will they let down the Kurds, once the first goal of removing Baath has been fulfilled? The hasty visit of Secretary Blinken to Ankara a few days ago was a sign of deep concern in the light of patent objectives of Turkey. It is telling that this country, successively beneficiary of ISIS and benefactor of reformed Al Nusra, labels "terrorists", organized ethnic communities which precisely against all odds effectively resisted the terrorists.

My forecast is that the Kurds once again, abandoned by temporary friends, will have to rely on their own devices.

Now, open minded people in the West will realize that Assad's Syria for all its sins, was a comode buffer state. After its demise, the West, Israel, Russia, the Arab League member states face new hydras; Iranian presence and influence seems to be greatly diminished, nor is evacuation of Russian bases to benefit the western powers to provide a pattern of stability in Syria.

Israel's position in the new constellation is not identical with Turkey's. Turkey will pose as protector of Syrian Moslems and benevolent vis a vis the new "dimmes", Syrian Christians, with President Erdogan aspiring to be sort of both a new Saladin and Sultan Selim Yavuz. On the contrary, Israel, has no group to rely upon in Syria, with the possible exception of the Druzes. For all the damage inflicted upon the Syrian defence and scientific infrastructure and the acquisition of new swaths of territory around the Mount Hermon,

Israel only gains time. Its technological prowess will not be sufficient to hedge the Jewish state from fresh enemies. Time might come when Israel will regret the fall of Assad to which was not indifferent. A path for Tel Aviv to escape its strategic dilemma after armistice with Lebanon, would be to give some breathing space to the PLO and to provide all assistance necessary to the beleaguered Syrian Kurds.

Last note: there is no reason for the Arab League countries to cheer. Jordan feels the pain. Egypt, for its part, strategic partner for Greece and the EU, will face an emboldened Moslem Brotherhood.

Hence, an approach to tame the new Hydras unbound by regime change in Syria, would be, first for Israel to end incursion to Gaza and relieve pressure upon the West Bank, second for the West and the entire international community to raise a barrier to Turkey's war machine in northern Syria and the Euphrates banks. Not a lot is to be expected from the upcoming December European Council summit meeting.

***Stravon of Amaseia,  
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