


The Story of Syria- Ghayth Armanazi

The Story of Syria, A New Book by Ghayth Armanazi

For the great majority of opinion in the West Syria appears today as a sad,  tragic and even barbaric country that is noted only for the savage killings and destruction, and the hordes of refugees that threaten the stability and security of Western societies.

There is even a growing sense of 'shock fatigue' whereby even images of dying children become 'mundane' and distant - the result of a complex and multi-layered conflict that defies explanation. A new book that has just come out entitled 'The Story of Syria' is meant as a response to the widespread ugly and negative portrayals of the country. Written by Ghayth Armanazi, a commentator and researcher and former Arab League Ambassador to London, it gives the Western reader a rare and accessible insight into the real essence of Syria: a country that has been at the beginning and at the heart of human civilisation. It paints a picture of the country far removed from the contemporary impression and reveals its historical and cultural richness that spans several thousands of years, where the first examples of settled farming communities arose as did the earliest cities known to humanity such as Damascus and Aleppo. The book also covers the eras of ancient history when Syria was a crossroads as well as incubator for the flow and counterflow of empires, at one stage providing for the Roman Empire a dynasty of Syrian emperors. During those times Syria was a melting pot: absorbing but also contributing greatly to the dominant culture and civilisation. The book also reminds the reader of Syria's role in the spread of Christianity. From its territory, and precisely from Damascus, on the road to which St. Paul experienced his miraculous conversion, Christianity ceased to be a narrow cult and expanded across the World. Later on, with the Islamic Conquest, it was Syria that provided the base from which radiated the new vibrant Empire with Damascus as its capital, and that same Syrian spirit infused the creators in Spain of the splendid Andalusian domain. The invasion by the Crusaders presented a great challenge to the region of Greater Syria which, by then, was

split among a number of rulers. Yet it was from Syria that the fightback began and Saladin succeeded in uniting the forces that eventually liberated Jerusalem. This renowned leader came to rule both Syria and Egypt and established the Ayyoubid dynasty. It is emblematic that he died and is buried in Damascus and his statue adorns the front of the sleeve of the book.

Later chapters cover the years of Ottoman rule and the the beginning of the stirrings of opposition to that rule especially among the nationalist activists and intellectuals in Greater Syria. The author underlines the pivotal role of Syrians in bringing about the age of Arab enlightenment and tells the story of the revolt against the Turks which, with the liberation of Damascus should have opened the door to an independent nation. Indeed such a Syrian nation -including Lebanon and Palestine- was proclaimed by the Syrian Congress meeting in Damascus which also declared The Amir Faisal King of the new Kingdom .But already the colonial powers, Britain and France, had entered into a secret agreement, revealed in 1917, that divided the Fertile Crescent into subject territories later to become governed as 'mandates' granted to those powers by the League of Nations. In pursuance of that agreement Syria was accorded to France whose army, under General Gouraud, marched on Damascus in July 1920. The army was met at the village of Maysaloun by a hastily-arranged Syrian force under the command of the Syrian Minister of War, Youssef Al Azmeh. The French deployed overwhelming force and the outcome was predestined but for Syrians it represented a historical moment of glory that symbolised their resistance to foreign rule , a resistance amplified by the death in action of Youssef Al Azmeh who remains to this day a revered national hero.

The book then goes on to chronicle the twenty five years of obdurate Syrian resistance to French rule culminating in the achievement by Syria, ahead of any colonised Arab country, of full and unconditional independence with the evacuation of all foreign troops in April 1946. The years that followed saw the disaster of Palestine and the succession of coups and counter-coups as Syria became embroiled in regional geo-political rivalries. But despite all the tension and instability the country enjoyed a richness of political life that gave rise to ideas and ideologies that spread beyond its borders. Modern parties such as the Baath, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party , the Communist party and others attracted the youth-and the military- and eclipsed the more traditional formations that led the struggle for independence. That political life was snuffed out by the

establishment of the Egyptian-Syrian union under the leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser and ,later, the seizure of monolithic power by the Baath. The last forty years, under first Hafez Assad, and then his son Bashar are recorded and analysed, with attention given to the internal and external dynamics that governed the direction of their rule.

The author does not go into great detail with regard to the catastrophe now enveloping the country and which still shows little sign of resolution. He does, however, point to the many opportunities the young President Bashar had available to him to avoid the abyss to which the country has descended. He also is critical of an opposition that 'Islamised' a movement of protest that began as a call for freedom, dignity and the unity of 'one people'. He reflects with great pain on the reality of today's war-torn Syria with sectarianism on the rampage and the country and its skies open to all regional and international powers with agendas that feed on the blood of Syrians. How different the Syria of that glorious day when it gained its hard-won independence from the country that today is subject once more to the planners and map-drawers that have inherited, from a century ago , the mission of Sykes and Picot.

Nevertheless the author leaves the reader with an optimistic quote from the British historian Tom Holland who wrote: `when, in due course, the killing stops, the blood dries and the Syrian people attempt to refashion something out of the rubble to which their land has been reduced they will need symbols' .These symbols, adds the author, are there in the pages of Syria's rich history.