

SYRIAN-ARMENIANS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

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Hamo Moskofian, Beirut, September 2012

 *The following are excerpts from Hamo Moskofian's lengthy analysis of the Syrian conflict pertaining to the Armenian community. It appeared in Nouvelles D'Armenie of Paris. The opinions of various Armenian leaders and community workers shed light on the ongoing tragedy that has engulfed Syria.-*

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General Panos Manjian, Minister of State (Lebanon)



The whole population in Syria is in great difficulty...If it continues in this manner, hundreds or thousands of Armenians will be forced to emigrate. These people have homes, schools and churches. The remaining Armenians will be in great difficulty. Wealthy families leave for Armenia or Europe to live there temporarily, but the majority remains in Syria and is in great need of help for everything. Whoever is trying to keep their children in Armenian schools and churches our collective financial help in Lebanon or from the global Armenian Diaspora.

Azniv Aintablian, Syrian Armenian from Kessab

Recently armed bandits, coming from Turkey, attacked the region of Kessab. The Syrian government forces defeated them in a counterattack, capturing their weapons. The weapons were distributed among the Armenians and other inhabitants of the region to defend themselves. The forest, in front of Kessab, on the borders with Turkey was burned down, preventing the bandits from using it for cover.

We are united and safe here. We wish that peace returns to our country where we have lived for ages.

Doctor Sam Racoubian, Chief Editor of *Tidag* International Armenian magazine, founder of St. Marc

medical centers (Lebanon-Syria) It's not a secret that the Middle East has been going through

immense planned changes since 1975, because at the center of the Middle East exists Israel and this region has the most important oil reserves. It was expected to divide the Arab countries to small ethnic and religious areas to secure Israel's existence. And these cantons must have weak borders, so that disputes continue endlessly.

Turkey has unresolved problems with its neighbouring countries, including Syria. Ankara's relations with Damascus are becoming more complicated because of the Kurds in Syria and the Alevis in Turkey. Aleppo is not very far from the Turkish border; disturbances between the two countries could affect this important city. Here lies the fear of the Armenians who have settled in Aleppo for ages and lived a relatively prosperous life, while at the same time defending their national identity and heritage as a central Diasporan community.

The Christians of Syria were not a target till now, but because of the example of Iraq, they are terrified of the explosions, assassinations and kidnappings, while Western armies occupied the country to provide "peace". Just as Dean Brown suggested in 1975 to the Lebanese president Suleiman Franjeh, ... resettle the 2-million "small" Christian communities in Canada and the U.S.

A policy of self-destruction is practiced in the region and no one can predict the outcome. It's not clear how superpower interests will meet in the geography of the Middle East. God help the "small ones" if the "big" ones do not agree on the price of their heads.

Yeghia Jerejian, former member of the Lebanese Parliament, a leading member of Social Democratic Hunchak Party's central committee

If the situation in Syria worsens, it's very natural that the state of the Armenians will worsen too, as in Lebanon. The situation in Syria is very bad and it could be worse in the near future. Naturally, the Armenians as other citizens of Syria, will be affected by the events, which are going to take a very dangerous turn.

When there is a national tragedy in which our compatriots are involved, we are obliged to help them by any means possible. Regarding Armenia--because we always proudly mention our independent state--let me say this: The authority of that state covers not only Armenia but also all the Armenians of the world. If there is need for collective help, Armenia comes first as a state, then the Armenian Church by its two leaders. After them the traditional political parties, the cultural and humanitarian organizations, even individuals. We must organize collective aid so that our compatriots will heal their wounds and retain their normal life. In this complex situation, I have a national question which concerns the preserving of the Armenian communities in the Middle East, specially in Syria and Lebanon. It is of national importance, besides being a humanitarian one. Unfortunately, at least in the last decade, I have seen that the same interest could not be found with the leaders of the Armenian state and the Armenian organizations of America and other Diaspora communities. I think that preserving the Armenian communities in Lebanon and Syria is in our national interest. I agree that we

must all participate in organizing collective aid to help these communities....

Salpi Kasparian, Journalist, Editor, Analyst in Aleppo

From the beginning, in what we can call an international conspiracy against Syria, the Armenian community maintained "positive neutrality" in the densely Armenian populated Aleppo,

Damascus and Kessab. We were never targets and our human losses, although very valuable are comparatively limited compared to the massacres going on in the country. Unfortunately, the foreign mass media channels in the Gulf region, lavishly financed by autocratic Arab sheikdoms and the West, launched a propaganda war against Syria and manipulated a virtual civil war, the aim of which was to destroy the country. Regrettably, there are some "experts" from Armenia, also in the Emirates, who are being paid perhaps to be part of this propaganda war; the other aim is to disperse the historic and powerful Armenian community on the borders of Turkey, near our occupied lands! Turkey was always worried of Aleppo and Kessab and will be very happy indeed to see the deportation of Armenians whom it massacred and occupied their lands.

We don't want to destroy the Armenians of Syria and the "mother" of the Diasporan culture and patriotism of Aleppo. The Syrian regime granted us most of our minority rights, while we became the backbone of the country in business, industry, medicine, arts, music and even the army! Also, like the Palestinians, we don't want to lose the right of return to our occupied lands by just immigrating to Armenia, which today is economically and socially unstable.

We will remain here and defend our community and the state which hosted us and which we are part of!

Hagop Pakradouni, member of Lebanese Parliament, leader in A.R.F. Dashnagtsoutyouun Party

The Syrians, and with them the Armenians of that country are living hard days, beginning from Deir Zor, Kamishli, Damascus and recently in Aleppo. I believe community leaders there have the necessary maturity and experience to organize their presence and take positive decisions in favor of Syria and its people. The community leaders are having frequent meetings to solve their financial, security, organizational, and medical needs and problems of Armenians who have come temporarily to live in safer areas of Syria. This country is like the motherland of Syrian-Armenians, and not a an area for refugees. It's a land full of life. The deserts of Syria are mixed with the blood of Armenians. The Syrian people always stood beside the Armenian Genocide survivors, who played a vital role in the development of the country. The origin of many Syrians is Armenian; many Arab tribesmen are Armenian. There is published material about the tribal leaders who state they have Armenian roots.

The Armenian community is highly respected in Syria. The tragic events there are affecting the feelings of Armenians not only in Syria, but also in Lebanon. We wish dearly that peace prevails in the country because our community there has lived both good and bad days, participating in the defense of the country against Israeli attacks, offering martyrs for the independence of the country

and the liberation of Golan Heights. We spilled blood for the unity of Syria and unfortunately what's going on as tragic events in the country are being manipulated by those who say they are interested in democratic changes or development, but they are destroying what remains of Arab unity. Their aim is to give a hard blow to Syria--one of the leading countries of the Arab world--and secure the future of Israel.

One of the main parties responsible for what's happening in Syria is Turkey. Until recently Ankara was in "honeymoon" with Syria, its Arab neighbour. Then suddenly, we saw how in a strange manner and in hatred, Erdogan, Davutoglu and Gul turned Turkey the centre of Syrian opposition and used its border for the passage of weapons and destructive operations against the state.

We must not forget that Turkey's intentions are also aimed to disturbing the life of the Armenian community, as it happened during the Lebanese Civil War, by minimizing the importance of the power and number of the Armenians in this country. We must be cautious about the war in Syria, which is also a war with Turkey, where the future of the two countries is decided, especially when 20% of Turkey's population are Kurds, 19% to 20% are Alevi. So Turkey must take into consideration the limits of its interference in Syria's interior affairs.

I believe Armenians had reached a stage where they forgot they were refugees. We don't put our motherland in our luggage. Unfortunately, the Lebanese Civil War and before the incidents in Egypt and Syria ('60s) and the Iraq War resulted in the immigration of thousands of Armenians from these countries, which resulted in the loss of Armenian identity. We are respected in the whole world as Armenians. If we lose our traditions and identity, we'll be a part of the globalization. We have been in this area for many centuries; the Church of Forty Martyrs in Aleppo and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem have been there for centuries. If we are obliged to leave, we'll only be going to Armenia and Nagorno- Karabagh; it will be our motherland's gain, if we can describe it in that way.

Raffi Madoyan, Political Analyst, the step-son and grandson respectively of late George Hawi and Haroutoun Madoyan, former leaders of the Communist Party in Lebanon and Syria

On the regional level we see the reconstruction of the Middle East and of the political structures of  the area after the departure of the American military from Iraq which it occupied (2003) and now is divided into a confederate state. We also see the beginning of the retreat of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan, and redirection of the U.S. policies in the region after the military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. We also see the division of Sudan and the beginning of Libya's disintegration into three states. Actually, we see an international rivalry which endangers the future of international relations and the creation of a multi-polar world: the double veto that was imposed by Russia and China in the U.N., also the rise of India, Brazil and South Africa in international relations. The future of international relations in a multi-polar world. It depends on the war in Syria. Is the geopolitical future of Syria within the Russian-Chinese-Iranian sphere or in the U.S.-Saudi Arabia-Western sphere? The political system in Syria and the Syrian opposition - the revolution began as a movement for the

development of the agriculture on which 70% of the Syrian economy depends, the revolution began from the rural regions and was led by the intelligentsia of the cities who were affected by the "Arab Spring" in different countries.

The Syrian state was successful to divert the internal political rivalry into a regional and international complicated situation and as a war against terrorism. Because the Syrian opposition made a crucial mistake in using weapons as an armed revolution, it gave the totalitarian state reason to use the power of the army to curb the popular movement. After 6 months of fighting, conflict transformed into an international crisis between U.S. and its allies against Russia, Iran and China, which reminds us of the Cold War. So the Syrian crisis can be solved through direct talks between U.S., France, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and other regional and international powers. The crisis can only be solved by an international conference, a new "Yalta" or a "Taef" to reach to an international agreement on Syria.

The Armenians, as other Christian minorities in Syria, enjoyed the rights and status granted to them by the 1917 Sykes-Picot international agreement. Since the rise of the Arab revolutionary Sunnite-Islamic movements, specially the Salafist, who have vowed to take over governing powers in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, this dramatic change could be against the rights of the minorities of the region. The Armenians and the Christians in Syria are afraid that the rise to power of the Islamic fundamentalism could lead to the deportation of Christians as it happened in Iraq and to the Copts in Egypt. So they consider that the current Baathist totalitarian regime at least respects the freedom of other ethnic groups, religions and sects such as Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, Syriacs, Arameans besides Armenians. There is a real danger that the conflict can destroy the multi-religious and ethnic minorities. So the Christians and the Armenians are afraid that the takeover of a Sunni majority dictatorship will be an end to their rights, and deportation and mass emigration will follow.

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While heavy battles are going on in Syria, the regional and international superpowers are trying to resolve the crisis. A crisis which is the beginning of a new Cold War, with fears of developing to a political and military clash between the East and the West.

