

Bloody Spring

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ON A FLIGHT to London in 1961, I had a unique experience.

On the way, the plane made a stop in Athens and a group of Arabs joined us. That by itself was an experience. In those days, Israelis hardly ever met people from Arab countries.

Three young Arabs took seats in the row behind me, and I somehow managed to introduce myself and start a conversation with them. I learned that they were Syrians. I mentioned the recent breakup of the United Arab Republic, the union of Egypt and Syria under the pan-Arab leadership of Gamal Abdal-Nasser.

My three neighbors were very happy about the split. One of them drew a passport from his bag and passed it to me. It was a shiny new document, issued by Syrian Arab Republic.

There could be no mistake about the immense pride with which this young Syrian showed me – an Israeli enemy – this evidence of Syria's new-found independence. Here was a Syrian patriot, pure and simple.

ONE OF the books which had a profound impact on me in my youth was Phillip Hitti's "A History of Syria".

Hitti, a Maronite Christian from what is now Lebanon, was educated in Ottoman Beirut and emigrated to the US, where he became the father of modern Arab studies.

His ground-breaking book was based on Syria being one country from the Sinai desert to the Turkish mountains, from the Mediterranean Sea to the borders of Iraq. This country, called Sham in Arabic, includes the present-day states of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

Hitti recounted the history of this country from the earliest prehistoric times to the (then) present, layer upon layer, including every period and every region, such as Biblical Israel and the Petra of the Nabataeans. Everything was part of the superbly rich history of Sham.

The book changed my own geographical and cultural view of our place in the world. Even before the State of Israel was created, I argued that our schools should apply this inclusive view to the history of Palestine throughout the ages.¹

FROM HITTI I learned for the first time about the many ethnic-religious groups of today's Syria and Lebanon. Muslim Sunnis and Shiites, Druze, Maronites, Melkites and many other ancient and modern Christian confessions in Lebanon; Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Kurds, Assyrians and a dozen Christian confessions in Syria.

The European imperialist powers, Britain and France, which

¹This would have enraged Hitti, who denied that there was a country called Palestine. In a long public controversy with Albert Einstein, a devoted Zionist, Hitti claimed that the entity called Palestine was invented by the British in order to fix in the mind of people that Jews had a claim on it.

²It was called Greater Lebanon because the French included in it not only purely Christian regions, but also Muslim ones – Shiite in the South and Sunni in the port cities.

³This is partly an inheritance from the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, but without an emperor or a sultan. It exists in Israel, too – Jews, Sunnites, Druze and Christians have their own courts for personal status affairs and cannot intermarry.

broke up the all-inclusive Ottoman Empire after World War I, had scant respect for the diversity of their new acquisitions. However, they both adopted the principle of "divide et impera". The French excelled in it.

Faced with a fierce nationalist opposition and an armed uprising led by the Druze, they carved up the rump Syria into small religious-ethnic-geographical statelets. They played on the animosities between Damascus and Aleppo, Muslims and Christians, Sunnis and Alawis, Kurds and Arabs, Druze and Sunnis.

Their most far-reaching venture, the division between a Christian-dominated "Greater Lebanon" and the rest of Syria, had a lasting effect.²

WHEN THE French were finally kicked out of the region at the end of World War II, the question was whether and how Syria and Lebanon could survive as national states.

In both there was an inbuilt contradiction between the unifying nationalism and the dividing ethnic/religious tendency. They adopted two different solutions.

In Lebanon, the answer was a delicate structure of a state based on a balance between the communities. Each person "belongs" to a community. In practice everyone is the citizen of his community, and the state is but a federation of communities.³

The Lebanese system is a negation of "one person – one vote" democracy, but it has survived a vicious civil war, several massacres, a number of Israeli invasions and a shift of the Shiites from last to first place. It is more robust than might have been supposed.

The Syrian solution was very different - dictatorship. A series of strongmen followed each other, until the al-Assad dynasty took over. Its surprising longevity arises from the fact that many Syrians of all communities seem to have preferred even a brutal tyrant to the breakup of the state, chaos and civil war.

NO MORE, it seems. The Syrian Spring is an offspring of the Arab Spring, but under very different conditions.

Egypt is far too different from Syria to allow a comparison. The unity of Egypt has been unquestionable for thousands of years. Egyptian national pride is almost tangible. The question raised by Israeli commentators, whether the new President is first of all a Muslim Brother or first of all an Egyptian, sounds gratuitous to an Egyptian. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is, of course, first of all Egyptian. So are Egyptian Copts, the sizable Christian minority. (Their name, like the word Egypt itself, derives from the ancient name of the country.)

The unity of Egypt, like that of Tunisia and even Libya,

after the overthrow of the dictators, is evidence of the national consciousness of these peoples. This is not a given in Syria.

If the Monster of Damascus is finally removed, will Syria survive?

All over the West, and in Israel, pundits gleefully foretell that the country will break into pieces, more or less on the lines of the French colonial precedent.

This is quite possible. One of the few options left to Bashar al-Assad is to gather the Alawis in his army and retreat to the Alawi redoubt in the North-West of the country, cutting it off from the rest of Syria.

This would lead to much bloodshed. The Alawis would certainly drive out all the Sunnis from their region, and the Sunnis would drive the Alawis out of all the other regions. It could resemble the horrible events in India during the partition of the sub-continent and the creation of Pakistan, if on a much smaller scale .

The Druze in the south of Syria would then found their own state (an old dream in Israel. The Kurds in the north-east would do the same, perhaps to join the neighboring Kurdish semi-state in Iraq, a Turkish nightmare. What would be left of Syria would be the eternally competing cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

Possible, but certainly not inevitable. It would be a supreme test of Syrian nationalism. Does it exist? How strong is it? Strong enough to overcome the separatism of the communities?

I would not dare to prophesy. I can only hope. I hope that the diverse elements of the Syrian opposition unite enough to win the present brutal civil war and create a new Syria.

Unlike most Israeli commentators, I am not afraid of the “Islamization” of Syria. True, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has always been more violent than the Egyptian parent organization. By their actions at the time they helped to provoke the terrible massacre in Hama perpetrated by Hafez al-Assad. But political power has a moderating effect, as we are seeing in Cairo.

FOR ME, one riddle remains. I see on the internet that many well-meaning people around the world, especially on the left, support Bashar.

This is a phenomenon that repeats itself. There seems to be a kind of leftist monsterphilia around. The same people who embraced Slobodan Milošević, Hosni Mubarak and Moammar Qaddafi now embrace Bashar al-Assad, again loudly protesting against American imperialist designs against this public benefactor.

Frankly, this seems to me a bit looney. True, Great Power politics do influence what’s happening in Syria, as they do everything else in the world. But the character and actions of Bashar, following those of his father, leave nothing to doubt. He is a monster butchering his people, and must be removed as quickly as possible, preferably under UN leadership. If that is impossible, owing to the Russian and Chinese veto – why, for God’s sake?! – then the Syrian rebels must be supported as much as possible.

I HOPE with all my heart that a free, unified, democratic Syria will emerge from this turmoil, another daughter of the Arab Spring.

In sha Allah, if God wills it, as our neighbors would put it.