

## **THE SYRIAN UNREST AND BROADER REPERCUSSIONS\***

*Dr Yiorghos Leventis*

*Director, International Security Forum*

In this short paper I will seek to analyse the sad developments in Syria in combination of two main perspectives. On the one hand, the perspective of international law and on the other, the view from Nicosia but also I would say the view from Athens and any other capital that is concerned by the rise of Ankara's Neo-Ottomanism and Muslim fundamentalism.

To be sure the UN Charter as the prime global multilateral agreement governing relations between member-states is clearly based on the fundamental principles of sovereignty and friendly relations between nations. The UN Charter prohibits interference in the internal affairs of other member-states. On the other hand, the evolving principle of responsibility to protect (R2P) lacks as yet the credibility that an agreed set of universal criteria would have bestowed it. Libya is the most recent example of partial departure from the principle of non-intervention with a view to R2P. Brazil's, China's, Germany's, India's and Russia's grudging abstention allowed the Security Council pass Resolution 1973 which imposed an arms embargo, a no-fly zone, and authorized implementation of 'all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack ... while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory'. Though no ground forces were used to intervene and thereby no foreign occupation actually took place, the outcome of NATO's 'volunteer' intervention begs the question as to whether it produced the intended results of civilian protection and steering the country into the foreseen road of stability and democracy.

### *The Possible Use of the British Bases (BB) in Cyprus*

Among Western nations there is increasing talk of stepping in the unrest in Syria. The potential use of the BB in Cyprus for a military intervention in Syria, whether authorized or not by the Security Council, raises concerns among Cypriots. Since its establishment the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) has steadfastly adhered to the policy of good neighbourly relations with all its neighbours and honoured in practice the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states. Herself a victim of foreign invasion and continuing occupation by Turkey, it would have been preposterous if Nicosia adopted any other position that would have immediately provoked her losing any credibility in her quest to disengage herself from foreign domination.

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Cypriots have been unhappy with the long presence of the British military bases and other surveillance and spying installations on the island since the perpetuation of their status was sought to be secured through steadfast provisions in the Treaty of Establishment (ToE) of the RoC (1960). Peace marches (1960s), peaceful but also violent demonstrations (June 2001), party leaders' statements across the political spectrum, a unanimous parliament resolution expressing deep concern (June 2005), all made their appearance throughout the fifty year old life of the RoC as an independent state seeking to exercise sovereignty over its entire domain.

Opposition to the use of British military installations became more vocal, as the RoC joined the EU in 2004, scrapping its non-aligned foreign policy in order to join an *under-construction* European CFSP. An ecliptic EU and Russian policy in the two Iraq wars allowed free range to the US-UK alliance to assume the role of the world's policeman intervening twice in the Middle East region on the pretense of the (non) existent weapons of mass destruction supposedly maintained by the defunct Saddam Hussein regime.

*Since the two Iraq wars, criticism of the British military presence in Cyprus has been motivated by widespread opposition to the use of Cypriot territory for military interventions in the region, which is perceived as violating Cyprus' deeply-rooted neutrality* opined Andreas Gross, the Swiss Rapporteur to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (CEPA) on the situation of the inhabitants of the two British bases in Cyprus. (April 2007).

On 30 June 2005, the Cyprus House of Representatives unanimously adopted a resolution on the legal status of the two bases, which illustrates the critical view taken *by all political parties* in the RoC. The resolution refers to *relevant UN decisions on the abolition of colonialism, as well as fundamental principles of international law, which forbid the occupation of territory within the domain of any other country*. This unanimous resolution passed seven years ago spoke of *the adverse consequences from the operation of the Bases on the human rights and quality of life of the Cypriot citizens residing within the Bases' area, as well as the danger of the Bases becoming involved in aggressive military actions against friendly states in the Southeastern Mediterranean*.

Neither the consent of the Cypriot parliament nor of its government is required under the ToE by which London reads the book of conduct. The proximity of Syria to Cyprus is so real and tangible that clearly one can easily understand the Cypriot opposition to the use of the British military installations in a possible (Franco)-Anglo-American military intervention in the troubled country. The danger cited in the afore-mentioned resolution becomes too real in the event of retaliatory attacks by the crumbling Syrian regime or for the matter by the Iranian mullahs who have long assumed the role of Assad's protector. As it is well known, Tehran

maintains medium-range missile capability (i.e. a real possibility of targeting RAF Akrotiri) albeit of unknown accuracy, which is naturally of concern to Cypriot civilian population. In this respect, lest we forget, an attack on Iran is contemplated in Western circles with respect to terminating its nuclear programme. Thus in the not-to-be-excluded scenario of an Anglo-American use of the British Cyprus bases vis-a-vis Syria and/or Iran, Cyprus stands to suffer collateral damage, a notion which became a real fact in the cases of NATO interventions in Yugoslavia, Iraq and as of last year in Libya. A misguided Syrian/Iranian-fired missile going off-target and unintentionally hitting the business and trade hub port town of Limassol would definitely not be to the particular liking of Cypriots.

### *Broader Repercussions*

From the perspective of Nicosia, as well as Athens and all those concerned with the rise of Neo-Ottomanism as propagated by Turkish FM Ahmet Davutoglu and PM Erdogan, kicking-off as a zero-problems-with-neighbours foreign policy doctrine on the way degenerating into a problems-with-all-neighbours foreign policy practice, the Turkish involvement in the Syrian unrest proves to be another source of deep concern. In addition to aiding and abetting the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on Turkish soil, the prospect of the creation of a buffer zone on the Syrian territory mulled by the leadership in Ankara, smacks of its Cypriot equivalent: after the Turkish invasion, about three per cent of Cyprus territory has been reserved as no man's land - a buffer zone patrolled by a weak, manpower-lacking UNFICYP but all too often encroached upon by the Turkish Armed Forces (numerous violations reported to the UNSC during the 38 year-old ceasefire).

In reality, the Western powers are funding and directing the insurgency through the mechanism of the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the work on the ground of their regional proxies, most notably Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The setting up of a buffer zone on the Turkish border will provide a bridgehead and base of operations for the SNC and various covert operatives. More importantly, its "protection" will be used to legitimize a wider military deployment and aerial attacks, as was carried out recently in Libya.

The Turkish media is awash with reports that the government in Ankara is in the process of finalizing plans to *seize Syrian territory by force and create the trumpeted buffer zone*. *Zaman*, for example, reported on April 9, 2012 that Turkey was considering whether to invoke a 1998 agreement with Syria that would sanction an armed intervention. The accord included Damascus's pledge not to undermine Turkey's security.

Thus the real question we need to address is not whether the international community aims at the departure of Bashar al Assad but more importantly *what will ensue after his departure*. And what will be the fate of Christian

and other minorities in Syria and for that matter in the wider Middle East if Sunni radicals take power in Damascus? Will Syria follow the road leading to a western-style democratization or will the country plunge further into the abyss of civil war as the West continues to fund, arm and direct the insurgency through its regional proxies on the ground?

Has the Security Council authorized (Resolution 1973) recent intervention undertaken by NATO in Libya produced a democratic regime in the North African Arab country? To the contrary: tribalism, fragmentation of authority and zones of lawlessness imposed by adversarial militias came to rule supreme in the country following the demise of Muammar Qaddafi. Michael Bradle, the appointed International Human Rights Commission (IHRC) Ambassador for the United States of America & Official Delegate to the United Nations HQ has been preparing more than 85 pages of a documented case against the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC). This extensive important report will be filed into the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) in the proceeding weeks. Bradle already sent a letter (May 4, 2012) imploring the ACHPR to examine the possible concealment of human rights violations and crimes committed by the NTC in Libya (for the full letter see:

[http://www.inter-security-forum.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=179:ambassador-to-the-un-international-human-rights-commission-files-case-against-libyan-ntc&catid=50:global-security&Itemid=173](http://www.inter-security-forum.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=179:ambassador-to-the-un-international-human-rights-commission-files-case-against-libyan-ntc&catid=50:global-security&Itemid=173))

Is the Iraqi scene any better after almost a decade of US intervention and final withdrawal from the country? Investigative reports by British and other western media bring to light documented evidence to the contrary. One such brilliant documentary is Channel Four's "Iraq War Files Death at Checkpoint" (online: <http://www.channel4.com/news/iraq-war-files-death-at-checkpoint>)

#### *Dwindling Number & Persecution of Christians in the Middle East*

The dwindling number of Christians in the Middle East countries point to another worrying factor that the unrest in Syria brings to the fore. In this connection: a profound analysis of the dire conditions of the region's Christians was presented in a remarkable lecture by The Right Reverend Dr Michael Lewis, the Nicosia-based Bishop of Cyprus and the Gulf of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East. Dr Lewis, a British Anglican Bishop analysed in extensive detail the serious problems faced by the Christian communities in the Middle East at a New Year's Inter-denominational Symposium of all Christian faiths at the Maronite Archbishopric in Nicosia (December 27, 2011).

Few, if none, of political observers would have likened Bashar al Assad, the heir of a dynasty, to a champion of human rights. However, upon receiving a delegation of Syrian Christian and other minority leaders in Damascus, Assad declared that he would stand against Ankara's policy of

extending its Neo-Ottoman blanket all over the region, seeking to turn the clock back and reduce the Christians to the status of (Neo-) Ottoman subordinates.