Book Reviews

Frédéric Pichon, *Syria - Why the West Got it Wrong*, Bucharest, Corint Publishing Group, 2016.

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The outbreak of the Syrian crisis in March 2011 which was threatening the Middle East’s stability has opened a new area of study for the researchers of contemporary history, who are now trying to answer the questions concerning the real reasons behind the conflict situation from Syria, passing over Western diplomacy’s statements and actions. In this regard, Frédéric Pichon’s book represents a welcoming approach for historiography as it is attempting to exhibit the way in which the actions took place and how the West seems to have missed a chance to solve or appease the state of affairs from Syria.

The present paper comes after the French edition published at Groupe Artège Éditions du Rocher, in 2014. Its main subject deals with the

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war from nowadays Syria and the position took by the Western embassies. This volume is structured in 5 chapters, as it follows.

The first chapter, „The conflict’s anatomy: a country like a mosaic”, outlines Syria’s profile which, if we take into account the number of communities living there, is one of the least homogeneous Arab country, where the Sunni Arabs represent 65% of the population, the rest being composed of diverse communities, such as Alawites, Christians, Armenians and Kurds. At the same time, the particularity of these communities is given by the logic of the tribal order, or clan order, which is generating a social fracture within these communities.

For a better understanding of the Syrian political, religious and social status as well as the nature of power, the author defines the concepts of “asabiyyah” and emphasizes the unique character of the Alawite community, which is so different from the rest of the Islamists that, theologically speaking, they must be considered non-Muslims.

The fact that the first revolutionary intentions aroused in rural areas constitutes a distinctive element of this conflict. By no longer getting involved in the economic sphere – alongside with Bashar al-Assad’s failure to respect his promises (borders surveillance, fight against corruption) - the state allowed social classes living in urban areas to take advantage of this phenomenon, which caused an explosion of the commercial exchanges and increased the number of tourists. This phenomenon coincided with the emergence of poverty and instability in the rural areas.

According to the author, globalization, and especially that of information, acted as a catalyst for the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. The
externalization of the social issues for almost a decade, with the aim of attracting foreign direct investment, alongside with the border’s permeability (notably in the northern region, at the Turkish border), permitted a wide dissemination of the jihadist ideology through the internet network, far more intense compared to the events from Afghanistan and Iraq. The Jihad, originally a virtual one, became an integrated part of the battle waged between loyalists and rebels.

The second chapter, “Arab spring euphoria”, brings into question the role of the press in the evolution of the events from Syria. Considered by the author as direct responsible for presenting the Syrian conflict in a truncated and subjective manner, the western mass media has often shown to the world the fact that Syria is confronting with an extremely difficult situation, however the terms used through the communication channels were risking to become dangerous. Thus, the governmental armies turn into “pro-governmental forces”, “pro-Assad”, whilst on the opposite side there are “revolutionaries”, “opposition”, armed “combatants”, but who are miraculously changing into civilians when they are facing a brutal repression. Moreover, the author thinks that the western journalists have even resorted to staged events intended to prove a pre-established thesis.

With the lack of field reporters, even the editors have unthinking reactions, as their method is to misinterpret the facts in order to match them with the journalists’ general opinion. In front of this problematic situation, Frédéric Pichon urges the journalists who are dealing with the Syrian conflict to respect the code of ethics and therefore diversify their sources, or even question them.
The third chapter, “The impossible international intervention”, focuses on the relations between Syria and Russia, the latter being seen by the author as one of Syria’s main advantages at international level. Dating from the time of Tsarist Russia, the relationship between these two states remained on good terms until today, when Russia provides Syria with some air defense systems. At the same time, the Kremlin got involved in Syria’s economy, helping it to avoid an asphyxiation of this field which was subject to the embargo imposed by the European Union. On the other side, Syria allowed Russia to consolidate two essential fields: the supply of refined oil products and foreign exchange reserves of the Syrian regime.

Frédéric Pichon claims that jihadism is a taboo subject, Jacques Bérès being the first who has brought into the West’s attention the fact that jihadists are present in the Syrian conflict. The TV channel France 2 has broadcasted his testimony in 2012 and from that moment onwards, one can observe an evolution of the manner in which the Syrian war was perceived. In addition, the author indicates that the journalists living in Aleppo proved a certain incompetence as they did not revealed the jihadist’s presence until they had occupied the base Sheikh Suleiman, which is west of Aleppo and was the last refuge for the Syrian army.

In this situation, Pichon thinks that this is the moment when the West failed in taking a firm position regarding this conflict. This fail was due to the inaccurate assumption that there is a Free Syrian Army. Also, the number of jihadists has been minimized, estimated to be 45,000, therefore twice the number of Taliban in Afghanistan. According to the author, Syria will remain for many years a source of jihadists, at only a few hours away
from the central Europe: „We have allowed the positioning of a grey area at our door, from where the violence from tomorrow will come: a blind violence which will crush our fragile societies”1.

The fourth chapter, “France’s unbearable lightness”, analyzes France’s reactions concerning the evolution of the Syrian conflict, which are considered by the author as being frequently improper. France’s opposition in accepting Iran to a conference discussing the situation from Syria and the declarations made by the Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, in regards with Bashar al-Assad (that he must be killed as “he is not worth living”), brought France in a situation in which the diplomatic demarches were risking to no longer obtain any success. For this reason, France alongside with the United States have lost precious time in their attempt to put this violent conflict to an end.

On the other hand, Frédéric Pichon does not fall into the trap of considering France totally overwhelmed by the situation, bringing forward its relations with Qatar, a tiny state which managed, in the context of the Arab Spring, to impose itself in just a few years as an extremely respected actor. While the French diplomacy was acting carefully or more boldly, in 2013 there were large contracts of military equipment and public works signed between French companies and firms from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In addition, many French companies have contracted infrastructure works for preparing the Football World Cup from 2022, hosted in Qatar. On the

1 Frédéric Pichon, *Syria - Why the West Got it Wrong*, Corint Publishing Group, Bucharest, 2016, p. 82.
other side, the Government of Qatar has contracted an enormous amount of military equipment from France, taking the liberty to deliver them in accordance with its own interests. It is therefore clear that the Islamist militants were those who received these deliveries.

The author is then raising the issue of the Syrian Christians, an important community from a cultural point of view. Considered, to a certain extent, to be loyal to the Assad regime, the Christians found themselves in the situation of trying to resist with their own means - although extremely difficult, as it is proved by the numerous bombardments of Christian places of worship – or take the path of emigration.

Finally, the last chapter, “Syria, a laboratory for a worldwide imbalance”, debates the implications determined by the lack of reaction, or of the reactions lacking firmness, of some of the European chancelleries in regard to the Syrian conflict. Analyzing Russia’s position, Frédéric Pichon explains that with this conflict Russia saw an opportunity to get back on the international diplomatic scene, pursuing benefits like maintaining its naval base from Tartus (Russia’s only access point to the Mediterranean sea) and resolving the oil transportation issue. Syria is, from this point of view, the crossroad through which the new routes from the Persian Gulf could arrive in Europe. Moreover, the escalation of the Syrian conflict has an explosive potential on the long term, including for the West.

France’s position does not seem to coincide with the attitude expected by the world and the Middle East from the French diplomacy, more precisely, to be capable of discussing with all involved parties and to have a balanced and wise position. In return, the attitude displayed from
Paris reveals a “narrow atlanticism”, as the good faith, the morality and the
determination are prevailing.

The end of the book brings a warning regarding Syria’s neighbours
and their involvement in this conflict. According to the author, if the
situation will impose it, the idyll between Ankara and Damascus will
resume from where it stopped in 2011 and the role of an ambiguous
interlocutor will be played by Qatar, a country which excels and proves to
be extremely efficient in this position. As per Iran, it seems that this state is
recovering from the losses caused by the economic sanctions, while the US
are counting on the economic development in order to put to silence its
military ambitions. On the opposite side, the losing parties in this conflict
are Israel and Saudi Arabia, the main pivots for US’s anchoring in the
region. Given the fact that the US are progressively retreating from the
Middle East, Saudi Arabia might be thrown aside, while Israel feels
betrayed by its American ally and seems worried about the situation from
the Syrian front which caused a tension that could be compared with the
one from 1973.

Under these circumstances it takes place the rapid expansion of the
Islamic State, an entity which nourishes an old ambition and explains the
massive response of the Sunni populations from Iraq and Syria. This state
would abolish the heresy of the nation-states and would allow Sunni to
regain their dignity. With regard to the young European jihadists, the author
sees in frustration, nationalism and millenarianism an explosive cocktail.

Despite its subtitle, the present paper tackles to a lesser extent the
involvement of other Western embassies, preferring to always get back to
France’s position – and rarely to that of the United States – towards the Syrian conflict. The author denounces the poor diplomatic management of this conflict, towards which France has had an extremely offensive attitude. It would be interesting to identify what were the approaches chosen by other European states in order to solve the Syrian crisis.

The tragedy of the country that became a battlefield for Islamists from around the world has often been distorted in western mass media, certain parts of this conflict being covered or even falsified. Moreover, the author points out the mistakes and the contradiction in actions made by the Western powers in a war which, in just 3 years, has made over 150,000 deaths and which continues to represent a situation with an explosive potential in the Middle East. Ultimately, it does not seem that the problems from Syria will be solved shortly and this conflict will certainly remain an important subject for mass media from all around the world.