

Des élections municipales libres peuvent-elles être organisées par une « dictature » ?

REVUE DE PRESSE SYRIE
Mardi 13 décembre 2011

- Face aux élections municipales du lundi 12 décembre, le mot d'ordre de Washington à la presse était de soutenir l'appel du Conseil national syrien à la grève générale et au boycott du scrutin. Cette ligne a été parfaitement respectée par la presse occidentale et du Golfe.

Pour justifier sa position, la presse a choisi de considérer ces élections comme sans importance.

Dès lors, cette rhétorique devient incohérente : on ne comprend pas pourquoi les « révolutionnaires pro-démocratie » sont opposés aux élections municipales et à la démocratie locale. On devine par contre que la seule chose qui a une importance, c'est de renverser le sommet de l'Etat, y compris s'il le faut en bafouant les principes démocratiques les plus élémentaires.

- La Chine est préoccupée par l'image que lui attribuent les médias occidentaux de soutien à une répression sanglante contre une révolution populaire.

Quoi qu'il en soit, les experts chinois campent sur leur position de « non intervention ». Ils reconnaissent que l'opposition syrienne peut légitimement recourir aux armes, mais ne croient pas qu'elle dispose d'un soutien populaire suffisant pour triompher. Ils s'inquiètent d'une possible intervention militaire internationale qui se ferait en dehors de tout mandat de l'ONU. Il s'agirait pour eux d'une guerre d'hégémonie à la quelle la Russie n'a pas les moyens de s'opposer. Elle se solderait par une catastrophe pour la Chine : non pas que le nouveau gouvernement cesserait de commercer avec elle, mais parce que l'on assisterait à un basculement de tout le Proche-Orient dans la main des islamistes.

(voir p. 29 et 32).

- Après un moment de doute, la presse française fait bloc derrière son ministre des Affaires étrangères pour accuser la Syrie d'avoir commandité l'attentat contre les soldats français de la FINUL. Elle reconnaît toutefois que cette accusation reste à prouver.

- Le gouvernement Erdogan prépare de nouvelles « sanctions » contre la Syrie, mais la presse turque souligne que la crise entre les deux pays a déjà ruiné les provinces turques frontalières. L'économie turque, qui a beaucoup perdu dans la guerre de Libye, serait plus affectée encore si la crise syrienne devait se poursuivre.

- Frank Gaffney Jr., président du CSP, le principal lobby du complexe militaro-industriel, accuse l'administration Obama en général et Hillary Clinton en particulier de vouloir dissoudre la Commission pour la liberté religieuse dans le monde (USCIRF) pour plaire aux Frères musulmans qui pourraient ainsi perpétrer leurs exactions sans être inquiétés (voir p.16).

Can Free Municipal Elections be organized by a “dictatorship”?

SYRIA PRESS REVIEW

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

- Faced with the municipal elections of Monday, December 12, the motto of Washington to the press was to support the Syrian National Council's call for a general strike and for boycott the election. This line has been fully respected by the Western and Gulf press.

To justify its position, the press has chosen to consider these elections as unimportant.

Therefore, this rhetoric is incoherent: we do not understand why the "revolutionaries pro-democracy" are opposed to elections and local democracy. We understand that the only thing that is significant is to overthrow the top of the state, including if necessary by flouting the most basic democratic principles.

- China is concerned about the image assigned to it by the Western media claims to support a bloody crackdown against a popular revolution.

Nevertheless, Chinese experts are sticking to their position of "no intervention". They recognize that the Syrian opposition can legitimately use weapons, but do not believe that it has sufficient popular support to win. They are worried about a possible international military intervention that would be without a UN mandate. This would be for them a war of hegemony in which Russia can not afford to oppose. It would result in a catastrophe for China: not that the new government would cease to trade with it, but because there would be a shift of the entire Middle East in the hands of Islamists.

(See p. 29 and 32).

- After a moment of doubt, the French press support his foreign minister accusing Syria of ordering the attack against the French soldiers of UNIFIL. It recognizes that this charge is not proven.

- The Erdogan government is preparing new "sanctions" against Syria, but the Turkish press said that the crisis between the two countries has already destroyed the economy of the Turkish border provinces. The Turkish economy, which has lost much in the Libyan war, would be further affected if the Syrian crisis should continue.

- Frank Gaffney Jr., president of CSP, the main lobby of the military-industrial complex, accuses the Obama administration in general and especially Hillary Clinton to want to dissolve the Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to please the Muslims Brothers. So they could continue to perpetrate their atrocities without being disturbed (see p.16).

Libération (France)

En Syrie, la grève mobilise plus que le vote

ÉLECTIONS Les Syriens ont boudé les municipales, hier, sur fond de violence et de débrayage généralisé.



L'armée syrienne ouvre de force un commerce, dimanche à Deraa. PHOTO NETWORK SARAJEVO

Des élections, malgré la répression. Hier, plus de 14 millions de Syriens étaient appelés aux urnes pour désigner leurs représentants municipaux dans un climat de quasi-guerre civile. Près de 43 000 candidats étaient en lice pour seulement 17 000 sièges dans les assemblées locales réparties à travers le pays. Premier scrutin organisé depuis le début, il y a neuf mois, du mouvement de contestation contre le Président, Bachar al-Assad, ces élections municipales n'ont cependant pas mobilisé les Syriens. Et pour cause : boycotté par les anti-Al-Assad, le scrutin a eu lieu sous haute tension, les forces de sécurité fidèles au Président ayant encore fait au moins 15 morts, hier, selon l'opposition prodémocratique. Une violence qui, à l'évidence, a contrainst les rares Syriens encore favorables au régime

d'Al-Assad à rester chez eux, par sécurité.

Sans surprise, la participation devrait être encore plus faible dans les bastions de la contestation, où les militants antirégime ont, semble-t-il, empêché toute campagne électorale. «Je ne savais même pas que des élections avaient lieu», a expliqué un résident de Homs à la chaîne arabe Al-Jezira. Un autre opposant a lui affirmé que le scrutin se déroulait «dans des régions qui ne se sont pas encore soulevées contre le régime».

De fait, à Homs, Hama ou Deraa, l'ambiance n'était pas au vote, mais bien à la grève générale. Dans le but d'épuiser les ressources financières du régime, l'opposition avait lancé, dimanche, une campagne de désobéissance civile, largement suivie dans les villes contestataires. Des vidéos anonymes postées sur Internet mon-

traient des rues désertes, où les forces de sécurité tentaient d'ouvrir les commerces qui avaient baissé leur rideau. Dans ce contexte, les élections municipales ont davantage servi la propagande du régime. Lequel estime que le scrutin, organisé en vertu d'une nouvelle loi électorale adoptée en août, s'inscrit dans le cadre des «réformes» accordées par Bachar al-Assad aux manifestants.

Le vote se déroulait en outre sur fond de tensions diplomatiques entre la France et la Syrie. Hier, Damas a démenti les déclarations du ministre français des Affaires étrangères, Alain Juppé, qui, dimanche, avait accusé la Syrie d'être «sans doute» derrière l'attentat perpétré vendredi dans le sud du Liban contre des Casques bleus français de la Force intérimaire de l'ONU.

RAPHAËL BALENIERI

Le Figaro (France)

éditorial

par Pierre Rousselin

Assad et la carte du Hezbollah



Neuf mois après le début de la révolte en Syrie, le régime de Bachar el-Assad a fait la preuve de son incapacité à mater la rébellion, malgré l'extrême brutalité de la répression. L'opposition, de son côté, est trop faible et trop divisée pour renverser la dictature sans une aide extérieure.

Il en résulte ce que l'on appelle un peu facilement un « enlèvement », phase plus ou moins durable, que l'on a connue en Tunisie, avant la fuite de Ben Ali, en Égypte, avant la chute de Moubarak, et en Libye, avant la déroute des Kadhafi.

Alors que les autres pays du printemps arabe ont évité l'écueil de la guerre civile, la Syrie s'enfonce dans un affrontement de plus en plus sanglant. L'opposition, rejointe par les déserteurs, de plus en plus nombreux, de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), n'est plus aussi pacifique que le voudrait le Conseil national syrien.

Quant au régime, sa prétention à faire passer la crise pour un complot interna-

tional dont il serait victime n'a fait que creuser encore davantage un isolement international sans précédent. Tirer sur les manifestants avec une telle constance ne contribue pas à la légitimité d'un pouvoir qui aime se présenter comme l'ultime défenseur de la nation arabe.

À l'impasse politique s'ajoute l'effet des sanctions économiques qui portent sur les exportations d'hydrocarbures et auxquelles le pays ne s'est pas préparé. Dans ces conditions d'affaiblissement croissant, il n'est pas étonnant que Bachar el-Assad se tourne vers le Liban et ses alliés du Hezbollah pour tenter de desserrer l'étau qui le prend à la gorge.

L'attentat contre les forces françaises de la Finul est un avertissement. Malgré les démentis officiels, le calcul de Damas est limpide : en frappant un pays qui entre en campagne électorale, l'on espère le faire céder et briser le siège.

Le mouvement chiite libanais n'a pas pris ses distances avec Assad, mais il n'a pas forcément intérêt à se plier à toutes ses lubies en s'engouffrant maintenant dans la voie du terrorisme. ■

Le régime de Bachar el-Assad, maillon faible de l'axe chiite au Moyen-Orient



décryptage
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MIS EN CAUSE par Alain Juppé, le régime syrien a démenti toute implication dans l'attentat au Liban-Sud du 9 décembre dernier, perpétré contre une patrouille française de la Finul (cinq blessés, dont un grave). On n'est pas forcé de le croire sur parole, compte tenu de son passé en la matière et du fait que ses alliés chiïtes du Hezbollah contrôlent l'ensemble de la zone d'une main de fer.

Depuis plus de trente ans, la dictature alaouite de Damas est une habituée de tels « messages » violents, adressés aux puissances qui s'opposent à ses prétentions hégémoniques au pays du Cèdre. La Syrie est-elle également derrière la recrudescence des attentats du PKK (parti extrémiste kurde) dans l'est de la Turquie et des troubles dans les zones chiïtes du littoral saoudien donnant sur le golfe Persique ? Ce ne serait pas totalement impossible, dans la mesure où, comme la France, la Turquie et l'Arabie saoudite militent pour l'accroissement des sanctions internationales contre le régime de Bachar el-Assad. Le seul facteur qui pourrait plaider pour l'innocence récente des autorités de Damas est qu'elles doivent être déjà passable-

ment accaparées par leur combat contre l'insurrection sunnite, qui s'est propagée dans maintes provinces syriennes depuis le mois de mars dernier.

Bien qu'il ait reconnu ne pas disposer de preuves formelles contre le régime syrien, le ministre français des Affaires étrangères n'est pas infondé à imaginer de sa part le recours à des actes de violence désespérés. On se souvient des attentats mystérieux qui, pendant et après l'humiliant retrait de l'armée syrienne du Liban en 2005, avaient coûté la vie au journaliste Samir Kassir ou au député Gebran Tueni, deux personnalités libanaises connues pour leurs positions publiques antisyriniennes.

Retour de flamme

Quoi qu'il en soit, la dictature du clan el-Assad a toutes les raisons d'être bel et bien désespérée. Non seulement la situation intérieure du pays ne cesse d'empirer, mais, internationalement, la Syrie est clairement devenue le maillon faible de l'axe chiïte au Moyen-Orient. Ce dernier, qui s'étend de la Caspienne à la Méditerranée (Iran-Irak-Syrie-Hezbollah), est aujourd'hui dominé par Téhéran.

Au printemps dernier, l'intervention militaire de l'Arabie saoudite et des Émirats arabes unis à Bahreïn (pays majoritairement chiïte gouverné par une monarchie sunnite) a fait éclater une évidence : les pétromonarchies sunnites du Golfe sont entrées de plain-pied dans une guerre - pour le moment froide - contre l'Iran, accusé de vouloir se doter

de la bombe atomique pour asseoir des visées hégémoniques sur le réservoir mondial de pétrole. Dans cette confrontation globale, les puissances arabes du Golfe ont compris tout l'intérêt qu'elles trouveraient à la chute du régime alaouite de Damas, au profit des sunnites de Syrie (60 % de la population), aussi islamistes soient-ils. Si la Syrie s'en retirait, l'axe chiïte serait détruit et l'Iran s'en retrouverait considérablement affaibli.

Aujourd'hui, le Qatar finance généreusement la livraison d'armes de guerre à la résistance syrienne par les anciens rebelles libyens de Misrata. Les armes passent par la très poreuse frontière turco-syrienne. Écoutée par une centaine de millions d'Arabes, la télévision satellitaire qatarienne al-Jezira apporte un soutien aussi constant aux insurgés syriens que naguère aux insurgés libyens (avec une préférence, parmi eux, pour les islamistes). La chaîne avait été beaucoup plus discrète dans sa couverture du soulèvement chiïte à Bahreïn.

Dans le monde arabe, l'axe chiïte tenait sa force de son soutien sans faille aux mouvements « révolutionnaires » engagés dans la lutte armée contre Israël - le Hezbollah chiïte au nord, le Hamas sunnite au sud. Aujourd'hui, il subit un retour de flamme qu'il n'avait pas anticipé, venu des révolutions « démocratiques » ayant renversé les dictatures « laïques » en terres sunnites. Après la chute des dictateurs Ben Ali, Moubarak, Kadhafi, Saleh, le président Bachar el-Assad est le dernier sur la liste... ■

Dans le huis clos d'Idlib, avec les révoltés syriens

Notre reporter s'est rendue dans cette ville cadennasée par l'armée de Bachar.

EDITH BOUVIER
DÉPUTÉE SPÉCIALE À DOUR (FR)

SYRIE Sur la route qui descend de la frontière turque, la présence des chars se fait soudain pesante. Idlib, capitale d'une province où les heurts entre les troupes régulières et les insurgés de l'Armée syrienne libre se sont récemment multipliés, subit depuis une dizaine de jours un quasi-blocus. Les points de contrôle se succèdent à mesure qu'on s'enfonce dans la ville. Depuis la semaine dernière, les troupes de Bachar el-Assad affinent pour prêter main-forte aux contingents locaux. Dans Idlib coupée du monde, le téléphone ne fonctionne plus. Les coupures d'électricité sont mensuelles courantes.

Grand, très mince, Hassan plonge son regard dans la vitre à l'évocation des violents affrontements qui ont une nouvelle fois ébranlé la ville en fin de semaine dernière. Mercredi, lors d'une manifestation contre Bachar el-Assad, sept personnes ont été tuées et une soixantaine d'autres blessées par les snipers du régime. Le lendemain, alors qu'ils s'apprêtaient à entrer ces « martyrs », deux habitants sont tombés sous les balles de l'armée. « J'ai encore du mal à réaliser ce que j'ai vu ce jour-là, raconte le cheikh Hassan, figure respectée d'Idlib. Nous étions plusieurs jours, de paradedans les rues. »



Les heurts entre les troupes régulières et les insurgés de l'Armée syrienne libre se sont récemment multipliés à Idlib. A gauche, une scène de duel filmée le 30 novembre (image issue d'une vidéo postée sur YouTube). A droite, tenu par son oncle, le portrait d'Amad Saad al-Din tué jeudi dernier. AFP/YOUTUBE ET EDITH BOUVIER/LE FIGARO



L'Armée syrienne libre conspirait près de mille combattants dans la région d'Idlib. EDITH BOUVIER/LE FIGARO



5000 personnes au moins ont été tuées depuis le début de la répression en Syrie

Hassan s'interrompt un instant lorsque cinq véhicules passent devant lui, remplis d'hommes en tenue militaire, leurs armes sorties par la fenêtre. A l'arrière d'un pick-up, un fardé mitrailleur vise la foule. Hassan attend qu'ils s'éloignent puis reprend à voix basse, comme s'ils pouvaient encore l'entendre. « Voici les Chabibas, ces miliciens que Bachar el-Assad fait pour nous effrayer. Ce sont de véritables amuseurs, une malice prête à tout et assouffie de violence. Depuis plusieurs jours, ils paradedans les rues. »

« On ne faisait rien de mal »

Amad Saad al-Din était l'un de ceux qui sont tombés jeudi dernier. Agé de tout juste 11 ans, le garçon se trouvait à proximité des manifestants quand les militaires ont ouvert le feu. Sa famille, très pauvre, est encore terrorisée. Un oncle brandit son portrait, tout en essayant de faire passer son message à son fils. « On n'a pas vraiment de quoi vivre, manger ou se chauffer, alors je pensais à autre chose. Maintenant, on a peur des représailles. L'armée a déjà brûlé la maison de plusieurs familles de martyrs. On n'a plus sorti. » Derrière lui, une jeune fille dissimule son visage sous un voile fleuri. Les yeux rouges, elle essuie ses larmes et soupire. « Je ne peux plus dormir. J'ai peur et je ne sais même pas pourquoi. »

Dans la maison voisine, Hassan Saadi reçoit, allongé sur une banquette, deux le salons. Jeudi, cet adolescent de 17 ans a reçu une balle dans la hanche en essayant d'aller récupérer le corps du jeune Inad. « On restait de l'école. Le temps de regarder d'où venaient les cris et il a reçu une balle dans la tête. J'ai vu la fillette de là, le transporter à l'hôpital, mais je me suis effondré sous l'impact. » Aujourd'hui encore, Hassan se repose le fil sans comprendre. « C. ne faisait rien de mal, on ne manifestait même pas. Inad n'était qu'un enfant.

n'avait rien à voir avec la politique. » Malgré son air enfantin, Hassan sève desormais de révolution. « Ce crime a fait de moi un homme. Dès que je pourrai sortir, j'ai rejoint les autres, j'ai lutté. Je n'ai plus rien à perdre. Bachar el-Assad a tué toute mon innocence. »

En dépit du verrouillage imposé par l'armée syrienne, un habitant présumé Ahmed veut maintenant nous montrer sa ville. « C'est autre monde que Bachar el-Assad essaye de dissimuler en versant le sang. » A l'approche de chaque check-point, l'homme bécote ses yeux vers l'horizon et, les deux mains crispées sur le volant, répète plusieurs fois les mêmes versets du Coran, comme pour nous protéger. « Les militaires ont des litanies. Tous ceux qui ont quelque chose à voir avec la révolution ont leur nom inscrit dessus. Parfois, ils ne vérifient pas. Le reste du temps, on finit en prison pour une durée... indéterminée. »

Vêtu d'une tenue de chambre, Ahmed n'arbore aucun signe distinctif de son engagement révolutionnaire. « Aujourd'hui, on ne peut se fier à personne. Il y a des dizaines de milliers d'espions du gouvernement parmi nous. » Pour lui, les motifs d'inquiétude sont d'autant plus grands qu'il ap-

partient à l'Armée libre de Syrie. La structure clandestine compterait près de mille combattants dans la région d'Idlib : une centaine d'officiers et deux cents soldats. La semaine dernière, la désertion d'une dizaine de grades a redonné le moral aux troupes. « On ne peut pas faire grand-chose, si ce n'est essayer de protéger la population. On n'a pas assez d'armes pour s'attaquer aux forces du gouvernement. »

Le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU « est moralement responsable de ce qui se passe aujourd'hui en Syrie »

SÉBASTIEN BAILEY, AMBASSADEUR DE FRANCE AUX NATIONS UNIES

Ahmed nous entraîne dans des ruelles aux maisons délabrées. Tout d'un coup, plusieurs enfants arrivent en courant. L'un d'entre eux écrit en

lettres dorées le mot « liberté » sur le mur d'une école, puis s'enfuit en courant. Ahmed continue son chemin. « L'inscription sera recouverte de peinture demain matin par l'armée, mais les jeunes recommenceront », glisse-t-il en souriant. A l'abri d'une petite mosquée, il déploie le drapeau de la Syrie libre. Les uns après les autres, les combattants de son armée clandestine arrivent. Chacun jette un coup d'œil en arrière, avant de refermer la porte. Tous dissimulent une arme sous leur blouson. « On est obligé d'être très prudent : on s'attend à une attaque d'envahisseurs dans les jours prochains. Les violences ont pris une nouvelle ampleur ces derniers jours. Et ce va encore empirer. » Un autre s'écrit : « Bachar el-Assad veut nous intimider, il veut nous montrer que l'on n'est rien sans lui, nous désorganiser, mais on ne se laissera plus faire. C'est fini, le temps où on battait la tête sans rien dire. »

Derrière cette colère, les insurgés dissimulent leurs peurs. Au début des années 1970, quand le père de Bachar, l'ancien président Hafez el-Assad, était venu à Idlib, il avait été reçu par des jets de chaussettes. Cette fois la donne a changé et le régime semble plus fort que les bonnes volontés de ces soldats libérés. La nuit tombe et ces soldats de l'ombre sortent pour encadrer les manifestants qui s'éveillent dans les rues. Plus tard dans la soirée, ils croqueront deux tanks à l'estrie de la ville. Ces blindés, chacun le sait, profitent de l'obscurité pour rejoindre les check-points où ils sont soigneusement dissimulés sous une vaste bâche. Les habitants d'Idlib, eux, retiennent leur souffle. »

Grève générale à Deraa et Duma

PLUS DE 14 millions d'électeurs syriens étaient appelés hier à participer aux élections municipales tandis que les opposants à Bachar el-Assad ont lancé une campagne de désobéissance civile pour dénoncer la répression. « Les élections se déroulent dans le calme, dans un climat démocratique et il y a une bonne affluence », a déclaré le chef du Haut Comité des élections, Khalid al-Ezzawi. La grève générale se poursuivait cependant dans toute la région de Deraa (Sud), berceau de la contestation, alors qu'elle était largement observée dans la ville de Duma, près de Damas. Dans le même temps, les violences se sont poursuivies à Idlib et Deraa, selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH).

Le Monde (France)

L'opposition syrienne lance un mouvement de grève générale pour affaiblir le régime de Bachar Al-Assad

En Syrie, les autorités ont maintenu les élections municipales, en dépit de la poursuite des violences

Beyrouth
Correspondance

Plutôt que de diffuser les images de commerces fermés et de rues fantômes, la chaîne syrienne Dounia TV a préféré celles des souks de Damas et de leur animation, pour signifier que la « grève de la dignité », lancée dimanche 11 décembre par les militants antirégime, n'avait pas de prise en Syrie.

Ces commerces désertés, en ce jour ouvré, étaient pourtant bien visibles sur des films amateurs d'opposants, dans la banlieue de Damas, la province d'Idlib (nord-ouest) ou le Sud. On y voit aussi des hommes des unités de sécurité tenter, par la force, de rouvrir les rideaux de fer des boutiques grévistes.

La grève, dont l'étendue reste difficile à mesurer, doit inaugurer, selon les vœux des militants, un vaste mouvement de désobéissance civile. Le but est de tarir les res-

sources financières du régime, déjà soumis à des sanctions occidentales et arabes à cause de la répression qu'il exerce. Des étudiants d'Alep et des employés de l'Etat ont adhéré dès dimanche à la démarche, selon les Comités de coordination locale (CCL), à la pointe de la mobilisation sur le terrain.

Là où l'initiative a été suivie, des commerçants ont été menacés par les forces armées, selon les militants. Une usine en grève a même été brûlée dans les environs d'Alep, deuxième ville du pays. Dans plusieurs bastions rebelles, la répression se poursuivait. Les CCL ont fait état de 23 morts, dont 12 dans les régions meurtries d'Hama et d'Homs.

Les craintes perdurent sur le sort d'Homs, troisième ville du pays et « capitale de la révolution », plusieurs fois assiégée et soumise au feu des forces de sécurité depuis le début de la révolte, en mars. Les militaires maintiennent leur pression sur la ville.

Le Conseil national syrien (CNS), principale plate-forme de l'opposition, a indiqué le 8 décembre redouter que le régime soit près de « commettre un massacre » pour mater l'insurrection à Homs et « discipliner par l'exemple » les autres villes syriennes. Le CNS a de nouveau appelé, dimanche, à une décision du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU pour « protéger les civils ».

Elections municipales

Les CCL s'inquiètent de l'augmentation à Homs, depuis un mois, d'incidents à caractère confessionnel, qui prennent le plus souvent la forme du kidnapping. Ils accusent les autorités d'attiser un conflit intercommunautaire.

Mis en cause dimanche par le ministre français des affaires étrangères, Alain Juppé, dans l'attentat perpétré le 9 novembre contre un véhicule de la Force intérimaire des Nations unies au Liban (Finul), le régime a persisté,

dimanche, à qualifier les opposants de « terroristes ».

Malgré ce climat, les élections municipales prévues lundi ont été maintenues. Les affiches des candidats – plus de 40 000 pour quelque 17 000 postes à pourvoir – ont été installées dans les rues. Dounia TV a montré des images d'urnes transistants vers les bureaux de vote. Des bureaux itinérants auraient été prévus, selon les autorités, pour les populations déplacées d'Homs.

Ces élections locales constituent pour le pouvoir, qui a appelé à une participation massive, un « pas très important sur le chemin de la (...) démocratie ». Théoriquement, le parti Baas au pouvoir ne dispose plus d'un quota de sièges, comme c'était le cas lors des précédents scrutins. Le vote a lieu après l'adoption, en août, d'une loi sur l'administration locale, présentée comme l'une des réformes mises en œuvre par le président Bachar Al-Assad. ■

LAURE STEPHAN

De Standaard (Belgique / Belgium)

SUCCES VAN OPERATIE 'BURGERLIJKE ONGEHOORZAAMHEID' VOORLOPIG MOEILIK IN TE SCHATTEN

Syriërs beginnen aan hun 'staking van de laatste kans'

VAN ONZE CORRESPONDENT
IN HET MIDDEN-OSTEN

JOHN DE COCK

BEIROET | Het woelige Syrië, waar intussen al 4.600 doden zijn gevallen, leek gisteren opnieuw een land van twee werelden. Staatsmedia maakten melding van een 'mislukte campagne van de oppositie'. Alle winkels in Syrië zijn open, meldde het staatspersagentschap Sana, en de Syriërs moedden zich bij honderd voor de gemeenteraadverkiezingen die het regime gisteren organiseerde. Volgens president Bashar al-Assad zijn die lokale verkiezingen de eerste stap naar een volkomen hervormd land, waar de president uiteindelijk in het jaar 2014 democratisch zou worden (her)verkozen.

De oppositie sprak gisteren daarentegen over lege stembureaus: Syrië heeft in de laatste veertig jaar nooit democratische verkiezingen gekend, dus waarom zouden burgers gaan stemmen? In delen van het noorden, centrum en zuiden van het land werd bovendien opnieuw fel gevochten tussen het leger en gewapende deserteurs, zodat burgers in steden als Homs en Deraa zelfs hun huizen niet durfden te verlaten.

'Geestgestoorde leider'

In de hoofdstad Damascus gaan burgers na over tot hun eigen, geweldsuzer vorst. 'We hebben in Damascus altijd betoogd, maar slechts in enkele wijken', vertelt 'Wael', een activist, aan De Standaard. In het centrum is er te veel leger en geheime politie om manifestaties te houden. Maar veel inwoners willen wel deplijk een geweldloze bijdrage leveren. Voor velen was het interview met president Bashar al-Assad op de Amerikaanse zender ABC vorige week de druppel die de emmer deed overlopen.

In dat interview verklaarde Assad dat hij 'slechts president' was, en dus niet verantwoordelijk voor het bloedige optreden van zijn leger (waarin de beruchte brigade wordt aangevoerd door zijn eigen broer Maher). Volgens Assad zou alleen een 'geestgestoorde leider' schieten op zijn eigen volk.

Activisten in Syrië zijn begonnen met een brede campagne van burgerlijke ongehoorzaamheid tegen het regime. 'We beginnen een staking in winkels, daarna in scholen en op de grote verbindingswegen.' Represailles zijn ook al gemeld.



Een pro-Assad betoging in Damascus, maar oodertussen blijft de volksoptand doorgaan. © AP

Wael is zelf een typische Damascen die aanvankelijk meewarig stond tegenover de Syrische op-

stand, maar zich gedwongen voelde mee te doen. 'Ik heb in het Syrische leger gediend en daar was ik

trots op. Tot tuig van het regime dit voorjaar plots het ariobasje tegenhield waarin ik zat, twee in-

zittenden zonder reden doodschoot en ons allemaal begon te mishandelen. Hoe kan je dan stil blijven?

De nieuwe 'staking van de waardigheid' is zondag begonnen met een reeks winkels. Later deze week breiden we de actie uit naar scholen en universiteiten, tegen het weekendse bezetten we desnoods de grote invalswegen naar Damascus', zegt Wael.

Kort en klein

Het succes van de eerste stakingsacties was gisteren moeilijk te meten – het Syrische regime houdt nog altijd de internationale media buiten. In sommige wijken, zoals het opstandige Midan nabij het centrum van Damascus, lieven volgens ooggetuigen de meeste winkels dicht. In de zwaarbewaakte 'hoek' van Da-

Voor veel Syriërs was het ABC-interview met Assad vorige week de druppel die de emmer deed overlopen

mascus was alles open. YouTubeclips van de oppositie tonen hoe de geheime politie stakende winkeliers bedreigt, desnoods kan gesloten deuren binnentreden en de inbodel kort en klein slaat. Volgens de Syrische Nationale Raad, de overkoepelende organisatie van de oppositie, zijn de acties van burgerlijke ongehoorzaamheid een laatste kans om Syrië rijk in het scenario van een burgeroorlog te doen terechtkomen. 'Onze acties zullen, vrees ik, nog meer mensenlevens kosten', zei Hima Fleihan van de Nationale Raad gisteren. 'Maar ze zijn minder bloedig dan een gewapende opstand en het optreden van een regime dat het land in de richting van Libië sleurt.'

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

Siria presenta sus elecciones locales como un modelo de democracia

La prensa oficial habla de largas colas y la oposición, de amplio boicot

TOMÁS ALCOVERRO
Bretel, Corresponsal

Mientras la agencia nacional de información siria, Sana, publica noticias asegurando una buena afluencia de electores a las urnas de todo el país para elegir a los representantes de las corporaciones municipales y regionales, y difunde imágenes en las que se ven largas colas de ciudadanos a la espera de depositar su papeleta, los grupos de la oposición, las agencias internacionales y la prensa occidental y árabe -pese a no tener corresponsales en Siria debido a la prohibición gubernamental- hablan de la muy escasa participación electoral, si no nula, del boicot, y de la continuación por segundo día consecutivo de la huelga general.

Se puede colegir, sin embargo, que en Damasco, en Aleppo y otras poblaciones más prugubernamentales o menos inclinadas a

El régimen insta a los ciudadanos a votar para proseguir el "camino de democracia"

la oposición el ambiente electoral fue mayor que en el de las zonas como Homs, Hama o Dera, donde las manifestaciones son más populares. Las violencias y las protestas continuaron ayer en Siria. Según el opositor Observatorio Sirio de Derechos Humanos, hubo más de 20 muertos, incluidos dos niños.

La imagen del primer ministro, Adel Safar, depositando su papeleta en un colegio electoral de Damasco ha sido una de las difundidas por la agencia Sana, como si de una banal elección se tra-

tase. El Gobierno ha instado a los ciudadanos a acudir a estas elecciones municipales -las últimas fueron en el 2003- para proseguir el "camino de descentralización y de democracia". El diario *Al-Nahar* ha escrito: "El 12 de diciembre es un día importante. Todos los ciudadanos deben participar en las elecciones para elegir a candidatos que defiendan los intereses colectivos".

Además del Frente Nacional Progresista -alianza de partidos izquierdistas dominado por el gubernamental Baas- se han presentado otros once partidos políticos en estas elecciones, que, según el Gobierno, son las más libres efectuadas en medio siglo. Había 43.000 candidatos, para 17.500 puestos en los consejos municipales provinciales. El electorado potencial era de quince millones de ciudadanos, y desde los 18 años se podía votar. Por vez primera se ha empleado tinta indeleble para evitar fraudes. En Damasco una mujer de 35 años que se identificó como Zeinab declaró a la agencia France Presse que iba a votar "para contribuir a las reformas".

La oposición las ha boicoteado porque se llevaban a cabo en medio de interminables represiones armadas que ayer continuaron. En algunas localidades, como en Idlib, denunciaron que muchos ciudadanos fueron forzados a votar. En Homs, la tercera ciudad de Siria y foco de la revuelta, donde según la agencia Sana se presentaron 3.500 candidatos, el ambiente era más de un campo de batalla entre los insurrectos y los militares, que electoral. Siria es un nación esquizofrénica.

El presidente Bashar el Asad actúa como si no ocurriese nada a su alrededor. O mejor dicho, tal como ha repetido varias veces, no quiere adoptar decisiones bajo la presión popular de las mani-



Una votante muestra un dedo marcado con tinta ante un retrato de Bashar el Asad, en Damasco

festaciones. Así, desde el principio de este incesante movimiento de impugnación, consideró que había hecho concesiones importantes a sus adversarios, iniciando un proceso de reformas.

Derogó la ley del estado de urgencia, en vigor durante casi medio siglo a raíz del conflicto con Israel, y que fue una de las principales reivindicaciones de la oposición. En mayo anunció una ley de amnistía y dio libertad a centenares de presos políticos aunque quedaron miles en las cárceles. En julio reanunció Damasco a re-

presentantes de la oposición, aunque no a los jefes de las fuerzas vivas callejeras de las manifestaciones, para intentar un diálogo nacional. Y el 4 de agosto promulgó un decreto autorizando la formación de partidos políticos, acabando con el monopolio de medio siglo de poder del Baas, sin partido en su origen laico, panarabista y socializante antes de convertirse en una superestructura vacía de contenido manipulada por la minoría alauí, el ejército y el clan Asad. En noviembre el régimen volvió a aplicar una amnis-

tia para dos mil detenidos durante las manifestaciones de estos nueve meses.

Pero, por otro lado, el régimen de Al Asad no ha cesado la violenta represión armada, que justifica diciendo que ejerce contra "grupos terroristas armados" que quieren derrocar el régimen y trazar el Estado en entidades confesionales, con un trasfondo de guerra sectaria entre la mayoría suní y la minoría alauí. Las diferencias entre el país real y el país Agal, como se decía antaño, son cada vez más profundas. ■

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Syria regime fighting on three fronts

By Richard Spencer
Middle East Correspondent

FIGHTING has erupted on at least three fronts in Syria as the United Nations said yesterday that the number killed in the uprising was close to 5,000.

Regime forces were in armed engagements in the north and south and poised to attack rebels holding much of the restive city of Homs.

Human rights groups said there had been clashes between soldiers who had defected and regular troops in Deraa, in the south, and in the

province of Idlib near the Turkish border in the north-west, dragging the country nearer all-out conflict. In Homs, the government had given opposition groups, who hold much of the town, until last night to surrender.

One activist said the army had begun digging trenches around the city to prevent reinforcements arriving to help the rebels or to stop those inside escaping.

Reports suggest that tanks are surrounding the city. Scores of people were killed last week, with rebels claiming they were victims of "Shabiha"

militias, and government supporters saying they were evidence of sectarian killings.

The fighting overshadowed local elections across the country, which, reports suggested, were poorly attended, although the Syrian state news agency said that voters were "flocking" to the ballot boxes.

The agency admitted that three "law-enforcement personnel" and four rebels were killed in fighting that continued for the second day in Deraa province, where the uprising against the rule of President Bashar al-Assad began in March. It also said

there had been clashes in Idlib, where the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least three civilians were shot dead by security forces, and Homs, where it said four had been killed.

Iyas Malas, the son of Haitham Malas, one of Syria's best-known dissidents who was released from prison and exiled earlier this year, said troops had been trying to break up a strike of shops and businesses called at the weekend across the country. "This is the army fighting defectors who are trying to protect civilian protesters," he said.

The Guardian (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Turkey to go it alone with sanctions against Syria

Action against former ally to be revealed next month

Britain working on weakened UN resolution

Martin Chulov

Turkey is pressing ahead with plans to impose its own sanctions on Syria, despite European powers backing down from using the UN to punish the regime for its crackdown on the protest movement.

The Turkish measures are likely to be announced early next month, following Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's visit to camps in southern Turkey holding refugees who fled violence across the border and fear reprisals by security forces if they return.

Four European heavyweight states – France,

Britain, Germany and Portugal – were forced to abandon a recent attempt to use the UN security council to impose sanctions on Syria, after opposition from Russia, China and South Africa.

The four are now working on a watered-down resolution to threaten sanctions if the regime, led by President Bashar al-Assad, does not change its approach.

In the absence of UN security council action, Turkey's move could be decisive in a six-month standoff between Syrian security forces and anti-government activists which has seen more than 2,700 civilian deaths and greatly destabilised the region.

Erdogan is preparing for a range of economic, military and political sanctions which will further damage the once-close relationship between the two states.

After playing a back-seat role during the first months of uprisings in Syria, Turkey has taken centre stage. Some observers believe Turkey is potentially the most

influential regional player to emerge in the crisis.

"The reassessment on the Turkish side was because the formal policy of 'zero problem with the neighbours' was coming to an end as a result of the Arab Spring," said Sinan Urgan, a visiting scholar at international diplomacy organisation Carnegie Europe. "Turkey was somewhat late in making that evaluation, on Libya for example."

"Turkish policymakers realised that the policy could no longer stand because it boiled down to 'zero problem' with the regime. The government could no longer showcase Syria as a shining example of political success. From that point the policymakers took a decision to be on the right side of history."

As the Syrian uprising gathered pace in March, Erdogan and his government were reluctant to criticise the actions of the regime's security forces. Turkey's foreign minister twice met with Assad and

Erdogan spoke with the Syrian leader several times by phone.

"He believed that he had Assad's word," said a source close to the Turkish leader. "Then it became clear that everything he said he was not honouring."

The dramatic deterioration in relations between Assad and Erdogan has led to speculation that Syria may use the Kurdish minority in the north of the country to agitate Turkey. The PKK, a Kurdish group regarded by Ankara as a terrorist organisation, has strong support among the Kurds of Syria. The Turkish military fears Syrian officials may try to spark conflict.

"Turkey could no longer showcase Syria as a shining example of political success"

"It has happened once before 10 years ago," said a Turkish official. "We will watch closely to see what they do this time."

Urgan added: "There is speculation that ... the PKK and [will] be played against Turkey," said Urgan.

There is also speculation that Turkey may establish a buffer zone inside its border, or inside Syria if fighting in northern areas continues. But Urgan downplayed such talk. "It is politically very unlikely as things stand," he said. "The only scenario for this to become possible is if there is a resurgence in the atrocities that lead to a big refugee movement again."

Turkey continues to host senior members of Syria's nascent opposition movement and defectors from the military. It is understood to be working with the United States on moves to improve organisations of the opposition, but insists no military support is being provided.

"The deficit of trust is so big ... things can never return," said Urgan.

Le Journal de Montréal (Canada)

SYRIE

La répression a fait plus de 5 000 morts

NEW YORK | (AFP) La répression en Syrie a fait « plus de 5 000 morts », a affirmé, hier, le haut commissaire aux droits de l'homme de l'ONU, Mme Navi Pillay, s'en prenant devant le Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies à l'inaction de la communauté internationale.

« Aujourd'hui, j'ai rapporté le fait que le nombre (des morts) excède 5 000 », a-t-elle dit lors d'un point de presse à l'issue de la réunion du Conseil.

L'ONU a des informations selon lesquelles plus de 200 personnes ont été tuées, depuis le 2 décembre, par les forces du président Bachar al-Assad, a indiqué Mme Pillay, selon des diplomates qui ont assisté à la réunion du Conseil.

Le dernier bilan de l'ONU érait de plus de 4 000 personnes tuées par les forces syriennes, depuis le début du mouvement de contestation du régime, en mars dernier, interrogé sur ce bilan la semaine dernière, le président Assad avait mis en doute la crédibilité de l'ONU.

Mme Pillay s'exprimait devant le Conseil en réponse à une demande de la France, de la Grande-Bretagne et de l'Allemagne.

Torture

Le Conseil de sécurité n'arrive pas à se mettre d'accord sur une résolution qui condamnerait la répression en Syrie. Un double veto russo-chinois a torpillé, le 4 oc-



PHOTO RENSTONE

■ Selon l'ONU, l'inaction de la communauté internationale contribue à enhardir les autorités syriennes et assurer l'impunité aux auteurs de ces tueries.

ton, un projet de résolution en ce sens. Depuis, la Russie, alliée du régime syrien, n'a pas donné de signe d'assouplissement.

« Des informations crédibles reçues par mon personnel démontrent une tendance à l'usage systématique et étendu de la torture lors des interrogatoires », a assuré Mme Pillay, toujours selon des diplomates.

Citant des sources dignes de foi, Mme Pillay a indiqué que plus de 300 mineurs avaient été tués par les forces syriennes, dont 56 pour le seul mois de novembre. Les écoles ont été utilisées comme centres de déportation.

« Tuer des enfants en les frappant ou en leur tirant dessus pendant les manifestations » est une pratique « largement répandue », tout comme « la torture et les mauvais traitements », a-t-elle ajouté.

« L'inaction de la communauté internationale va enhardir les autorités syriennes et assurer l'impunité aux auteurs » de ces tueries, a-t-elle dit.

« Extrêmement troublé »

À l'issue de l'exposé de Navi Pillay, même Vitali Tchourkine, ambassadeur russe à l'ONU, s'est dit « troublé ». « Nous sommes tous unis par le fait que nous sommes extrêmement troublés par les développements tragiques, de ces derniers mois, en Syrie et par le fait que nous voudrions que cela cesse », a-t-il déclaré.

La position de la Russie n'a pas bougé pour autant, a résumé M. Tchourkine. « Ce que la Russie a demandé est le dialogue. Malheureusement, nous avons vu certains membres-clés de la communauté internationale et du Conseil de sécurité changer de vitesse et se tourner vers le mode "changer de régime" (en Syrie), décourageant le dialogue à l'intérieur de la Syrie et entre la Ligue arabe et la Syrie », a-t-il poursuivi. « C'est très dangereux », a-t-il prévenu.

Foreign Policy (Special : 100 Top Global Thinkers of 2011) USA

Selected as number 3 of this year :

ALI FERZAT, RAZAN ZAITOUNEH

For speaking truth to a bloody power.

Cartoonist, human rights lawyer | Syria

Ali Ferzat has been irritating Syria's heavy-handed powers for four decades with his biting political cartoons, evincing a razor-sharp wit and a withering eye for hypocrisy. When President Bashar al-Assad initially took power, Ferzat was allowed to start an officially sanctioned satirical magazine as part of what was supposed to be a new era of openness, but it was swiftly shut down. Emboldened by this year's uprising, Ferzat broke with his past practice of avoiding caricatures of actual people to defiantly portray Assad as a Napoleonic madman with delusions of omnipotence. His response to the regime he has internalized is simple: "You ask me why I air your dirty laundry, but you don't ask yourself why you soil it in the first place." A cartoon showing the president trying to hitch a ride in Muammar al-Qaddafi's getaway car evidently pushed things too far, and in August Ferzat was seized by security force members who beat him, broke his hands, and left him by the side of the road. The magazine he published his cartoons in has been shut down, though he now reaches a wider audience abroad.



ZAITOUNEH

MUSE: Syrian protesters.

STIMULUS OR AUSTERITY? Stimulus.

AMERICA OR CHINA? Syria.

ARAB SPRING OR ARAB WINTER? Democracy in all seasons.

READING LIST: Books? No place or time for books in the revolution.

BEST IDEA: One revolution is not enough.

WORST IDEA: Toppling Assad would lead to civil war.

If Ferzat embodies the Syrian uprising's defiant soul, Razan Zaitouneh represents its beating heart. The 34-year-old attorney has been active in Syria's opposition since founding the Human Rights Association of Syria in 2001; and her website, providing up-to-date information on casualties and abuses by security forces, has been an essential resource for journalists locked out of Syria by its bloodthirsty government during this year's uprising. Zaitouneh has been in hiding since security forces accused her of being a foreign agent, and her husband was reportedly arrested and tortured for three months before being released in July. In October, the international advocacy group Reach All Women in War gave Zaitouneh its Anna Politkovskaya Award, named for the murdered Russian journalist in honor of female human rights defenders who put their safety at risk. In accepting it, Zaitouneh said the Syrian people "deserve much more than complicit silence, or timid criticism from those who have failed to refer this regime to the International Criminal Court despite acknowledging its crimes."

Turks on Syrian border say sanctions cut deep

TURKEY FROM FRANCE

truck drivers protested after they were forced to leave their vehicles in Syria and walk to the Turkish border when businesses shut down its border near Urfu, in eastern Turkey. Drivers told Turkey's NTV news channel that Syrian buyers had shied from the and, besides, Turkish companies, which had been known to ship goods via Iraq and the Mediterranean Sea instead.

Syria last week unilaterally suspended its free trade agreement with Turkey, retaliating for Turkish sanctions by introducing taxes of up to 30 percent on Turkish goods entering Syria. Turkey has retaliated by doing the same.

The neighborhood followed aough Turkish sanctions in response to continuing violence against civilians in Syria, which the United Nations says has claimed more than 4,000 lives.

Just a year ago, Turkey and Syria were close allies. Turkey's governing Republican People's Party and Assad's Baathist party sought to signed a cooperation pact in 2007, the first in a series of pacts. The 800-kilometer Turkish-Syrian border is Turkey's longest, while Syria is entangled with Turkish influence from the popular Turkish soap operas to Ottoman-influenced architecture.

But after the Syrian authorities' violence against demonstrators, the Turkish government has turned emphatically against the Assad government. In Gaziantep, an industrial center of 1.7 million people, everyone from olive vendors to owners of large textile conglomerates complained that shifting geopolitics was proving bad for business. The Turkish creates divided by tribes in a city where Turkish and Arab culture have entwined centuries.

Enis Hadravoglu, 22, an electrical engineering student at Gaziantep, is on a strike at the Turkish government's policy in Syria that he has given a long fever in protest. Mr. Hadravoglu is an Alawite Muslim whose grandparents became Turkish citizens when his forefathers, Sarrazins, formerly part of Syria, was ceded to Turkey in 1922.

Mr. Hadravoglu expressed a bitterness with Mr. Assad, an Alawite, and said he believed reports of atrocities in Syria are overblown. Turkey, he said, "isn't doing anything to help the people." "Turkey should stand up to Assad," he said, and 4000 (interfering in another country's affairs," he said.



The old border at Gaziantep, Turkey, Merchanta shops, and other businesses in the city, have been hit hard by the loss of Syrian customers since Turkey imposed tough sanctions.



Middle East countries are bad for business." While the Arab Spring promises the possibility of democracy in some countries, many business people here complained that instability was hitting their profits. They noted that it could take years before countries like Syria, Egypt and Libya rebuild their economies and attract foreign investment.

Most of the Middle East's large south companies that have ties to Syria are making investments such as synthetic yarn and cotton for the Syrian market as well as for Europe and the Middle East. Demand in Syria has fallen by 40 percent since March, he said.

Mr. Mandeglu, who still travels regularly to Syria to check on his factories, said he had noticed a conspicuous cooling of the previous ardor for Turkey among many Syrians. "Before the crisis Syrians loved us. Erdogan had run for election in Syria, he would have won 90 percent of the vote. Now he would get 2 percent," he said, referring to Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister of Turkey.

Ferdik Akden, general manager of Altinok, a hotel agency focused on the Syrian market, said his sales since April had dropped by 80 percent. The company used to run four buses daily between Gaziantep and Aleppo; now there are none because of security concerns. To offset the decline, Mr. Akden is promoting trips for Turks to Moscow.

Despite the economic sacrifices, Mr. Akden said that the loyalty of the Alawite government justified Turkey's assistance. "We are not helping Assad," he said, "when we can't help him in any other way, we have to try and help him in the only way we can."

Mr. Akden, whose ancestors imported coffee from Syria during the Ottoman Empire and produced shoes for the oil-rich Gulf, said Akden's, which exports about 70 percent of its shoes to Middle Eastern countries, had benefited handsomely from Turkey's curbing of the Arab world. But he warned that Turkey's economic recovery would be slow and that the region's recovery would be "a long over," he said. "Real recovery will

people, though Turkey's economy remains strong, Turkey is Syria's second largest export market after China. Cengiz Akden, vice president of Akden in India, a shoe manufacturer that exports about 70 percent of its shoes to Middle Eastern countries, said that the Turkish footwear market is still recovering from Turkey's curbing of the Arab world. But he warned that Turkey's economic recovery would be slow and that the region's recovery would be "a long over," he said. "Real recovery will

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Syria holds local elections amid strike

BEIRUT

Opposition dismisses the ballot as irrelevant; army battles defectors

BY NADA BAKRI

The Syrian government called Monday for voters to turn out for local elections that it portrayed as a good-faith reform effort, but activists said that most citizens, observing the second day of a general strike, rejected the vote as irrelevant. Opposition groups reported at least 18 deaths in clashes between security forces and army defectors in several regions.

Prime Minister Adel Safar called on Syrians to cast their ballots to "stand together to save our country from the conspiracies against us," and the government reported that the turnout was good and voting was "proceeding in a democratic spirit."

But activists said that turnout was high only among those who support the government of President Bashar al-Assad, with most Syrians abstaining from voting. In some areas, they said, residents were forced to head to polling stations.

"Homs is on strike, and around 90 percent of the people did not participate in the elections," said Salim Qabbani from the Local Coordination Committees, an opposition group in Syria. "It's only the regime supporters who partic-

ipated, so there was basically no elections in Homs."

The authorities said the elections were part of a reform package that Mr. Assad announced earlier this year and would lead to parliamentary elections and constitutional amendments next autumn. But critics said that these elections would have little significance because municipal councils have no major power in the government, whose domination by the Baath Party is enshrined in the Constitution.

The government also denied that the general strike was being observed. The state news agency said that the strike was a failure and published an eight-page report to prove it, along with several pictures showing open shops and busy markets.

"The markets in Syrian provinces had normal movement yesterday," the report said. It added that the ordinary workday came "despite incitement by foreign-linked terrorist groups to stop economic and social activity."

But activists from the Local Coordination Committees and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — as well as residents reached by phone in Damascus; Homs, in central Syria; and Dara'a, in the south — said that shops were closed and that some schools did not open Monday.

"It seems that the strike was successful this time," said a 29-year-old resident of Damascus. "It was the talk of the town."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is based in London, also

reported clashes between army defectors and security forces loyal to the government of Mr. Assad.

The Local Coordination Committees said that 12 people were killed in Homs and three in Hama, both cities in central Syria, as well as two in Idlib in northern Syria and one in a suburb of Damascus.

Libyan militia battle kills 4

Rival militias in an area southwest of Libya's capital, Tripoli, exchanged heavy gunfire Monday after a dispute flared up between them that local residents said had killed at least four people over the previous 48 hours, Reuters reported from Wamis, Libya.

Journalists in Wamis, about 190 kilometers, or 120 miles, from Tripoli, said the fighting was between members of the El-Mashasha tribe, based around the town, and fighters from the larger town of Zintan to the north.

Shots could be heard and all men and boys in Wamis were carrying Kalashnikov rifles, they said.

The journalists were shown a school and a mosque that had been hit by artillery or rocket fire, and also saw evidence of shells or rockets landing between houses in a residential area.

Residents said three people had been killed in attacks on the town by fighters from Zintan. There is a longstanding rivalry between Zintan and the El-Mashasha tribe. This worsened during the seven-month conflict against the rule of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

Washington Times (USA)

Syrians stay home in protest

By ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT | Syrians closed their businesses and kept children home from school in several parts of the country Monday in a show of civil disobedience against the regime as a new and fierce round of clashes between troops and army defectors spread, activists said.

Amid the violence, President Bashar Assad's regime pushed ahead with municipal elections that the opposition has dismissed as a meaningless concession that falls far short of their demands for Mr. Assad to give up power.

The call by opposition activists for an open-ended general strike starting Sunday, if widely heeded, could place added economic pressure on Mr. Assad's regime at a time when it already is struggling with growing international sanctions and isolation.

A resident of Homs, the epicenter of the uprising, said only shops selling essential goods were open Monday.

"Only bakeries, pharmacies and some vegetable shops are open," he said, asking that his name not be used for fear of reprisals.

The opposition wants the strike to remain in force until the regime pulls the army out of cities and releases thousands of detainees. There were signs it was being widely observed in particular in areas that are centers of anti-government protest.

Most shops and schools were shut Monday in the restive city of Homs and parts of the southern province of Daraa and the northwestern region of Idlib near the border with Turkey, activists said.

On Sunday, the activist group called the Local Coordination Committees said security forces were breaking into shops in Daraa province closed for the strike in an attempt to force them to open.

Residents in the capital, Damascus, said business continued as usual Sunday and Monday with shops, schools and other businesses operating normally.

Mr. Assad has spent years trying to open up Syria's economy, which helped boost a new and vibrant merchant class even as the regime's political trappings remained unchanged.

If the economy continues to collapse, Mr. Assad could find himself with few allies inside the country.

Still, Mr. Assad has refused to buckle under Arab and international pressure to step down and has shown no sign of easing his crackdown. Economic sanctions, however, could chip away at the regime in the long run and erode his vital support base in the business community.



Video is said to show security forces in Daraa, Syria, on patrol Monday as many Syrians closed shops and kept their children home in a show of civil disobedience.

ARAB PROTESTS AT A GLANCE

A summary of political unrest Monday in the Arab world:

Yemen	Libya	Bahrain	Syria
At least 15 of Qaeda militants escaped from a prison in the southern Yemeni port city of Mocha, tunneling their way out in the second such spectacular jailbreak in a year.	Protesters in Benghazi called for Libya's interim prime minister to step down, saying about the case of reforms and lack of transparency in the government.	British Minister David Cameron called for a speedy implementation of a new reform to a scattering report on human rights abuses during the Arab nation's uprising.	Syrians closed their businesses and kept children home from school in several parts of the country in a show of civil disobedience against the regime.

Source: Associated Press; Agence France-Presse

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Stealth jihad in the Senate

Darbin seeks to silence religious freedom commission

By Frank J. Gaffney Jr.

We have been hearing a lot about the Muslim Brotherhood lately — and some of it is good news. Got used to it. With the Brotherhood's ascendancy in the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey and beyond, the world is going to be subjected to a crash course in Islamist oppression — and what it means for the rest of us.

We were so naive even before the Egyptian elections in which the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and their allies secured approval of 90 percent of the votes in that country's new post-Mubarak parliament — and the murderous violence toward Coptic Christians that preceded them. A reminder came on Dec. 7 when a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit unanimously affirmed convictions of leaders of the MB-associated Holy Land Foundation. The earlier trial in 2008 did much to expose the totalitarian, supremacist nature and evil intentions of that group, elsewhere and here in the United States.

Notably, evidence introduced (and omitted) by the defense in that case by federal prosecutors established that the Brotherhood has established myriad front organizations, including the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT), to pursue what it calls "civilization jihad." This is a stealthy form of holy war designed to "villainize and destroy Western civilization from within ... by their hands [i.e., those of the infidel]."

The Obama administration has greatly facilitated the efforts of such organizations to penetrate and influence the government of the United States. To cite but one example, on Monday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton convened a meeting with representatives of the Brotherhood's multinational official counterpart, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). As Phyllis Kessler points out in a brilliant essay published by PPMedia titled "The End of Religious Freedom," the OIC's stated purpose for this meeting was to counter "media campaigns and fabrications made by some quarters in nonmember states regarding the mistreatment of non-Muslim minorities and communities in the OIC member states under the disguise of religious freedoms and so on."

Put simply, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and other adherents to the Islamist politico-military-legal doctrine of Shariah seek to impose their practice of "blasphemy" laws worldwide. Accordingly, they seek to suppress information that "offends Muslims" or otherwise puts them,

their agenda or their behavior in a negative light — no matter how accurately.

In recent years, the U.S. government has increasingly conformed to what amount to Shariah blasphemy laws. A singular exception has been the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Since its inception by an act of Congress in 1998, the special commission has rendered indispensably important services monitoring and reporting on threats to freedom of religion originating from Islamist and other sources.

USCIRF has, for example, documented the plight of Copts in Egypt and Christians and Jews in other parts of the Middle East. They have exposed how non-Shariah-adherent Muslims and "apostates" from Islam have been raped, tortured and killed for deviating from what is deemed to be the true faith by Brotherhood, OIC and like-minded forces.

The commission has also helped expose how Saudi government-supplied textbooks used, among other places, in American madrasas, cited violent jihadism and intolerance for

legislation that would extend the life of the commission.

Consequently, unless something changes before the current government funding bill expires, our nation's sole official, independent and still-effective watchdog for religious liberty — and the most trusted and important American voice for those being denied it — will go out of business on Friday.

The majority whip's role in this stealthy jihad against an agency that still dares to speak the truth about the Islamist power is all the more reprehensible since Mr. Darbin frequently excoriates his colleagues' use of secret holds. In fact, he has co-sponsored legislation to bar the practice. Such rank hypocrisy simply adds to the venality of Mr. Darbin's conduct in this matter.

So does the repeated reason for the hold: Mr. Darbin has yet to acknowledge he is exercising against the USCIRF. Evidently, he is trying to trick members of the House of Representatives into co-sponsoring funds for the federal government to purchase a state prison in Thompson, IL, that his home state can no longer afford to operate.

When the idea of a federal takeover of this facility was first floated last year, it ran into strenuous opposition on both sides of Capitol Hill. Not only was the deal deemed to be unaffordable at a time of yawning federal deficits, it turned out the Obama administration and its allies in Illinois' Democratic machine in Washington and Springfield had in mind another, even more outrageous, justification: the Thompson prison could serve as the place to relocate terrorists currently held off-shore at Guantanamo Bay, allowing Ghena's disclosure.

In other words, Mr. Darbin is seeking to secure by stealth an earmark that would overturn existing legislation barring the relocation of such detainees inside the United States — and the real risk that they would be granted constitutional rights, access to civilian courts and perhaps be set loose in our country by irresponsible federal judges. How many more reasons do the American people need to oppose and condemn Dick Darbin's chicanery?

Voters in Illinois and elsewhere need to call out Mr. Darbin's contribution to the stealth jihad — both with his office and their own representatives. America needs to safeguard religious freedoms against all enemies, foreign and domestic. To that end, we must strengthen, not gut, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom — the one official entity still performing that vital mission.

Frank J. Gaffney Jr. is president of the Center for Society Policy, a columnist for The Washington Times and host of the nationally syndicated program "Secure Freedom Radio," heard in Washington weekdays at 9pm, on WRC-AM 1280.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB SCHMIDT

people of other faiths. Interestingly, such texts exploit three different ways homosexuals can be executed in conformity with Shariah's treatment of their behavior as a capital offense.

Now that Team Obama has made promoting the radical lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender agenda what Mrs. Clinton calls a "US foreign policy priority," one would think the administration would be grateful for the work the religious freedom commission has done, among other things, to expose and demand changes in such Saudi textbooks.

To the contrary, the Obama administration has been working behind the scenes to do as its Islamist friends have demanded by shutting down the USCIRF. It has invited for this purpose Sen. Dick Durbin, the Senate's No. 2 Democrat. Mr. Durbin is not only perfectly placed to do the deed stealthily, he has his own close associations with a number of the Brotherhood's top fronts and operations in his home state of Illinois, in Washington and elsewhere across the country.

As it happens, in addition to serving as the majority whip, Mr. Durbin is a member of both the Senate Foreign Relations and Appropriations Committees — the panels responsible for reauthorizing and funding the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. He has used his leadership and committee positions to place what amount to secret "holds" on

The Washington Post (USA)

Syrians strike to pressure Assad

Action intended to erode
autocrat's support
among merchant classes

BY ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY

BEIRUT — Syrians closed their businesses and kept children home from school Monday in a general strike, a powerful show of civil disobedience to pressure President Bashar al-Assad to end his nearly nine-month-old crack-down on a popular uprising.

The open-ended strike is designed to erode Assad's main base of support — the merchant classes that have benefited in recent years as the president opened up the economy.

If the economy continues to collapse, Assad could find himself with few allies inside the country, where calls are growing for him to step down. The authoritarian president is also struggling with international isolation and sanctions.

It is difficult to gauge the strength of the strike because the regime has banned most foreign journalists and prevented local reporters from moving freely. But there were signs that it was being widely observed, in particular in centers of anti-government rallies: the southern province of Daraa, the suburbs of the capital, Damascus, the north-western region of Idlib and the restive city of Homs.

The opposition wants the strike to continue until the regime pulls the army out of cities and releases thousands of detainees.

"Only bakeries, pharmacies and some vegetable shops are open," said a resident of Homs who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. He said those stores didn't close because they sell essential goods.

Security was tight, he said, with agents deployed at every intersection in the city. Gunfire erupted sporadically.

"There is a terrifying security deployment in Homs," he said.

An official with the United Nations said Monday that more than 5,000 people have died in the uprising. Navi Pillay, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, told reporters that she had informed Security Council members of the sharp increase in deaths. The United Nations had previously estimated the death toll at 4,000.

Activists said a new round of clashes between Syrian troops and army defectors began Sunday and spread Monday. The violence is raising fears of civil war.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that fresh clashes between soldiers and defectors were reported Monday in Idlib and that fighting continued for a second day in Daraa.

At least 16 people were reported killed nationwide Monday, most of them in Homs, according to activist networks.

— Associated Press

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

Syrians Close Shops in General Strike

Associated Press

BEIRUT—Syrians closed their businesses and kept children home from school Monday as part of a general strike, a powerful show of civil disobedience to pressure President Bashar al-Assad to end his nine-month-old crackdown on a popular uprising.

The open-ended strike takes direct aim at the country's already ailing economy. It is designed to erode Mr. Assad's main base of support, the new and vibrant merchant classes who have benefited in recent years as the president opened up the economy.

If the economy continues to collapse, Mr. Assad could find himself with few allies inside the country, where calls are growing by the day for him to step down. The authoritarian president is struggling under international isolation and suffocating sanctions.

It was difficult to gauge the strength of the strike because the regime has banned most foreign journalists and prevented local reporters from moving freely. But there were signs it was being widely observed in particular in centers of antigovernment protest: the southern province of Daraa, the suburbs of the capital, Damascus, the northern region of Idlib and in the restive city of Homs.

The opposition wants the strike to remain in force until the regime pulls the army out of cities and releases thousands of detainees. "Only bakeries, pharmacies and some vegetable shops are open," said one resident of Homs. He said those stores stayed open because they sell essential goods.



Syrians voted in municipal elections in Damascus on Monday as violence raged in several parts of the country.

In addition to the strikes, he said, security was tight in Homs on Monday with agents deployed at every intersection. The crackle of gunfire erupted sporadically.

"There is a terrifying security deployment in Homs," he said. Activists said new clashes between Syrian troops and army defectors began Sunday with a major battle in the south and spread to new areas Monday, raising fears the conflict is spiraling toward civil war.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said new clashes between soldiers and defectors were reported Monday in Idlib and that fighting continued for a second day in Daraa province. Four members of the security forces were killed as a result of the clashes there, the Observatory said.

At least 16 people were reported killed nationwide Monday, most of them in Homs, according to various activist networks. On Sunday, army defectors set several military vehicles ablaze in a prolonged battle in Daraa province. The uprising has grown increasingly violent in recent months as defecting soldiers fight back against

vote as an overhaul measure because some new rules were introduced recently allowing more people to run in the election.

"The number of voters is very small," said Mohamed Saleh, an activist in Homs. He said security in the city was very tight and people were too scared to go out. "Even in normal days, people did not give much attention to municipal elections," he said.

Since the uprising began, Mr. Assad has made several gestures of reform. But after nine months, the opposition is demanding nothing less than the downfall of the regime.

The U.N. says more than 4,000 people have been killed since March. The revolt has raised concerns of regional conflagration, given Syria's strategic importance in the Middle East with alliances in Iran and with the Shiite militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon.

As the violence continues, there are fears the conflict could morph into a civil war and exacerbate long-standing sectarian tensions.

Syria is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, but Mr. Assad and the ruling elite belong to the Alawite sect which accounts for about 10% of the population.

The political domination by Alawites has bred seething resentments, which Mr. Assad tried to tamp down by enforcing the strict, secular ideology of his Baath Party. But as the popular uprising surged and Sunni army conscripts refused to fire on civilians, Mr. Assad called upon his Alawite power base to crush the resistance, feeding sectarian tensions of the kind that fueled civil wars in Iraq and Lebanon.

Witnesses said turnout was low. The opposition doesn't consider the vote a legitimate concession by the regime because it coincides with the crackdown on antigovernment protesters. The regime had touted the

Toward a Dictator-Free World

BY MARK PALMER
AND PATRICK GLAZ

Dictators made the 20th century the bloodiest in human history, with over 100 million deaths directly caused by Stalin, Hitler and Mao. Armed with nuclear weapons, the 21st century's dictators could kill upwards of a billion people. That's why it's folly to think we can ever achieve a "nuclear-free" world—as President Obama seeks, echoing President Reagan and, more recently, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn and others—without first achieving a dictator-free world.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei clearly considers nu-

clear weapons central to his vision for dominating the Middle East and destroying Israel. North Korea's Kim Jong Il, running a failed state, sees the continuing possession of nuclear weapons as his one strength, the key to remaining personally in power. It is an illusion to believe he will negotiate it away. China has shown little interest in joining Russia and the United States in major reductions from current levels. And since the 1986 Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Reykjavik, Russia has refused to agree to a plan for a nuclear-free world without constraining the very missile defense systems which would help make it possible.

Recognizing these barriers does not mean we should simply sit back and wait for dictators to fall; there is much we can and should do to control and reduce the number of these weapons of mass destruction. But the closer we get to a nuclear-free world, the more difficult will be the challenge presented by dictators who possess them.

We will never be able to trust and verify that dictators have not hidden away a sufficient number of weapons to cause us catastrophic damage. The so-called Great Tunnel of China—3,000 miles of tunnels hiding a huge arsenal of nuclear warheads and

bombs—is just the latest reminder of the lengths to which an authoritarian regime will go to conceal these weapons. Despite our best intelligence efforts, estimates of the current Chinese stockpile vary wildly, from 400 to 4,000. We face similar problems in determining what Iran and North Korea have.

There's a reason we don't worry when democracies have nukes.

Achieving a dictator-free world would massively simplify the verification challenge and open the road to the total elimination and prevention of return of these weapons. Nuclear-armed democracies are not threats to world peace. Democracies have freedom of the press, representative government and publicly known and debated defense budgets. Hiding nuclear weapons programs is qualitatively much more difficult and massively less likely.

But is it possible to create a world without dictators? Is the world destined always to have strong men and monopoly parties, or can these species be made extinct? While history is certainly not unidirectional, and freedom

must be won and protected, it is encouraging that the number of "Not Free" countries (as measured by Freedom House) is now down to 47 out of 194 nations.

The foreign policy establishment's near-total pessimism about various countries' prospects for democracy has often proven wrong over the past half-century, with dozens of supposedly rock-solid dictators being ousted by their own people, all too often without much support from the democratic world.

Strongly supporting democratic movements inside dictatorships reinforces rather than contradicts our goal of a nuclear-free world. Our best allies are the Iranian, North Korean, Chinese and other captive peoples who want a more just, prosperous, peaceful and free life. Engaging them as well as the regimes that oppress them is not only possible but essential. The dictators assume we are working for their downfall even when we aren't. Actually helping the forces of freedom will add no additional burden to the arms control process; it will give us added leverage.

So let us commit ourselves to achieving a dictator-free world and a nuclear-free world—recognizing that we can make progress on both fronts simultaneously, but that we cannot get to zero nukes

without first making the last dictator retire.

Mr. Palmer, a former director of the State Department's Office of Arms Control and Disarmament, is author of "Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Mr. Glaz, a lawyer, is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center.

Pepper . . . and Salt
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"If you are satisfied with your outgoing message press '1'. If not press '0' for a live therapist who can assist you with your control issues."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Strike shuts shops as battle rages in Syria

AMMAN — Syrian troops and army defectors have fought one of the biggest battles in Syria's nine-month uprising while a protest strike shut businesses in a new gesture of civil disobedience, residents and activists said.

Arab foreign ministers will meet Saturday to discuss a response to Syria's conditional acceptance of an Arab peace plan aimed at ending its crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, Egypt's MENA news agency said, citing an Arab diplomat.

And in a major international development likely to raise Western pressure on Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, France's Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said Paris believed Syria was behind attacks that wounded French peacekeepers in neighbouring Lebanon on Friday.

In Sunday's fighting, Syrian troops mainly from the 12th Armoured Brigade based in Isra, 40 km from the southern border with Jordan, stormed the nearby town of

Busra Al-Harir.

A housewife in Busra, who did not want to be named, told Reuters by telephone that the town was being hit by machinegun fire from tanks. Her children were crying.

The sound of explosions and heavy machineguns was heard there and in Lujah, an area of rocky hills north of the town, where defectors from the army have been hiding and attacking military supply lines, residents and activists said. "Lujah has been the safest area for defectors to hide because it is difficult for tanks and infantry to infiltrate. The region has caves and secret passageways and extends all the way to Damascus countryside," said an activist, who gave his name as Abu Omar.

Opposition activists said they had shut down much of the capital and other towns with a strike, the biggest walkout by workers since the protest movement demanding Assad's removal erupted in March.

— Reuters

Arab News (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Syria sets terms for admitting observers

AGENCIES

DAMASCUS: Syria has "responded positively" to an Arab League request to send observers to the country as part of a peace plan, and the nation's eight-north crisis, the Foreign Ministry said Monday.

But there appeared to be serious stumbling blocks, Syria demanded that the Arab League sweep recent

decisions taken against Damascus, including economic sanctions and suspension of the country from the Arab League, before the protocol is signed.

"We are waiting for the Arab League's response and all decisions taken by the League in Syria's absence should be annulled," Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Mahlouf told reporters in Damascus.

Syria's top diplomat, Walid Muallim, "responded positively" to the League and sent a letter to the organization's chief, Nabil Elaraby on Sunday night, Muallim said. He said Muallim's message contained some "mutual arrangements that won't affect the essence of the plan."

In Cairo, Elaraby said he was awaiting Arab League ministers on Syria's response to the League's

Sunday deadline for Damascus to accept the observer mission. He confirmed Muallim's letter contained "conditions and demands."

An increasingly isolated Syria on Monday imposed additional sanctions on former friend Turkey. In a display of muscle that could be intended to deter any idea of foreign military intervention in a crisis, which has killed at least 4,000 people, the army staged a big exer-

cise with riot police, tanks and helicopters. Top generals watched the war games and state television made it their headline news story, as the death toll mounted.

The civilians were killed by security forces in Hama, according to the website of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Four died when troops fired on a funeral procession and one man was shot at a hospital

in a youth district of gunshot victims sustained at the weekend. In southern Latakia province, three members of the security forces were shot dead by army defectors in front of the local courthouse, the website reported.

The corpse of Basma Ajlouni, 35, was handed back to relatives in Hama, a section of state funeral, it said. Already hit by economic sanctions from the United States and

Europe, Syria was punished last month by regional countries, with sanctions announced by the Arab League and imposed by Turkey, other Assad's ally.

Syria responded to Turkish sanctions by imposing a tariff of 30 percent on its imports and probable duties on food and freight. State news agency SANA quoted a pro- Assad economist as saying Turkey would be "the biggest loser."

Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Syrians back general strike

Businesses, schools will continue to stay shut in show of disobedience against Assad regime

Elizabeth A. Kennedy

BEIRUT — Syrians closed their businesses and kept children home from school in several parts of the country on Monday in a show of civil disobedience against the regime as a new and fierce round of clashes between troops and army

defections spread, activists said. Amid the violence, President Bashar Assad's regime pushed ahead with municipal elections that the opposition has dismissed as a meaningless concession that falls far short of their demands for Assad to give up power.

A call by opposition activists for an open-ended general strike starting from Sunday, if widely

heeded, could place added economic pressure on Assad's regime at a time when it is already struggling with growing international sanctions and isolation.

A resident of Homs, the epicenter of the uprising, said only shops selling essential goods were open on Monday.

"Only bakeries, pharmacies and some vegetable shops are open,"

he said, asking that his name not be used for fear of reprisals.

The opposition wants the strike to remain in force until the regime pulls the army out of cities and releases thousands of detainees. And there were signs it was being widely observed in particular in areas that are centers of anti-government protest.

Most shops and schools were shut on Monday in the restive city of Homs and parts of the southern province of Deraa and the northwestern region of Idlib near the border with Turkey, activists said.

Activists said a new round of fierce clashes between Syrian troops and army defectors began on Sunday with a major battle in the south and spread to new areas

on Monday, raising fears the conflict is spiraling toward civil war.

The Beirut-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says new clashes between soldiers and defectors were reported on Monday in Idlib in the north, and that fighting continued for a second day in southern Deraa province. — AP

> SEE EDIT & PAGE 15



A woman casts her vote in Damascus on Monday. — AP

Syrians go to polls amid general strike

Panel claims municipal elections turnout good

DAMASCUS — Syrians voted on Monday in municipal elections held amid a general strike called by the opposition and as security forces killed another seven people as they pursued a crackdown on dissent. The elections committee, in a statement, said "voting is proceeding in a democratic spirit," adding that voting turnout was "good." It did not elaborate.

Opposition activists have urged citizens to intensify a civil disobedience campaign launched on Sunday in a bid to bring down the government of President Bashar Al Assad.

Polling stations opened at 0600 GMT, with 42,889 candidates vying for 17,588 seats. Information Minister Adnan Mahmud said the elections were part of a reform package pledged by the authorities

**“ I am surprised that elections are taking place under such circumstances
Govt opponent**

to promote democracy and would be followed by legislative polls in February.

"These elections are taking place on time in line with a reform programme," Mahmud said.

"They are taking place although some are trying, in vain, to stop them through terrorist acts carried out by armed groups who are terrorising the citizens," he said.

Last week local administration

minister Omar Ghalawanji said a special indelible ink would be used for the first time in the municipal elections "to prevent any fraud."

"I voted because we want to contribute to the reforms (pledged by Assad) and choose the best" candidates, said Zeina, a 35-year-old woman, as she emerged from a polling state in the central Umayyad Square of Damascus.

Ahmad, a pro-regime taxi driver, said the vote was essential "as a response to those calling for a strike."

But a regime opponent, speaking on condition of anonymity, said he did not expect a huge turnout.

"I am surprised that elections are taking place under such circumstances," he said. "Cities gripped by the uprising are not concerned by these elections." — AFP



Syrians across the country voted in municipal elections yesterday. President Bashar Al Assad ordered the elections as part of a programme of promised reforms but activists rejected the ballot. (Photo: Reuters/ AP)

Syrian opposition boycotts 'meaningless' elections

Ten more die as violent repression of protests continues

Phil Sartin
Foreign Correspondent

DAMASCUS (Reuters) - Municipal elections yesterday amid continued violence that killed at least 18 people, and a boycott of voting by opposition groups.

The authorities hailed the nationwide ballot as a critical step towards democracy, and evidence that president Bashar Al Assad is acting on promises to reform a decades-old autocracy.

"Despite the hard situation in the country, there is the political will among the leadership to hold a democratic election and to let the people have their say," said Yusra Zuhbi, a prominent member of the ruling Baath Party. "It also shows that life is normal, with no problems in the big cities."

Opposition activists, who refused to field any candidates or campaign, dismissed the ballot as "entirely meaningless".

The localisation of positions being contested here has paved the way for issuing neighbourhood building permits, local decision-making is firmly in the hands of provincial governors and security officers appointed by the president.

"Even if we took part and voted

every seat in every district in the country, we would still not have the power to make a single decision about the smallest thing," said Mohamed Munnir, a leading member of the National Coordination Committees, one of the major opposition political blocs.

"To call this an 'election' is an abuse of the word, it's empty talk, and it is certainly not a sign of a serious reform agenda, if they are serious about reform, let them release all the political prisoners and allow independent observers into Syria for a start."

Syria, continued on AFD →

→ More Syria, page 412
→ Main editorial, page 411

Opposition chooses to boycott 'meaningless' elections

→ Syria, from page 41

Government officials said this ballot - municipal elections are held every four years - differs from previous ones because the list system that guaranteed dominance for a Baath party-led coalition had been dropped, ostensibly giving a freer choice of candidates.

In addition, this year a judicial committee rather than the interior ministry is overseeing electoral integrity, and a new local administration law purports to boost de-

centralisation.

State-run media reported yesterday that Syrians had "flocked" to the polls, although no official figure for turnout was given. However, even staunch regime supporters quietly acknowledged that few people would take part, given the low stakes and continuing violence.

"Maybe 40 to 45 per cent will participate in Damascus and stable cities but in the areas where there are problems, like rural Damascus, Homeq, Daraa and Idlib, 10 per cent

turnout will be between 2 and 10 per cent," said Mr Zuhbi.

Opposition activists said fewer than 5 per cent of the eligible 14.5 million voters would participate, and that the authorities would falsify the returns to make it appear as if turnout had been high.

In a polling station at a school in Marsaken Barzeh, on the restive northeastern side of Damascus, fewer than 80 people had cast votes by midday yesterday.

"It is my national duty and the duty of every Syrian citizen to exercise

the right to vote," said Nada Al Sweda, a 35-year-old government employee.

"Everyone has their own opinions and aspirations and I should choose a candidate who will best fulfil those, if I want a better municipal authority, I should cast my vote to make sure that improvement happens," he said.

The bloodshed that has characterised Syria's nine-month uprising continued yesterday, with 10 people killed by security forces in Idlib and Homs, according to rights monitors. A second day of heavy fighting

between army deserters and loyalist forces was also reported in Idlib and Daraa, and a general strike called on Sunday was still being observed in some parts of the country, including Homs and Douma.

By the latest UN count more than 4,000 civilians have been killed by the security services since March. Syrian officials claim upwards of 1,000 security personnel have been killed by insurgents, whom they blame for civilian casualties.

To: perseus@thenational.ae



Anti-government protesters mourn the death of Abdul Haleem Baqour during his funeral in Hula near Homs this weekend. Baqour was killed by shrapnel during shelling by the army last week. Reuters

'If you want to die, go to Syria'

Homs is a war zone

Eyewitnesses recount how security forces are targeting civilians

Douglas Hamilton and Erika Solomon

BEIRUT // The dead can lie uncollected in Homs until the shooting dies down or darkness screens their recovery. In daytime, sniper fire and bursts from machineguns can make it too dangerous to retrieve the corpses of people shot on the open street.

Accounts from people who have witnessed the scene in recent days, some having been wounded and escaped abroad, said the shooting has been heavy and often indiscriminate. Together with video distributed by opposition activists, it suggests that some parts of the city

of more than a million people now resemble a war zone.

Homs has become the centre of resistance to months of repression by the army and security forces of Syria's President Bashar Al Assad. Mr Al Assad has insisted there is no shoot-to-kill policy.

Mohammed, 20, an army conscript who defected, was shot while fighting in Homs a week or so ago and was carried to safety. Now in Lebanon, he is recovering from multiple bullet wounds.

"I was lying on the ground for hours with my friends. Five of them were dead. I eventually passed out and didn't wake up until much later that night when the gunfire stopped. Our friends could come retrieve our bodies," said Mohammed.

"The bodies can lie in the roads for hours until the shooting stops long enough to go out on the street."

The United Nations has said that at least 4,000 people have been killed in Syria since March. The

government says more than 1,000 members of its security services have been killed.

They were the target, it has said, of "armed terrorist gangs" taking money, orders and weapons from abroad to destabilise Syria, stirring up revolt as part of a foreign conspiracy.

Tayfun Sari, 38, a Turkish lorry driver, arrived from Syria at the Turkish border last week looking like he had not slept in days. He described a scene of chaos and fear.

"If anyone wants to end his life or kill himself he should go to Syria," Mr Sari said. "They are shooting civilians."

"I saw five soldiers dead on the road after Homs to Turkey and nobody was doing anything for them."

They were lying on the road. I saw military tanks on the road between Homs and Hama. In Homs, civilians were cutting off the road with burning tyres and the military was opening fire on protesters.

"There were many bullet casings on the road and some trucks had flat tyres. I was caught in crossfire but luckily my lorry was not hit. I saw a Syrian military vehicle on fire and a house on fire."

From districts of Homs where residents have defied orders to stop protesting, videos show camouflaged bunkers, armoured fighting vehicles, riddled and burnt-out cars, bullet-raked shopfronts and people crouching to dart across empty streets.

The video shows how defiance persists. Flash demonstrations by hundreds form in narrow streets, chanting and waving the old Syrian flag. In images over the past week, they gather, shout slogans against Mr Al Assad, and scatter when shooting starts.

Mr Al Assad, whose 11 years in power have continued a family rule established by his father in 1970, has denied that the army or police have deliberately used lethal forces against peaceful demonstrators:

"We don't kill our people," he said on last week. "There was no command to kill or be brutal."

According to some activists the number of dead since March is now well beyond 4,000. One site lists 4,330 by name. With up to a quarter of the victims coming from the security forces, military funerals held almost daily feature honour guards and laurel wreaths for "martyrs killed by terrorists".

Widely differing estimates of death tolls cannot be resolved. Personal accounts can be challenged and contradicted.

Not every portion of film can be vouched for as genuine and newly shot. But those hundreds of bursts of video streaming out of Syria, many from sources known to Reuters and checked by independent journalists familiar with Homs and other cities, display an undeniable picture of extreme violence.

* Reuters
 ↪ More on Syria, page a17

Neighbours start to feel the threat of Syrian unrest

For nine months, the world has been watching Syrians be killed at the hands of the Assad regime. For neighbours and former allies of Damascus, this had been an obvious human rights issue. Now, very quickly, we are seeing it become a fundamental regional security concern.

The threat of a spillover has already turned into a reality for Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, although certainly violence has so far been contained. In Amman at the weekend, anti-Assad protesters clashed with diplomats at the Syrian embassy. Accounts of the violence varied, but an open attack on an embassy in Jordan surely has the attention of King Abdullah's government.

There have also been troubling signs in Lebanon, which so often has been the victim of Syrian ambitions. On Sunday, Alain Juppe, the French foreign minister, said Syria was responsible for an attack on French peacekeepers in southern Lebanon. "Syria's armed wing" – Hizbollah – was blamed. After the militia's leader Hassan Nasrallah has so openly endorsed the bloody regime, Lebanon's security is again held hostage by its larger neighbour.

As the death grip of the Assad regime weakens, we are seeing a return to the time when regional and global powers all had a hand in Syria's affairs. Some of this clearly stems from human rights concerns: France has proposed humanitarian corridors. Turkey is lobbying for a military-patrolled buffer zone in Syria's north.

But overlapping security issues mean that the philanthropic line is quickly becoming blurred; Ankara also has an overriding interest

to prevent unrest in Syria's Kurdish communities from affecting its own minorities. Every neighbour has to be concerned with the flow of weapons and materiel across borders.

There has been more concerted foreign pressure, in particular economic sanctions levied by Arab countries threaten the Assads' staying power, but there are reasons to proceed cautiously – none more so than the precarious regional balance. The regimes death throes could be savage.

What is still missing in this milieu is strong leadership in the Syrian opposition. In that vacuum, opponents of the regime, such as those who attacked the embassy in Amman, are doing their cause more harm than good.



What is missing is strong opposition leadership

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

Kilis feels the pain most over lost trade with Syria

AYDIN ALBAYRAK / KILIS

The trading session between Turkey and Syria has hit Kilis particularly hard. The reason is simple: The border town doesn't have much from which to make a living. The province's entire agricultural land is very limited, and the only agricultural activity is viticulture and raising olives. The province doesn't have much industry, either, nor is it situated on a major transit route. And that makes Kilis heavily dependent on the revenue that used to come from border trade with Syria. Now with the crisis between Turkey and Syria, that's also almost gone.

Mehmet Ocakoglu, president of the Kilis Chamber of Commerce and Industry, told Today's Zaman, "80 per cent of the economy in Kilis depended on the border trade." The Syrians who used to come to shop would each spend \$500-1,000, but since relations between Turkey and Syria have deteriorated, 95 percent of this business has stopped. People in Kilis would also

visit Syria daily, buy various items, such as tea, and sell them at a profit in Kilis. Before the crisis, this was the way a good many people in Kilis made a living.

Ocakoglu, who used to get wood, coal, black cumin and leather scraps from Syria and sell them in the Turkish market, notes: "But it's no longer possible to do such trade any longer. Kilis is now left to its own devices." In Kilis cases of burglary and theft are almost nonexistent. But if the present crisis should persist, Ocakoglu worries there is no positive outcome for Kilis.

In Kilis, which is situated only four kilometers from Syria, there are shuttle cars that run between Kilis and Aleppo/Damascus. Twelve cab companies are in this business. The price per passenger is TL 30. The manager of one of these companies, who asked not to be named, told Today's Zaman that business has plummeted by 95 percent since the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared Syria unsafe. In the good old days, the company sometimes used to make more than 10 runs to Syria, but now business is very slack.

In this border town with a population of about 90,000, in Syria, who like to make a quick trip for their shopping, there are several shops dealing in a huge variety of items from cleaning supplies to candles, dishes, shampoo, mineral water, tea glasses and so on. These shops were founded with a view to only serve Syrians. For the most part locals don't live in that neighborhood. A shop owner told Today's Zaman that they were posing a real problem, especially since the Muslim holiday festival of sacrifice.

Transporters have also felt deeply the negative effects of the crisis. The border gate at Kilis, Ocakoglu says, is open, but nobody knows, not even the Syrian officials at the border, what tariff is to be applied to Turkish goods and trucks because no official document has yet been issued by the government. "The business at Syrian customs, whatever there is, runs in accordance with what the Syrian government announced about 10 days ago in which Syria put at least a 30 percent customs tax on Turkish products. But actually everything is pending," Mehmet Tosdemir, president of

Tosdemir Transportation, told Today's Zaman. With a fleet of trucks of his own and being an exporter mainly of cement to the Syrian market, he is one of the people most qualified to know about Syria. But he also feels helpless because of the sorry unknowns.

In order to discourage Turkish exporters, Syria not only raised taxes on Turkish products, but also levied on transportation enormously. A truck to Syria now costs \$1,410, whereas the figure was \$485 before-hand. And this figure doesn't cover the cost of petrol or pocket money needed to be given to Syrian officials. Some of Tosdemir's trucks were about to be sent loaded with Turkish exporters' products to Syria just when the Syrian government announced they would increase the customs duty on Turkish goods nearly two weeks ago. Those trucks still can't leave for Syria because the price has so greatly increased due to new taxes that it would be unreasonable for them to be bought, the cost being too high. For cement it is the same thing. "The export costs to Syria have doubled, and exports have stopped," Tosdemir said.

BATTLES SPREAD ACROSS SYRIA, REGIONAL CONFLAGRATION FEARED

Fierce clashes between Syrian troops and army defectors spread to new areas Monday after a major battle in the south raised new fears the 9-month-old conflict was spiraling toward civil war, activists said. The uprising against President Bashar al-Assad has grown increasingly violent in recent months as defecting soldiers fight back against the army and once-peaceful protesters take up arms to protect themselves against the military assault. The UN says more than 4,000 people have been killed since March. The revolt has raised concerns of a regional conflagration, given Syria's strategic role in the Middle East with alliances in Iran and with the Shiite militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says new clashes between soldiers and defectors were reported on Monday in the northwestern region of Idlib, and that fighting continued for a second day in the southern province of Daraa. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 11**

Syria tense, regional conflagration feared

The uprising against President Bashar al-Assad has grown increasingly violent in recent months as defecting soldiers fight back against the army and once-peaceful protesters take up arms to protect themselves against the military assault. New clashes between soldiers and defectors reported in Idlib



Men raise their shoes as a sign of disrespect during a protest demanding the release of Syrian refugee Ahmed al-Shureiqi in front of the Syrian Embassy in Amman.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Also on Monday, Syria's state media reported that voting started in scheduled municipal elections, but witnesses say turnout was low. The opposition does not consider the vote a legitimate concession by the regime because it coincides with the deadly crackdown on anti-government protesters.

Since the uprising began, Assad has made several gestures of reform. But after nine months, the opposition is demanding nothing less than the downfall of the regime.

It is almost impossible to verify events in Syria, because the regime has banned most foreign journalists and prevented local reporters from moving freely. Accounts from activists and witnesses, along with amateur videos posted online, provide key channels of information.

On Sunday, army defectors set several military vehicles ablaze in a prolonged battle in Daraa province. Sunday also marked the start of calls for a general strike in Syria to push the government to stop its bloody crackdown. The strike was open-ended, until the regime pulls the army out of cities and releases detainees.

Because of the restrictions placed on reporters, it was difficult to gauge how many people were abiding by the strike. But activists said few people were out in Daraa on Monday. Assad has refused to buckle under Arab and international pressure to step down and has shown no sign of easing his crackdown.

Economic sanctions, however, could chip away at the regime in the long run and erode its vital support base in the business community.

France blames Syria for Lebanon attack on its troops

In Paris, France's Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said on Sunday Paris believed Syria was behind attacks on its troops in Lebanon earlier last week.

A roadside bomb wounded five French peacekeepers in southern Lebanon on Friday, in the third attack this year on United Nations forces deployed near the frontier with Israel.

"We have strong reason to believe these attacks came from there [Syria]," Juppe said on RFI radio. "We think it's most probable, but I don't have proof." France -- with Britain, Germany and the United States -- has been pushing for the UN Security Council to take up the issue of Syria again. In October, Russia and China vetoed a resolution that would have condemned Damascus's crackdown on pro-democracy protesters and threatened possible sanctions.

Paris is now pushing for the creation of humanitarian corridors to provide aid to the population. When asked if he believed Hezbollah had carried out the attack on behalf of Damascus, Juppe said: "Absolutely. It is Syria's armed wing [in Lebanon]." There was no immediate response from Hezbollah.

Friday's bombing follows attacks in May and July against French and Italian peacekeepers and comes as the United Nations prepares a review of its 12,000-strong operation, which was beefed up after Israel's 34-day war with Hezbollah

in 2006. Juppe called on the Lebanese government to ensure the safety of peacekeepers in the country and said the review at the UN would assess the consequences of the attacks and redefine the objectives of the UNIFIL mission.

Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati is due to visit Paris in January and Syria is likely to be top of the agenda.

France has led Western efforts to try to force Assad to end the crackdown. Juppe has suggested a need to set up zones to protect civilians, the first proposal by a major Western power for outside intervention on the ground.

Resistance has been fiercest in the central city of Homs. Increasingly in the last several weeks the town has seen sectarian killings and kidnappings between Sunni Muslims, who are the majority in Syria, and members of Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

Juppe said he was worried about the situation in Homs and hoped the Arab League would still be able to convince Damascus to allow observers into the country to provide aid and see what was happening on the ground.

"It is still being discussed and we hope the [Arab League] will achieve it," he said.

The UN Security Council agreed on Friday to France's request for a briefing on Syria's crackdown from the UN human rights chief, overcoming resistance from Russia, China and Brazil, Western envoys said. Juppe said Assad had lost all legitimacy and Paris was pushing Russia to change its stance at the United Nations where Moscow has refused to endorse any Security Council resolution against Syria. **Beirut AP/Reuters**



CHINESE ENVOY SAYS CHINA DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT SYRIA

AYDIN ALBAYRAK / ABDULLAH BOZKURT ANKARA

The top Chinese diplomat in Turkey has said his country is deeply concerned with the situation in Syria, Turkey's neighbor, and added that Beijing is not pleased with what has been happening recently in Syria.

In an exclusive interview with Today's Zaman, Chinese Ambassador to Turkey Xiaosheng Gong said many people have misinterpreted the Chinese position when it comes to the embroiled Syrian regime, stressing that "just like Turkey and many other countries in the world, China is deeply concerned by the situation in Syria." He added, "The recent developments in Syria are not what we would like to see."

"The Chinese policy towards the Syrian issue is that the international community should support a political solution by means of dialogue and negotiations rather than confrontation," he underscored, noting that the "sovereignty of a country" should be respected.

Turkey and China, two emerging economies at either end of the Asian continent, have been making efforts to promote bilateral relations and, with them, trade in recent years. The two countries enjoy a yearly trade volume of around \$20 billion. This trade is heavily in China's favor - imports from China amount to \$15 billion while Turkish exports at \$2 billion. However, the ambassador assured that he has been making efforts to promote trade for mutual benefit. Turkish firms have also been taking steps to strengthen their presence in the Chinese market.

Attracting Chinese direct investment to Turkey

One way to balance out the wide gap in trade is to attract Chinese direct investment to Turkey. The number of Chinese firms looking for investment opportunities in Turkey seems to be on the rise. Tourism is another area that would help Turkey with the imbalance in bilateral trade. The number of Chinese tourists visiting Turkey has almost doubled in the last three years. When Gong was appointed to his post in Ankara in late 2008, the figure stood at less than 40,000; however, this year the number of Chinese tourists to Turkey is expected to reach 100,000.

2012 will be the "Year of Chinese Culture" in Turkey, with many cultural events to be held in various cities across Turkey all year long.

The "Year of Chinese Culture" in Turkey began Monday with an art exhibition titled "Color from the Silk Road," where works of famous Chinese painters were on display. "The main theme of the event is the historical Silk Road, a road of friendship which is full of morning, interesting tales," Ambassador Gong stated. "We have chosen 'Silk Road' as a theme for the purpose of creating an example for other countries. That is an example of cooperation," Gong said. For the Chinese, the Silk Road is not just a passage for trade between continents but also a passage by which cultures and civilizations were conveyed to each other.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to the event, which aims to promote understanding between the two countries' peoples. More than 50 projects, performances, exhibitions, concerts and forums will be held not only in Ankara and Istanbul but also in such cities as Bursa, Izmir, Trabzon, Konya and Antalya. More than a thousand Chinese artists will perform shows, and a Chinese film week has been slated. What comes as good news for lovers of Chinese cuisine, Chinese food will also be included at these events. Reciprocally, 2013 will be celebrated as the "Year of Turkish Culture" in China.

However, as one chat with Ambassador Xiaosheng Gong deepened, the conversation tilted upon Turkey's politics and the economy that culture, which may not be surprising given the tense situation in the region. There has been a lot of international outcry over the Syrian

government's crackdown on civilian protesters, Turkey, the Arab League, the EU and the US have all announced sanctions targeting the regime in Syria. What is the position of China on Syria, and do you think Turkey has done enough to resolve the situation in Syria?

Talking of the situation in Syria, I think many people have [the] wrong interpretation of the Chinese position. They wrongly interpret the Chinese position as supporting the Syrian regime's suppression [of] its own people. This is totally wrong. The Chinese policy towards the Syrian issue is that the international community should support a political solution by means of dialogue and negotiations rather than confrontation. The second principle of [the] Chinese policy is [of] policy of noninterference. [The] sovereignty of a country should be respected by other countries.

Just like Turkey and many other countries in the world, China is deeply concerned by the situation in Syria. The recent developments in Syria are not what we would like to see. Having served as an ambassador for more than 30 years in the Middle Eastern region, when I look back to history, we can find examples in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Drawing lessons from these examples, we think the international community should encourage the resolution of this problem by means of dialogue.

And no country can say now we have exhausted the diplomatic and political means to solve the Syrian problem.

Both countries are also members of the G-20 platform. What are the common positions China and Turkey take on the G-20 platform?

In the international arena, including the G-20, China and Turkey share a lot in common and they share the same position in most of the cases because these two countries have [a] very similar situation. They are both rising and developing countries and they both wish to have bigger roles in the world economy and a bigger say in the international affairs.

Nowadays, the world is gripped by [a] financial crisis and also there are security concerns in the world. As Chinese President Hu Jintao says, members of the international community should not criticize each other. I think this should be the approach we should take to work international affairs - that is, cooperation and dialogue.

Compensating for trade imbalance

The trade between Turkey and China is heavily in your favor. Chinese officials say they will compensate for the trade imbalance with direct investments, joint ventures... What more do you think could be done to promote Turkish products in the Chinese market?

True, in the bilateral trade China enjoys a trade surplus. But over the past several years, Turkey-Chinese trade has undergone a rapid development; trade volume has grown heavily. Many Turkish businessmen visit to China. When you look at the Chinese trade, a trade volume of around \$1 trillion. China enjoys a general balance between imports and exports. But in terms of Turkish-Chinese trade, the present situation is not what we would like to see, we would like to see balance. As soon as I assumed my post in Turkey, I made great efforts

to promote bilateral trade to mutual benefit, and will continue to do so.

To change this situation we are working in several directions. One is to encourage more Chinese direct investment in Turkey. More and more Chinese enterprises are now looking for investment opportunities in Turkey. Just last month, many Chinese enterprises came to Turkey to look for investment options in the area [of] agriculture, food and minerals.

The second area in which we have made a lot of efforts is tourism. This year the number of Chinese tourists visiting Turkey is expected to reach 100,000. Compared to the year 2008, the year I started to serve in Ankara, the figure has doubled. In 2008, the figure was less than 40,000.

The third area we are making efforts [of] is infrastructure. For example, we are promoting cooperation between the two countries in the area [of] railway construction, energy, transportation and also telecommunications. Chinese and Turkish entrepreneurs are also talking of cooperating in third countries, which is beneficial to both China and Turkey.

The fourth area is to promote Turkish exports to China. We are taking various measures in this perspective, but the main problem is difficulty in communication. Turkish firms need to do a lot of promotional work, but without understanding the language in trade you can't promote.

We also wish to see more efforts from the Turkish side in promoting the trade, and hope that more promotional [of] events will be undertaken by Turkish firms in China.

Do you see a strong commitment from Turkish firms to promote their products in the Chinese market? Are they really motivated to do so? What's your impression?

What I say should not be taken as a criticism, but I personally believe that promotional efforts by Turkish businessmen are not enough. They make much more efforts to export to Germany than to China, they put more weight [of] the European market.

As far as China is concerned, a trade volume of \$20 billion is not a big portion [of] China's total trade volume. So, to add another \$20 billion is not a problem for China, actually. But the biggest problem is the difficulty in communication while promoting Turkish products, and also the competitiveness of Turkish products' prices. Actually, China imports more and more Turkish products such as wine, olive oil and raisins [of], but in the market you can find Italian or Spanish olive oils, but no Turkish olive oil.

China also imports a lot of Turkish wines, and many delegations from China visiting Turkey think Turkish wines are good. But in the Chinese market, Turkish wines are mostly sold as Italian or French wine. China is also the biggest importer of Turkish marble. But in the Chinese market, on the marble you can't see [the] label of Turkey - it's mostly Italian marble.

Because Italy buys Turkish marble, processes it and re-exports it...

And many Turkish businessmen, when trying to promote their products in China, talk like this: "China has a population of 1.3 billion. If everyone buys one bottle of olive oil, that would hugely promote the bilateral trade." But that's not the point, because European and Chinese people have different income levels, and the price [of which] you sell your olive oil in the European market is hardly acceptable for the Chinese consumer. But we should keep making efforts and be patient to promote bilateral trade.

A modern express railway

When you talk about cooperation in third markets where Turkey and China could do business together, to what industries are you referring?

In the area of infrastructure and on overseas construction projects we can realize cooperation most easily, and also in the construction of railways. It's our hope to build a modern express railway along the ancient Silk Road.

How is the education component on the bilateral level? What more can Turkey and China do in terms of the educational exchange issues to raise qualified human capital in both the Chinese and Turkish cultures and languages?

The biggest obstacle to the bilateral relations is the language. The people who know both Turkish and Chinese are so limited in number. Even in the embassy we are in demand of Turkish-speaking diplomats.

There are now two Confucius Institutes in Turkey, and more Turkish universities apply to host [of] Confucius Institutes in their campuses. And more and more Chinese students come to Turkey to study.

Now we are also promoting academic exchange programs between universities, research centers and NGOs between the two countries. I agree with you that we should not only promote bilateral cooperation in trade, construction, economy and culture, but also promote cooperation in the area of education and technology.

What do you like most about the Turkish way of life?

When you talk to Turkish people, they are warm and friendly, and enthusiastic; that's what I like about Turkish people. The longer I stay in Turkey, the more I find similarities between not only Turkish and Chinese people, but also in food. You have foods similar to Chinese dumplings and noodles, for example.

You put emphasis on the Silk Road for promoting collaboration between peoples. But in the countries along the Silk Road, there are a lot of problems. What does the close cooperation of Turkey and China mean for other countries, especially for those along the Silk Road?

We don't limit these events - the "Year of Chinese Culture" in Turkey and [the] "Year of Turkish Culture" in China - to bilateral cooperation, but we also hope that through these events we can send a message to the region and to the world. That is, we should move in the direction of cooperation, friendship and dialogue between civilizations. So, in order to achieve that, mutual understanding should be cultivated. We think that [the] "Year of Chinese Culture" in Turkey is only a starting point. We hope not only Turkey and China, but also all the countries along the Silk Road, will participate in such cultural events.

Upon the suggestion of Turkish firms, we are considering participating in regional or international activities in this region. For example, for [the] Nevruz festival in Turkey we have already received an invitation and are considering participating in this event.

With regards to the Syrian issue, China supports 'a political solution by means of dialogue and negotiations rather than confrontation.' 'No country can say now we have exhausted the diplomatic and political means to solve the problem,' Chinese Ambassador to Turkey Xiaosheng Gong tells Today's Zaman

China Daily

Damascus denies role in attack on UN troops

France claims Syrian forces were probably behind Lebanon bombing

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria on Monday denied involvement in a bombing that wounded five French UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon, a day after France said Damascus was probably behind the attack.

"Syria has no link whatsoever with this act which we condemn," Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi said in a statement that also criticized French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe for pointing a finger at Damascus.

Juppe said on Sunday that Syria was probably behind Friday's bombing in southern Lebanon, adding however that so far he had no proof to back his claim.

"We have strong reasons to think that this attack came from there," Juppe told the TV5 Monde television channel and Le Monde newspaper.

Juppe claimed that Syria had used the militant group Hezbollah for such attacks in the past.

However, "I don't have proof," he said.

Also on Sunday, Lebanese pro-Western opposition leader and ex-prime minister Saad Hariri tweeted that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was to blame for the attack.

"Another message from Bashar," Hariri said on Twitter. "Another Syrian message."

In his statement, Makdissi said that "remarks by Mr Juppe and others are within the framework of premeditated French accusations made to mask the reality concerning Syria."

The five French members of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon were wounded on Friday when a bomb targeted their patrol on the outskirts of the coastal city of Tyre. Two passers-by were also wounded.

On Sunday, Syrian troops

and army defectors fought one of the biggest battles in Syria's nine-month uprising, while a protest strike shut businesses in a new gesture of civil disobedience, residents and activists said.

In the fighting, Syrian troops mainly from the 12th Armored Brigade based in Isra, 40 km from the southern border with Jordan, stormed the nearby town of Busra al-Harir.

A housewife in Busra who did not want to be named told Reuters by telephone that the town was being hit by machine gun fire from tanks.

The sound of explosions and heavy machine guns was heard there and in Lujah, an area of rocky hills north of the town, where defectors from the army have been hiding and attacking military supply lines, residents and activists said.

"Lujah has been the safest area for defectors to hide because it is difficult for tanks and infantry to infiltrate. The region has caves and secret passageways and extends all the way to the Damascus countryside," said an activist, who gave his name as Abu Omar.

The opposition in Syria has called for a general strike to add pressure on the government.

The opposition call was greeted with little enthusiasm by Syrians, particularly in the heart of the capital Damascus, where the shops were all open and daily life proceeded normally.

Arab foreign ministers will meet on Saturday to discuss a response to Syria's conditional acceptance of an Arab peace plan aimed at ending its alleged crackdown on protesters, Egypt's MENA news agency said, citing an Arab diplomat.

REUTERS—AFP—XINHUA

Global Times (Chine / China)

► Damascus denies role in attacks on foreign troops

Syrians vote as violence rages

Syrians voted yesterday in municipal elections amid a general strike called by the opposition, and security forces reportedly killed another seven people as they pursued a crackdown on dissent.

The elections committee, in a statement received by AFP, said "voting is proceeding in a democratic spirit," adding that voting turnout was "good." It did not elaborate.

Polling stations opened with 42,889 candidates vying for 17,588 seats.

Syrian Prime Minister Adel Safar appealed to voters to "stand together to save our country from the conspiracies against us."

Information Minister Adnan Mahmud told AFP the

elections were part of a reform package pledged by the authorities to promote democracy and would be followed by legislative polls in February.

"I voted because we want to contribute to the reforms (pledged by Assad) and chose the best" candidates, said a 35-year-old woman.

A regime opponent, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "I am surprised that elections are taking place under such circumstances," he said. "Cities gripped by the uprising are not concerned by these elections."

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said authorities "forced dozens of people" in Idlib to go to vote despite raging violence in the

northwestern province where three people were killed by security forces in an early morning raid. Four other civilians were killed in the central province of Homs.

It also reported that army deserters were locked in heavy fighting with regular troops in two Idlib villages and that similar fighting was also raging in Daraa province.

In a major international development likely to raise Western pressure on Syria, a Syria foreign ministry spokesman denied involvement in a bombing that wounded five French UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon.

"Syria has no link whatsoever with this act which we condemn," Jihad Makdissi said in

a statement that also criticized French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe for pointing a finger at Damascus.

Juppe said on Sunday that Syria was probably behind Friday's bombing in southern Lebanon, adding however that so far he had no proof to back his claim. He claimed that Syria had used the militant group Hezbollah for such attacks in the past.

Hezbollah yesterday also denied any role in the attack. In a statement, Hezbollah urged Juppe to "correct his position and pay heed to the seriousness of such accusations which represent a great injustice, and which we completely reject."

AFP - Reuters

China sticking to non-intervention on Syria

Editor's Note:

As violence escalated in Syria, the nation's future stirs up all kinds of speculations. China has repeatedly voted against outside intervention. Why has China taken a stand against intervention? Should China get more involved in the Middle East? People's Daily Online (PO) talked to Li Shaoxian (Li), vice president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, and Yin Zhuo (Yin), a rear admiral and senior researcher with the PLA Navy Equipment Research Center, on these issues.

PO: Is a war against Syria by the West possible?

Li: There should be at least three conditions for the West to conduct military interference in Syria: a request from the Syrian rebels, support from the Arab countries and legal permission from the UN. Obviously, the Western countries are preparing for a military operation, as seen from their equipping the rebels.

The West is trying to copy what they did to Libya in Syria. But it's hard to realize. The situation in Syria is quite different.

Western military intervention could twist the normal development of the region.

Li Shaoxian

The Bashar al-Assad government still has the support of most Syrians. Even US analysts acknowledge that the anti-Bashar group is supported by less than 40 percent of Syrians. The protests of Syrian rebels have limited influence. They are not a strong enough threat to the Bashar government.

The Arab countries don't support military intervention from the West, demanding the problem be solved within the framework of the Arab League. Besides, it's also very difficult to gain support on the international stage to legalize a military intervention.



Li Shaoxian (李绍先)

PO: Under the current situation, what's the best choice for the Bashar government?

Yin: The current Syrian government is made up of Bashar, his near relations and the governing team, whose interests are not the same. Bashar could give up power and seek protection from Russia or Belarus.

For his governing team, the collapse of the Bashar regime means they will lose everything. They have to fight against the rebels to the death for their vested interests. Another possibility is that they could betray Bashar and swing to another figure that could be accepted by both the rebels and the West, but there is not such a figure yet.

PO: How do you see Russia's role in the Syria issue?

Yin: Russia won't take military risks for Syria. Even though a Russian aircraft carrier sailed for the Mediterranean, it's merely a diplomatic move. The Russia navy won't risk a war with the US navy in the open sea. Russia may impose some pressure on the West, but it couldn't decide the direction of events.

PO: How will the Syria problem affect China? What should China do to safeguard its interests and international justice?



Yin Zhuo (尹卓)

Yin: In the short run, China's commercial interests in Syria will be influenced. China has many commercial contracts and construction contracts in Syria, we believe the new regime will acknowledge these contracts and continue them. In the long run, if a new Islamist regime is formed in Syria, an Islamist group of nations joining Egypt, Yemen and other Arab countries will appear, which is a great challenge for China's current diplomatic policies.

Li: At present, China's Middle East policy sticks to the principles of non-intervention of internal affairs and respecting the choice of the local people. Meanwhile, China has managed to protect its regional interests.

Many hold that China should adopt more active policies, but such a misjudgment is based on their unfamiliarity with the Middle East.

As the most complicated region in the world, the Middle East is known as the graveyard of empires. Middle East is taken as the strategic crossroad and many countries are competing for influences in the region. However, the US is the only one that could play a major role.

China should try its best to protect its regional economic interests, but it hasn't enough strength to seek louder

voices on the regional issues. For now, China's performance is admirable.

PO: Some are advocating China should change its non-intervention policy and get more involved in the Middle East issues actively. How do you view this?

Yin: Non-intervention is the right choice. The Syrians have the right to choose their leaders by various means, including military ones. But military intervention is a reflection of hegemony.

China promotes a harmonious world and harmonious seas and opposes any form of hegemony. That's why China vetoed the US plan on the Syrian issue and China and Russia as responsible members of the UN security council couldn't indulge the UN resolution to legalize the military intervention of the West.

Non-intervention is the right choice. The Syrian have the right to choose their leaders by various means.

Yin Zhuo

Li: Western military intervention could twist the normal development of the region. The UN resolution was made up of by the West to justify their military intervention against Libya. Such things shouldn't happen again.

PO: China took the Arab League's attitudes into consideration over the Libya issue. Why don't we support it now?

Yin: The current declarations have been driven by Western pressure. Today's Arab League is dominated by Saudi Arabia and members of the Gulf Cooperation Committee. Political forces that could balance their power such as the Mubarak regime have collapsed.

The currently dominant forces in the Arab League are expecting an Islamist regime in Syria. China carries out an independent policy and has its own standards.

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Thierry Meyssan, journaliste «L'expression printemps

Thierry Meyssan est un journaliste français et président du Réseau Voltaire. Il est connu pour ses articles et positions polémiques sur les questions internationales et les conflits armés. Il a été un des journalistes à avoir ouvert la polémique sur les attentats du 11 septembre 2001 avec son livre intitulé *L'Effroyable imposture*. Un livre qui a dénoncé cet attentat en le qualifiant de «complot», attribuant la responsabilité à «une faction du complexe militaro-industriel». Il est très présent dans les médias russes, latino-américains et moyen-orientaux, où il est présenté comme un «dissident» ou un «révolutionnaire». Fondateur du Réseau Voltaire, dont le principal objectif est celui de la «défense de la liberté d'expression et de la laïcité», le journaliste Thierry Meyssan, répond dans cet entretien à plusieurs questions en rapport avec la situation de la Syrie, pays où il effectue, actuellement, une enquête sur les derniers événements politiques.

Entretien réalisé
par Farouk Belhabib

Le Troisième d'Algérie : Vous êtes un des rares journalistes à être présent en Syrie et à apporter un témoignage décisif sur la situation sur le terrain. Qui croire, M. Meyssan, et quelles sont, selon vous, les raisons du décalage entre la version dominante sur les événements en Syrie et celle de témoins neutres, dont vous faites partie, dont la voix ne porte pas et semble frappée de soupçons de complaisance, y compris au sein même de la corporation des journalistes ?

Thierry Meyssan : Les Occidentaux dominent l'information. Dans les années 1970, l'Unesco a remis en cause cette domination provoquant la fureur des États-Unis et du Royaume-Uni. Cette tentative a échoué et, au fil du temps, la situation a empiré : aux agences de presse se sont ajoutées des chaînes satellitaires. Désormais, AP, Reuters, AFP, BBC, CNN, France24, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia ont une belle puissance qu'ils peuvent imposer à l'ensemble du public. Ces médias citent et se répondent, dominant l'information bilatérale d'une information occupée, contrôlée. La situation en Syrie est simple : les puissances occidentales et leurs alliés ont décidé de renverser le gouvernement de Bachar El-Assad et de déstabiliser son pays. Ils l'ont, actuellement, une guerre non-conventionnelle avec des combattants infiltrés qui tentent de provoquer une guerre civile conventionnelle de manière à ouvrir la voie à une intervention militaire conventionnelle. Durant cette période, les Occidentaux montent un dossier juridique contre la Syrie pour légaliser la guerre qu'ils veulent entreprendre. À cette fin, leurs médias inventent une histoire effrayante de révolutions et de répression de masse. Il n'y a aucun rapport entre la fiction développée par les médias impérialistes et la réalité sur le terrain. Ce n'est pas que ces médias ont exagéré des faits, c'est qu'ils les ont inventés.

Comment analysez-vous la situation actuelle de la crise syrienne ? Estimez-vous que les revendications de la population sont d'ordre démocratique ou social ?

Il y a en Syrie une opposition intérieure qui milite pour des changements profonds et une alternance démocratique après des décennies de



puissance du parti Baas. Cette opposition, qui a été réprimée par le passé, participe aujourd'hui au «dialogue national» : des tables rondes avec le gouvernement qui sont retransmises en direct à la télévision. Les deux parties profitent de la crise pour éliminer l'influence de la vieille garde : pour les leaders de l'opposition comme pour le président El-Assad, c'est le moment des réformes. Il y a, également, en Syrie un courant takfiriste, très marginal, mais très violent. Il exige que le pays soit gouverné par des sunnites orthodoxes. À l'appel de prédicateurs saoudiens, il entend égorger les «samaritains alassouites». Il affirme que, s'il le faut, un tiers des Syriens doit mourir (les chiites, alawites, druzes, ismaélites, chrétiens...) pour que les deux autres tiers gouvernent sans partage. Il est probable que s'ils arrivaient au pouvoir après avoir massacré les autres confessions, ils poursuivraient leur épuratoire en jetant l'assassin sur les autres écoles théologiques sunnites. Il existe, enfin, une opposition fabriquée à l'étranger et sponsorisée par les Occidentaux pour habiliter un «changement de régime». Ces gens ne font pas mystère de leurs ambitions ni de leurs stratégies. Amr Abdelhakim Khaddam a déclaré à la presse israélienne qu'il rentrerait en Syrie «sur la tourelle d'un char américain» (sic).

La Ligue arabe a initié une voie de

dialogue avec le gouvernement syrien, mais elle a échoué, selon certaines parties, en raison du refus de Damas à appliquer les principes de cette démarche. Quelles sont, selon vous, les raisons qui ont empêché la réussite de la démarche entreprise par la Ligue arabe ?

La Ligue arabe est aux mains de ceux qui la financent : les États du Conseil de coopération du Golfe. Elle agit ici comme elle avait commencé à le faire avec la Libye. Elle ouvre la voie à la recolonisation de la région. Si la Ligue arabe avait voulu sincèrement le dialogue, elle n'aurait pas suspendu la Syrie de son organisation avant la fin de la période convenue pour la mise en application des engagements mutuels. La chronologie est indiscutable : ce n'est pas la Syrie qui a rompu le dialogue, c'est la Ligue qui a violé ses propres engagements, puis ses propres statuts.

Quelles seront, d'après vous, les conséquences des sanctions prises par l'Organisation panarabe sur la Syrie. Le peuple syrien sera-t-il touché et à quel degré ?

Ce qui est appelé «sanctions» ne sanctionne rien du tout. C'est un ensemble de mesures pour assiéger la Syrie et l'af-faiblir avant de l'attaquer. Elles ne ressemblent pas de la diplomatie, mais de l'action militaire préalable. Les Occidentaux ne peuvent réaliser ce

siège seul. Ils ont besoin de l'aide des États riverains et ils l'ont en partie obtenue. Les membres de la Ligue arabe s'ajoutent à celui de l'Irakien extrême et des États-Unis. D'ores et déjà, on assiste à un effondrement du niveau de vie, mais à aucune pénurie. En effet, l'import-export est devenu presque impossible avec l'Europe et l'Amérique du Nord, mais la Syrie est autosuffisante en de nombreux domaines, dont l'alimentation. En réponse, la Syrie est en train de créer de nouvelles voies commerciales avec la Chine. Compte tenu de l'interdiction bancaire, ces échanges ont lieu sous forme de troc. Les besoins des deux pays ne correspondent pas (tout à fait, l'Irak joue le rôle de troisième partenaire dans ce troc. Le choc du siège devrait donc être en grande partie amorti dans les prochains mois, seul le tourisme restera sinistré.

Selon vous, pourquoi certains partis d'opposition n'ont pas voulu s'inscrire dans la démarche de réforme entreprise par le gouvernement syrien ? S'agit-il d'un manque de confiance ?

La seule force d'opposition représentative, qui se milite pas pour une alternance politique, mais pour un «changement de régime», ce sont les Frères musulmans. La branche syrienne de la confrérie marche sur les pas de la branche libyenne : dans sa quête du

et fondateur du Réseau Voltaire syrien est une pure fiction»

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pouvoir, elle a noué une alliance objective avec l'impérialisme. Son programme vise prioritairement à l'établissement d'un régime islamique, tandis qu'elle remet à plus tard la libération du Moyen-Orient, en général, et de la Palestine, en particulier.

Des analystes n'hésitent pas à remettre en cause le «printemps syrien», estimant que le problème syrien, d'ordre interne, est amplifié par des pays. Quel est votre avis à ce sujet ?

L'expression «printemps syrien» vise à faire croire en l'existence d'un mouvement populaire révolutionnaire. C'est une pure fiction. Il n'y a eu aucune manifestation importante en Syrie contre le régime. Un assaut, par contre, à de petites manifestations de quelques centaines de personnes au cri de «À mort Bachar!». Elles ne sont pas le fait de démocrates, mais de takfiristes. Et elles ne sont pas réprimées.

Les médias étrangers, notamment les chaînes satellitaires, sont accusés par le gouvernement syrien d'être à l'origine de l'amplification de la révolte populaire. Peut-on croire à cette accusation ? Quelle est justement la part de responsabilité des médias dans la crise syrienne ?

Ce n'est pas exactement cela. Le gouvernement n'accuse pas les médias pro-impérialisme de pousser le peuple à la révolte. Il les accuse de mettre une fiction en image. La plupart des vidéos de téléphones cellulaires qui sont diffusées par ces médias sont des images de fiction.

Souvenez-vous que lors de la guerre contre la Libye, j'avais révélé à l'avance qu'Al-Jazeera avait fait construire un studio à ciel ouvert pour reproduire la Place Verte. Lors de la bataille de Tripoli, Al-Jazeera a effectivement diffusé des images de fiction, tournées dans ce studio, pour faire croire que les «rebelle» étaient entrés dans la ville, alors qu'en fait on était à la phase de bombardements intensifs et que les «rebelle» ne sont arrivés que deux jours plus tard. Et vous vous souvenez qu'entre les images de propagande d'Al-Jazeera et la chute de la capitale, Sefi el-Bilam a été acclamé sur cette place par ses partisans qui ne l'avaient jamais quitté. Dans cette affaire, les médias pro-impérialisme – dont Al-Jazeera – ont acquis un savoir-faire technique pour créer des mensonges. Et ils ne s'en privent pas.

Selon certaines analyses, les deux véritables révolutions dans le monde arabe sont celles de la Tunisie et de l'Égypte. Dans ces deux cas, les pays occidentaux n'ont pas appelé au départ de Ben Ali et de Moubarak, encore moins à l'intervention étrangère. Les communistes et les déclarations des officiers occidentaux étaient tellement prudents que des médias ont dénoncé, sinon leur complicité, au moins leur attention. A ce propos, il y a lieu de rappeler les déclarations de l'ex-ministre française des Affaires étrangères Michel Alliot-Marie de soutien au régime de Ben Ali dans la répression des manifestants, jusqu'à vouloir dépêcher des avions pleins de bombes lacrymogènes et autres

moyens de répression. Qu'en pensez-vous ?

Les États-Unis souhaitaient se débarrasser de Ben Ali et de Moubarak qui n'étaient plus assez dociles. Ils ont donc créé les conditions de ces révolutions. Mais lorsqu'elles ont eu lieu, ils ont été dépassés par la colère populaire. Ils ont essayé par tous les moyens de la canaliser, mais les événements leur ont échappé.

Le déclencheur profond de ces révolutions, c'est la spéculation sur les denrées alimentaires organisée par Washington dans les années précédentes jusqu'à provoquer des émeutes localisées dans ces deux pays. À ce moment, tous les commentateurs politiques ont pronostiqué une révolution. Pourtant, tout le monde a été surpris quand cela a eu lieu parce que personne n'avait anticipé la manière dont les gens réagiraient. La CIA a immédiatement envoyé ses équipes de révolutions colorées pour reprendre en main la situation, mais tout cela étant plaqué, impossible, et a échoué.

Dans ce contexte, peut-on dire que les révoltes tunisienne et égyptienne, d'essence populaire, ont été exploitées pour renverser le gouvernement libyen et tenter de reproduire le même scénario en Syrie ?

Oui, les médias occidentaux font croire à leurs spectateurs que le monde arabe est un bloc homogène. S'il y a une révolution dans deux pays, il doit y en avoir partout. Ils nous expliquent que les Européens ont eu tort de ne pas soutenir les Tunisiens et les Égyptiens et voulu se rattraper en soutenant les Libyens et les Syriens. Mais la vérité, c'est qu'ils ont fait tout ce qu'ils ont pu pour empêcher les révoltes en Tunisie et en Égypte dès qu'ils ont vu qu'elles menaçaient leur domination, et qu'ils font tout en Libye et en Syrie pour imposer leur domination.

Quel est également le poids de la Russie et de la Chine dans le déclencheur de la crise syrienne ? Pensez-vous que les deux puissances seront capables de faire face à la pression des pays occidentaux exercée sur le gouvernement syrien, d'autant plus que Moscou s'est dit favorable à la solution proposée par les pays du Golfe au président Saleh du Yémen ?

Les intérêts de la Russie sont directement menacés par l'agression occidentale contre la Syrie. Pas du tout parce que Moscou se sentirait concerné par la lutte contre le terrorisme, mais pour deux raisons fondamentales. Premièrement, Moscou ne dispose que d'une seule base navale en Méditerranée : le port de Tartous. Si la Russie perd cette facilité, elle perd toute liberté dans cette mer et sa Boie de la mer Noire, bloquée derrière les détroits, sera l'otage de la Turquie. Deuxièmement, si les Occidentaux contrôlent la Syrie, ils y feront passer un gazoduc qui permettra aux Européens d'acheter le gaz du Golfe et d'Asie centrale au lieu du gaz russe. Ce sera l'effondrement de Gazprom et de l'économie russe.

Qu'est-ce qui empêche, selon vous, le président Al Assad d'organiser une élection présidentielle anticipée dans laquelle il sera candidat au même titre que les autres opposants ?

Pour le moment, le pays affronte une guerre non conventionnelle. Des mil-

liers de combattants, principalement étrangers, tentent de le déstabiliser. Ce n'est guère propice à un scrutin démocratique. Le président el-Assad a été élu sous l'emprise de l'ancienne Constitution. Je suis certain qu'il remettra son mandat au jeu lors d'une élection présidentielle anticipée ou lors d'un référendum, dès que la situation sera stabilisée.

Quel est justement le poids des figures de l'opposition syrienne ? Sont-elles capables de diriger le pays et de sauvegarder leur indépendance, sachant que la Syrie a été toujours secourue par des tentatives de déstabilisation ? Il est tout à fait possible que l'opposition syrienne intérieure dispose de leaders capables de diriger le pays et d'assumer une alternance politique, il est trop tôt pour en juger. Par contre, quand ils ont été reçus à Moscou le mois dernier, ces leaders ont d'abord renoncé les Russes pour avoir usé de leur veto au Conseil de sécurité et fait échouer à la guerre conventionnelle. Ils ont donc fait preuve de leur patriotisme.

Comment analysez-vous également le rôle de la Turquie dans la gestion de ce conflit ? Pour certains spécialistes, la Turquie est devenue le porte-parole des États-Unis d'Amérique dans la région. Les Américains considèrent d'ailleurs le mouvement d'autonomie du Kurdistan comme une organisation terroriste au même titre qu'Ankara...

Une altercation à Davos et quelques phrases à propos de la Flottille de la Liberté ont suffi à faire oublier que la Turquie est membre de l'OTAN. L'élimination du réseau Ergenekan n'a rien changé à la domination en sous-main des États-Unis dans ce pays. La preuve : la Turquie vient d'acquiescer le transfert sur son sol des bases militaires que l'OTAN entretenait en Espagne. De plus, elle laisse construire sur son sol de nouvelles installations radars dirigées contre l'Iran.

Quand aux organisations kurdes, tout le monde joue avec elles. L'armée turque garde l'œil sur une de ses bases et l'agie dès que le pouvoir civil lui tient tête. Des émeutes téléphoniques dans l'allaire Ergenekan ont largement illustré les complémentarités secrètes entre l'état-major turc et le PKK. Les Israéliens utilisent aussi les Kurdes. Je vous rappelle par exemple que Netanyahu avait pu donner l'ordre d'attaquer simultanément la Flottille par Toubal et une base navale turque par le PKK. Ankara n'a toujours pas compris que ses alliés historiques, Washington et Tel-Aviv, ont besoin d'une Turquie solide pour défendre leurs intérêts au Proche-Orient, mais ne veulent pas qu'elle soit forte.

Si on devait mettre en perspective



les événements qui secouent le monde arabe et musulman, quelle lecture en faites-vous ? Faut-il penser qu'il y a une stratégie derrière tout cela ? Si tel est le cas, pourquoi ? L'habillage de ces mouvements est qu'il répond à un désir de démocratie. Dans ces conditions, comment expliquez-vous que des pays comme les monarchies du Golfe soient épargnées ?

Où est la liberté ? En Europe avec la bureaucratie bruxelloise anonyme, la pensée unique et le masclage des médias ? Aux États-Unis avec le Patriot Act, la torture et Guantanamo ? Non. Nous sommes sous le joug d'un système de domination globale et les seules révolutions authentiques sont celles qui luttent d'abord pour la souveraineté nationale. La démocratie, telle qu'elle fonctionne aujourd'hui en Occident, n'a plus grand rapport avec le projet des penseurs du XVIII^e siècle. Elle est contournée par les lobby et les ingénieurs de toutes sortes. Elle n'est plus qu'un leurre. L'Occident n'est plus un modèle démocratique et assiste à la domination sur le reste du monde en combattant la démocratie partout où des peuples lui tiennent tête. Les révolutions en Tunisie et en Égypte ont été des mouvements à la fois sociaux et politiques. Les Tunisiens et les Égyptiens s'en sont d'abord pris aux présidents Ben Ali et Moubarak, mais ils ont parfaitement intégré que ce n'était pas le changement de qui que ce soit qui changerait tant que les structures de dépendance ne soient pas renversées. Les monarchies du Golfe sont héritières.

Cependant, les plus puissantes tiennent exclusivement leur fortune du commerce d'hydrocarbures qu'elles entretiennent avec l'Occident. Elles n'ont donc pas besoin d'être occupées militairement pour être vassalées, il suffit qu'elles prêtent le confort à la liberté. Là encore, le système de domination privilégie les gouvernements les plus impopulaires (Arabie saoudite, Bahreïn...) parce qu'ils sont les plus dépendants. F. B.