

Sarkozy tells French army international community must face to its responsibilities in Syria

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While Sarkozy's recent declarations are given minimal press coverage in France, they are widely echoed in international news outlets. During a New Year's address to army personnel, the French president accused the Syrian regime of barbarous repression, demanding that his counterpart Bashar al-Assad step down, and said that the international community must shoulder its responsibilities (in other words intervene militarily). However, the press exudes neither enthusiasm nor disapproval in regard to these bellicose statements.

The other major theme today is the emergency meeting that the Council of Ministers of the Arab League will hold on Saturday to decide on the continuation or discontinuation of the monitor mission.

- Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group states in *La Croix* that the monitors' mandate was to force the regime to exercise restraint, so that the peaceful protests could have free rein and facilitate a smooth transition. From this point of view, the mission has failed. Yet it would be a mistake to withdraw it because the international community has no other means of action, with the war promising to inflame the region.

- The U.S. ambassador to Damascus, Robert Ford, affirmed that the fuel rationing is a government ploy and not a consequence of the economic sanctions, reports the *Washington Times*.

- Parroting Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barack, a high-ranking officer, under the cover of anonymity, in the *Jerusalem Post* predicts a possible rapid victory of the Syrian opposition. But beyond the apparent endorsement of his minister's views, he voiced concern over the deployment of Al Qaeda jihadists in Syria, which comes down to taking a stand against the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad.

- *L'Orient-Le Jour* reports on the appeal addressed by the Vice President of the Socialist International, the Lebanese Walid Jumblatt, to the Druze community in Syria for a radical change of regime. What the newspaper omits to say is that, while Mr. Jumblatt has long exerted a major influence on the Lebanese Druze, he never held sway over the Syrian Druze that have always backed the leadership of Prince Talal Arslan.

- Furthermore, *L'Orient-Le Jour* confirms that the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, equipped with numerous combat planes and helicopter, would soon make port in Tartous. It will be joined by four other vessels. It will not go unnoticed that such vessels are not only there to escort but could well be delivering equipment.

- Finally, in *The National* (UAE), Phil Sands ponders why Kurdish involvement in the protests is so insignificant. He argues that the main explanation is the naturalization of 300 000 Kurds by the Assad administration at the outset of the events. Curiously, the reporter glosses over the Kurds' historical preference for Arab nationalists over Islamists, nor does he mention Erdogan's project of creating a large Turkish-Kurdish federation after the dismemberment of Iraq and Syria.

Le Monde (France)

La Ligue arabe réaffirme la légitimité de la mission d'observation en Syrie

Face aux critiques, le secrétaire général de l'organisation, Nabil Al-Arabi, tente de reprendre l'initiative et exige « l'arrêt total des tirs »

Confronté à des critiques venant tant de l'opposition syrienne que de l'intérieur même de son organisation, le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe, Nabil Al-Arabi, a tenté de reprendre l'initiative en exigeant, lundi 2 janvier, « l'arrêt total des tirs » qui font chaque jour des morts en Syrie.

Lundi alors que les 70 observateurs arabes étaient présents dans six villes – dont Homs, Hama et Deraa, les principales places fortes de la contestation –, 20 personnes ont encore été tuées. « Nous inviterons pleinement ses engagements », a insisté M. Al-Arabi pour qui « le retrait de l'armée et des armes lour-

des des centres-villes » ne suffit pas, ni « la libération de 34 844 détenus ».

Selon les Comités locaux de coordination de la révolution, 315 civils dont 24 enfants ont été tués depuis l'arrivée, le 26 décembre 2011, des premiers observateurs chargés de vérifier l'application d'un plan de sortie décrété par la Syrie et la Ligue arabe, comprenant le retrait de l'armée des villes, l'arrêt des tirs contre les manifestants pacifiques, la libération de tous les prisonniers arrêtés depuis le début de la contestation, et le lancement d'un dialogue avec l'opposition.

Dans la province d'Idlib, des déserteurs auraient attaqué trois postes de contrôle, lundi, tuant,

blessant et prenant en otage plusieurs dizaines de membres des forces de l'ordre, malgré la révélation, le 30 décembre 2011, par l'Armée syrienne libre.

La cacophonie des premiers jours et l'impréparation des observateurs ont rapidement semé le doute sur la capacité de la Ligue arabe à mener à bien sa mission. La Ligue se serait ainsi vu proposer l'aide et les conseils du bureau de la haut-commissaire aux droits de l'homme, Navi Pillay. Sans reportage, d'autres organisations indépendantes, comme Human Rights Watch, ont pris contact avec le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe sans plus de succès.

Tous se sont inquiétés du profil controversé du chef de la mission, le général soudanais Mohammed Moustapha Al-Dabi, mis en cause au Darfour et imposé par le Qatar.

Ses déclarations, le 28 décembre 2011, au lendemain de sa première visite à Homs, où il disait n'avoir « rien vu d'effrayant », ont scandalisé, tout comme le démenti qu'il a opposé à un observateur qui déclarait avoir vu des yeux de soldats perses gouvernemen-taux à Deraa.

Protection des témoins

Les observateurs, qui effectuent une mission inédite pour la Ligue dans des conditions de sécurité précaires, ont des profils très

hétéroclites : militants des droits de l'homme, anciens militaires, fonctionnaires de la Ligue arabe, magistrats, etc.

La taille de la mission pose également problème : 70 personnes sur le terrain, c'est trop peu, pour être partout et comprendre la situation. Treize autres doivent arriver jeudi. La Ligue, qui souhaitait envoyer 500 observateurs, a accepté, à la demande de Dama, de se limiter à 150. Nabil Al-Arabi a laissé, lundi, la porte ouverte au renforcement du nombre d'envoyés et évoqué une réunion ministérielle pour évaluer la mission. Une réponse indirecte à l'appel d'Al-Saleh Al-Dibbas, le président koweïtien du Parlement

arabe, un organe consultatif de la Ligue, qui avait réclamé dimanche l'arrêt de la mission à cause de la poursuite de la répression.

On peut s'interroger sur les conditions de déplacement des observateurs. Ils sont véhiculés par les autorités syriennes, ce qui n'est pas sans poser de problème de protection des témoins. Il est arrivé que des panneaux indicateurs soient placés par les autorités ou que les observateurs visitent un quartier tandis que les autorités tiraient dans un autre... Enfin, les sites militaires, où de nombreux prisonniers seraient détenus, leur sont interdits. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

Le Monde (France)

La Ligue arabe par Stephff



Dessin de Stephff (Bangkok). CARTOONS@COURRIERINTERNATIONAL.COM

Le Figaro (France)

Le chef de l'État incite la Ligue arabe à la fermeté

NICOLAS SARKOZY et Alain Juppé ont émis des doutes, hier, sur les conditions dans lesquelles s'effectue la mission des observateurs de la Ligue arabe en Syrie. Il faut « s'assurer » que ceux-ci « ont tous les moyens et toute la liberté de faire leur travail », a insisté hier le chef de l'État devant les forces armées, en réclamant à nouveau le départ

de Bachar al-Assad. Le chef de la diplomatie française a exigé, lui, des « clarifications » concernant cette mission. Divisée, la Ligue arabe se réunira samedi pour faire le point. Elle se trouve face à une alternative : poursuivre une mission de plus en plus controversée ou retirer ses observateurs. Le premier cas suppose que la Ligue arrache aux autorités syriennes la possibilité de

déployer des effectifs plus nombreux, avec une liberté et des moyens plus grands. Une option que la France, qui reste étroitement au contact via le Qatar, serait prête à appuyer. Dans le cas d'un retrait des observateurs arabes, l'une des pistes à l'étude serait d'obtenir de l'ONU qu'elle dépêche ses propres observateurs, plus aguerris à ce type de mission.

A. BA.

la Croix (France)

PETER HARLING

Directeur des activités de l'International Crisis Group en Syrie, en Égypte et au Liban

La mission des observateurs arabes en Syrie est-elle crédible ?

- Nicolas Sarkozy a répété hier que le président syrien Bachar Al Assad devait « quitter le pouvoir » et « laisser son peuple décider librement de son destin ».
- La communauté internationale doit « s'assurer que les observateurs de la Ligue arabe ont tous les moyens et toute la liberté de faire correctement leur travail », a-t-il ajouté, en recevant les vœux des forces armées.
- Depuis leur arrivée, le 26 décembre, les appels au retrait des observateurs arabes se sont multipliés, en raison de la poursuite de la répression par le régime.

« À un moment où le mouvement de protestation, longtemps pacifique, s'arme tous azimuts, et où le régime syrien se lance dans une surenchère de la violence, le déploiement d'observateurs peut aider à changer les dynamiques. L'objectif est de donner un second souffle aux manifestations et d'imposer un minimum de retenue au pouvoir, en espérant le contraindre à accepter une transition négociée. C'est une perspective que le régime rejette, lui préférant ce chantage : "Si vous voulez notre perte, soit, mais nous entraînerons le pays et la région dans notre chute." De fait, il conserve une capacité redoutable à combattre, même s'il est très affaibli sur le plan diplomatique, économique et en termes de légitimité populaire. Les observateurs arabes ont donné un coup de fouet au mouvement de protestation, un coup de frein à l'insurrection qui s'amorce, et un coup d'avertisseur au pouvoir, en informant sur certains de ses abus.

Mais ces observateurs restent très peu nombreux, étroitement encadrés, et eux-mêmes observés de près par une société syrienne poussée au désespoir. Leurs profils parfois ambigus, leurs déclarations lénifiantes et leurs résultats modestes suscitent de vives critiques de la part de tous ceux qui crient au massacre et voudraient "faire quelque chose".

Le problème, c'est que les options de la communauté internationale sont limitées. Des vagues de sanctions se sont abattues sur une économie syrienne fragile, menaçant de précipiter une crise humanitaire. Une intervention militaire, face à un régime qui dispose d'alliés puissants, à savoir le Hezbollah et l'Iran, présenterait des risques énormes. Les "couloirs humanitaires", "zones tampon" et autres "no fly zones" (zones interdites de survol) cachent, sous de bonnes paroles, des opérations armées. Restent les instruments diplomatiques. Or l'isolement du régime a quasiment atteint son comble. L'initiative de la Ligue arabe est donc un rare outil disponible qu'il faut tenter d'optimiser. »

RECUEILLI PAR FRANÇOIS D'ALANÇON

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Die Welt (Allemagne / Germany)

Sarkozy fordert Rücktritt von syrischem Präsidenten Assad

PARIS – Der französische Präsident Nicolas Sarkozy hat mit ungewöhnlich scharfen Worten erneut den Rücktritt des syrischen Präsidenten Baschar al-Assad gefordert. Die internationale Gemeinschaft solle ihrer Verantwortung gerecht werden und die „grausame Unterdrückung“ in Syrien anprangern, sagte Sarkozy am Dienstag bei einem Neujahrsempfang der Marine im westfranzösischen Lanvéoc-Poulmic. Die „Massaker“ an Zivi-

listen lösten zu Recht „Ekel und Auflehnung“ aus.

Auch Israels Verteidigungsminister Ehud Barak äußerte sich zu den Aufständen in Syrien. Assad und seine Familie würden sich nur noch „einige Wochen“ halten können, sagte Barak vor dem Außen- und Verteidigungsausschuss des israelischen Parlaments. Vor kurzem hatte der Minister erklärt, ein Sturz Assads wäre ein „Segen“ für den Nahen Osten.

Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Suisse / Switzerland)

Kritik in Syrien an arabischer Mission

Opposition fürchtet politische Lösung

Die Arabische Liga hat den Abzug schwerer Waffen aus syrischen Städten bestätigt. Das genügt nicht, sagt die Opposition.

Jürg Bischoff, Beirut

Zwischen der Arabischen Liga und der syrischen Opposition ist eine Kontroverse über den Nutzen der Beobachter im Gange, welche die Einhaltung des arabischen Friedensplans für Syrien überwachen sollen. Bei der aufständischen Stadt Rastan wurde am Dienstag laut der Regierung eine Gasleitung, die zwei Kraftwerke versorgt, von «Terroristen» in die Luft gesprengt. Es ist der vierte solche Anschlag in diesem Jahr.

Der Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga, Nabil al-Arabi, strich vor den Medien die Fortschritte dank den Beobachtern heraus. Er sagte, die Armee habe sich mit ihren schweren Waffen aus bewohnten Gebieten zurückgezogen, 3484 Gefangene seien freigelassen worden und die Quartiere würden wieder mit Nahrungsmitteln versorgt. Arabi gestand aber ein, es würden weiterhin Heckenschützen eingesetzt und es werde weiter geschossen. Er forderte die unverzügliche Einstellung des Feuers und verlangte von der Regierung, ihre Versprechungen zu erfüllen.

Die 70 arabischen Beobachter wurden bisher bloss in den bekannten Brennpunkten des Aufstands einge-

setzt. Dass die Mission eine positive Wirkung haben kann, zeigt sich auch am Rückgang der Opferzahlen am Neujahrswochenende. Die Beobachter haben der Opposition auch insofern genützt, als ihre Anwesenheit die Beteiligung an den Kundgebungen gegen das Regime in die Höhe trieb.

Die Opposition kritisiert die Arbeit der Beobachter als unprofessionell und ineffizient. Deshalb, sagten die Lokalen Koordinationskomitees (LCC) des Aufstands am Montag, seien die arabischen Beobachter «in die üblichen Fallen des Regimes getappt» und seien unfähig gewesen, als neutrale und unabhängige Beobachter zu fungieren. Laut den LCC sind seit der Ankunft der Beobachter 315 Personen getötet worden. Der Chef der «Freien Syrischen Armee» drohte, Angriffe gegen das Regime zu verstärken, falls die Beobachtermission keinen besseren Schutz der Zivilisten erreiche.

Die Forderung der Opposition nach Beobachtern hatte wohl weniger das Ziel, die Zivilbevölkerung zu schützen, als die Verbrechen des Regimes anzuprangern. Mit ihrer professionell organisierten Medienkampagne haben die Aktivisten dies aber selber geschafft. Heute suchen die Führer des Aufstands eine internationale Intervention zu provozieren und fürchten einen Erfolg bei der Suche der Arabischen Liga nach einer politischen Lösung, die laut der Erklärung der LCC «gegen die Ziele der Revolution gerichtet wäre».

Publico (Portugal)

Oposição síria defende utilidade da missão árabe

● A eficácia da missão da Liga Árabe na Síria foi uma das questões em cima da mesa num encontro entre o líder do Conselho Nacional Sírio, Burhan Ghalioun, e o ministro português dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Paulo Portas, em Lisboa.

A reunião ocorreu numa altura em que cada vez mais vozes se levantam questionando a missão de observadores, levando mesmo a Liga a convocar para sábado um encontro de emergência para discutir o assunto.

Em Lisboa, o líder do principal grupo de oposição da Síria defendeu, contra as recentes opiniões dos activistas anti-Assad, a utilidade da missão. “Precisamos dos observadores para que falem com as pessoas que testemunharam o drama e o sofrimento”, disse. A sua presença “permitiu já que as pessoas se manifestem com mais esperança”.

Portas classificou, pelo seu lado, como “preocupantes” as informações preliminares sobre a actividade da missão. Os ataques contra civis têm prosseguido mesmo após a chegada dos observadores. Ontem, opositores denunciaram mais mortes em Homs, Damasco e Hama. Para já, a declaração mais forte que veio da Liga Árabe em relação à missão foi dizer que havia atiradores furtivos a disparar sobre os civis.

O líder do Conselho Nacional Sírio pediu aos países europeus para que pressionem o regime de Bashar al-Assad para “retirar os tanques das cidades, libertar os presos políticos e parar de disparar contra civis” - dizendo por outras palavras sensivelmente o que se afirma no acordo entre a Liga e o regime. Se isto não acontecer, pede que a questão seja levada ao Conselho de Segurança da ONU.

O ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros apontou alguns entraves no âmbito do Conselho de Segurança da ONU. “É necessário que países como a Rússia e a China percebam o sentido da história e não bloqueiem resoluções com efectividade para a mudança”.

Ghalioun pôs a tónica na parte pacífica do movimento anti-regime, enquanto Portas pediu aos opositores “que coloquem o que os une acima das suas diferenças”. A contestação começou com manifestações pacíficas reprimidas com extrema violência, mas recentemente têm surgido, em paralelo, acções armadas.

Ontem, o coronel Riad al-Asaad, líder do grupo dissidente Exército Sírio Livre, prometeu intensificar os ataques contra as forças do regime. Em declarações à Reuters a partir da

Diário de Notícias (Portugal)

Sarkozy critica Assad e exige a sua demissão

Cairo. Liga Árabe convocou reunião de urgência para sábado. Nela irá analisar o relatório dos observadores que tem em missão na Síria

LUMENA RAPOSO

O Presidente francês, Nicolas Sarkozy, denunciou, ontem, a “repressão bárbara” cometida pelo chefe do Estado sírio, cuja demissão exigiu. Esta tomada de posição coincide com o anúncio da Liga Árabe sobre uma reunião de urgência – sábado no Cairo – para analisar o relatório feito pela sua missão de observadores que se encontra ainda na Síria. Enquanto isto continuam a chegar notícias de ações repressivas do regime contra os manifestantes que, desde meados de março, exigem o fim da ditadura.

“Os massacres cometidos pelo regime sírio estão a provocar desagrado e revolta no mundo árabe, em França, na Europa, e um pouco por todo o mundo”, afirmou Sarkozy ao falar numa base militar em Lanveoc-Poulmic. O chefe de Estado francês, que fazia o seu discurso de Ano Novo aos militares, não hesitou em exigir de forma perentória: “O Presidente sírio tem de deixar o poder.”

Sarkozy aproveitou ainda o momento para lançar um apelo à comunidade internacional no sentido de que esta “assuma as suas responsabilidades ao decidir sanções mais duras [contra Damasco] e ao “garantir o acesso humanitário” às populações sírias.

Por seu turno, o chefe da diplomacia de Sarkozy, Alain Juppé, lamentou que a Rússia continue a bloquear uma condenação do re-

gime sírio por parte da ONU. Com direito de veto no Conselho de Segurança, Moscovo tem impedido que este órgão e a da ONU tome uma decisão contra Damasco.

Entretanto e perante as notícias de que as forças fiéis ao regime de Bachar al-Assad prosseguem com a repressão contra os manifestantes, apesar dos apelos da Liga Árabe para que cesse a violência, a organização pan-árabe convocou, para sábado no Cairo, uma reunião de urgência para analisar o

primeiro relatório da sua missão de observadores que ainda se encontra no país de Assad.

Uma das questões que vão estar em cima da mesa prende-se com a retirada da Síria dos cem observadores da Liga Árabe, uma vez que estão a ser infrutíferos todos os seus esforços para conseguir que o regime deixe de recorrer à violência. No entanto, como afirmou na segunda-feira o secretário-geral da Liga Árabe, Nabil Elaraby, algo foi conseguido, nomeadamente a retirada de tanques e de armamento pesado das cidades, assim como a libertação de prisioneiros.

Os Comitês Locais de Coordenação (CLC), que congrega uma série de grupos de ativistas, consideram, porém, que a missão da Liga Árabe apenas deu a Assad cobertura para mais violência.

De acordo com a ONU, desde que os protestos começaram em meados de março de 2011, as forças fiéis ao regime de Assad já fizeram mais de cinco mil mortos, 390 dos quais desde que a missão de observadores entrou na Síria a 26 de Dezembro último. Ontem mesmo, o Centro para a Imprensa e Liberdade de Expressão sírio denunciou a morte, segunda-feira, de um jornalista em Damasco e exigiu um inquérito às circunstâncias da sua morte. Choukri Abu Bourghol, de 54 anos, trabalhava no diário oficial sírio *as-Saoura* desde 1980 e foi atingido na cabeça quando estava na sua casa.

Com Susana Salvador

PORTUGAL

Portas defende saída de Presidente sírio

» O chefe da diplomacia portuguesa considerou ontem “inaceitável” a violência contra os sírios e disse que o “ditador” Bachar Al-Assad “deve partir para que possa regressar a paz”. Paulo Portas, que defendeu uma “iniciativa de origem e legitimidade árabes” para pôr termo à violência, reuniu-se com o líder da oposição ao regime. Burhan Ghalioun, do Conselho Nacional Sírio, veio a Portugal (membro não permanente do Conselho de Segurança da ONU), apelar à comunidade internacional para que faça “o máximo de pressão para que Assad deixe o poder o mais rapidamente possível”.

The Irish Times (Irlande / Irland)

French president accuses Syrian regime of massacres

MICHAEL JANSEN

AS THE Arab League announced an emergency meeting to discuss whether to withdraw monitors from Syria, French president Nicolas Sarkozy accused the regime of massacres.

The French president called on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to resign, and said the regime's crackdown had produced disgust around the world. Mr Sarkozy added that the Syrian people should determine their future.

"The conditions in which the observer mission is taking place need to be clarified," said French foreign minister Alain Juppé. "Does it really have completely free access to information? We await the report that it will submit in coming days to see more clearly."

While the league's meeting – scheduled for Saturday – will review the report, the final decision on the observers' mission will be taken later. There are 70 monitors in Syria and an additional 30 are due to arrive tomorrow. They have been dispatched to oversee compliance with the league's peace plan which calls for an end to violence by all sides, withdrawal

of troops from urban areas and release of prisoners.

While the government has partially complied, at least 170 people have been killed since the monitors began work on December 27th.

Opposition groups have been critical of the observers who, they say, are not acting independently.

Anti-regime activists report four to five killed, while the government said saboteurs had blown up a gas pipeline that supplies two power stations near Homs. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is reporting that army defectors have killed 18 loyalist troops in Deraa province.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, voters massed at polling stations in nine provinces in the final round of the first parliamentary poll.

Some 14 million voters were eligible to cast ballots yesterday and today for 150 seats in the 498-seat assembly. Muslim fundamentalist candidates are expected to secure more than two-thirds of seats, as they have done in the first two rounds. The main contest is between the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood and ultra-orthodox Salafis.

Former Egyptian president

Hosni Mubarak, accused of "tyrannical rule" by the prosecutor, was wheeled into court on a gurney on Monday to face charges of killing protesters during the uprising and corruption.

The trial was adjourned until today when the panel of judges will consider a defence motion to prosecute the two cases separately.

Brotherhood deputy head Rashad Bayoumi said that the movement, set to win the largest number of seats in parliament, intends to call for a referendum on the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

"We will not recognise Israel under any circumstances. We are talking about an occupation entity and a criminal entity. There is no condition that obligates the movement to recognise Israel," he said.

Mr Bayoumi added that the brotherhood would adhere to international agreements signed by Egypt during the ongoing transition period, but once a new government is installed, the treaty, signed by a regime "far from the people", would be reconsidered and Egyptians would decide "whether this agreement hurts Egyptian interests and sovereignty".

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

France demands Assad's resignation

Syrian regime must end the killing, says Sarkozy in strongest attack by the West

By Adrian Blomfield
Middle East Correspondent

NICOLAS SARKOZY demanded the resignation of Bashar al-Assad yesterday after accusing the Syrian leader of perpetrating a massacre against his own people that aroused "disgust and revulsion" throughout the world.

The French president's denunciation, the most scathing yet made by a Western leader, was made as the Arab League stepped up pressure on Mr Assad by hinting that its observer mission to Syria could be withdrawn.

"The massacres being committed by the Syrian regime rightly arouse disgust and revolt in the Arab world, in France, in Europe and everywhere in the world," Mr Sarkozy said yesterday during a New Year address at a navy air base in Lanveoc-Poulmic. "The Syrian president must leave power."

Mr Sarkozy said Syrians should be allowed "freely to choose their own destiny" and repeated a call for the "toughest sanctions" against Damascus.

The league's Syria steering committee will convene an emergency session in Cairo on Saturday to decide the fate of the mission, which has faced growing criticism for its perceived reluctance to chronicle regime abuses against protesters demanding Mr Assad's overthrow.

The committee, which includes the foreign ministers of Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Qatar and Oman, will make a non-binding recommendation to the rest of the league in the coming weeks.

If the observer mission is adjudged to be a failure, the Arab League could be left with no choice but to refer Syria to the



The French president greets students at a naval air base in Lanveoc-Poulmic, where he gave his New Year message. He used the speech to attack Syria's Bashar al-Assad

UN Security Council, paving the way for international action against Mr Assad's government, most likely in the form of sweeping sanctions.

Echoing concerns over the violence, the White House condemned the treatment of protesters, saying it was "past time" for the UN Security Council to act. The Arab League's Sudanese leader, Lt Gen Mustafa al-Dabi, has been accused of giving a positive gloss to the regime's suppression of the uprising. More than 5,000 civilians have been killed since the protests began in March, according to the UN.

Syria's opposition has also claimed that the monitors, who number fewer than 100, have been sheltered around by regime agents, meaning that many

witnesses they have interviewed have been afraid to give accurate accounts. With six more civilians reportedly killed yesterday, the French government warned that the observer mission was running out of time to restore its credibility.

The conditions under which this observer mission is operating should be clarified," said Alain Juppé, the French foreign minister. France, which governed Syria after the First World War, has been of the forefront of the West's largely ineffective efforts to defuse the crisis.

Nabil Elaraby, the Arab League's secretary-general, insisted that the observers had persuaded the regime to release thousands of prisoners.

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Arab League could pull observers out of Syria

**Mounting criticism of
monitors' response as
French President calls
for Assad to stand down**

By **CATRINA STEWART**
in Jerusalem

The Arab League is to convene an emergency meeting in Cairo this weekend to discuss the fate of its observer mission to Syria, amid mounting criticism of the international monitors' reluctance to catalogue abuses by the Assad regime against civilian protesters.

The 22-member body is responding to claims that the mission – charged with assessing the Syrian government's implementation of a peace plan – has provided cover for continuing human rights abuses by the regime as the embattled President, Bashar al-Assad, seeks to crush a nearly 10-month-long uprising against his rule.

If the mission is withdrawn, it will be an embarrassment for the League, which was widely praised for its uncharacteristically robust response to the Syrian regime's abuses late last year when it suspended Damascus from the pan-Arab body and imposed sanctions.

As Arab powers prepared to meet, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, issued the harshest criticism of the

Syrian strongman yet by a Western leader, accusing Mr Assad of "barbarous repression" against his people.

"The massacres being committed by the Syrian regime rightly arouse disgust and revolt in the Arab world, in France, in Europe and everywhere in the world," Mr Sarkozy said during a new year address at a navy air base in France. "The Syrian President must leave power."

The UN has estimated that more than 5,000 people have been killed since a popular uprising erupted in March; Damascus says that 2,000 of those are members of the security forces, and has portrayed the uprising as a foreign-backed insurrection by "terrorist" gangs.

After the League's steering committee meets to decide the future of the mission it will make a non-binding recommendation to the Arab body. The final decision could determine whether Syria is ultimately referred to the UN Security Council, a move that could lead to broader sanctions against the regime. The UN has thus far taken a backseat role because of opposition from Russia and China.

Since arriving in Syria, the observer mission, which numbers less than 100, has been accused by opposition groups of presenting an overly positive image of the situation. The Sudanese mission head, General Mustafa al-Dabi, has been singled out for criticism after he described a visit to Homs, one of the cities that has suffered the worst bloodshed, as reassuring.

The opposition claims that the observers have been tightly controlled by the regime and exposed only to carefully staged events as they move around Syria. They claim, too, that the observers are unable to obtain a true picture of events as most of those interviewed are too frightened to talk candidly.

Under the peace plan agreed on 19 December, the Assad regime must withdraw troops from residential areas, start talks with opposition leaders and release political prisoners. The Local Co-ordination Committees, an umbrella group of activists, says nearly 400 people have died in the violence since 21 December.

The Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi conceded this week that killings had

CALL FOR EUROPE TO TOUGHEN STANCE ON IRAN

France has called on its European partners to match tougher US sanctions on Iran by the end of the month. Speaking days after it emerged that Iran had produced its first nuclear fuel rods, the French Foreign Minister, Alan Juppé, warned there could no longer be any doubt that Tehran was "perfecting" a nuclear arms capability.

Earlier, the US passed a law, effective in six months' time, which imposes sanctions on all international financial institutions that deal with Iran's central bank, while on Monday, Tehran said it

Le Droit (Canada)

Mission de la Ligue arabe en Syrie

La controverse enfle autour des observateurs

DAMAS — Les militants pro-démocratie syriens ont dénoncé hier le « manque de professionnalisme » des observateurs de la Ligue arabe dépêchés en Syrie pour tenter de faire cesser les violences, les États-Unis estimant qu'il est « grand temps » que l'ONU agisse.

Sur le terrain, cinq civils ont été tués hier par les tirs des forces de sécurité à Hama et à Homs, haut lieu de la contestation contre le régime du président Bachar al-Assad, a rapporté l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'Homme (OSDH) alors que la télévision d'État faisait état de la présence d'observateurs dans les régions de Homs, Deraa et Idleb.

Dans la région de Deraa, 18 membres des forces de sécurité ont été tués à l'aube dans des affrontements avec des déserteurs, a d'autre part indiqué l'OSDH.

La Maison-Blanche a estimé que la Syrie n'avait pas respecté ses engagements vis-à-vis de la Ligue arabe et qu'il était « urgent temps pour le Conseil de sécurité [de l'ONU] d'agir » pour « soutenir les aspirations légitimes des Syriens ».

Évoquant les « tirs de tireurs embusqués, les actes de torture et les meurtres qui continuent en Syrie », le porte-parole du président Barack Obama, Jay Carney, en a conclu qu'il est « évident que le cahier des char-

ges (du plan de sortie de crise arabe NDLR) n'a pas été respecté » par le régime syrien.

Les Comités locaux de coordination (LCC), qui organisent les manifestations sur le terrain, ont appelé le chef de la Ligue arabe et les observateurs à « annoncer leur impuissance à mener seuls cette mission et demander l'aide des organisations internationales concernées ».

« Le manque de professionnalisme des observateurs et le non-respect des horaires de leur arrivée dans des lieux précis ont fait que de nombreuses personnes ont été tuées », ont-ils indiqué.

« Les officiers et les soldats de l'armée portent des costumes de policiers, conduisent des

véhicules militaires repeints et changent le nom des lieux, mais cela ne signifie pas que l'armée s'est retirée des villes et des rues ni que le régime applique les clauses du protocole » arabe, ont dénoncé les LCC.

Selon eux, 390 personnes ont été tuées depuis que les observateurs ont entamé leur mission le 26 décembre.

Hier, le président français Nicolas Sarkozy a répété que M. Assad devait « quitter le pouvoir », et son ministre des Affaires étrangères, Alain Juppé, a estimé que « les conditions dans lesquelles se déroulent cette mission d'observateurs méritent d'être clarifiées ».

Agence France-Presse

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

France's Sarkozy Accuses Syrian Regime of Committing Massacres

Associated Press

French President Nicolas Sarkozy accused Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad of "barbarous repression" Tuesday and demanded he step down, saying the regime is massacring its own people.

Mr. Sarkozy said Syrians should be allowed to determine their own future.

"The massacres being committed by the Syrian regime rightly arouse disgust and revolt in the Arab world, in France, in Europe and everywhere in the world," Mr. Sarkozy said during a New Year's address at a Navy air base in Lanveoc-Poulmic,

France. "The Syrian president must leave power," he told members of the French military.

The U.N.'s last estimate, announced several weeks ago, was that more than 5,000 people have been killed in the government's military crackdown on the revolt that erupted in mid-March, inspired by uprisings across the Arab world. But since that report, activists say hundreds more have been killed.

The violence has drawn broad international condemnation and sanctions, but Mr. Assad remains defiant. The Arab League sent in about 100 observers a week ago to verify

Syria's compliance with the organization's plan that requires the regime to remove security forces and heavy weapons from city streets, start talks with opposition leaders and free political prisoners.

Syria agreed to the plan, intended to halt the crackdown completely, on Dec. 19.

The Local Coordination Committees, an umbrella group of activists, put the death toll at more than 300 people since Dec. 21.

Meanwhile, activists reported more bloodshed Tuesday.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that as dozens of soldiers were defecting

in the southern village of Jassem, they came under fire from security forces in a clash that killed at least 18 government troops. The Observatory said security forces later launched raids in the area, detaining more than 100 people in and around the village.

The group also said security forces shot dead three people in the restive city of Homs and three in the central province of Hama. The LCC had a higher toll, saying security forces killed four people in Homs, one in the Damascus suburb of Kfar Batna and four in Hama.

The Arab League's chief acknowledged Monday that killings have

continued even with the monitors working on the ground.

The league called an emergency meeting Saturday to discuss whether to withdraw the monitors because security forces are still killing people, an Arab official said. The meeting will be in Cairo, where the Arab League is based.

Syrian opposition groups have been critical of the Arab League mission, saying it is simply giving Mr. Assad cover for his crackdown.

Also Tuesday, an explosion struck a gas pipeline in central Syria in an attack the government blamed on terrorists, the state-run news agency SANA said.

The Washington Post (USA)

Arab group may order monitors out of Syria

BY ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY
AND MAGGIE MICHAEL

BEIRUT — The Arab League called Tuesday for an emergency meeting to discuss whether to withdraw the group's monitors from Syria, where security forces are still killing protesters despite the observers' presence, an Arab official said.

The ministerial meeting is to take place Saturday in Cairo, where the Arab League is based. The body's deputy secretary general, Ahmed bin Heli, said it will look into the first report by the head of the monitoring mission, which began Dec. 27.

Another official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the meeting will discuss whether to pull out the monitors because of the ongoing violence. Participants will not make a final decision, officials said, but will send their recommendations to another, high-level ministerial meeting.

Meanwhile, Syrian activists reported more bloodshed Tuesday.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that as dozens of soldiers were defecting in the southern village of Jassem, they came under fire from security forces. The clash killed at least 18 of the government troops, the observatory said. Security forces later raided the area and detained more than 100 people, it said.

The group also said that security forces fatally shot three people in the restive city of Homs and three in the central province of Hama. The Local Coordination Committees, an umbrella group of activists, reported a higher toll, saying security forces killed four people in Homs, one in the Damascus suburb of Kafr Batna and four in Hama.

Also Tuesday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy accused Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad of "barbarous repression" and demanded that he step down, saying the government is massacring its own people. Syrians should be allowed to determine their own future, Sarkozy said.

There are about 100 Arab League monitors in Syria, dispatched to verify the government's compliance with an Arab League plan to stop its crackdown on a nine-month-old uprising. Syria agreed to the plan Dec. 19.

But activists say hundreds have been slain in the week since the observers started work.

On Monday, league chief Nabil Elaraby acknowledged ongoing bloodshed but insisted that the observer mission has obtained important concessions from the government, such as the withdrawal of heavy weapons from cities.

Opposition groups have been deeply critical of the mission, saying it is simply giving Assad cover for his crackdown. The Local Coordination Committees says that the observer mission is witnessing mainly government-staged events.

The United Nations' last estimate, given several weeks ago, was that more than 5,000 people have been killed since the revolt erupted in mid-March. But since that report, activists say, hundreds more have been killed.

Syria has banned most foreign journalists from the country and prevented independent reporting, making it difficult to confirm claims from either side.

— Associated Press

The Washington Times (USA)

SYRIA

Sarkozy condemns 'barbarous repression'

French president calls on defiant Assad to resign as military killings continue

By ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY
AND MAGGIE MICHAEL
ASSOCIATED PRESS

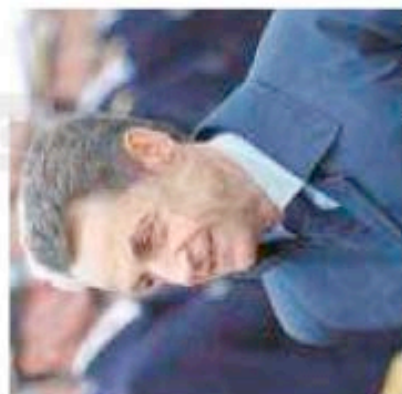
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"The Syrian president must leave power," he told members of the French military.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS
French President Nicolas Sarkozy reviews sailors in Lanveoc-Poulmic before a speech in which he called the violence in Syria "a massacre."

in mid-March, inspired by uprisings across the Arab world.

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but Mr. Assad remains defiant.

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forces later launched raids in the area, detaining more than 100 people in and around the village. The group also said security forces fatally shot three people in the restive city of Homs and three in the central province of Hama.

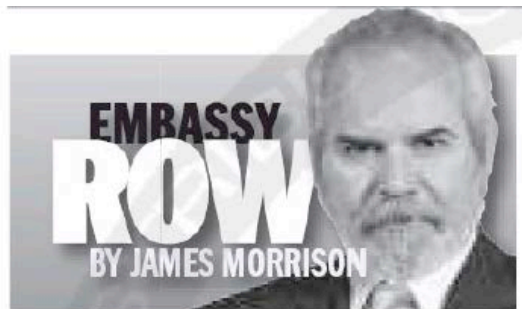
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The Washington Times (USA)



FORD RESUMES ATTACKS

U.S. Ambassador **Robert Ford**, who returned to Syria last month, is already resuming the types of verbal assaults against President **Bashar Assad** and his violent regime that brought death threats and forced a recall to Washington.

"The killing at the hands of Syria security forces of hundreds of civilians during the past weeks is appalling. . . . Each of these killings is a tragedy and a crime," Mr. Ford said Tuesday on his Facebook page.

The United Nations estimates that Syrian authorities have killed more than 5,000 protesters since demonstrations against the government erupted in March. Syrian opposition sources say the regime has killed nearly 400 civilians since Dec. 21, only two days after Mr. Assad agreed to an Arab League plan to stop the crack-down on protesters and open talks with the opposition.

Mr. Ford also expressed shock over seeing long lines of Syrian women waiting to get fuel from an oil tanker on "one cold, dark night." He blamed the government for creating the fuel shortage because international sanctions against Syria do not include a ban on the sale of refined oil.

"I have never seen this in an Arab country before — women having to stand in a long line in the night," said Mr. Ford, a career diplomat who has served in Algeria, Egypt and Iraq.

"The government and [regime loyalists] will try to blame the West for the shortages, but the sanctions do not stop sales of refined energy products to Syria."

Last year, Mr. Ford angered the regime by denouncing the violence and traveling outside the capital, Damascus, to visit protesters across Syria.

The State Department recalled him in October after he received death threats.

Syria responded by recalling Ambassador **Imad Moustapha** from Washington. Mr. Assad has not replaced his ambassador to the United States, but Mr. Moustapha's message to Syrian-Americans remains on the website of the Syrian Embassy, where Deputy Chief of Mission **Zouheir Jabbour** is in charge.

Al-Ahram Hebdo (Egypte / Egypt)

La Ligue arabe sur la corde raide

LES CHEFS de la diplomatie arabe dudit comité de suivi sur la Syrie s'étaient retrouvés à Doha. Le Saoudien Saoud Al-Fayçal y est allé même s'il n'est pas membre. Mais leur hôte dit vouloir « s'inspirer de sa sagesse et de son expérience », comme le confie un diplomate arabe présent à la rencontre. Un représentant du régime syrien trouve sa place. Les discussions peinent sur un véritable exercice linguistique. Arrêt de la violence contre les citoyens ». La Syrie s'oppose, l'Arabie s'entête. Un coup de fil à Walid Al-Mouallim. Un appel du Caire, du côté des renseignements. La conférence de presse durant laquelle la signature du protocole arabe devrait être annoncée est reportée. Enfin, l'expert modifie un terme qui devient « les citoyens désarmés » et Damas paraphrase le document proposé par la Ligue arabe pour l'envoi d'observateurs arabes en Syrie, chargés de déterminer si le président Bachar Al-Assad tient sa promesse de mettre un terme à la répression du mouvement de contestation.

La Ligue arabe avait prévu d'en envoyer 600. Le régime n'a accepté la venue que de 150 à 200 experts civils et militaires (lire encadré page 4). De leur compte rendu dépendra la levée ou le durcissement des sanctions infligées au régime syrien par la Ligue arabe.

Les observateurs, chargés de surveiller la situation, se sont rendus dans plusieurs villes où la contestation est importante : à Idlib, Hama, Homs et Deraa, ville théâtre de manifestations importantes. Rien que dans la province d'Idlib, plus de 250 000 manifestants se sont rassemblés dans des dizaines de villes, entraînant des affrontements. C'est dans les villes visitées que la répression a fait au moins 3 morts et des dizaines de blessés lors de manifestations du nouvel an et des voix au sein même de la Ligue demandent désormais

le retrait de ces observateurs, accusés de servir de caution au régime de Bachar. A Homs, selon une télé privée syrienne, proche du pouvoir, les observateurs ont débuté une tournée de la ville par le quartier de Bab Sebaa. Ils « ont évalué les dégâts faits par les groupes terroristes. Ils ont rencontré en outre des proches de martyrs ainsi qu'une personne qui avait été enlevée » par ces groupes, a indiqué la télévision. A leur arrivée, « de nombreuses personnes se sont rassemblées affirmant vouloir faire face au complet ouïdi contre la Syrie », a-t-elle précisé.

Un homme, portant le gilet orange de la Ligue arabe, s'adresse à la foule qui l'entoure : « J'ai vu le sniper de mes propres yeux. Nous demandons aux autorités de les retirer immédiatement. Nous allons sans tarder contacter la Ligue arabe s'il n'y a pas de réponse d'ici 24h, sinon, nous prendrions d'autres mesures ! ». La scène fait partie d'une vidéo diffusée par la chaîne Al-Jazeera et se joue dans le sud de la Syrie, à Deraa, berceau de la contestation. Le général Mohamed Al-Dubi, à la tête de la mission, a démenti les propos de « l'observateur » peu après. A Homs, et dans une autre vidéo diffusée toujours par la chaîne qatari, des activistes syriens tentent de parler avec les observateurs :

— Un jeune homme : Je suis l'un des habitants de ce quartier !

— Un des responsables (veste beige et un badge au cou) : Toute déclaration aux médias se fera par l'intermédiaire du président de la commission de la Ligue arabe.

— D'accord, mais vous, dites-leur ce que vous avez vu ! Il se tourne vers une personne) Filme-moi cela. Nous ne pouvons pas traverser la rue car il y a des snipers sur les toits. Il ne s'agit pas de déclaration aux médias, c'est la réalité ! Vous l'avez vu vous-même, il faut le dire au président de la commission ! Nous sommes en train de nous faire tuer.

— (Une voix hors champ) : On a eu 20 martyrs. — (Une autre) : Des habitants désarmés sont en train de mourir. — (Une autre encore) : Allez plus loin, vous allez voir les chars.

A la fin du document, une fusillade éclate. Selon la Ligue arabe, les observateurs font leur travail conformément au programme et rencontrent les habitants de plusieurs villes, mais selon Basma Kodmani, opposante en exil et membre du Conseil national syrien, ils sont impuissants. Elle estime qu'ils « sont en train d'enquêter sur des violations et la répression dans un endroit, et il y a une autre répression qui se passe en un lieu non loin de là. La réalité est que nous n'avons absolument vu ni de régression de la répression, ni de régression du nombre de victimes ». « Les observateurs sont des témoins qui ne voient rien », protestait, hier, une banderole brandie par des manifestants à Barzeh, dans la banlieue de Damas.

Utiliser les informations recueillies

Le dirigeant de ce principal groupe d'opposition syrienne, Burhan Ghalioun, a rencontré au Caire le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe, Nabil Al-Arabi, pour discuter de la conférence nationale sur la Syrie que doit accueillir la Ligue arabe. L'opposition syrienne a presque pris pour siège la capitale égyptienne pour « suivre le travail des observateurs, lequel est coordonné par un centre d'opération à la Ligue arabe », comme le précise un diplomate de cette organisation. L'idée, comme il précise, est d'utiliser les informations recueillies par l'opposition syrienne et les faire passer aux observateurs sur le terrain, pour faciliter leur mission.

Tout en exprimant des doutes sur l'efficacité de cette mission, des opposants syriens ont jugé que la présence des experts arabes « assu-

rait en quelque sorte une protection » aux manifestations réprimées dans le sang par les forces du régime. Elle permettra dans le scénario le plus optimiste de briser le mur de la peur chez les Syriens, les poussant à des manifestations pacifiques. Une fois les places occupées en nombre, le régime ne pourra plus avoir recours à la force militaire. Mais on évoque d'ailleurs une autre possibilité. Le régime de Bachar poursuit dans la logique militaire dans son dit combat contre le « terrorisme » et continue à réprimer dans le sang les Syriens les poussant à une sorte de guerre civile. C'est ainsi que l'explicite Fawaz Traboulsi dans son entretien avec l'Hebdo. Cet écrivain et politicien expert de la Syrie et du Yémen estime qu'une violation du protocole par Assad conviendra aux Américains et poussera le dossier au Conseil de sécurité (lire interview page 4). Les couilles, telles racontées par un diplomate arabe qui a requis l'anonymat, parlent ainsi du trio émirati-qatari-saoudien qui exécute un plan américain. La Ligue arabe est divisée, le Liban et l'Algérie surtout s'opposent à toutes nouvelles sanctions contre Damas. « Un embargo aérien pour isoler le régime », propose un diplomate français. Un scénario à l'iraquo-libyenne. « Mais celui-ci empêchera ceux qui veulent faire les combats », lui réplique un diplomate égyptien. Le responsable français reste muet avant de parler de la campagne présidentielle de Sarkozy. « Laissez une chance aux observateurs », affirme-t-on à la Ligue arabe. L'opposition syrienne en exil ne semble pas contre pour l'instant. Leur jugement n'interviendra qu'à la fin de la mission des observateurs. A ce jour, le pouvoir syrien n'a encore répondu à aucune des demandes de la Ligue arabe : arrêt de la violence, retrait de l'armée des villes et libération des détenus. Seul un bloqueur a été relâché.

Samar Al-Garnal

| Chronologie de la répression des manifestants | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>16 mars 2011 : Les forces de sécurité brisent un rassemblement de 150 manifestants sur la place Marjeh à Damas. Ils brandissent des photos de leurs proches emprisonnés.</p> <p>24 mars : Le président Bachar Al-Assad ordonne la constitution d'un comité pour étudier la façon de lever le niveau de vie et l'état d'urgence, en place depuis 48 ans.</p> <p>29 mars : Le gouvernement démissionne.</p> <p>3 avril : Assad demande à Adel Safar, un ancien ministre de l'Agriculture, de former un nouveau gouvernement.</p> <p>8 avril : Les manifestants se regroupent à travers la Syrie. 22 personnes sont tuées à Deraa, 15 autres ailleurs.</p> <p>14 avril : Assad présente un nouveau cabinet et ordonne la libération des détenus arrêtés durant un mois de protestations.</p> <p>19 avril : Le gouvernement passe le projet de levée de l'état d'urgence.</p> <p>22 avril : Les forces de sécurité et des hommes armés fidèles à Assad tuent au</p> | <p>moins 100 manifestants.</p> <p>23 mai : L'Union européenne impose des sanctions à Assad et 9 autres hauts responsables du gouvernement.</p> <p>27 juin : Les intellectuels syriens appellent au changement politique lors d'une conférence de rares personnes autorisées par les autorités à se rassembler.</p> <p>8 juillet : Rassemblement de milliers de personnes à Hama appelant Assad au départ. L'ambassadeur américain Robert Ford et l'ambassadeur français Eric Chevallier visitent la ville pour montrer leur soutien aux manifestants.</p> <p>31 juillet : Tempête de chars à Hama, les habitants se disent assiégés depuis près d'un mois. Au moins 80 personnes sont tuées.</p> <p>7 août : L'Arabie saoudite rappelle son ambassadeur en Syrie. Le Koweït rappelle en fait de même le lendemain.</p> <p>18 août : Le président américain Barack Obama demande à Assad de se retirer.</p> <p>21 août : Assad dit qu'il s'attend à des</p> | <p>élections législatives en février 2012 après les réformes permettant de nouveaux partis.</p> <p>2 septembre : L'Union européenne impose une interdiction sur les achats de pétrole syrien et met en garde contre des mesures supplémentaires, sauf si la répression se termine.</p> <p>15 septembre : Des militants de l'opposition syrienne annoncent les membres d'un Conseil national syrien pour offrir une alternative au gouvernement.</p> <p>4 octobre : Russie et Chine opposent leur veto à une résolution européenne au Conseil de sécurité condamnant la Syrie.</p> <p>2 novembre : La Syrie accepte un plan de la Ligue arabe de retirer son armée des villes et de libérer les prisonniers politiques. Les militants affirment le lendemain que des forces de sécurité ont tué 11 personnes à Homs.</p> <p>12 novembre : La Ligue arabe suspend la Syrie.</p> <p>16 novembre : Des transfuges de</p> |
| <p>13 décembre : Le Haut commissaire pour les droits de l'homme, Navi Pillay, rapporte que le nombre de décès après neuf mois d'agitation est plus de 5 000. La Syrie déclare que plus de 1 100 membres des services de l'armée, de la police et de sécurité ont été tués.</p> <p>15 décembre : La Russie propose au Conseil de sécurité une nouvelle résolution sur la violence en Syrie. Les émissaires occidentaux disent que le texte russe est encore trop faible, mais sont prêts à négocier.</p> <p>19 décembre : La Syrie signe le plan de la Ligue arabe de paix, acceptant de laisser venir des observateurs dans le pays pour surveiller la mise en œuvre du retrait des troupes et la libération des prisonniers politiques.</p> <p>27 décembre : Visite de la délégation des observateurs de la Ligue arabe. Les autorités syriennes ont libéré 755 détenus incarcérés depuis la révolte.</p> <p>30 décembre : Invitation à marcher vers les places « de la liberté » (tahrit) du pays. ●</p> | <p>19 novembre : Assad dit qu'il y aura des élections en février ou mars.</p> <p>27 novembre : Les États arabes votent pour imposer des sanctions économiques.</p> <p>30 novembre : La Turquie déclare qu'elle a suspendu toutes les opérations de crédit avec la Syrie et a gelé les avoirs du gouvernement syrien.</p> <p>2 décembre : L'Union européenne impose des sanctions à 3 entreprises pétrolières syriennes.</p> <p>5 décembre : La Syrie dit avoir conditionnellement approuvé un plan de paix de la Ligue arabe. La Syrie exige l'annulation des sanctions ainsi que la réintégration au sein du bloc régional.</p> <p>12 décembre : La Syrie tient des élections locales dans le cadre d'un processus de réformes. Les critiques disent que le vote n'est pas valable.</p> | |

Jerusalem Post (Palestine occupée /Occupied Palestine)

Syrian opposition has good chance of toppling Assad in coming months, predicts top IDF officer

• By YAAKOV KATZ

There are growing signs that the Syrian opposition is stabilizing and will succeed in the coming months in toppling President Bashar Assad's regime, a top IDF officer predicted on Tuesday.

According to the officer, the IDF has learned of the defection of thousands of Syrian soldiers, including dozens of officers, among them a number of high-ranking colonels.

The officer's prediction came a day after Defense Minister Ehud Barak told the Knesset that Assad was expected to fall in the coming weeks.

The officer said that the IDF was

increasingly concerned with the possible fallout from Assad's downfall and particularly the possibility that Syria's chemical arsenal would fall into terrorist hands.

There are also concerns that clashes could break out along Israel's border with Syria in the Golan Heights. The IDF has detected an increase in the number of Syrian troops patrolling the border and recently decided to deploy a battalion nearby to contain a potential isolated attack.

The IDF is also concerned with the presence of global jihad elements in Syria, which it suspects were behind the twin suicide bombings in Damas-

cus last week which killed 44 people. "It is unclear what role these elements are playing in Syria and their presence is concerning," the officer said.

Turning to Iran, the IDF believes that Iran will make a decision in the coming years to manufacture a nuclear device. Currently, Iran is assessed to be on the threshold, which means that it has mastered all of the technology required for a nuclear weapon as well as the fuel cycle process.

"All that is needed now is for the Iranians to make a decision to make the bomb and we predict with high probability that it will happen in the coming years," the officer said.

The Iranians recently opened the Fordo facility built under a mountain near the city of Qom and are moving centrifuges there which they plan to use to enrich uranium to 20 percent levels, moving closer to the 90% levels required for a nuclear weapon. In addition, the facility can be used to store between 1 and 2 tons of enriched uranium.

"Once they go to the breakout stage [begin enrichment of military-grade uranium Y. K.], it will take between one year to a year-and-a-half to manufacture a nuclear device," the officer said. "It will take another couple of years for them to manufacture a number of bombs."

Pour Joumblatt, la seule solution à la crise en Syrie est un « changement radical du régime »

Le chef du Parti socialiste progressiste, le député Walid Joumblatt, a souligné hier la ressemblance saillante entre « la fameuse expression “la force des faibles” du grand intellectuel, écrivain et ancien président de la République tchèque Vaclav Havel et celle du martyr Kamal Joumblatt, selon lequel “ceux qui ne portent pas de chemise sur leur torse sont ceux qui libéreront le monde” ».

À partir de ce rapprochement, M. Joumblatt a souligné la puissance des soulèvements populaires, « insufflés par cette force sous-jacente des faibles, apte à rejaillir en tout lieu et à toute époque. Toutes les épreuves de l'histoire ont prouvé que les mouvements populaires avancent et ne reculent pas, et que ce qui est bâti sur des bases erronées ne saurait perdurer ». Rappelant le contexte historique du printemps de Prague en 1968 et la révolution de Velours en 1989, ayant inspiré les essais de Havel, qui en a été un acteur-clé, M. Joumblatt a conclu que « la force des faibles est ce qui a initié les révolutions arabes et continue à le faire

pour un regain de liberté et de dignité ». En effet, « l'histoire est une marche cumulative et un livre ouvert à tous ceux qui souhaitent en tirer des leçons ».

La force des bolcheviques et de Khomeyni

C'est ce précepte de la force des faibles que le leader druze a tenu à rappeler à la Russie et à l'Iran, concernant leur politique à l'égard de la Syrie. « Il serait bon que les autorités russes observent ce principe dans leur approche de la crise que traverse leur allié syrien, en se résignant au fait que ce ne sont pas des solutions sécuritaires qui mettront un terme à la crise, mais un changement radical du régime », a estimé M. Joumblatt. Et d'ajouter : « Au lieu de s'attacher à un régime qui n'a pas su tirer les leçons des événements de Hama en 1981, qui rappellent d'ailleurs ceux de Budapest en 1956, il vaudrait mieux que la Russie conseille au régime syrien d'accepter que le principe de l'alternance au pouvoir supplante l'attachement au pouvoir et les bains de sang qui en découlent. » M. Joum-

blatt a rappelé dans ce sens la révolution bolchevique en 1917, lorsque les Russes « se sont soulevés contre l'injustice des tsars ». Parallèlement, M. Joumblatt a souhaité que « la République islamique (d'Iran) prenne elle aussi en compte le principe de “la force des faibles” », rappelant aux « petits-fils de l'imam Khomeyni que c'est ce principe qui a motivé la lutte contre le chah d'Iran (...), prouvant ainsi que les torsos nus qui appellent à la liberté et à la démocratie sont capables d'affronter les régimes les plus miteux ».

Aux druzes de Syrie

Le chef du PSP s'est enfin adressé aux druzes de Syrie « qui savent eux aussi que le mouvement des peuples ne va pas à reculons, que la mémoire populaire est sans merci, et que tous les torsos nus dans les villes et villages syriens ont désormais l'avenir pour eux parce qu'ils incarnent la force des faibles ». M. Joumblatt a appelé ainsi les druzes syriens à « refuser de participer aux opérations de répression contre le peuple syrien aux côtés de la police et des unités de l'armée ».

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

L'Armée syrienne libre « prête » à reprendre l'offensive

Révolte La controverse enfle autour de la mission arabe ; au moins 21 tués hier.

La mission des observateurs de la Ligue arabe est à ce jour un échec et les combattants de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) sont prêts à reprendre l'offensive si la situation n'évolue pas rapidement, a menacé le colonel Riad el-Asaad, le commandant des forces insurgées. « Si nous avons le sentiment que les observateurs ne sont toujours pas sérieux dans les prochains jours, au plus tard dans une semaine, nous prendrons une décision qui surprendra le régime et le monde entier », a-t-il affirmé, dans une interview à Reuters.

Notons que la semaine dernière, le colonel Asaad avait annoncé qu'il avait ordonné à ses troupes de cesser le combat pendant la visite des observateurs de la Ligue arabe, sauf dans les cas de légitime défense. La suspension des hostilités, ajoutait-il, devait donner aux observateurs l'occasion d'agir et de « démontrer que c'est le régime qui est criminel ». Mais hier le colonel a déclaré que la présence de la mission de la Ligue arabe en Syrie n'avait pas stoppé les effusions de sang. D'après les informations obtenues de sources proches de l'opposition, au moins 129 personnes ont été tuées au cours de la première semaine de mission des observateurs. D'autres groupes avancent jusqu'à 390 morts. « Ce qui semble le plus probable à présent, c'est que nous déclencherons une vaste escalade de nos opérations », a prévenu M. Asaad. Il ne s'agit pas d'une déclaration de guerre pure et simple, a-t-il précisé, mais d'un changement trans-

formateur de notre manière de lutter », ajoutant que « nous espérons que le peuple syrien le soutiendra ».

Insoumis v/s armée régulière

Sur le terrain, « au moins 18 membres des forces de sécurité ont péri à l'aube à Jassem après que des dizaines de soldats de l'armée régulière eurent quitté les rangs loyalistes avec leurs armes », a indiqué l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH). « Pendant leur fuite, les agents de sécurité du commissariat de Jassem leur ont tiré dessus et des affrontements s'en sont suivis. Les corps ont été transportés dans un hôpital gouvernemental et les agents de sécurité ont arrêté plus de cent personnes parmi les habitants », a ajouté l'OSDH.

Par ailleurs, au moins 21 civils ont encore été tués hier, selon al-Arabiya. Ainsi, deux jeunes hommes, âgés de 20 et 28 ans, ont péri par les tirs des forces de sécurité dans le quartier de Qoussour à Hama. Trois autres civils ont été tués à Homs, où cinq civils, dont une femme, ont été blessés par les forces gouvernementales qui ont tiré sur des manifestants qui attendaient l'arrivée d'une équipe d'observateurs de la Ligue arabe, a affirmé l'OSDH.

Face à ces violences continues, les militants prodémocratie syriens ont dénoncé le « manque de professionnalisme » des observateurs de la Ligue arabe dépêchés en Syrie. Les Comités locaux de coordination (LCC), qui organisent les manifestations sur le ter-

rain, ont appelé le chef de la Ligue arabe et les observateurs à « annoncer leur impuissance à mener seuls cette mission et demander l'aide des organisations internationales concernées », indiquant que « le non-respect des horaires de leur arrivée dans des lieux précis ont fait que de nombreuses personnes ont été tuées ». « Les officiers et les soldats de l'armée portent des costumes de policiers, conduisent des véhicules militaires repeints et changent le nom des lieux, mais cela ne signifie pas que l'armée s'est retirée des villes et des rues ni que le régime applique les clauses du protocole », arabe, ont en outre dénoncé les LCC.

Rappelons que le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe, Nabil al-Arabi, avait demandé lundi « l'arrêt total des tirs » en Syrie où la répression a fait plus de 5 000 morts depuis mars, selon l'ONU. « Les chars se sont retirés des villes et de leurs environs. Mais selon certaines informations, des tireurs embusqués continuent à opérer depuis les toits de bâtiments et il y a des violences continues », avait affirmé M. Arabi.

Washington demande à l'ONU d'agir ; Paris s'énerv

Face à cette situation, la Maison-Blanche a estimé que la Syrie n'avait pas respecté ses engagements vis-à-vis de la Ligue arabe et qu'il était « largement temps pour le Conseil de sécurité (de l'ONU) d'agir » pour « soutenir les aspirations légitimes des Syriens ». Évoquant les « tirs de snipers em-

busqués, les actes de torture et les meurtres qui continuent », le porte-parole du président Barack Obama Jay Carney en a conclu qu'il est « évident que le cahier des charges (du plan de sortie de crise arabe) n'a pas été respecté » par le régime syrien.

Le président français Nicolas Sarkozy a quant à lui répété que M. Assad devait « quitter le pouvoir », et son ministre des Affaires étrangères Alain Juppé a estimé que « les conditions dans lesquelles se déroule cette mission d'observateurs méritent d'être clarifiées ».

Sauf que cette mission reste « utile politiquement, moralement et psychologiquement... C'est ce qu'a affirmé hier le chef du Conseil national syrien (CNS) Burhan Ghalioun depuis Lisbonne, estimant qu'« il faut passer par cette étape pour (...) apporter la preuve que ce qui se déroule en Syrie est une révolution d'une population pacifique ». Le comité ministériel arabe sur la Syrie doit d'ailleurs se réunir samedi au Caire pour examiner un rapport préliminaire du chef de la mission d'observateurs.

Notons que le bureau exécutif du CNS a annoncé hier soir son rejet de l'accord signé récemment avec un autre groupe de l'opposition, le Comité national pour le changement démocratique (CNCD). « Ce texte est en contradiction avec le programme politique du CNS et avec les demandes de la révolution en Syrie », affirme le CNS sur sa page Facebook, ajoutant que « les membres du bureau exécutif ont appelé à l'unanimité à l'adoption d'un

nouveau document qui sera présenté par le CNS aux forces et personnalités politiques (...) et qui sera en phase avec les revendications des jeunes de la révolution ». Le CNS a expliqué avoir signé le 30 décembre au Caire un texte qui « incluait des idées premières devant encore être débattues et ne constituait pas un document politique » comme il a été présenté par le CNCD. Selon le CNCD, cet accord, signé par le chef du CNS Burhan Ghalioun et un membre du CNCD, Haytham Manaa, « rejette toute intervention militaire qui porte atteinte à la souveraineté et à l'indépendance du pays ».

Entre-temps, 25 prisonniers d'opinion ont entamé une grève de la faim pour réclamer une visite des observateurs dans la prison d'Adra près de Damas, a indiqué l'OSDH. L'organisation a en outre appelé M. Arabi à réclamer la libération de Faten Rajab Fawaz, professeur de physique interpellée le 26 décembre à Douma, près de Damas, où elle anime la contestation et dont on n'est depuis sans nouvelles. Et le Centre syrien pour la presse et la liberté d'expression a demandé aux autorités une enquête sur le meurtre du journaliste Choukri Abou Bourghol, un assassinat condamné par la fédération des syndicats de la presse arabe.

Signalons finalement que le parti Baas a annoncé, comme si de rien n'était, la tenue en février de son 11e congrès régional.

(Sources : agences et rédaction)

Un groupe inconnu revendique l'enlèvement de 5 Iraniens et met en garde Téhéran et le Hezbollah

Un groupe jusque-là inconnu a revendiqué hier l'enlèvement en décembre de cinq ressortissants iraniens en Syrie, dans un communiqué. « Nous nous sommes emparés de cinq Iraniens pour lancer une première mise en garde à l'Iran et au Hezbollah contre la poursuite de leur soutien au régime syrien dans la répression de la révolte dans tout le pays en général et à Homs en

particulier, le cœur battant de la révolution », affirme le texte signé du Mouvement contre l'expansion chiite en Syrie, mettant en garde Téhéran et le Hezbollah que le sort de leurs éléments en Syrie sera « le même que celui de ces cinq personnes s'ils ne cessent pas immédiatement toute forme de soutien au régime criminel dans la répression de la révolution ». Le groupe précise en outre

avoir transmis la semaine dernière à l'ambassade d'Iran à Damas ses conditions pour libérer les otages. Rappelons que l'ambassade d'Iran à Damas avait indiqué le 21 décembre que cinq ingénieurs iraniens travaillant pour le projet de la centrale électrique de Jandar à Homs avaient été enlevés la veille par des personnes non identifiées alors qu'ils étaient en route pour le chantier.

Le porte-avions russe Amiral Kouznetsov attendu à Tartous

Une flotte russe menée par le porte-avions Amiral Kouznetsov accostera à la base navale de Tartous en Syrie dans les prochains jours, a rapporté hier le quotidien à grand tirage al-Watan, et elle y restera « six jours ». La flotte russe comprend « des avions Sukhoï 33 et Mig 29, ainsi que des hélicoptères (anti-sous-marins) Ka-27, plusieurs systèmes de missiles antiaériens, des navires de

guerre et des sous-marins », précise al-Watan. Selon ce dernier, le groupe d'escorte du porte-avions est composé « du navire anti-sous-marins Amiral Chabanenko (...) du navire de support Nicolai Chiker, ainsi que des tankers Sergueï Osipov, Viazma et Kama ». Rappelons que la Russie dispose d'une base navale qu'elle a récemment agrandie au large de Tartous.

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

Turkish political party organizes fact-finding mission to Syria

A Turkish fact-finding mission to Syria, organized by Turkey's Islamist-based Felicity Party (SP), went to Syria on Wednesday night for a three-day country tour, which includes the capital Damascus as well as the restive towns of Hama and Homs in the northern part of the country.

SP leader Mustafa Kamalak is the first Turkish political leader to make such a trip to neighboring Syria since the Bashar al-Assad government started a violent crackdown on a 10-month long civilian protest movement. The group was also accompanied by

a number of Turkish journalists, including Today's Zaman Ankara bureau chief Abdullah Bozkurt.

Kamalak told Today's Zaman that the mission is purely a humanitarian one and should not be interpreted as supporting the Assad regime, though he hopes to talk with Assad himself. "We

are first and foremost trying to verify what has been happening on the ground. It is a fact-finding mission," he said, adding that his party has real concerns about a possible Western intervention in Syria. "We will give our suggestions and warnings."

We hope the current stalemate can be resolved through dialogue and peace," he remarked.

The SP leader also noted that the Syrian government should embark on reforms and democratization if it means ending bloodshed in the country and preventing outside interference, which is looming large on the horizon.

The trip was jointly organized by the SP outreach committee and the Turkey-Syria Friendship Committee, a nongovernmental organization that has members in both countries. The trip was ap-

proved by the Syrian government.

Mustafa Yilmaz, deputy chairman of the SP, told Today's Zaman that the SP had organized similar trips to other Muslim countries in the past, the last one to famine-stricken Somalia. The meetings were planned with Syrian Vice President

Najm al-Atari, Speaker of the People's Assembly Mahmoud al-Atrash, Deputy Foreign Minister

Ahmad Arnous, Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Haseen, scholar Sheikh Sa'd Ramadan al-Buh and members of the opposition. **Ankara** Today's Zaman

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

Activists say Syrian regime misleading Arab League observers

Activists accused President Bashar Assad's regime on Wednesday of misleading Arab League observers by taking them only to areas loyal to the government and changing street signs to confuse them. According to the activists, regime loyalists also are painting military vehicles still inside of cities blue to make them look like police vehicles - a ploy that allows the government to claim it has pulled the army out of heavily populated areas in accordance with the Arab League plan to end the crackdown on dissent. About 100 Arab League observers now in Syria for a week are supposed to be assessing whether the government is complying with the plan. Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi denied the charges and said the government does not interfere with the observers, "but rather ensures protection and escort for them." The Arab League plan requires the government to remove security forces and heavy weapons from city streets, start talks with opposition leaders and free political prisoners. The UN estimated several weeks ago that more than 5,000 people have been killed by Syrian security forces in the crackdown on the anti-government protests that began in March. Since that report, opposition activists say hundreds more have been killed. Syria's opposition say the bloodshed has continued despite the presence of the observers. **Beirut AP**

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

League to review status of its monitors in Syria

WITHDRAWAL TO BE DISCUSSED ON SATURDAY AS FRANCE STEPS UP CRITICISM

Gulf News Report

Dubai The Arab League will hold an emergency meeting on Saturday to discuss whether to withdraw its observers from Syria, as the mission's credibility came under deeper scrutiny yesterday.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday demanded that the Bashar Al Assad regime give the observers space to work, and called on the international community to "face up to its responsibilities" by imposing the "toughest sanctions" on Damascus.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said there were many questions about the effectiveness of the League mission.

"Does it really have completely free access to information? We await the report that it will submit in the coming days to see more clearly," he said.

Saturday's meeting will look into the first report by the head of the monitoring mission which began on December 26 and could also decide whether to pull out the monitors.

Meanwhile, violence continued in Syria yesterday, with three people shot dead in the flashpoint town of Homs. Also in the vicinity of Homs, an explosion struck a gas pipeline, which the government blamed on "terrorists".

See also Page 14



EPA

Observers' credibility in question

Arab League observers (in orange jackets) touring the restive Syrian city of Daraa yesterday. The League has dispatched around 60 observers to Syria to check if the government is complying with a plan to end 10 months of deadly violence.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Sarkozy wants Al Assad to step down over 'disgusting' massacres

Syrians should be allowed to freely choose their own destiny, French president says

Damascus (AFP) French President Nicolas Sarkozy demanded Syria's Bashar Al Assad step down for overseeing "disgusting" massacres against his own people, as an Arab observer mission came in for more flak yesterday.

The mission has been mired in controversy since a first team of observers arrived on December 26, with activists accusing Al Assad's regime of keeping the monitors on a short leash as it presses on with a lethal crackdown on dissent.

Arab League chief Nabeel Al Arabi, in his first remarks since the observers were deployed, defended the mission, saying it had secured the release of political prisoners and the withdrawal of tanks from cities.

However, "there are still snipers and gunfire. There must be a total halt to the gunfire", he told reporters on Monday.

The issue will be raised with Al Assad's government "because the aim is to stop the shooting and protect civilians", Al Arabi said, adding, "it is difficult to say who is firing on whom".

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said yesterday that he was "sceptical" about the progress of the Arab League's operation.

Brutal persecution

"The conditions under which this observer mission is operating should be clarified," Juppe said, questioning whether the observers really had free access to information.

Sarkozy also weighed in yesterday, saying Syrians should be allowed "to freely choose their own destiny" after facing what he denounced as brutal persecution that inspires



The message is clear

Demonstrators protest against Syria's President Bashar Al Assad in Kafranbel on Sunday. The banner reads, "We demand a space invasion to save us".

“The conditions under which this observer mission is operating should be clarified.”

Alain Juppe
French Foreign Minister

"disgust and revulsion".

Sarkozy demanded the regime give the observers space to work, and called on the international community to "face up to its responsibilities" by imposing the "toughest sanctions" to force Damascus to grant humanitarian access.

After weeks of stalling, Syria agreed last month to allow the deployment of observers as part of an Arab roadmap calling for the military's withdrawal from cities and residential zones, a halt to violence against civilians and the release of detainees.

According to the UN's latest estimates given in December, more than 5,000

people have been killed in the Al Assad regime's crackdown on dissent since mid-March.

The Arab League mission has also been criticised by Syrian activists and opposition figures over the choice of a former top Sudanese military commander, General Mohammad Ahmad Mustafa Al Dabi, to head its observer operation.

Controversial figure

Al Dabi is a controversial figure because he served under Sudan's President Omar Al Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes.

On Sunday, the Arab Par-

liament, an advisory body of the 22-member Arab League, intensified the pressure saying the monitors should be immediately withdrawn having failed to halt the government's crackdown.

"We are seeing an increase in violence, more people are being killed including children... and all this in the presence of Arab League monitors, which has angered the Arab people," said the body's speaker, Salem Al Diqbassi.

He urged Arabi to "immediately pull out the Arab observers, considering the continued killing of innocent civilians by the Syrian regime".

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The National (EAU / UAE)

Rebels turn up the heat on Assad

Leader's warning

Free Syrian Army vows to hit back as observer mission stutters



An Arab League observer talks with Syrians during a tour in Deraa yesterday. The Syrian opposition has criticised the league's mission, saying the regime is stage-managing their tours. Syria via EPA

BEIRUT // The commander of Syria's rebel Syrian Army has vowed to hit back at Assad's forces, saying he was frustrated with Arab League monitors' lack of progress in ending the government's crackdown on protests.

"If we feel they are still not serious in a few days, or at most within a week, we will take a decision that will surprise the regime and the whole world," said the head of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Colonel Rifaat al-Assad.

The Arab League said on Monday its monitors in Syria were helping to stem bloodshed in months into a mass uprising against Syria's ruling family, and asked for more time to do their job.

But since the team's arrival last week, security forces have killed at least 129 people, according to Reuters. Activist groups have said 390 have been killed.

The monitors have been checking whether Syria kept its promise to implement a league peace plan by withdrawing troops from flashpoint cities, starting dialogue with the opposition and releasing thousands detained in the revolt.

Gen Assad, whose FSA is an umbrella group of armed factions, said he was waiting for the league's final report on its first week before deciding whether to make a "transformative shift" that would mark a major escalation against security forces.

Since the monitors arrived "we had many more martyrs", he said, speaking from his safe haven in southern Turkey.

"As in the Syrian people's interest to allow the mission to continue," the league mission has already been plagued by security forces' resistance to its work, and its small size and were appalled when the head of the mission, a Sudanese general, suggested he was reassured by first impressions of Homs, one of the main centres of the unrest.

France's foreign minister, Alain Juppé, said yesterday it was crucial that monitors were able to act independently — protesters have complained security forces accompany monitors, making them difficult to approach.

"But they truly have genuinely free access to information? We are waiting for the report they will produce in the coming days for more clarity," Mr Juppé said in an interview

assaults have continued to come in, highlighting concerns that the FSA does not fully control rebels.

The state news agency said terror-ists blew up a gas pipeline near the central town of Raastan yesterday, cutting off supplies to two power plants and causing power cuts by at least an hour.

Activists said at least 12 people were killed across the country on Monday. The grassroots Local Coordination Committees (LCC), which put Monday's toll at 24, said the Arab League monitors were unable to end the violence or reach an independent assessment of its causes.

"The Arab League has fallen victim to the regime's typical traps in which observers have no choice but to witness regime-staged events and move about the country only with the full knowledge of the regime," the LCC said.

Political detainees at Damascus'

central prison started a hunger strike in protest over an observer visit that met with jailed rebels but not with political prisoners, their relatives told the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Some people who monitors met had nothing to do with the strike, so these prisoners went on strike themselves, said Rami Abdelrahman, the head of the British-based Observatory.

The Arab League secretary general, Nabil Elaraby, said on Monday Syria's military had withdrawn from residential areas to the outskirts of the cities, but that gunfire continued and snipers were still a threat.

"We call upon the Syrian government to fully commit to what it promised," he said. He asked Syrians to "give the monitoring mission a chance to prove its presence on the ground".

Mr Elaraby said the monitors succeeded in getting food supplies into Homs, and had secured the release of 1,484 prisoners, before the mission began. The rights group Assad had said 37,000 were still in detention.

On Sunday, the Arab Parliament, an 88-member committee of delegates from each of the league's member states, called for the monitors to leave Syria, saying their mission was providing cover for unabated violence and abuses by the government.

Kinam Shami, a member of the Syrian Revolution Coordinating Union activists' group, said from Damascus people were taking huge risks by gathering in cities where Arab League monitors were expected, in the hope of talking to them.

★ Reuters

We call upon the Syrian government to fully commit to what it promised
Nabil Elaraby
Arab League secretary general

The National (EAU / UAE)

Assad: friend or foe of the Kurds?

Syria's suppressed Kurdish minority seems to be hedging its bets during the uprising, siding with neither the regime of Bashar Al Assad nor the groups keen to overthrow him until they can determine which side will offer the most benefits. **reports Phil Sands, Foreign Correspondent**

DAMASCUS // As Syrian protesters battle to overthrow President Bashar Al Assad, the country's large Kurdish minority is struggling to decide if its interests lie in the fall of the regime or in its survival.

Politically divided and uncertain about their future, Syria's two million Kurds, 10 per cent of the population, have played a limited role in the uprising, analysts, activists and Kurdish groups say.

"Until now we are seeing about 10,000 people in the street for the largest demonstrations (in the Kurdish areas of north-east Syria)," said one Kurdish activist.

"When we really rise up there will be hundreds of thousands, and there will be big Kurdish protests in Damascus and Aleppo, but we are not at that stage yet."

Mr Al Assad has offered concessions to win Kurdish support – or at least entice them to stay out of the revolt – granting citizenship to stateless Kurds in April.

The military crackdown has also been less harsh in Kurdish areas, in an effort to avoid inflaming the tense situation there, but those measures alone do not explain the cautious involvement in the uprising.

Among those in Syria with an axe to grind against the regime, the country's Kurdish minority would seem to rank near the top – a long history of state-imposed ethnic discrimination and economic neglect put it in permanent semi-rebellion against Damascus.

The north-east city of Qamishli in Hasakia province, the Kurds' strong hold, has long been one of its most impoverished areas.

Over the years many Kurds have moved to Aleppo and Damascus in search of work and education, often settling in illegally built neighbourhoods as a poverty-stricken urban underclass that derided their direct

source of political and ethnic tension that continues to exert a major influence on the region. The four countries view with suspicion their Kurdish populations and the separatist movements that exist among them.

The Kurds feel themselves targets of harassment and discrimination, and many do want to win Kurdish autonomy.

With a strong sense of communal identity, the Kurds have been the most politically active and well-organised opposition bloc in Syria, and played a leading role in the shore-lived Damascus Spring of 2005, making unprecedented calls for democracy and greater freedoms.

Still, mainstream Kurdish political parties have tread carefully since March when the uprising began, trying to solve the equation of whether their interests would be better served by a revolt that could yet succeed or fail, or by trying to reform the status quo.

It's true that for seven months or so some of the Kurdish political parties were not engaged in the uprising. Really, it was just the Future movement and Yeketi. The rest hadn't taken the decision to go to the street," said Foad Aleko, a senior Syrian Kurdish political figure and Yeketi party official.

Of the dozen or so Kurdish parties in Syria, the Future movement is an anomaly.

Founded by Meshal Tammo it quickly and unequivocally joined the revolt, co-operating closely with Arab protesters nationwide.

It was the only Kurdish group to join the opposition Syrian National Council.

Unlike other Kurdish leaders, Mr Tammo shunned identity politics. He flatly refused to have Kurdish flags flown at protest rallies, insisting instead the Syrian national flag be raised.

Mr Tammo was murdered by gunmen on October 7, the first national level opposition figure to be killed in the uprising.

While his funeral attracted about 50,000 mourners – five were shot during the procession by security forces – and led to speculation it would inflame the Kurdish street, it did not.

Instead, allegations about who killed him only underlined divisions among them.

Some accused Turkey, fighting its own Kurdish insurgency against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Others pointed to different Kurdish factions, citing mafia-like entrenched interests.

These schemes and in particular

ish parties in Syria, have helped the Syrian authorities to prevent the Kurds from fully supporting the uprising.

In an effort to solve their lingering divisions, Syrian Kurdish political blocs, including 10 major parties and representatives of non-affiliated groups – doctors, engineers and other professionals – met in October to thrash out a unified position. The PYD did not attend.

In June it had helped found the National Coordination Committee (NCC), an opposition alliance that the other Kurdish groups refused to join because it insisted Syria be defined as part of the Arab world.

The October 26 meeting declared the Kurds were fully committed to the Syrian revolution and would not negotiate with the regime independently of other opposition blocs. It demanded a new constitution.

Unlike other Kurdish leaders, Mr Tammo shunned identity politics. He flatly refused to have Kurdish flags flown at protest rallies, insisting instead the Syrian national flag be raised.

Mr Tammo was murdered by gunmen on October 7, the first national level opposition figure to be killed in the uprising.

While his funeral attracted about 50,000 mourners – five were shot during the procession by security forces – and led to speculation it would inflame the Kurdish street, it did not.

Instead, allegations about who killed him only underlined divisions among them.

Some accused Turkey, fighting its own Kurdish insurgency against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Others pointed to different Kurdish factions, citing mafia-like entrenched interests.

These schemes and in particular

tion recognising the Kurds and their right to self-determination within a united Syria.

"That meeting was a decisive point and a decision was made by all to take to the streets and the protests have been getting bigger and bigger since," said Mr Aleko.

"The protests are big now, the regime blocks the streets, there is tear gas and shooting so the accusation that we're not committed to the revolution isn't true."

But one analyst said the Kurds are still hedging their bets.

"We've seen hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets in Homs, Hama, Deraa and Idlib despite all the dangers they face, but in Kurdish areas the numbers have been nothing like as big," he said, on the condition of anonymity.

The Kurds have long been better organised than Arab groups, so this means a political decision has been made to pull their punches, the analyst said.

"The Kurds have a foot in both camps still, they are not sure if the regime will survive or fall, and they want to be able to benefit whatever the outcome," he said. "They are waiting until they know the answer to that big question, then they will commit themselves."

Kurdish political leaders deny they have cut a deal with the regime. They say they want to prevent the uprising being seen as Kurdish, not Arab.

Despite such assurances, deep divisions remain among the Kurds.

"To be honest, the Kurds have not decided who the real enemy is yet, the [Syrian] regime or the Turks," said another Kurdish activist. "Both are threats to our future but we have to decide which is the biggest and we have to know what will happen to us if Assad does fall."

Kurdish population



The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Urgent AL meeting to decide on monitors

BEIRUT — The Arab League Tuesday called for an emergency meeting to discuss whether to withdraw the group's monitors from Syria, where security forces are still killing protesters despite the observers' presence, an Arab official said.

The meeting will take place Saturday in Cairo, where the Arab League is based.

Meanwhile, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has said the Syrian regime was committing massacres. He also called on President Bashar Al-Assad to leave power.

Sarkozy's comments came during a New Year's address at a Navy airbase in Lanveoc-Poulmic, France. "Massacres being committed by the Syrian regime" have aroused disgust around the world, he said. Al-Assad should allow Syrians to decide their own future, he added.

Activists reported more bloodshed Tuesday. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said security forces shot dead three people in the restive city of Homs.

The Arab League's Deputy Secretary General, Ahmed Bin Heli, said the meeting on Saturday will look into the first report by the head of the monitoring mission, which began Dec. 27. The meeting will not make a final decision, but will send its recommendations to another, high-level ministerial meeting. — Agencies

Global Times (Chine / China)

Sarkozy scolds Syria's Assad, Arab mission takes more flak

French President Nicolas Sarkozy demanded Syria's Bashar al-Assad step down for overseeing "disgusting" massacres against his own people, as an Arab observer mission came in for more flak yesterday.

The mission has been mired in controversy since a first team of observers arrived on December 26, with activists accusing Assad's regime of keeping the monitors on a short leash.

Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi, in his first remarks since the observers were deployed, defended the mission, saying it had secured the release of political prisoners and the withdrawal of tanks from cities.

However, "there are still snipers and gunfire. There must be a total halt to the gunfire," he told reporters on Monday.

The issue would be raised with Assad's government "because the aim is to stop the shooting and protect civilians," Arabi said, adding "it is difficult to say who is firing on whom."

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said yesterday that he was "skeptical" about the progress of the Arab League's operation. "The conditions under which this observer mission is operating should be clarified," Juppe said, questioning whether the observers really had free access to information.

Sarkozy also weighed in yesterday, saying Syrians should be allowed "to freely choose their own destiny" after facing what he denounced as brutal persecution that inspires "disgust and revulsion."

Sarkozy demanded the regime give the observers space to work, and called on the international community to "face up to its responsibilities" by imposing the "toughest sanctions" to force Damascus to grant humanitarian access.