

# La prensa atlantista y del Golfo ante sus propias contradicciones

*REVISTA DE PRENSA SOBRE SIRIA #18  
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*La prensa internacional recibe con embarazo y confusión las declaraciones del director de la Misión de Observación de la Liga Árabe, Mohamed al-Dabi, quien califica la situación en Homs como «tranquilizadora».*

*Ante esas declaraciones, los diarios se dividen entre los que se expresan con prudencia, temiendo –sin decirlo– haberse dejado manipular y haber deformado o exagerado los hechos, y los que acusan a los observadores de «falsos testimonios», poniendo directamente en tela de juicio la honestidad del señor al-Dabi y de sus colegas.*

*En sus esfuerzos por justificar su propio cambio de actitud, los medios de prensa que hasta hace poco exigían la presencia de los observadores, afirman ahora que el general al-Dabi fue impuesto a la Liga Árabe por el régimen sirio. Pero, al dar esa explicación olvidan que la Liga Árabe suspendió la membresía de Siria, que no pudo por lo tanto ejercer la menor influencia sobre la designación del jefe de los observadores.*

# Syrie : débuts des observations à Homs

Human Rights Watch assure que des centaines de détenus ont été déplacés dans des sites militaires

Les premiers observateurs dépêchés en Syrie par la Ligue arabe ont effectué leur première sortie, mardi 27 décembre, dans la ville d'Homs, au nord de Damas. Dans ce bastion de la révolte contre le président Bachar Al-Assad, théâtre de nombreuses violences, la venue de ces observateurs, dirigés par un militaire soudanais, le général Mohammed Ahmed Moustapha Al-Dabi, a coïncidé avec une manifestation de milliers de personnes dans le quartier Khalidiyé, au nord de la ville, selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH).

Ces manifestants ont ensuite tenté de pénétrer sur la place Al-Saa, la place principale du centre d'Homs, mais des agents de la sécurité les ont dispersés en tirant des gaz lacrymogènes. Des forces de sécurité ont aussi tiré à balles réelles dans une rue menant à la place, faisant quatre blessés, dont un grave, a ajouté l'OSDH.

La télévision privée Dounia, proche du pouvoir, a affirmé que les observateurs, qui n'ont pas rencontré ces manifestants, s'étaient rendus dans le quartier de Bab Sebaa, à l'entrée est d'Homs. Une vidéo postée sur le site YouTube montre certains de ces observateurs, dont le chef de la mission, pris à partie par des habitants pour qu'ils visitent leur quartier. Ces observateurs ne se seraient pas rendus dans celui de Bab Amr, épice de la contestation, où des chars d'assaut auraient été retirés et d'autres cachés avant leur arrivée, selon l'opposition.

Au terme de ce premier déplacement et avant de rentrer à Damas, le responsable soudanais a jugé que « la journée a été très bonne et

[que] toutes les parties se sont montrées coopératives », ajoutant que son équipe resterait sur place. Mercredi matin, le général a jugé la situation à Homs « rassurante jusqu'à présent », ajoutant qu'« il faudra enquêter davantage ».

La délégation de la Ligue arabe doit être renforcée par une centaine de nouveaux observateurs qui se déplaceront dans le pays en utilisant des moyens de transport mis à leur disposition par le gouvernement syrien, comme l'a confirmé le général Al-Dabi, une disposition qui inquiète l'opposition.

## Accès aux sites de détention

Cette mission découle d'une « feuille de route » prévoyant l'arrêt des violences, le retrait de l'armée des villes et l'ouverture d'un dialogue entre les deux parties. Alors que les Etats-Unis ont assuré, mardi, par la voix du porte-parole du département d'Etat, que « le régime a profité des derniers jours pour multiplier ses attaques contre certains quartiers d'Homs et d'autres villes avant l'arrivée des observateurs », la France a mis en garde contre « toute tentative de dissimulation et de manipulation » par le régime, demandant notamment que les observateurs puissent « avoir accès à l'ensemble de la ville » d'Homs.

De son côté, l'organisation de défense des droits de l'homme Human Rights Watch a exigé, mercredi, « le plein accès à tous les sites » de détention, « conformément à l'accord conclu avec le gouvernement syrien », après avoir affirmé que des centaines de détenus ont été transférés vers des sites militaires interdits. ■

SERVICE INTERNATIONAL

Le Monde (France)

# Le regard de Plantu Observateurs en Syrie



Le Figaro (France)

# Syrie : les observateurs accusés de myopie

Tandis que la répression continue, la Ligue arabe juge que la situation « n'a rien d'effrayant ».

PIERRE PRIER

**PROCHE-ORIENT** Au deuxième jour de leur visite, les critiques ont continué de pleuvoir hier sur les observateurs arabes en Syrie. La France s'est montrée la plus virulente, accusant sans détour les enquêteurs de légèreté dans leur travail à Homs, bastion de la résistance, où s'était rendu mardi matin un groupe d'observateurs emmené par le chef de la mission lui-même, le général soudanais Mohamed al-Dabi.

« La brièveté de leur séjour n'a pu leur permettre d'apprécier la réalité de la situation prévalant à Homs. Leur présence n'a pas empêché la poursuite de la répression sanglante dans cette ville, où des manifestations importantes ont été violemment réprimées, faisant une dizaine de morts. » Le général al-Dabi ne s'en est pas aperçu. Hier, il a jugé que la situation à Homs « n'avait rien d'effrayant, au moins lorsqu'on nous étions là », ajoutant : « Tout était calme et il n'y a pas eu d'effacement. »

L'armée a pourtant continué hier à tuer à Homs, selon l'Observatoire syrien



Tirée d'une vidéo amateur diffusée sur YouTube, cette image montre des observateurs de la Ligue arabe, mardi dernier, dans le centre de Homs, avec un tank syrien à l'arrière-plan. AFP

des droits de l'homme (OSDH) qui recense deux morts, dont un enfant. Les enquêteurs de la Ligue arabe, revenus dans la ville, n'ont rien fait pour rassurer la population sur leur indépendance. Des résidents du quartier Baba Amro, cœur de la répression, ont voulu leur en refuser l'accès pour protester contre la présence aux côtés des observateurs d'un « accompagnateur » de l'armée syrienne.

« Les habitants leur ont demandé de venir voir les personnes blessées et les parents des martyrs, et non pas des membres du parti Baas » [Le parti au pouvoir], a déclaré Ramé Abdel Rahmane, de l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH).

La visite a pu finalement avoir lieu, sans que l'on sache si l'officier était présent. Le manque de crédibilité de ces

tournees encadrées a été souligné en pointeillé par l'un des derniers alliés du régime, la Russie. « La mission devrait pouvoir visiter n'importe quelle partie du pays et formuler une opinion indépendante et objective sur les événements », a déclaré le ministre des Affaires étrangères, Sergueï Lavrov.

« Où sont les observateurs ? »

Damas a pour sa part annoncé la libération de 755 prisonniers arrêtés lors des manifestations, afin de satisfaire l'une des exigences du plan de paix arabe. L'ONG Human Rights Watch a, de son côté, affirmé que des centaines d'autres prisonniers ont été transférés vers des sites militaires, interloqués aux observateurs. L'ONG presse les enquêteurs de « rougir à ce sujet ». Les manifestations et la répression ont continué hier, faisant un mort à Hama, un autre près d'Alep et plusieurs blessés dans la province de Damas. Les images de la télévision qatarienne al-Djazeera montrent un panache de fumée noire s'élevant au-dessus de la ville où plusieurs dizaines de personnes ont défilé en criant : « Où sont les observateurs arabes ? »

Ces derniers devaient arriver aujourd'hui à Hama, ainsi qu'à Idlib, Deraa et dans un périmètre de 50 à 80 km autour de Deraa », a déclaré hier le général al-Dabi. Les observateurs arabes devront sans doute travailler également sur les morts tombés dans le camp gouvernemental. Hier, selon l'OSDH, quatre soldats de l'armée syrienne ont été tués et 12 autres blessés dans une embuscade tendue par des déserteurs dans la province de Deraa. ■

## Un opposant agressé à Berlin

**LE MINISTRE** allemand des Affaires étrangères a reçu hier, l'ambassadeur de Syrie, « invité » à s'exprimer après les accusations selon lesquelles Damas serait derrière l'agression d'un opposant au régime syrien à Berlin. Dans la nuit de lundi à mardi, deux

hommes affirmant être des policiers se sont présentés au domicile de Ferhad Abma, 37 ans, élu municipal Vert à Berlin. Originaire du Kurdistan syrien et membre du Conseil national syrien (opposition), il vit à Berlin depuis 1996. Alors que le militant ouvrait la porte,

il a été immédiatement frappé à coups de barre de fer et de marteau, occasionnant de graves contusions et des blessures multiples. Les agresseurs, silencieux lors de l'agression, ont pris la fuite à l'arrivée d'un voisin.

# STANDPUNT

## Alles oké in Syrië?

"Sommige plaatsen lagen er wat rommelig bij, maar we hebben niets angstaanjagends gezien. Voorlopig is de situatie geruststellend." Aan het woord is Mustafa Dabi, de Soedanees generaal die aan het hoofd staat van de waarnemersmissie van de Arabische Liga die onderzoek doet naar de bloedige protesten in Syrië. Dat geweld kostte sinds maart het leven aan zeker vijftuizend mensen.

De uitlatingen van Dabi zijn bevreemdend. Op het moment dat hij een rondleiding kreeg in het opstandige Homs, werd in diezelfde stad een betoging van 70.000 mensen met traangas en kogels uit elkaar gedreven. Daarbij vielen naar verluidt 6 doden. Een dag eerder waren er 34 mensen om het leven gekomen. De tanks die opstandige wijken hadden beschoten, waren enkele uren voor de aankomst van de observatoren op geheime locaties teruggetrokken.

Met de nodige goede wil zou je natuurlijk kunnen zeggen dat Dabi en zijn waarnemers niet alles kunnen zien wat zich in Homs afspeelt. Maar die gedachte blijkt na het bekijken

van enkele YouTube-beelden behoorlijk naïef. Op die video's is te zien hoe boze bewoners van de gehavende wijk Bab Amro de waarnemers bij de arm nemen. "Je zei net dat je de straat niet over kon omdat er sluipschutters zijn", zegt een jongeman tegen een waarnemer. "Herhaal dat nu eens op camera." De waarnemer zwijgt.

De bijna absurde tegenstelling tussen schokkende feiten en het minimalistische gedrag van generaal Dabi &

## Stel anders oorlogsmisdadiger Ratko Mladic aan als CEO van Amnesty International

co. doen vragen rijzen over het nut en de geloofwaardigheid van de waarnemersmissie. Deze onderneming was natuurlijk al van bij het begin gelypotherkeerd door het problematische verleden van Dabi zelf. Hij is al meer dan twintig jaar een cruciale medestander van de Soedanees president Omar al-Bashir, die door het Internationaal



KOEN VIDAL

Chief/buitenvland

Strafhof van misdaden tegen de mensheid wordt beschuldigd. De generaal speelde een sleutelrol bij de conflicten in Zuid-Soedan en Darfur, twee oorlogen die samengeteld 2,3 miljoen levens eisten. Generaal Dabi op waarnemersmissie naar Syrië sturen om mensenrechtenschendingen te onderzoeken, is zowat hetzelfde als de Bosnisch-Servische generaal Ratko Mladic aanstellen als CEO van Amnesty International.

Het ziet er dus naar uit dat de observatiemissie een schertsvertoning is die iedereen goed uitkomt. Assad hoopt met dit initiatief wat imagopunten te scoren zonder dat hij echt verplicht wordt om zijn troepen uit de opstandige steden te trekken. Maar ook de Verenigde Staten en Europa hopen met de hulp van generaal Dabi op een adempauze. De waarnemersmissie is in die zin ook een onhandige poging om te verhullen dat Washington noch Brussel een flauw idee hebben over wat ze moeten doen om het geweld in Syrië te helpen stoppen.



Reageren op dit standpunt?

[www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be)

# Syrien erschwert die Arbeit der arabischen Friedensmission

Beobachter reisen in militärischer Begleitung in die Rebellenhochburg Homs.

**DAMASKUS.** In Syrien bleibt die Lage auch nach Ankunft von Beobachtern der Arabischen Liga unübersichtlich. Einem Bericht des Staatsfernsehens zufolge ließen die Behörden gestern zwar 755 Häftlinge frei, die in die Proteste gegen Staatschef Baschar el Assad „verwickelt“ gewesen sein sollen. Laut der Menschenrechtsorganisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) wurden jedoch Hunderte politische Gefangene vor den Beobachtern der Liga gezielt versteckt.

Die Freigelassenen hätten „kein Blut an den Händen“, hieß es in dem Bericht des Staatsfernsehens. Die Freilassung politischer Gefangener ist einer der Schlüsselpunkte im Friedensplan der Arabischen Liga, mit dem der Konflikt in Syrien beigelegt werden soll. Der Plan, dem Damaskus Mitte Dezember nach langem Zögern zugestimmt hatte, verlangt zudem ein Ende der Gewalt gegen Zivilisten.

HRW warf Damaskus die Verschleppung Hunderte politischer Gefangener vor. Sie seien zu Armeestützpunkten gebracht worden, die für die Kontrolleure der Liga nicht zugänglich seien. „Die Arabische Liga muss reagieren“ und solle sich Zugang zu den Orten verschaffen, forderte die Organisation. Bis zu 600 Häftlinge seien vor der Ankunft der rund 50 Beobachter versteckt worden.

## Nicht ohne militärische Begleitung

Die Beobachter hatten ihre Arbeit in der Protesthochburg Homs zu Wochenbeginn aufgenommen. Während ihres Besuchs gingen 70.000 Menschen gegen Syriens Präsident Baschar el Assad auf die Straße. Die Kontrolleure sollen laut Friedensplan in ihrer Arbeit nicht eingeschränkt werden. Die Regierung behielt sich aber die Sperrung von Armeestützpunkten vor.

Gestern Abend wollten die Beobachter in die Städte Hama, Daraa und Idlib sowie in die Region um Da-

maskus reisen. Zudem sollten weitere Kontrolleure ins Land kommen, sagte Missionschef Mustafa el Dabi, ein General der sudanesischen Armee.

Frankreich äußerte sich gestern enttäuscht über den bisherigen Verlauf der Friedensmission. Der Besuch von Beobachtern habe die Fortsetzung der blutigen Unterdrückung in der Stadt Homs nicht verhindern können, kritisierte das Außenministerium in Paris. Die Kürze des Aufenthalts habe es der Delegation

nicht einmal ermöglicht, die tatsächliche Situation in der umkämpften Stadt einzuschätzen. „Die Beobachter der Arabischen Liga sollten ohne Verzögerung in die Stadt der Märtyrer zurückkehren können und dort den notwendigen Kontakt mit der Bevölkerung herstellen“, schrieb das Außenministerium.

Bewohner der Rebellenhochburg Homs verweigerten laut Nachrichtagentur Reuters sogar ein Treffen mit der Delegation, weil diese mit Vertretern des Militärs in die Stadt gereist war. Ein Bewohner sagte demnach, dass die Vertreter der Arabischen Liga nicht bereit gewesen seien, sich in der Stadt ohne militärische Begleitung zu bewegen.

Die russische Regierung rief Sy-

rien auf, den Beobachtern größtmögliche Handlungsfreiheit zu gewähren. Damaskus müsse für die Arabische Liga „möglichst angenehme und freie Bedingungen schaffen“, verlangte Außenminister Sergej Lawrow. Moskau gilt als Verbündeter Assads und blockierte monatelang eine Resolution des UN-Sicherheitsrats.

## Moskau - Freund oder Gegner?

Mitte Dezember legte Russland jedoch überraschend einen Resolutionsentwurf vor, der die Gewalt „aller Beteiligten“ verurteilte. Bei den Protesten gegen Assad sollen seit Mitte März bereits mehr als 5.000 Menschen ums Leben gekommen sein. Die US-Regierung warf der syrischen Führung vor, die Repression gegen die Protestbewegung vor Ankunft der Beobachter noch einmal verschärft zu haben. „Das Regime hat die vergangenen Tage genutzt, um seine Angriffe auf gewisse Viertel von Homs und anderer Städte vor dem Eintreffen der Beobachter zu verstärken“, sagte der Vizesprecher des US-Außenministeriums, Mark Toner.

Der oberste Kontrolleur el Dabi zeigte sich immerhin zuversichtlich, dass die Mission ein gutes Stück vorankommen werde. Die syrischen Behörden seien bisher kooperativ gewesen, sagte der General der panarabischen Zeitung „Al-Hayat“ - zu kooperativ, wie die Regimegegner finden. HB

50  
Beobachter  
hat die  
Arabische Liga  
auf Friedensmission  
nach Syrien geschickt.

Quelle: Arabische Liga



**Demonstration gegen das Regime:** Syrische Demonstranten verbrennen ein Bild des Staatschefs Baschar al Assad.

# Washington droht Damaskus

US-Außenministerium kündigt „weitere Schritte“ der Weltgemeinschaft gegen Syrien an.

**WASHINGTON/PARIS.** Die USA drohen Syrien mit „weiteren Schritten“, sollte die Regierung in Damaskus nicht mit der Friedensmission der Arabischen Liga kooperieren. „Wenn das syrische Regime weiter die Anstrengungen der Arabischen Liga missachtet und sich widerspenstig zeigt, wird die Weltgemeinschaft andere Mittel in Erwägung ziehen, um syrische Zivilisten zu schützen“, heißt es in einer Mitteilung des US-Außenministeriums.

Zuvor hatten Beobachter der Arabischen Liga in der seit Wochen umkämpften Provesthochburg Homs ihre Mission gestartet. Wenige Stunden zuvor war es dort noch zu heftigen Kämpfen zwischen Sicherheitskräften und Gegnern von Präsident Baschar el Assad gekommen. Die französische Regierung kritisierte gestern bereits, die Beobachter hätten in Homs nicht genügend Zeit für eine Überprüfung der Lage. Die Menschenrechtsorganisation Human

Rights Watch warf den syrischen Behörden vor, Häftlinge vor Beginn der Beobachtermission in geheime Militäreinrichtungen verlegt zu haben.

Das US-Außenministerium äußerte sich nicht dazu, wie die „weiteren Schritte“ gegen das Regime aussehen könnten. Sanktionen vieler Staaten sind bereits in Kraft. Eine Militärintervention wie in Libyen hat Washington bisher abgelehnt. cpa

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# La situation à Homs est jugée «rassurante»

## Les observateurs de la Ligue arabe ont pu se rendre hier au cœur de la révolte syrienne

Les observateurs de la Ligue arabe ont pu visiter hier des quartiers rebelles de Homs, dans le centre de la Syrie, sur fond de craintes occidentales de voir leur mission escamotée par manque de temps ou de liberté de mouvement. Parallèlement à cette visite entamée mardi, les autorités syriennes ont annoncé la libération de 755 détenus «impliqués» dans le soulèvement populaire contre le régime de Bachar el-Assad. Les observateurs devaient ensuite se rendre à Deraa (sud), Hama (centre), Idleb (nord-ouest) et près de Damas.

Selon des militants, cités par l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH), des observateurs ont finalement accédé au quartier rebelle de Baba Amro à Homs après en avoir été empêchés par des habitants en raison de la présence avec eux d'un officier de l'armée syrienne. Les habitants ont demandé aux observateurs de «venir voir les personnes blessées et les parents des martyrs,

et non pas des membres du parti Baas» au pouvoir. Le comité des observateurs s'est rendu ensuite dans un autre quartier rebelle, Bab Sebaa, où le régime avait préparé un défilé de partisans du président Assad.

L'OSDH dit «craindre que [...] les observateurs arabes ne deviennent les faux témoins» de la situation en Syrie et ne quittent le pays sans avoir pu voir la réalité. Les mêmes craintes ont été soulevées par Paris. «La brièveté de leur séjour n'a pu leur permettre d'apprécier la réalité de la situation prévalant à Homs», a estimé Bernard Valero, porte-parole du Ministère des affaires étrangères. Moscou, fidèle allié du régime syrien, a demandé de son côté à Damas de faciliter le travail des observateurs.

Le général soudanais Mohamed Ahmed Moustapha al-Dabi, chef de la mission des observateurs, a pour sa part affirmé que «la situation semble rassurante jusqu'à présent». Alors que selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme, les forces de sécurité ont tué 34 personnes lundi à Homs et six autres mardi.

**Y.V.D.S. avec agences**

# Des Syriens disent leur scepticisme sur la mission des observateurs

**> Syrie** Les envoyés de la Ligue arabe se déploient sur le terrain

**> Trois témoins** donnent leurs impressions

**Boris Mabillard**

Les observateurs se déploient sur les points chauds de la contestation en Syrie. Une cinquantaine d'entre eux ont commencé leurs inspections mardi, rejoints le lendemain par 16 experts supplémentaires. Mercredi, après Homs où une équipe est retournée, les villes de Deraa, d'Idlib et de Hama étaient au programme. Ces quatre agglomérations sont celles qui ont connu les pires violences depuis le début de la révolte en mars dernier, les bilans les plus lourds aussi. La venue des observateurs de la Ligue arabe y est attendue plus que nulle part ailleurs, car le succès de la mission se mesurera là, si les violences cessent. Mais rien n'est moins sûr.

En gage de sa bonne foi, le président Bachar el-Assad a fait libérer hier 755 prisonniers. Mais les doutes persistent quant à la capacité

des observateurs à remplir leur mission: pourront-ils se déplacer librement? Auront-ils les moyens d'enquêter? Le régime de Damas ne se joue-t-il pas de la communauté internationale? Interrogations que des dizaines de milliers de manifestants ont exprimées dans les rues de Homs mardi. Un scepticisme dont le Ministère français des affaires étrangères s'est fait l'écho: «La présence des observateurs n'a pas empêché la poursuite de la répression sanglante», a déclaré hier Bernard Valero, porte-parole du ministère, lors d'une conférence de presse.

*Le Temps* a pris contact avec trois personnes qui témoignent chacune de la situation sur le terrain au moment où arrivent les premiers observateurs. Parmi elles, Abou Rami, qui, lorsqu'il le peut, prodigue des soins d'urgence dans une clinique clandestine à Homs. Il a cherché mardi et mercredi à rencontrer la délégation de la Ligue arabe, sans succès: «Rien n'a changé, les checkpoints restreignent l'accès de certaines zones, les forces de sécurité continuent d'assiéger certains quartiers, celui de Baba Amro par exemple, le plus touché. Ils n'ont même pas pris soin de cacher tous les tanks, seule l'artillerie lourde s'est tue. Je voulais y croire, mais impossible, nous avons attendu trop longtemps.»

Abou Rami voudrait que les na-

tions arabes fassent plus et surtout tiennent compte de l'urgence humanitaire: «La population de Khaldiya, à Homs, s'est de nouveau réunie [hier]: des dizaines de milliers de manifestants qui demandent juste à rencontrer les fameux observateurs, pour témoigner de leurs souffrances. Des blessés doivent être transférés pour être soignés.»

**«Les chars ont disparu, réapparu, puis ont été cachés ailleurs»**

Selon le directeur de l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme, Rami Abdel Rahmane, certains habitants de Baba Amro auraient refusé l'accès de leur quartier à une équipe d'observateurs au motif qu'ils étaient accompagnés par un officier de l'armée syrienne. Après le départ de ce dernier, la délégation a rapidement visité quelques pâtés de maisons et s'est ensuite rendue dans une autre partie de la ville où un défilé de partisans de Bachar el-Assad était organisé.

A Deraa (dans le sud-ouest près de la frontière jordanienne) où, il y a neuf mois, les manifestations ont donné le coup d'envoi à la contesta-

tion générale, la délégation internationale s'est fait attendre. Ra'ed fait partie d'un réseau clandestin, la Coordination du Horan. Il désespère d'obtenir enfin de l'aide: «Mardi, la foule s'est rassemblée en masse, nous voulions leur montrer notre soutien et notre optimisme malgré tout, mais seules les forces de sécurité étaient au rendez-vous. Des femmes et des enfants étaient venus, pensant que ce serait un jour de réunion sans répression. Les miliciens ont fait un carton sur une foule désarmée. Des blessés et deux morts parmi lesquels Mahmoud Mohammed al-Bernaoui, un garçon de 13 ans. Lors des funérailles, mercredi, un jeune homme a été tué. Nulle trace des observateurs.»

Un ressortissant d'Idlib (nord-ouest), qui ne consent qu'à donner son pseudonyme, Forkan, parle d'étranges ballets dans sa ville: «Les chars ont disparu, réapparu, puis ont été cachés ailleurs. Les *moukhabarat* [la sécurité intérieure] ont déplacé des panneaux indiquant des noms de village ou de rues. Le village de Kafroueid (ndlr: où aurait eu lieu un massacre le 20 décembre) se trouve désormais en zone militaire, et le panneau indique le nom d'un autre village.» Les observateurs étaient donc attendus et pas seulement par la population de la ville, mais ils ont, semble-t-il, fait faux bond.



## SIRIA

### La Lega araba non vede «niente di così terrificante»

Gli osservatori della Lega Araba, in Siria per cercare di risolvere la crisi che attanaglia il paese da metà marzo, ieri hanno visitato la provincia di Homs, nella regione centrale del paese. Il capo-delegazione, il generale sudanese Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, si è

detto «ottimista» sull'esito della missione, il cui obiettivo è verificare sul campo l'attuazione del protocollo siglato al Cairo dal regime di Damasco per mettere fine alle violenze. Secondo al-Dabi, anche se «in alcune aree le condizioni non sono state buone», a una prima ricognizione non si è visto «nulla di terrificante». Altre fonti provenienti dalla delegazione hanno confermato l'esistenza di violazioni dei diritti umani a Homs - morti e fori di proiettili nelle case -, ma hanno specificato di non aver potuto accertare se le responsabilità siano da attribuirsi al governo oppure a «terroristi». Secondo gli oppositori, le famiglie dei morti nella repressione nel quartiere di Baba Amr a Homs, si sono rifiutate di incontrare gli osservatori in presenza di un ufficiale, che li stava scortando, e la delegazione è ripartita. Il regime ha liberato altri 755 detenuti arrestati in questi dieci mesi per le proteste. La Francia ha criticato gli osservatori della Lega Araba, accusandoli di non essere stati in grado di fermare gli spargimenti di sangue a Homs, centro nevralgico delle proteste. Nei prossimi giorni, la missione si sposterà anche nelle città siriane di Hama e Idlib, non lontano dal confine con la Turchia, da cui transitano gli armati del cosiddetto Esercito di liberazione siriano e i disertori di quello regolare che raggiungono gli oppositori.

“Sono pochi e scortati dal regime”. Ieri gli inviati della missione in visita nella città ribelle di Homs. Il governo libere 755 manifestanti coinvolti negli scontri

# Siria, l'opposizione contro gli osservatori della Lega araba

Lea curiel

LA MISSIONE della Lega araba in Siria esordisce sotto una salva di accuse incrociate. I primi 60 osservatori, inviati a monitorare il rispetto del Piano di pace arabo nel tentativo di disinnescare la crisi, varcano l'ingresso di Homs e Bab Sebsa, i quartieri ribelli di Homs. Poi raggiungono Hama, Idlib e Dera'a, gli altri focolai della protesta. E subito dall'opposizione si levano critiche: «Gli osservatori sono pochi, scortati dai bu' affilati, e ingannati dalle apparenze. Il piano arabo, sottoscritto dalla Siria, prevede il ritiro delle forze militari, la liberazione dei prigionieri, e l'avvio di un dialogo con l'opposizione. Il governo annuncia il rilascio di 755 detenuti - scatenati negli scontri»,



Però, mentre gli osservatori ispezionano le prigioni, Human Rights Watch sospetta che molti siano stati trasferiti nelle carceri militari, escluse dai sopralluoghi. All'inizio, i militanti sbarrano il passo agli inviati della Lega, contrari alla presenza di un ufficiale siriano: «Dovete lasciarci

feriti e i familiari delle vittime, non i rappresentanti del potere», protestano. Poco dopo, le barricate cadono. Migliaia di persone sono scese per le strade di Homs, alla vigilia, disperse con gas lacrimogeni. L'Osservatorio siriano dei diritti umani, di base a Londra, calcola almeno nove morti

**Ma il capo della delegazione si dice "rassicurato" da quel che ha visto: "Nessuno scontro"**

Un gruppo di osservatori della Lega Araba a Homs

quel che ha visto: «In alcuni posti la situazione non era buona, ma nulla di spaventoso. C'era calma, niente scontri. Un invito alla calma viene da Haytham Manana, uno dei più feriti avversari del regime, leader del Comitato per un cambiamento democratico. Interpellato dal New York Times, giudica le critiche affrettate: «L'invito arabo ancor prima che sia applicata. Già puniscono gli osservatori meno di 24 ore dal loro arrivo». Dall'estero, la Russia chiede alla Siria «piena collaborazione». La Francia, invece, scarta le rassicurazioni del generale: «È troppo presto per giudicare la realtà».

(A.F.A.)

**LE SANZIONI**  
A fine novembre la Lega Araba annuncia sanzioni contro il regime siriano

**LA REPLICA**  
La replica è dura: «È una dichiarazione di guerra». Poi la Siria accetta la missione

**LA MISSIONE**  
Sessanta osservatori sono in Siria, e dovrebbero arrivare 500; ma i ribelli non si fidano

# La Liga Árabe asegura que la situación en Homs “parece tranquilizadora”

La oposición acusa al Ejército de causar decenas de muertos antes de la visita

ENRIC GONZÁLEZ  
Jerusalén

El jefe de los observadores de la Liga Árabe en Siria, el general sudanés Mustafá Dabi, considera que la situación en Homs “parece tranquilizadora por el momento”. Dabi declaró ayer a la agencia Reuters que el lunes “había calma y no se produjeron enfrentamientos”. “No hemos visto tanques, pero sí algunos vehículos blindados. La investigación acaba de comenzar”, añadió.

Según la oposición siria, el Ejército del presidente Bachar el Asad cañoneó hasta el lunes varios barrios de Homs y causó decenas de muertes. En la madrugada del martes, horas antes de que llegaran a la ciudad los observadores de la Liga Árabe, los tanques fueron camuflados en zonas periféricas. Pese a ello, numerosos testimonios locales indicaron que las manifestaciones opositoras celebradas en presencia de Dabi y su equipo fueron reprimidas con gases lacrimógenos y se escucharon tiroteos esporádicos. Portavoces de la oposición afirmaron que el martes murieron otras seis personas en Homs.



Un manifestante lanza un bote de humo en una imagen de video. / AP

[Además, al menos siete manifestantes resultaron heridos en la ciudad de Hama cuando la policía dispersó una marcha, informa Reuters. Los observadores visitarán mañana la ciudad].

Ayer, el régimen de Damasco liberó a 755 detenidos sin delitos de sangre que estaban arrestados por participar “en los últi-

mos sucesos”, informó la televisión siria en una nota urgente. La liberación de los detenidos durante las protestas es uno de los puntos de la iniciativa de la Liga Árabe para dar una solución a la crisis en Siria, que estipula también el fin de la violencia, el acuartelamiento de las tropas y el inicio de un diálogo con la ope-

sición. Varias organizaciones defensoras de los derechos humanos han criticado la elección de un general sudanés como jefe del equipo de observadores. El presidente de Sudán, Omar al Bashir, es acusado por la Corte Penal Internacional de La Haya de haber cometido genocidio y crímenes contra la humanidad en la región de Darfur, donde el propio general Mustafá Dabi ha sido uno de los máximos mandos del Ejército.

Las primeras declaraciones de Dabi incrementarán el temor de la oposición siria a que la delegación de la Liga Árabe contemporee con el régimen de Damasco. Fuentes anónimas del equipo de observadores citadas por la agencia Efe afirman, sin embargo, que las primeras impresiones recogidas en el país confirman una represión a gran escala.

La misión de los observadores no consiste en evaluar las violaciones de los derechos humanos cometidas hasta ahora por el régimen de Bachar el Asad, sino en verificar el cumplimiento del acuerdo de pacificación propuesto por la Liga Árabe y aceptado por el Gobierno de Damasco.



## Crece la incertidumbre

La situación en Siria está siendo cada vez más compleja y lo que es peor, se acrecientan, día a día, las graves violaciones de los derechos humanos, atribuibles a la represión que lleva a cabo el régimen de Asad. Las ciudades en las que se expresa con mayor nitidez la oposición al régimen sirio, encabezadas por Homs, proyectan una imagen desoladora que podría ser el escenario final al que asistamos si se consolida la resistencia del poder alauí. La comunidad internacional en su conjunto no está haciendo lo suficiente. Los órganos que representan a esta comunidad permanecen semiparalizados por las diversas posiciones que mantienen unos y otros. El temor a liderar una «intervención en Siria» que pudiera tener consecuencias imprevisibles en Próximo Oriente hace que el conflicto se prolongue y que el régimen sirio intente ganar tiempo en su labor de aniquilamiento de los opositores. No pueden aún valorarse los resultados de la visita, que está teniendo lugar, de los observadores de la Liga Árabe. Las labores de observación no pueden ser meramente formales sino que habrán de traducirse en recomendaciones que los árabes plasmen en respuestas concretas, en su caso con actuaciones contundentes respaldadas por las Naciones Unidas. El camino no puede ser otro que actuar decididamente en Siria con un protagonismo decisivo de la organización mundial. Lo que está en juego en Siria ahora es el respeto básico de los derechos humanos. Ni China ni Rusia pueden permanecer al margen y no deben impedir que se adopten decisiones colectivas que pongan fin a las violaciones. La posición que asumió Rusia la semana anterior se debe completar con posiciones más eficaces, cuando ocupa la Presidencia del Consejo de Seguridad y, sobre todo, en adelante. Acabar con las violaciones de derechos en Siria sólo tiene una solución: el fin del actual régimen. O lo hacen los sirios solos o cuentan con la ayuda de la comunidad internacional, en particular con la Liga Árabe, cuyos observadores tienen ahora la palabra. Todo ello con el apoyo del Consejo de Seguridad.

**Sólo existe una salida para el fin de la violencia, que termine el régimen**

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

## Siria oculta la represión militar a los observadores de la Liga Árabe

DAMASCO, Agencia

Los peores temores de la oposición siria se confirmaron ayer cuando el jefe de los observadores de la Liga Árabe señaló que "la situación parece tranquilizadora" y que en Homs, la ciudad donde decenas de personas han muerto en los últimos días, "no hay nada amenazante", sólo "al-

gunas zonas un poco caóticas". Al frente de la misión de la Liga Árabe está el general suadés Mustafa Dahi. El Tribunal Penal Internacional ha acusado a Sudán de violar los derechos humanos en Darfur y la oposición se pregunta si, con estas amenazas, el general Dahi podrá recomendar una intervención en Siria (país amigo) para frenar los

ataques contra la población civil. Los observadores estuvieron ayer en Homs y no vieron nada. Visitaron el barrio de Babu Amir, centro de los combates, pero lo hicieron acompañados de un general sirio y los vecinos no quisieron hablar. Hoy estarán en Hama, desde ayer murieron, según la oposición, seis personas. Fueron sueltas por disparos de la

policia y el ejército contra una manifestación de decenas de miles de personas.

El general Dahi ha pedido paciencia. Asegura que la misión durará un mes, que a final de semana tendrá a casi todos los 150 observadores disponibles y que podrán moverse libremente por el territorio. Esta libertad, sin embargo, es muy relativa. El ejército sirio se encarga de la seguridad de los observadores, y ayer, cuando un grupo intentó volver sin escolta al barrio de Babu Amir, en Homs, sostaron disparos -de origen desconocido- que los obligaron a desistirse. Todo lo que vieron

fueron fachadas apuñaladas por los tiros y gente muerta.

Los observadores deben determinar si el régimen de El Assad ha retirado al ejército de las calles, ha impuesto una tregua y ha liberado a los presos políticos. El Assad dejó ayer en libertad a 750 detenidos, pero sin delitos de sangre. Amnistía Internacional asegura que hay más de 13.000 aún en prisión. Los observadores seguirán en Homs y hoy, además de en Lilib, Decra y los alrededores de Hama, también se desplegarán en Damasco. El ejército los acompañará y, a su paso, el Basa organizará marchas de apoyo a El Assad. ■

# Arab League mission to Syria sees 'nothing frightening'

By Richard Spencer  
Middle East Correspondent

AN Arab League peace mission to Syria was in crisis last night, attacked by opposition activists for failing to get to grips with the scale of the violence even as more people were shot dead in fighting.

Lt Gen Mohammed Ahmed Mustapha al-Dabi, head of the mission, described the city of Homs, where it is thought more than 1,000 people have been killed, as being "nothing frightening", although he conceded "some places looked a bit of a mess".

At one point, the opposition denied a group of monitors entry to the besieged rebel enclave of Bab al-Amr in the city because their security detail included a lieutenant colonel from the Syrian army.

Eventually he agreed to step aside, but activists later claimed that the group had been unable to visit a secret detention facility because of gunfire nearby.

Activists from the human rights group Avaaz later claimed that a four-year-old boy, Ahmed al-Raai, was killed when troops opened fire on a van carrying his family in the al-Shams district of Homs. Arab League monitors were taken to see the boy's body at a nearby mosque.

The group quoted activists on the ground as alleging that some of the shooting in Homs had been intended to scare away the monitors.

The opposition said that the mission was losing credibility. Radvan Ziadeh, a member of the Syrian National Council, said it did not have the "capacity or experience" to stop what was going on.

"What's needed is international intervention," he said. "We need a buffer zone along the Turkish borders where the situation is still escalating."

During the course of the day the regime of President Bashar al-Assad ordered the release of 755 political prisoners, apparently in an attempt to stop the visit falling apart completely.

The release of political prisoners was one of the terms of the peace deal agreed between Syria and the Arab League

whose implementation the monitoring mission is supposed to be overseeing.

However, activists and human rights groups say tens of thousands remain behind bars, having been detained since the start of the uprising in March.

Other terms of the deal included the withdrawal of the army from the streets and negotiations with the opposition. Since neither of these has happened, many opposition leaders have called the mission's visit pointless at best and at worst a means for Mr Assad to play for time while continuing military action.

Bab al-Amr was subjected to a four-day attack by troops and tanks which lasted until Monday, the eve of the mission's visit to the city.

On Tuesday, tens of thousands of protesters attending a funeral attempted to reach the city centre to meet the mission, but were turned back by troops with tear gas, and some live fire. Instead, individual protesters attempted to make their points to the mission's delegates.

There was angry reaction to footage of one delegate appearing to turn away and light a cigarette as a man urged him to report the presence of snipers.

One monitor appeared to refuse to accompany a protester who wanted to show him the scene of a "slaughter", though another was seen on video being shown by a woman the bloodstains where her son had been shot.

Lt Gen Dabi appeared to play down the significance of what the monitors had seen. "Some places looked a bit of a mess but there was nothing frightening," he added. "Yesterday was quiet and there were no clashes."

France, which has become increasingly critical of the regime, issued an implicit criticism of Lt Gen Dabi's approach.

"The brevity of their stay did not allow them to appreciate the reality of the prevailing situation yesterday in Homs," a foreign ministry spokesman said.

In Hama, another restive city, which the mission was due to visit today, the army opened fire on protesters, killing at least six, according to local activists.

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)





# WHICH TYRANT WILL FALL NEXT?

As the leaders of Syria and Bahrain cling to power, **Patrick Cockburn** explains how they have managed to resist the protesters – and wonders whether they can survive another 12 months

In three of the Arab countries east of Egypt – Syria, Bahrain and Yemen – protesters have challenged their governments over the past year but failed to overthrow them. The reasons for those failures are very different though they have important points in common. In each of these states protesters were frustrated because a significant part of the population had a lot to lose if the ruling elite were reformed or overthrown.

In Syria and Bahrain religious identity helps explain loyalty to the powers-that-be. Protesters in Bahrain might insist that their programme was secular and democratic, but everybody knew that a fair poll would affect revolutionary change by putting the majority Shia in power instead of the minority Sunni. In Syria, similarly, democracy means that the Sunni, three quarters of the population, would effectively replace the Alawites, a heterodox Shia sect, as rulers of the state.

This does not mean that the demonstrators in both countries had a secret sectarian agenda. It was simply that political divisions already ran along sectarian lines. In Bahrain the security forces were almost entirely Sunni. As the year went on sectarian hatreds became starker.

At the height of the repression, the government demolished Shia mosques claiming it had suddenly discovered they did not have planning permission. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the sectarian homogeneity of the ruling elite in Syria and Bahrain made it impossible for senior state officials to dump an unpopular regime in order to maintain their own power and privileges. In Syria the Alawites came to believe that if President Bashar al-Assad lost so would they.

The Shia and Sunni split has other serious implications. The struggle between these two Islamic traditions, so similar to the battle between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, has been escalating since the Iranian revolution of 1979. The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88

and Shia-Sunni civil war in Iraq in 2006-7 deepened the hatred between the two sects. Of course it was always much in the interests of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Assad clan in Syria and the al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain to play the sectarian card and demand communal solidarity from their co-religionists. As far back as 1991 I remember Saddam Hussein bringing the mutilated bodies of Baathist officials back from Najaf, where they had been lynched by Shia insurgents, and the terror expressed by Sunni friends in Baghdad, previously opposed to the regime, that the same fate awaited them if Saddam was toppled.

The Sunni-Shia rivalry goes some way to explaining why the Arab Spring won successes in North Africa that it has not achieved east of Egypt. Each side has been led by religiously inspired states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have struggled for supremacy in the region for 30 years. Embattled regimes and their insurgent enemies automatically gain al-

**The struggle between Shia and Sunni has been escalating since the 1979 revolution**

lies. The Assad government might be isolated, but not quite to degree that Muammar Gaddafi was before his fall. Iran will do almost anything to keep its most crucial ally in the Arab world in power. By the same token Iran's many enemies, unable to overthrow the government in Tehran, are determined to weaken it by changing the regime in Damascus.

Regional rivalries, deepening Sunni-Shia divisions and the democratic protest movement, commonly called the Arab Spring, combine to produce the ingredients for a long-running crisis. "2012 will be one of the most unstable years ever in the Middle East," predicted a minister in one of the Gulf countries. In almost every Arab state he foresaw violence increasing as no decisive winners emerge. Syria and Yemen are on the verge of civil war, Bahrain remains divided while the turmoil affects other states in the region. For instance, one reason why the Islamist Shia gov-



**Demonstrators gather in Syria, while, below, Bahraini women join a protest march**  
REUTERS, EPA



building which turned out to be the general's own headquarters.

In Syria, and to a lesser extent, in Bahrain there is a danger that a frustrated opposition will progressively turn to violence. In Bahrain, the Shia see themselves as not only being politically disenfranchised, but becoming the victims of social and economic apartheid. Opposition leaders say it would not be surprising if some militants turn to violence against the monarchy.

In Syria, the opposition clearly does not have an effective strategy for getting rid of Bashar al-Assad and the Baathist government. It can keep up demonstrations and propaganda, but those familiar with the inner core of the regime in Damascus, say they are confident they can hold out. The opposition is fragmented and divided between those inside and outside the country. There is no provisional government in waiting as there purported to be – and to

**In Syria, the opposition calls vainly for foreign military intervention, but this is not likely to happen**

some extent was – in Libya. The core of the Syrian security forces remains united. Sanctions are squeezing the government but, as happened in Iraq in the 1990s, these hurt the people – and cause popular resentment – before they damage the government. Neighbouring governments repeat the mantra "Assad is bound to fall", but are not sure how or when.

"Nobody knows what to do about Syria," said one Middle East leader. The opposition calls vainly for foreign military intervention as in Libya, but this is not likely to happen. Extreme Sunni militants previously active in Iraq may see their chance and, in the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the first big suicide bombs have exploded in Damascus this month.

The bright hopes of the Arab Spring are vanishing and peaceful protests may have had their day across the region as civil confrontation threatens to turn into civil war.

ernment of Iraq has struck at Iraqi Sunni leaders in the past few weeks is the fear in Baghdad that it may soon be facing a hostile Sunni regime in power in Damascus. The Shia political elite want to strengthen their grip on power now.

Look at the situation in Yemen 10 months later. The protesters are still camped out in the capital Sanaa and many have been killed or wounded by government forces. President Saleh may go to the US for further medical

treatment for injuries he received from a bomb that almost killed him in June. But the surprise at that time was that his departure to hospital in Saudi Arabia did not mean triumph for the uprising because his son Ahmed Saleh, commander of the Republican Guard, took over. The street protesters have been pushed to one side by such dubious members of Yemen's ruling establishment as General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of the First Ar-

moured Division and Hamid al-Ahmar (no relation), a billionaire entrepreneur and tribal leader. Troops and fighters loyal to both men have been protecting protesters. These divisions at the top are not new. When General al-Ahmar was fighting Shia rebels known as Houthis in northern Yemen in 2009 his own government, according to a US embassy cable published by WikiLeaks, tried to kill him by asking Saudi planes operating against the rebels to bomb a

**TOMORROW**  
**The role of women in the Arab uprisings, and the changes the revolutions may bring**

PIERRE ALLARD  pallard@le droit.com

## Mettre fin au massacre en Syrie

**S**il est une leçon qui aurait dû être retenue de l'expérience libyenne, c'est que les populations civiles, même nombreuses, même avec quelques armes, n'ont aucune chance contre des militaires appuyés de chars et d'avions. À regarder ce qui se passe depuis le printemps 2011 en Syrie, où les forces armées du pays ont abattu des milliers de citoyens opposés au régime dictatorial de Bachar al-Assad, on ne peut que s'interroger sur l'inertie de la communauté internationale.

La situation est pourtant claire même si les enjeux au Moyen-Orient sont rarement simples. Au-delà des subtilités stratégiques de l'axe Téhéran-Damas-Hezbollah, des divergences entre musulmans d'obédience sunnite et chiite (la majorité des Syriens sont sunnites, al-Assad est chiite), ou du branle-bas sociopolitique résultant d'un printemps arabe qui n'en finit plus en rebondissements, une vérité demeure, vieille comme le monde: le pouvoir quasi absolu corrompt, et ceux qui l'exercent s'y accrochent par tous les moyens.

À quelques exceptions près dans l'histoire de l'humanité, la démocratie reste un phénomène relativement récent. Quelques centaines d'années tout au plus. Dans un pays comme la Syrie, où la capitale, Damas, est vieille de 10000 ans et qui n'a connu que quelques lueurs de liberté politique au cours du dernier siècle, la tradition est autoritaire. Mais en ce début du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, plus personne ne vit en vase clos avec les nouvelles technologies. L'information circule malgré les entraves et la population syrienne, comme les autres humains, n'accepte plus en silence les anciens diktats.

Les droits qu'ils réclament, et pour lesquels ils sont prêts à risquer leur vie, la liberté de s'exprimer sans crainte, d'élire un gouvernement de leur choix, sont des droits que nous tenons pour acquis en Amérique du Nord. Ce sont des droits inscrits dans la charte des Nations unies. Nous les présentons à l'ensemble des peuples comme un modèle à

suivre, même si entre 40 % et 50 % de nos citoyens ne se donnent même plus la peine de voter... Quoi qu'il en soit, armés de ces principes démocratiques, nous condamnons et, parfois, allons jusqu'à combattre des dictatures ou d'autres formes de régimes autoritaires.

Bien sûr, la réalité des interventions de la communauté internationale depuis la fin de la Première Guerre mondiale est loin d'être cohérente et a connu bien des ratés. Mais à travers le brouillard et les conflits, petits et grands, l'adhésion aux valeurs démocratiques a progressé. L'intervention de cette année en Libye aurait été impensable il y a un demi-siècle. Qui aurait cru que les pays de l'OTAN pourraient un jour, avec l'aval de la Ligue arabe, utiliser leur arsenal militaire contre les forces de Kadhafi pour protéger et soutenir une population civile en rébellion contre un dictateur en selle depuis 40 ans?

La situation est différente en Syrie mais le nombre de morts dans la population civile rivalise avec le bilan libyen. On dénombre déjà environ 5000 tués depuis mars 2011, et des dizaines s'ajoutent tous les jours. On a eu droit à une accalmie ces derniers jours parce que le régime Assad a finalement accepté de recevoir des observateurs de la Ligue arabe, qui avait condamné la répression en Syrie, geste sans précédent, et qui menaçait de porter la question devant le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU. Le dictateur syrien a dissimulé ses troupes et caché ses blindés l'espace de quelques jours, mais le massacre reprendra dès que les observateurs auront plié bagages.

Le Canada a fermement condamné le président Assad en 2011 et imposé des sanctions essentiellement économiques. La Commission des droits de l'homme de l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies a adopté le mois dernier une résolution coparrainée par 60 pays, dont six nations arabes, condamnant la répression sanglante des manifestations en Syrie. Combien de milliers de morts de plus faudra-t-il pour que les reproches verbaux se transforment en bouclier armé?

New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

# Syrian forces fire at rally; prisoners are freed by regime

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**BEIRUT**

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*THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Security forces in Syria opened fire on thousands of anti-government protesters in the central city of Hama on Wednesday and killed at least six people, activists said, as 60 Arab League monitors continued their mission to end the regime's crackdown on dissent.

Though Syria has made some concessions to the monitors since they began work this week, government forces have at the same time reportedly been pressing ahead with attempts to crush peaceful protests in Hama, Homs and other parts of the country. Activists said at least 39 people had been killed by security forces since the observers began work in a one-month mission on Tuesday.

The government released 755 prisoners on Wednesday after the release of a report by Human Rights Watch, which accused the authorities of hiding hundreds of detainees from the observers. It was the second concession in two days to the Arab League.

On Tuesday, the army pulled some of its troops back from Homs after bombarding it for days and killing scores of people before the arrival of the monitors there.

The Arab League monitors seek to ensure that the regime is complying with the terms of a plan to end the crackdown on protests. The United Nations says more than 5,000 people have been killed in Syria since March.

# Syria Releases 755 As Observers Visit

Associated Press

BEIRUT—Syria released 755 prisoners on Wednesday as Arab League monitors spent a second day in the Syrian city of Homs gathering accounts about the government's crackdown on dissent.

But President Bashar al-Assad's military is pressing ahead with a violent campaign to put down mostly peaceful protests, as troops in nearby Hama opened fire on thousands of unarmed protesters and killed at least six, according to activists. Activists said at least 39 people have been killed in the two days since the monitors began work.

The continuing violence—and comments by an Arab League official praising Syrian cooperation—have fueled concerns by the Syrian opposition about the one-month Arab League mission.

"This mission has absolutely no mandate, no authority, no teeth," said Ausama Monajed, a member of the Syrian National Council, the country's main opposition group. "The regime does not feel obliged to even bring down the number of casualties a day," he said.

The 60 Arab League monitors—the first Syria has allowed in during the nine-month antigovernment uprising—are supposed to be ensuring that the regime is complying with terms of a plan to end the crackdown on protests. The United Nations says more than 5,000 people have been killed in Syria since March.

The Arab League plan demands that the government remove its security forces and heavy weapons from city streets, start talks with opposition leaders and allow human-rights workers and journalists into the country. It calls for the release of all political prisoners.

The government released 755 prisoners following a report by Human Rights Watch late Tuesday accusing authorities of hiding hundreds of detainees from the monitors. It was the second concession in two days to the Arab League.

On Monday, the army pulled some of its troops back from the city of Homs after bombarding it for days and killing scores of people. It allowed the monitors to visit, and as they came, tens of thousands of protesters poured into the streets, calling for the execution of Mr. Assad.

In the week after signing on to the Arab League plan Dec. 19, the Assad regime stepped up the crackdown and killed hundreds of people. The opposition suspects that Mr. Assad is only trying to buy time and to forestall more international sanc-

tions and condemnation.

Despite the continuing crackdown, an Arab League official said cooperation by Syrian authorities with the monitors was "reassuring."

"The Syrian side is facilitating everything," Adnan Issa al-Khudeir told reporters in Cairo.

The Arab observers kicked off their mission with a visit on Tuesday to the central city of Homs, a city at the heart of the uprising.

Several from the team of 12 stayed in the city overnight, and the team continued work there Wednesday. There was no word on whether other teams went to different cities.

According to officials and activists, the monitors went to several districts including trouble spots in Baba Amr, Bab Sbaa and Inshaat.

Amateur video posted on the Internet showed the head of the team, Sudanese Lt. Gen. Mohamed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, walking in Baba Amr and stopping to talk to people.

In one video, Gen. Dabi is seen talking to a man who accuses the regime of killing his 64-year-old brother, a former official of Mr. Assad's ruling Baath party, and his wife, and then blaming it on armed gangs. "Your excellency, they are killing influential people to draw a violent reaction from people," he tells Gen. Dabi.

Some amateur video showed the orange-jacketed observers in a white car, surrounded by people shouting for Mr. Assad's downfall and apparently objecting to the presence of a Syrian military escort in the car with them. Other video showed monitors visiting women and children who purportedly lost family members in recent violence.

There were no reports of firing on protesters in Homs during the visit on Wednesday. Troops did open fire on the crowds on Tuesday.

Images from Homs in the days leading up to the monitors' visit showed army defectors firing machine guns through holes in the outer wall of a bombed-out building. In another, a crowd fills the street for a nighttime demonstration behind a banner of the uprising's revolutionary flag.

On Thursday, the monitors are expected to visit Hama, Idlib and Daraa—all centers of the uprising.

In Hama, several thousand protesters were trying to reach the city's main square to stage a sit-in amid a heavy security presence when troops opened fire, activists said. Hama-based activist Saleh Abu Kamel said he had the names of six people who were killed. The number couldn't be immediately confirmed.

The Washington Times (USA)

# Sudanese general linked to genocide a monitor in Syria

By ASHISH KUMAR SEN  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A Sudanese general linked to genocide in Darfur is leading an Arab League team to Syria to monitor the regime's compliance with a promise to end its violent crackdown on anti-government protesters.

Gen. Mohamed Ahmad al-Dabi served as Sudan's military intelligence chief, and President Omar Bashir appointed him as his representative in the western province of Darfur in the late 1990s.

In Darfur, Gen. al-Dabi recruited and armed Arab militias and set the building blocks for the mass killing of black Africans, said Omer Ismail, a Sudan analyst with the Enough Project, an anti-genocide group.

"He was one of the architects of the genocide in Darfur. Instead of going to Syria, he should be investigated by the ICC and held accountable for his deeds," he added.

The Hague-based International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Gen. al-Dabi on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur. He denies the allegations.

Mousab Azzawi, chief coordinator with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said in an interview from London that Gen. al-Dabi's presence undermines the credibility of the Arab League mission.

"Out of 340 million Arabs, they could not find one decent person to lead the observer mission?" he said.

Gen. al-Dabi on Wednesday said that he had seen "nothing frightening" in the restive city of Homs, where the Syrian military has inflicted mass casualties.

About one-third of the more than 5,000 deaths documented by the United Nations in the uprising that started in March have been reported from Homs.

Nevertheless, Gen. al-Dabi told the Reuters News Agency, "The situation seemed reassuring so far."

His comments sparked an angry response from the Syrian opposition.

"I wonder if he does not have a much higher threshold than others for what constitutes frightening, given his own baggage," said Rafif Jouejati, a spokeswoman for the civil resistance movement in Syria.

Members of the opposition Syrian National Council worry that Gen. al-Dabi's comments portend a possible Arab League whitewash of the crackdown on protesters by Syrian President Bashar Assad.

An Arab League official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Gen. al-Dabi is not wanted by the ICC in connection with war crimes in Darfur, but declined to say whether the accusations would affect the monitors' mission in Syria.

The Obama administration has called on the Syrian regime to allow unfettered access to the monitors. However, the Arab League team is accompanied by Syrian military minders, deterring many who want to report atrocities committed by the regime's forces but fear for their safety.

"How effective can people believe this delegation to be when it is being accompanied by the tools of the regime that are killing them," said Dima Moussa, a member of the opposition Syrian National Council and spokeswoman for the Revolutionary Council of Homs.

The Assad regime has flouted an Arab League peace initiative that calls on it to halt its crackdown, open talks with the opposition, withdraw forces from

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**"He was one of the architects of the genocide in Darfur. Instead of going to Syria, he should be investigated by the ICC and held accountable for his deeds."**

— Omer Ismail, a Sudan analyst with the Enough Project, an anti-genocide group

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city streets and allow access to human rights workers and journalists.

Najib Ghabbian of the Syrian National Council predicted that the Arab League mission is destined to fail.

"The point of the mission is to stop the killing, but the killing is still going on even while the observers are on the ground," he said. "We don't believe this is going to work."

In Homs, explosions and gunfire rocked the city, armored vehicles were in the streets, and a large protest erupted even as the observers visited on Tuesday.

Abu Rami, a resident of Homs, said security forces killed 15 people.

"What is the use of these monitors if this death machine doesn't stop?" he asked.

On the eve of the monitors' visit, the regime transferred thousands of political prisoners to military bases, giving the impression to the monitors that there are very few people incarcerated for opposing the government, according to multiple sources.

Activists also accused the regime of deceiving the monitors by changing neighborhood signs.

In Homs on Tuesday, the team was taken to Nuzha, a pro-regime neighborhood but were told they were in Bab Sbaa where heavy fighting has been reported.

International journalists have mostly been barred from Syria, making it difficult to confirm accounts from conflict zones.

The monitors are expected to visit the city of Hama on Thursday.

# Damascus deadlock

This was an unprecedented year for Syria. For the first time since the Syrian Baath Party came to power nearly 50 years ago, the Syrian people rose up and began a peaceful revolution demanding freedom, dignity and democracy against a regime used to suppressing opposition by force.

Nearly 10 months ago, some children in Deraa in southern Syria, who were influenced by the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia and swept over Egypt, Yemen and Libya, wrote graffiti on the wall of a school demanding the fall of the regime. Their graffiti ignited a revolution, initially peaceful, now one of the most bloody and violent of the Arab revolts.

Syrian intelligence arrested them for weeks without their parents knowing anything about them. Security officers refused to release them and ignored the pleas of their families. Their relatives chanted in the street for freedom, but they did not mean freedom just for their children but for all of the Syrian people.

Like any totalitarian regime, security forces used excessive force with the small crowd, spilling blood. Civilians were killed and the small protest within days had become a massive demonstration demanding freedom and the prosecution of security agency leaders who gave the orders to kill.

Like a snowball, protests spread across the country, beginning with the towns and villages in Deraa. Security forces not only used force in Deraa but also live ammunition against anyone who took part in demonstrations, irrespective of their demands.

As the number of deaths rose, towns were invaded, property destroyed and thousands of young people arrested. The ceiling of demands evolved from abstract demands for freedom and dignity to root and branch political demands. These included the freedom to form political parties, the right to rotation of power, the dissolution of intelligence agencies and others. All this without realising that these demands spelt the end of the incumbent totalitarian regime in Syria. Three months into the revolution, the demand became one of overthrowing the regime entirely.

The Syrian regime not only relied on security agencies that some monitors estimate at more than half a million security personnel, but the regular army, deployed in the crackdown against protesters. The army invaded Deraa, Hama, Homs and other restive areas using heavy artillery to stop demonstrations. Some cities and towns were transformed into military barracks while some districts seemed more like war zones than sites of protest.

The Syrian president gave three speeches to the people that observers described as ineffective in ending the protests, because he did not propose solutions, except through security means and promises of reform that the people have waited for now for five decades. According to the opposition, his speeches fell short of the demands and aspirations of the people.

The Syrian leadership did not listen to the counsel of its allies either, and continued its violent security policies in the belief that it could suppress the protests and end them, and then begin the reform process according to its own vision.

As towns were raided, the Syrian government issued a series of decisions that did not satisfy Syrians. These included repealing emergency law (replaced with

It's been nearly 10 months since the start of protests in Syria, but the regime still believes it can quash the uprising by brute force, writes **Bassel Oudat** in Damascus

another law that is very similar). It also allowed the formation of political parties, but placed restrictive conditions on their creation. Similarly, a law for the freedom of the media was passed, but in practice the media remained under the control of the security agencies.

Instead of implementing fast and effective reforms, the regime and pro-government media boasted about its achievements and derided the fall of leaders of Tunisia and Egypt. The official media adopted a dreary and hostile attitude that ignored co-citizenship in one homeland between the revolutionaries and the regime. It propagated open animosity and all-out confrontation.

The international media, meanwhile, was not allowed entry into Syria, with several reporters arrested or deported.

Revolutionaries relied on their cell phones to upload footage of systematic killings and violence by the regime against demonstrators, which made some observers call the Syrian revolution the "YouTube revolution".

The regime's key allies abandoned it; Turkey, which had a strategic relationship with Syria, became an enemy, and the same thing happened with Qatar whose emir was a personal friend of the Syrian president.

European states advised the Syrian president to carry out immediate, urgent and genuine reforms, but this advice fell on deaf ears.

The regime used excessive force and propaganda to muddle facts. It claimed a "universal conspiracy" against it and accused the US, Europe and Arab states of being part of the conspiracy to put an end to the "resistance posture" Syria represents — according to the regime — in the region. The regime also accused revolutionaries of being terrorists, of constituting armed militias and following the dictate of foreign agents, while refusing all but security solutions.

The Syrian opposition and observers assert that the Syrian regime has spared no method — however brutal — in suppressing the opposition. It removed the larynx of Ibrahim Al-Qashush, who sang for the revolution; broke the fingers of caricaturist Ali Farzat, who drew for the revolution; killed the "graffitist" of the revolution who wrote slogans against the president on school walls; and arrested many media persons and artists because of their support for the revolution.

The regime also beat university students and

mutilated the bodies of children, killed women and the elderly, and arrested tens of thousands of Syrians since the start of the uprising, according to human rights monitors.

The Syrian opposition had previously been weak, fragmented and clandestine after five decades of the regime arresting opposition figures or forcing them to flee the country. As the revolution gained momentum, new opposition forces and movements were created on the ground, most prominently the youth in the field who organised demonstrations, connected different locations together, and became active in the media. Opposition forces were formed inside and outside Syria and attempted to close ranks and unite their views.

Two important opposition blocs were formed: the National Council overseas and the Coordination Committee inside Syria. The former included the Muslim Brotherhood, the Damascus Declaration Bloc that includes five parties, and independent figures. The latter included 15 Arab and Kurdish opposition parties, as well as independent figures. The opposition inside Syria insisted on a peaceful revolution and rejected foreign military intervention, while the opposition abroad indicated that military intervention is the only means to overthrow the regime. This caught the attention of the world community.

Although it is not united, has not presented a clear alternative to the incumbent regime, and continues to work separately, the opposition is unanimous about the political goal of overthrowing the regime and its figureheads, as well as transforming Syria into a democratic, plural state with a rotation of power.

The revolutionaries using peaceful means and supported by the major opposition camps (National Council and Coordination Committee) were unable to secure the overthrow the regime during the past 10 months. The regime remained in control of the military and security apparatus that together are estimated at one million troops, and which have each engaged in confronting protesters.

Naturally, the Syrian army is not a homogenous entity. Paramilitary operations were launched by defectors from the army and security forces who refused to open fire on peaceful demonstrators. They formed the Free Syria Army (FSA) whose leaders claim to include 12,000 fighters on a

defensive mission. A small number of civilians have joined the FSA to avenge the deaths of their loved ones. These irregular forces have carried out concise military operations targeting security and intelligence agencies and anyone who fires at protesters.

The revolution meanwhile became influenced by regional and international developments. Arab and European countries withdrew their ambassadors from Syria as a form of pressure on the Syrian regime to end the violence. Damascus's response was to ignore attacks by pro-regime supporters against Arab, European and US embassies and diplomats. Meanwhile, Europe and Arab countries imposed economic and political sanctions against the Bashar Al-Assad regime and its leading figures. But none of these measures convinced the regime to change its methods. Meanwhile, the regime was very slow in responding to any initiative aimed at ending the internal conflict, including the proposal by the Arab League.

The opposition has declared Homs and Deraa as destroyed cities and called on the world community to intervene to end the bloodbath. UN human rights groups assert that the Syrian regime has committed crimes against humanity, and revolutionaries have called on the Arab League and the UN to pressure the Syrian government to allow international relief agencies, human rights committees and the media entry, to help save the lives of Syrian citizens.

Russia shielded the Syrian regime more than once by rejecting UN Security Council resolutions condemning the regime's crackdown on protests. While senior Syrian officials hope that Russia's support continues, the opposition believes Russia will change its position as a result of escalating violence.

But even Moscow's political support could not prevent the Syrian regime from collapsing, especially in the face of economic pressures. In 10 months, the Syrian Lira has dropped 25 per cent in value and oil production has fallen by nearly 65 per cent. The Syrian people have started to suffer shortages of basic foods, fuel and other commodities.

According to figures gathered by Syrian, Arab and international human rights monitors, 6,200 people have been killed so far, including 320 children and 210 women, while more than 180 have died under torture. Meanwhile, the number of detainees and the missing are in the tens of thousands, and refugees number more than 16,000, driven out to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

For 10 months, the Syrian regime has used excessive violence and cruelty, refusing to understand or recognise the revolutionary movement. It has not proposed political solutions that meet the minimum aspirations of the peaceful civic movement. The opposition holds the regime responsible for the current dead end, where the country teeters on the edge of civil war.

Syria is at a crossroads that leaves many diverging options open. No one knows where the country is heading and if the people will reap freedom and dignity in return for their sacrifices, or if the revolution will become militarised, if foreign intervention will follow, or a sectarian civil war breaks out. Many observers assert that foreign military intervention would equally destroy the regime and society, but with the killing ongoing, the same result looms on the horizon regardless.



An amateur video still of a youth in Homs shot at by Syrian troops

# 'Nothing frightening' seen in Syrian city, says monitor

## Arab League team aborts Homs visit over army presence, trip to Baba Amr marked by gunfire

By FERAH SOLOMON and MARIAM KALOUZI

**BEIRUT (Reuters)** - The chief Arab League monitor in Syria said he saw "nothing frightening" on a first visit to the battered provincial town of Homs.

But he said his remarks premature and targeted Syria to guarantee his team five more visits.

The second day of monitoring, his 9 visit when he visited the Homs neighborhood of Baba Amr, which has been punished by tanks in a military crackdown on popular unrest, refused to speak with the observer in the presence of a Syrian army colonel.

The monitor allowed the visit to the district, where dozens of protesters have been killed by government tanks and snipers, and insurgents have shot back to protect the locals.

They later returned and entered Baba Amr (pronounced) but had to stop an effort to check an area where militants believed detainees were being held by President Bashar Assad's forces because gunfire erupted nearby, activists told Reuters by telephone.

Undistracted across and across, he said many are critical to the Arab League's mission to verify that Assad is honoring a deal by withdrawing tanks and troops that have attacked protesters, fire prisoners and held dialogue with the opposition.

"Some places looked a bit of a mess but there was nothing frightening," Sudanese Gen. Mustafa DHA, chief of the monitoring contingent, told Reuters by telephone from Damascus.

"The situation worsened remaining so far," he said on Wednesday after his team's first foray into the city of one million people, the center of revolt against the regime.

"But remember, this was only the first day



MEMBERS OF THE SYRIAN ARMY PROBABLY DROVE AT A CORNER OF SOCIETY ACTIVISTS' HOMES IN DAMIEN, NEAR DAMIEN, IN THIS IMAGE TAKEN FROM SOCIAL MEDIA. (AP/WIDE WORLD)

and it will need investigation. We have 20 people who will be there for a long time," DHA said. The monitoring team is to number 130 in all, with most due to arrive by the end of the week.

Security forces used live ammunition and tear gas to scatter an anti-Assad rally in Homs, another major flashpoint of unrest, protests to the north of Homs that Arab monitors plan to visit on Thursday. At least seven people were reported wounded.

Al Jazeera television showed gunfire, rising black smoke and men in Homs marching

being intercepted communication with opposing Syrians and blocking them to the full dimensions of Assad's crackdown.

The Arab League's mission to Homs was derailed by an increasing number of protesters who fear the mission could end up blaming Damascus in relative responsibility.

"The brevity of their stay did not allow them to appreciate the reality of the ground situation yesterday in Homs," French Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valera said.

"The Arab League mission must be able to return quickly to this shattered city and be able to move freely and have all necessary contacts with the population,"

and Syria's primary weapons supplier, urged Damascus to let the observers move around the country freely.

"The mission should be able to visit any part of the country, any towns or villages, and come up with its own independent, objective opinion about what is happening and where," Foreign Minister Saïp LAYE said.

Video reports, which cannot be independently verified, have shown parts of Homs looking like a war zone. Constant machine gun and sniper fire is audible and corpses are strewn by the wayside.

Activists say about a third of the estimated 3,000 people killed in Homs since the March 15th in Homs. Doctors have been killed in the past week alone and thousands arrested in the months before the 22-month Arab League was formed.

Activists in Homs said they showed investigators some buildings riddled with bullets and mortar wounds and pointed out what they said were tanks, but had only two hours with

them in Damascus.

One activist, who named himself as Oussama, said the mission was derailed.

"It felt like we were being misled. We planned but hopes in the Arab League," he said. "But these members don't seem to understand how the regime works, they don't seem interested in the suffering and death people have lived."

The mission against the first international intervention on the ground in Syria since the revolt began. Protesters hope what they expect will judge the world into action against Assad.

But the very choice of the Sudanese general to head the League mission has dismayed activists, who fear Sudan's overt defiance of a war-torn nation over the Darfur conflict.

The Arab League says it has military and diplomatic expertise needed to lead an unprecedented intervention in the internal situation of a member state.

But international human rights activists criticized Sudan's government as it is not responsible to imagine a Sudanese general involved in the Darfur genocide over increasing international to halt human rights abuses in a Muslim Arab country.

Western powers have shown an ability to intervene militarily in a volatile region of Middle East conflict. The UN Security Council is split, with Russia and China against intervention.

State television on Wednesday flouted news that Syria has hired 755 people detained in the arrest "above heads were not raised with Syrian blood." Following detention is part of Assad's agreement with the Arab League to defuse the crisis.

But there are still 15,000 Syrians in detention, according to Amnesty International.



# Une nouvelle phase dans la crise syrienne...

**Scarlett HADDAD**

Avec l'arrivée des observateurs arabes en Syrie, la crise dans ce pays est passée à une étape que le régime considère plus positive. Ses défenseurs libanais affirment que ceux qui veulent la tête du régime d'Assad avaient misé sur le fait que ce dernier n'accepterait jamais le déploiement d'observateurs arabes. Or, il l'a fait, sur les conseils russes et parce qu'il reste convaincu que ces observateurs ne pourront que constater que les violences viennent aussi de l'opposition et que les médias qui mènent campagne contre lui depuis des mois, soit continueront sur leur lancée, soit chercheront à avoir un peu plus de crédibilité en faisant la part des choses. En tout état de cause, le régime estime que si les rapports des observateurs ne sont pas en sa faveur, car trop d'intérêts sont en jeu, ils seront en tout cas moins négatifs que les reportages diffusés actuellement sur de nombreuses chaînes et qui sont essentiellement basés sur les déclarations des opposants.

Sur un plan plus stratégique, des sources libanaises proches du régime affirment que celui-ci a désormais achevé l'installation de son dispositif de défense maritime et aérien. Les dernières manœuvres militaires effectuées en Syrie constituent un message clair dans ce sens. Ce qui signifie, en d'autres termes, que la Syrie ne craint plus une attaque militaire maritime ou aérienne, alors que sur le plan terrestre, des soldats ont été déployés le long de toutes les frontières sur une profondeur de 20 km. De plus, toujours selon les mêmes sources, le Premier ministre turc aurait actuellement des difficultés dans son propre pays, et notamment dans les régions frontalières avec la Syrie (Antalya) essentiellement peuplées de chrétiens et d'alaouites, ces derniers étant plutôt réfractaires à toute action en Syrie contre le régime.

De même, les alaouites d'Anatolie ont à leur tour ex-

primé leur solidarité avec le régime syrien. Ce qui permet de croire que la crise syrienne est en train de devenir un élément de division interne en Turquie, prenant même une dimension confessionnelle et ethnique entre Arabes, Kurdes et Turcs et entre alaouites et chrétiens d'une part et sunnites de l'autre. Sans oublier que le gel par la Turquie de l'accord de libre-échange avec la Syrie a entraîné de grosses pertes pour l'économie syrienne, puisque le volume des échanges a baissé de 3,3 milliards de dollars au cours des trois derniers mois.

## Le régime améliore sa position

Enfin, le régime syrien considère qu'il a réalisé une grande première en organisant des élections municipales pour la première fois dans le pays. Même si cet événement a été quasiment passé sous silence dans les médias hostiles au régime, il n'en a pas moins constitué un tournant dans la crise, puisqu'au total il y a eu 41 % de participation à ces élections. Ce qui constitue un chiffre acceptable, surtout en période de crise. Certes, les opposants ont réussi à empêcher l'organisation des élections dans certaines régions sous leur contrôle, mais dans tout le reste du pays, le scrutin s'est déroulé sans problèmes et il a permis au régime de confirmer sa base populaire.

L'objectif de l'organisation de ce scrutin était aussi d'impliquer les jeunes Syriens dans la lutte contre les Frères musulmans et de permettre à une nouvelle classe politique de faire son apparition en vue des élections législatives qui doivent se tenir en février ou mars 2012. D'ici là, le président Assad devrait décider d'amender la Constitution et en particulier l'article 8 qui considère que le Baas est le parti unique. sûr de sa base populaire, il procéderait ainsi plus facilement aux réformes nécessaires, tout en réussissant

à isoler une opposition manipulée par les Frères musulmans et les groupes qui évoluent dans cette mouvance.

Pour toutes ces raisons, les sources libanaises proches du régime estiment que le président Assad aborde l'année 2012 dans une position acceptable, d'autant que le recours aux attentats terroristes dans le genre de ceux qui ont visé des postes de sécurité à Damas montre l'échec des tentatives de renverser le régime militairement, diplomatiquement et politiquement. Onze mois après le déclenchement des protestations en Syrie et en dépit des annonces à répétition sur sa chute imminente, le régime tient bon, avec son appareil administratif, politique, sécuritaire, militaire et diplomatique. Il est protégé sur le plan international par une alliance stratégique avec la Russie, sans parler de l'Iran et de l'Irak, et sur le plan local par un appui populaire qui reste important, surtout avec la recrudescence des actes de violence qui effraient la population et ne renforcent pas nécessairement l'opposition.

Les sources libanaises proches du régime estiment ainsi qu'il y aurait peut-être encore un trimestre difficile, mais après cela, le régime parviendra à dépasser la période cruciale et s'employer à faire des réformes dans le calme. Entrant en période électorale et devant affronter une crise économique sans précédent, l'Occident aura bien d'autres soucis que le dossier syrien.

Quant au Liban, les mêmes sources estiment que le dossier de l'infiltration des éléments d'el-Qaëda vers la Syrie à partir du Liban est appelé à nourrir la polémique politique, d'autant que le ministre de la Défense Fayez Ghosn détendrait des informations concrètes sur le sujet qui devraient être communiquées aux autorités concernées mais qu'il n'est pas encore bon de jeter en pâture aux médias...

# « Pas de preuves » de la présence d'el-Qaëda à Eرسال, assure Mikati

**Polémique** Il n'y a « pas de preuves » de la présence d'el-Qaëda à la frontière libano-syrienne, a assuré hier le Premier ministre, Nagib Mikati.

Le chef du gouvernement, Nagib Mikati, a pratiquement dévoué son ministère de la Défense, en minimisant l'importance des « informations » que ce dernier avait affirmé posséder au sujet de la présence d'éléments d'el-Qaëda, qui se seraient installés au Liban en Syrie, à travers le village de Eرسال. « Quelle est la définition d'el-Qaëda ou du terrorisme? Y a-t-il des preuves sur des lieux connus des personnes présentes au Liban et cette organisation? » s'est-il interrogé devant les responsables de presse accrédités au Sénat, avant d'insister sur le fait que « le mot el-Qaëda est devenu une terminologie générale qu'on lance à tort et à travers ». « Ce qui s'est passé, a expliqué M. Mikati, est que l'armée est entrée à Eرسال à la suite d'informations sur la présence d'une personne dans le village, qui serait peut-être liée à une organisation terroriste internationale. » « Il n'y a pas de preuves de la présence d'el-Qaëda à Eرسال et le fait de parler d'informations à ce sujet ne rend pas celles-ci utiles », a souligné le chef du gouvernement qui a mis en garde contre les discours qui peuvent causer du tort au Liban. « Les services de sécurité qui ont été chargés de l'enquête commencent par la vérité aux Libanais », a-t-il précisé.

Interrogé au sujet des opinions différentes à ce sujet et notamment entre les ministres de la Défense et de l'Intérieur, M. Mikati a répondu en indiquant que les divergences de vues au sein du gouvernement sont normales et rappelant que Marwan Charbel avait seulement dit qu'il ne détenait pas d'informations à ce sujet alors que Fayez Ghosn avait fait état d'informations « qu'il avait d'ailleurs communiquées à un groupe d'officiers à qui il a demandé que les moyens qui s'imposent soient pris pour éviter que le Liban ne devienne une base pour le lancement d'opérations terroristes ». « Il a ensuite rappelé qu'il avait reçu mardi une délégation de Eرسال dont les habitants sont conscients du fait que la situation est délicate et souhaitent que l'armée protège la frontière ». « A mon avis, l'armée accomplit son devoir complètement », a-t-il dit.

En réponse à une autre question, il a indiqué qu'une commission de liaison libano-syrienne suit la situation sur le terrain. « Si le besoin d'une coordination politique se fait sentir, nous l'établirons », a ajouté le chef du gouvernement.

## Beirut sans armes, « une entente politique... »

Pour ce qui est de l'initiative des députés de la capitale qui plaident pour un Grand-Beirut dépourvu d'armes, le chef du gouvernement a affirmé que « pour qu'elle se concrétise, une entente politique et un mécanisme militaire sont indispensables ». « Le gouvernement ne peut pas l'appliquer seul. Depuis l'indépendance jusqu'à aujourd'hui, les armes moyennes et lourdes sont aux mains de la population. Les retirer est une revendication légitime, mais cela nécessite une décision politique à travers le dialogue, en plus du mécanisme militaire », a ajouté M. Mikati.

## Les salaires, « une décision en temps opportun »

Pour ce qui est de la majoration des salaires, il s'est dit en faveur de toute entente entre les travailleurs et le patronat, avant de faire valoir que le gouvernement attend aujourd'hui la décision du Conseil d'Etat qui doit se prononcer sur la majoration. « A la lumière de son avis, nous prendrions la décision qui conviendrait le mieux à l'intérêt du Liban. Je ne serai sûrement pas la personne qui prendra le pays vers une place qu'il n'a jamais occupée », a observé M. Mikati. Sans vouloir dire s'il compte, ou pas, signer le décret de la majoration. « Est-ce que la décision qui avait déjà été rendue était dans l'intérêt supérieur du Liban? Je ne le crois pas », a-t-il déclaré.

## Les rapports avec Berry

Interrogé ensuite au sujet de ses rapports avec le président de la Chambre, Nabih Berry, le Premier ministre a souligné les relations sur un fondé dans ses relations avec le numéro 2 de l'Etat à cause



Le chef du gouvernement a présidé hier une réunion de la commission ministérielle sur le pétrole

de dossier du pétrole et lui a rendu un vibrant hommage : « Mes rapports avec lui sont excellents au double plan personnel et professionnel. Je n'oublierai jamais le rôle de détenteur que le président de la Chambre joue en faveur du gouvernement. Il nous aide dans plusieurs de nos réalisations. » M. Mikati a ensuite indiqué que les décrets de pétrole ont été soumis à une commission présidentielle qu'il préside et « qui a déjà tenu plusieurs réunions ». « Nous sommes en train d'étudier une question spécifique avant d'inscrire ce dossier à l'ordre du jour de la prochaine réunion du Conseil des ministres », a-t-il souligné sans vouloir donner d'autres précisions.

## Priorité à la stabilité

Pour ce qui est du programme de son équipe pour l'an prochain, M. Mikati

a fait valoir que la priorité sera accordée à la stabilité « qui repose sur trois éléments : maintenir le calme au Liban-Sud, poursuivre l'action du Tribunal spécial pour le Liban et empêcher d'éventuelles répercussions de la situation en Syrie sur le Liban ». Il a ensuite mis l'accent sur le dossier des nominations administratives « qui n'est pas facile en raison des tiraillements en cours, en plus des dossiers socio-économiques et de développement ».

M. Mikati a annoncé dans ce contexte que la première réunion qu'il tiendra l'an prochain sera avec le président du Conseil de la Fonction publique « pour établir le plan complet des nominations afin de lancer ce dossier ». Prêt de dire quelles sont les chances d'une entente avec le chef de CFP, le général Michel Anan, à ce

sujet, il a répondu : « Nous appliquerons le mécanisme prévu pour les nominations et nous présenterons des noms. Que le Conseil des ministres prenne la décision adéquate. » Et d'ajouter : « Il ne faut ignorer le point de vue de personnes au Liban, mais il serait grave de tenir compte d'un seul point de vue. Nous devons les prendre tous en compte pour un meilleur choix. »

Pour ce qui est du dossier dit des faux témoignages, M. Mikati a précisé qu'il ne s'était jamais opposé à son examen en Conseil des ministres. « Mais comme il s'agit d'une matière conflictuelle, il n'est pas nécessaire de l'examiner maintenant », a-t-il précisé, en exprimant l'espoir, en réponse à une question, que le renouvellement du mandat du TSI ne provoquera pas de conflit au Liban.

## Hariri réclame une force arabo-turque commune « pour en finir avec le régime syrien »

L'ancien Premier ministre, Saad Hariri, a dénoncé, dans un communiqué, les tirailleurs syriens contre trois libanais à Wadi Khalek, en faisant assumer au gouvernement la responsabilité de la violation de la souveraineté libanaise, ainsi que celle de ce que la population frontalière endure à cause des exactions syriennes. Il a exprimé le vif mécontentement

par le gouvernement de M. Nagib Mikati, en jugeant nécessaire que des mesures soient prises « pour protéger les citoyens libanais et pour empêcher la poursuite des violations syriennes de la souveraineté libanaise ». Répondant par ailleurs à une question de NowLebanon sur son compte de Twitter, l'ancien Premier ministre a appelé à

la formation d'une « force arabo-turque commune pour en finir avec le régime syrien ». M. Hariri s'est dit « horrifié par les crimes commis par celui-ci à l'encontre de son peuple », estimant que si le Conseil de sécurité adopte une résolution contre Damas, « ce sera soit le résultat d'un grand changement au niveau de ce dossier, soit le fruit d'un hasard ».

# Wadi Khaled buries 3 locals killed by Syrian army



Residents attend the funeral held in the village of Maseyrahakb, Akkar.

Harriri blasts attack, accuses government of inaction as violations of sovereignty persist

By Antoine Amrith  
The Daily Star

MUQYBALEH, Lebanon: Angry residents of Wadi Khaled in north Lebanon held funerals Wednesday for three men shot and killed by the Syrian army a day earlier, as opposition leader Saad Hariri and MP Youssef Haddad lashed out at the Cabinet and demanded better protection of citizens.

The three Lebanese men – Maher Abu Zeid, from the village of Majdal, and brothers Ahmad and Kaser Hussein Zeid, from the village of Hood – were killed Tuesday evening by gunfire from the Syrian side of the border with north Lebanon.

The residents chanted slogans against Syrian President Bashar Assad and his regime.

A military source told The Daily Star that investigators were under way to determine what the three Lebanese were doing when they were shot.

During a demonstration that followed the funeral, local officials called on the government to protect residents and to investigate the circumstances surrounding the shooting.

Harriri blasted the attack, saying "It shows how much this government is entangled with the Syrian regime, how more shameful can this get!"

"The killing of three Lebanese in Akkar is outrageous, we condemn the total lack of responsibility of the government toward protecting its citizens," Harriri, who has been outside the country since April, posted on Twitter.

"One of the infants of Akkar was recently assassinated by the Syrian forces, and before that, numerous attacks and violations of the Lebanese-Syrian border took place, and the government did not react," Harriri said in a separate statement by his press office.

"What is required today, more than

Lebanese sovereignty, this crime is odious and unacceptable."

Chairing a Cabinet session at Rashida Palace Wednesday, President Michel Sleiman asked authorities to investigate the incident.

Several Akkar MPs who attended the funeral offered their condolences to the families of the three men.

Akkar MP Mouin Merhebi called for expanding the mandate of UNIFIL to include the protection of the northern border.

"Given that the president and the

prime minister are too busy to tackle the affairs of Akkar and its people in all fields, we ask for their permission to expand the mandate of UNIFIL to include the northern border in Akkar and especially in Wadi Khaled and Aasi," Merhebi said in a statement.

The lawmaker lashed out at Defense Minister Foyez Ghosn for not responding to our calls for tasking our national army with protecting the border and defending its people... despite repetitive aggressions on people in their borders."

The Wadi Khaled area has witnessed a number of security incidents since the start of the nine-month uprising in neighboring Syria, including incursions by the Syrian army. In late October, Syrian troops that had fired at its citizens near the border of Wadi Khaled.

For his part, Khalid Zahranan, also an MP for Akkar, said that he feared the Syrian attack was a prelude to a security operation targeting the people of the north because they were hosting Syrian refugees.

Zahranan said in a statement that

the shooting of the three Lebanese violated Lebanon's sovereignty.

Separately, around 1,000 people called for arresting the residents of Wadi Khaled and Aasi in a sit-in held at Bait Bin Rabeh Mosque in the town of Abla, to the east of Sidon, following night prayers. Worshipers held banners attacking the Syrian regime and Assad, and holding the "martyrs of Syria."

Sheikh Ahmad Asir, the mosque's imam, blasted the Syrian regime and Ghosn, calling him the "Syrian defense minister."

## Syrians refuse to meet monitors in Homs hotspot area

Syrians in a flashpoint area of the city of Homs refused to meet Arab League monitors in the presence of a Syrian army officer, prompting the observers to withdraw from the area, activists said on Wednesday.

"The monitors left the Baba Amr neighborhood because they refused to enter the neighborhood without being escorted by Lt. Col. Mudeen Neda from the Fourth Division," said Ahmed, a local activist and resident of Baba Amr. "The families of the martyrs and the wounded refused to meet them in his presence, and the monitors left." The Syrian government reportedly released 755 prisoners detained over the past nine months in the regime's crackdown, but violence continued in several parts of the country. Activists said two died in the Baba Amr district of Homs, and at least four soldiers were killed in an ambush carried out by a group of military defectors in the country's south on Wednesday.

The prisoners' release, reported by the state-run news agency SANA, followed accusations by Human Rights Watch that Syrian authorities were hiding hundreds of detainees from the observers now in the country.

The New York-based group said the detainees have been transferred to off-limits military sites and urged the observers to insist on full access to all sites used for detention.

HRW's report, issued late Tuesday, echoes charges made by Syrian opposition members that thousands of detainees were being transferred to military sites ahead of the observers' visit. Syrian officials have said the Arab League monitors will have unrestricted access to trouble spots but will not be allowed to visit sensitive military sites.

"Syria has shown it will stop at nothing to undermine independent monitoring of its crackdown," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. She said it was essential for the Arab League "to draw clear lines" regarding access to detainees, and be willing to speak out when those lines are crossed. SANA said the prisoners released Wednesday did not include those with "blood on their hands."

Last month, Syrian authorities released 2,645 prisoners in three batches but activists and critics say thousands more who were picked up in the past months remain in jail.

The Arab observers kicked off their one month mission in the violence-wracked country with a visit on Tuesday to Homs -- the first time Syria has allowed outside monitors to the city at the heart of the anti-government uprising. Homs-based activist Majd Amer said members of the Syrian opposition wished to reach the observers but didn't know how.

"They are hostages in the hands of the regime," Amer said of the monitors. "They are totally dependent on authorities to move around, make calls and even to get their food and drink," he added in frustration.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Mark Toner demanded Syrian authorities allow the monitors full access to the Syrian people. "We expect that Arab League monitors will be able to deploy and move freely within Homs and other Syrian cities as protesters peacefully gather," Toner said Tuesday night. He suggested the international community "will consider other means to protect Syrian civilians" if authorities continued to resist the Arab League efforts. Activists said four soldiers were killed and 12 others wounded in the ambush Wednesday that targeted a joint military and security convoy and that was carried out by defectors in the southern province of Daraa. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which reported the ambush, also said troops conducted raids and arrests in villages in the south, forcing residents who have been on strike for almost three weeks to open up their shops. **Istanbul** - Today's Zaman with wires

# Activists alarmed over Syria monitors' Sudanese head

CRITICS SAY AL DABI IS UNLIKELY TO RECOMMEND STRONG ACTION

London (Reuters) The choice of a Sudanese general to head an Arab League mission in Syria has alarmed activists, who say Sudan's own defiance of a war crimes tribunal means the monitors are unlikely to recommend strong action against Syria's Bashar Al Assad.

The Arab League says Lieutenant-General Mustafa Al Dabi brings vital military and diplomatic expertise to its unprecedented mission to verify that Al Assad is complying with a deal to end Syria's crackdown on protesters.

But some critics of Khartoum say it is all but impossible to imagine a Sudanese general ever recommending strong outside intervention, much less an international tribunal, to respond to human rights abuses in a fellow Arab state.

Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College in Massachusetts, who studies Sudan and has written strong criticisms of its government, said the choice of a Sudanese general was a sign the Arab League might not want its monitors to produce findings that would force it to take stronger action.

"There is a broader question of why you would pick someone to lead this investigation... when he is part of an army that is guilty of precisely the sort of crimes that are being investigated in Syria," Reeves said.

"I think a Sudanese general would be one of the least likely people in the world to acknowledge these findings even if they are right there before him... It doesn't make any sense unless you want to shape the finding. They want it shaped in ways that



#### Gathering information

A video uploaded on YouTube shows a Syrian speaking with Al Dabi (right) during a tour of Homs on Tuesday.

#### SHOOTING TROOPS KILL THREE

Lebanese security officials say Syrian troops opened fire at a car that crossed illegally into northern Lebanon, killing three Lebanese men. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

The shooting came late on Tuesday as Arab League observers started a mission in Syria aimed at stopping nine months of bloody clashes during an uprising against the regime.

Some Syrians have fled to Lebanon, and Syria has complained that weapons are smuggled across its borders.

— AP

“There is a broader question of why you would pick someone to lead this investigation ... when he is part of an army that is guilty of precisely the sort of crimes that are being investigated.”

Professor Eric Reeves  
Smith College, Massachusetts

will minimise the obligation to do more than they already have.”

Syrian opposition activists are reluctant to publicly criticise a monitoring mission in which they have invested high hopes. But several have privately voiced concern over whether a Sudanese military man would be willing or able to take a hard stance towards Al Assad.

Al Dabi has held senior Sudanese military and government posts, including

in the Darfur region, where the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court says the army carried out war crimes and the United Nations says 300,000 people may have died.

#### Al Bashir indicted

Sudan's President Omar Al Bashir has been indicted by the Hague-based ICC for genocide and crimes against humanity. Khartoum says the accusations are baseless and politically motivated, and puts the

Darfur death toll at 10,000.

Al Dabi, 63, has flown to Damascus to lead about 150 observers assessing whether Syria is ending a nine-month crackdown on protests, the first foreign intervention on the ground in unrest that the UN says has seen 5,000 people killed.

He became head of Sudan's military intelligence in 1989, the day Al Bashir took power in a coup, and went on to head Sudan's foreign spy agency and serve as deputy chief of staff for military operations from 1996-99.

He has held at least four positions related to Darfur, including coordinator between Khartoum and international peacekeepers sent in after rebels complaining of political and economic neglect took up arms in the remote western region.

Jehanne Henry, Sudan

researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch, said that as head of Sudan's military intelligence in the 1990s, Al Dabi "certainly would have been in a position to know what the security services were doing at that time".

"As we and others have documented in reports from that period, the security services were implicated in serious human rights violations such as the arbitrary arrest and detention of political activists and their ill treatment and torture... He obviously does not fit the profile as a human rights monitor."

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# No end to carnage in Syria

## Free hand urged for monitors

BEIRUT — Syrian security forces opened fire on thousands of anti-government protesters in the central city of Hama on Wednesday and killed at least six people, according to activists, as Arab League monitors on a mission to end the regime's crackdown on dissent visited another flashpoint city nearby.

Though Syria has made some concessions to the monitors since they began work on Tuesday, government forces have at the same time been pressing ahead with attempts to put down peaceful protests in Hama, Homs and other parts of the country.

Activists said at least 39 people have been killed by security forces in the two days since the observers arrived.

The government released 755 prisoners following a report by Human Rights Watch accusing authorities of hiding hundreds of detainees from the observers. It was the second concession in two days to the Arab League.

On Monday, the army pulled some of its troops back from the city of Homs after bombarding it for days and killing scores of people. It allowed the monitors to visit and as they came, tens of thousands of protesters poured into the streets, chanting calls for the execution of President Bashar Al Assad.

World powers on Wednesday warned Damascus not to hinder the League mission aimed at revealing the truth about a crackdown on dissent.

Accusations that the regime was trying to hide the facts from the monitors were punctuated by France, which claimed the team was not being allowed to see what was happening in Homs as repression continued there.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also urged Syria to give the observers maximum freedom as they go about their mission. "We constantly work with the Syrian leadership calling on it to fully cooperate with observers from the Arab League and to create work conditions that are as comfortable and free as possible," Lavrov said.

Human Rights Watch accused the authorities of having "transferred perhaps hundreds of detainees to off-limits military sites to hide them from Arab monitors".

"The Arab League should insist on full access to all Syrian sites used for detention, consistent with its agreement with the Syrian government," it said. — *Agencies*

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For prayer timings  
See Page 2



# Doubts raised over Sudanese head of Arab mission in Syria

Dabi was part of an army that is accused of rights violations

Peter Graff

LONDON — The choice of a Sudanese general to head an Arab League mission in Syria has alarmed activists, who say Sudan's own defiance of a war crimes tribunal means the monitors are unlikely to recommend strong action against Syria's Bashar Al Assad.

The Arab League says Lieutenant-General Mustafa Al Dabi brings vital military and diplomatic expertise to its unprecedented mission to verify that Assad is complying with a deal to end Syria's crackdown on protesters.

But some critics of Khartoum say it is all but impossible to imagine a Sudanese general ever recommending strong outside intervention, much less an international tribunal, to respond to human rights abuses in a fellow Arab state.

Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College in Massachusetts, who studies Sudan and has written strong criticisms of its government, said the choice of a Sudanese general was a sign the Arab League might not want its monitors to produce findings that would force it to take stronger action.

"There is a broader question of why you would pick someone to lead this investigation ... when he is part of an army that is guilty of precisely the sort of crimes that are being investigated in Syria," Reeves said.

"I think a Sudanese general would be one of the least likely people in the world to acknowledge these findings even if they are right there before him... It doesn't make any sense unless you want to shape the finding. They want it shaped in ways that will minimise the obligation to do more than they already have."

Syrian opposition activists are reluctant to publicly criticise a monitoring mission in which they



Lebanese people protest over three civilians killed in the Wadi Khaled area in north Lebanon on Wednesday. Syrian troops killed three Lebanese in a border area of Lebanon on Tuesday.—Reuters

have invested high hopes. But several have privately voiced concern over whether a Sudanese military man would be willing or able to take a hard stance towards Assad.

Dabi has held senior Sudanese military and government posts, including in the Darfur region, where the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court says the army carried out war crimes and the United Nations says 300,000 people may have died.

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spy agency and serve as deputy chief of staff for military operations from 1996-99. He has held at least four positions related to Darfur, including coordinator between Khartoum and international peacekeepers sent in after rebels complaining of political and economic neglect took up arms in the remote western region.

He also served as Sudan's ambassador from 1999-2004 in Qatar, the country which has taken the lead in shaping the Arab League's unusually tough response to Syria.

Jehanne Henry, Sudan researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch, said that as head of Sudan's military intelligence in the 1990s, Dabi "certainly would have been in a position to know what the security services were doing at that time". — Reuters



# From regional giant to a

**Syria's influence once extended far and wide, but the regime's brutal response to peaceful pro-reform protests prompted condemnation from the Arab League and former allies, reports Phil Sands, Foreign Correspondent**

**DAMASCUS** // For a month, almost two, it looked as though 2011 was going to be a good year, even an easy one, for the Syrian president, Bashar Al-Assad.

After a long boycott, the United States returned an ambassador to Damascus in January, elevating Syria's standing on the international stage. Then, after three-way talks with allies Turkey and Qatar and a joint effort with regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia, a new prime minister to Syria's liking was installed in Beirut.

The role of Damascus in settling another round of the perpetual Lebanon crisis served as a reminder to the world, if one were needed, of the influence wielded by the Syrian president in the most hotly disputed region in the world.

Mr Al Assad managed all this while maintaining Syria's longtime alliances with Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas, and keeping the United Nations special court investigating the murder of Rafiq Hariri, the UN probe into an alleged secret nuclear site and long-time antagonist Israel at bay.

Not even the distant rumblings of the Arab Spring seemed to trouble

the regime in Damascus. Indeed, when the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, one of Syria's principal bêtes noires, was toppled, at least one Syrian official lit up a cigar to celebrate the fall of a vital US and Israeli ally.

The governments of Mr Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali were different from his own, Mr Al Assad said. They had lost touch with their people and failed to reform in time - two mistakes he had not made.

As 2011 draws to a close, that confidence is less evident.

At least 5,000 civilians and defecting troops have been killed by security forces, according to the UN, and an estimated 40,000 people are in detention. Syrian authorities say "terrorists" have killed 2,000 security personnel.

In Homs, Hama, Idlib and Deraa, war is raging. Government officials blame "armed gangs", while rights groups and dissidents say opposition groups are reluctantly taking up weapons in self-defence after months of regime brutality.

Similar conflicts are surfacing in other provinces, including the tribal east and the sprawling suburbs

and declining rural areas surrounding the capital.

Internationally, the Arab League and Turkey have turned their backs on their one-time friend, saying Damascus has used disproportionate force against protesters and failed to implement serious political reforms. Even the Islamist movement Hamas has moved to distance itself from its patron.

For Syria, it has been a year of deepening divisions and new national identity, of bravery, mourning and optimism, of fear and the end of fear. It has also been a time of profound confusion, as political change arrived in a place that for more than a generation had lived with sameness.

In February, as that match flared at the tip of that celebratory cigar, this all seemed improbable. Yet even then, there were signs the status quo in Syria was wobbling.

The previous month, the government abruptly reversed a key economic policy of phasing out vast, unaffordable fuel subsidies and instead raised fuel payouts for two million public-sector employees.

Weeks later, import duties on staple foods were cut to offset price rises angering ordinary Syrians, and

handouts were announced for the country's poor.

On the surface, such populist steps appeared to be working, with two calls for protesters to take to the streets to demand reforms fizzled. A planned "day of anger" outside parliament on February 4 melted away in a winter rain.

Experienced activists said the security services had mocked them at the time over their failure to stage a demonstration.

But they also said the huge mobilisation of secret police was proof that the regime was as afraid of the activists as the activists were afraid of it.

The same month, an MP stood up in parliament and suggested draconian emergency laws be reconsidered. For 48 years Syria had been governed under martial rules that suspended all basic civil rights and put complete power in the hands of the president. The MP was shouted down and told it was neither the time nor the place to discuss a legal review.

Less than three weeks later, in early March, the first anti-regime protests took place. A dozen or so youths did the previously unthinkable, giving the subversive slogan "God, Syria, Freedom" its public debut in a busy central market in Damascus. Until then, the holy trinity had consisted of God, Syria and Bashar.

Meanwhile, the southern city of Deraa had already begun to boil after a group of schoolchildren were arrested for daubing Egyptian-inspired pro-freedom slogans on walls.

Instead of quiet warnings to their

parents, the local security services arrested the boys and tortured them.

Polite requests by their families and influential tribal leaders to free them were rudely and arrogantly dismissed and, on Friday, March 18, the city marched to demand the children's freedom.

In response, security forces shot live ammunition into the crowds, killing at least four people. The next day, thousands took part in the funeral processions, chanting for "revolution". The uprising had begun.

The initial response by Syrian authorities to events in Deraa would turn into a long-term recipe for dealing with the unrest, east the demonstrators as foreign-backed Islamic terrorists, not peace-

ful reformers demanding basic freedoms. Make limited political concessions and promise much more to come. Now and then, sack an unpopular official.

Meanwhile, arrest protesters at the slightest whim, and deploy the security forces en masse, including the army, to crush dissent with deadly force.

That formula has failed to stop the spiralling cycle of demonstrations and violence from spreading throughout the country. To no avail, Mr Al Assad lifted the emergency law in April - a subject too sensitive to mention just two months earlier. It made no difference to the behaviour of a security apparatus accustomed to total impunity or their







# pariah state

protesters, for whom it was too little and too late.

The victories of the security forces have usually proved ephemeral, with protests quickly returning to supposedly pacified areas as soon as troops withdrew.

At year's end, a frenzied media war is being waged in which no event, no fact, is undisputed. Syrian protesters have become the reporters covering their own revolution, producing shocking images of violence and enduring images of change.

To a degree, Damascus has remained immune from the fires raging elsewhere in the country. Keen to avoid the glaring eye of the international media, officials have managed to prevent demonstrators

from taking root in a central square. That was Mubarak's mistake, they said.

Nevertheless, there is division in main suburbs of the capital, too, where the bulk of the city's population resides. While crowds of presidential supporters have turned out at recent mass street rallies to shout "The people want Bashar Al Assad," other groups have marched to the cry of "The people want to topple the regime."

Despite the deepening bite of international sanctions, Syria is not completely isolated. Iran has stood resolute, and Russia has given its Cold War ally crucial diplomatic cover at the UN Security Council.

Yet even Moscow's patience could

be showing signs of wearing thin, as it pushed a reluctant Damascus to accept a team of observers to monitor progress of an Arab League peace plan.

Atrocities had scarred the year and atrocities closed it, with massacres reported in the north and two huge car bombs in Damascus opening a new and dangerous chapter.

"One way or another a new Syria is being born now and nothing can stop that," as one Damascus resident put it. "The trouble is the old Syria is going to take a long time to die."

foreign.desk@thenational.ae

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Clockwise from bottom left: the president, Bashar Al Assad, and the first lady Asma Al Assad meet supporters in June; Syrian military police carry the coffins of 11 soldiers who were killed in Homs in May; soldiers of the Free Syrian Army, formed by army deserters, take up position in December; hundreds of refugees seek safety in the Turkish border town of Yaxlidagi in June; anti-Assad protesters rally against the regime in Amman in August; a pro-regime protester waves a Syrian flag as he stands in front of portrait of Bashar Al Assad in Damascus this month.

AFP; AP Photo / Sana; Ricardo Garcia Vilanova / AFP; Adem Altan / AFP; Reuters; Muzaffar Salma / AP Photo



## Compromise unlikely in the absence of 'third way'

Country may become a proxy conflict amid regional upheaval

Phil Sands  
Foreign Correspondent

**DAMASCUS** // The Syrian authorities say the uprising – or foreign-backed conspiracy, as they refer to it – is all but finished, with victory close at hand.

In similar, optimistic fashion, opponents of the regime have already signed its death certificate – the United States calling President Bashar Al Assad "a dead man walking".

While both proclamations have been hasty, 2012 should be the year to prove which side is right.

Almost 10 months of revolt have ravaged the country, putting it at war with itself. Syrian tanks are in Syrian streets, and thousands of people have been killed and wounded. Tens of thousands have also fled their homes, while many more languish in jail.

It is difficult to imagine (although not inconceivable) that another year can pass in the same manner as the last without something – either the regime and its backers or the opposition and their supporters – breaking.

And that is what it will take. If the previous months have shown anything, it is that there will be no compromise, no deal in which the opposing factions meet halfway and agree to settle their differences. The struggle for Syria is an all-or-nothing affair that will have a victor and a vanquished. And countless victims.

Sincere efforts have been made inside the country to broker a "third way", to replace bloodletting with politics. But those efforts were still-born, kicked aside as a naive fiction by those who know the centre of a cauldron is no place for give-and-take, open debate, power-sharing or partnership.

The process of deciding who wins and who loses Syria has already been brutal and the violence is escalating. The violence of the last two weeks – massacres reported in the rural battle zones and protest areas, car bombs in Damascus – are surely a harbinger of what is to come.

An already dirty conflict will get dirtier – the low point has not been reached. There will be more car bombings, more arrests, murders, kidnappings, assassinations and unspeakable abuse.

The key question is what will change to give one of the sides the upper hand. For now there is a stalemate, neither faction able to force defeat or surrender on the other, but both are under immense pressure.

The dying economy could play an important role in shifting the balance, yet it is unlikely to be decisive. Authoritarian regimes tend to have

little trouble withstanding blockades, at least for a decade or so.

Defections from the army have been increasing, and rebel soldiers have been seen attacking loyalist units, although not to the degree that the armed forces or security branches are fundamentally undermined. A shift here would be critical.

While the regime has been a model of discipline and unity of purpose, the opposition has struggled to organise and remains fractured. It may yet break.

Ultimately it is international politics that seems likely to be the deciding factor, with the Syrian revolt no longer a Syrian affair. The stakes are much higher than merely who gets to govern this beautiful but relatively poor country.

Syria is now an arena for the kind of proxy conflict that has long choked neighbouring Lebanon. On one side are Iran, the Syrian regime, Hizbollah and, more loosely but importantly, Russia and China, all happy to maintain the unraveling status quo. On the other are the US, Israel, Europe and the oil-rich nations of the Arabian Gulf, all hoping to clip Tehran's wings, using Damascus as the shears, before it can obtain nuclear weapons.

To what extent and exactly how these various actors decide to involve themselves in Syria will depend in part on election year politics in the US and Russia, both of which have presidential votes in 2012. There may be important domestic political changes in Iran and Saudi Arabia, too.

President Bashar Al Assad has warned there will be an "earthquake" – a devastating regional war – if his regime falls. But he has also insisted it will not come to that because his position is strong, his supporters steadfast, his allies unyielding. If he is wrong about the latter, 2012 may be the year in which his doomsday prediction is put to the test.

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psands@thenational.ae

### Outlook // Sanctions

## Economists say country should brace for a financial collapse

Government analysts defy prediction despite its isolation and woes

Phil Sands  
Foreign Correspondent

**DAMASCUS** // Syria's economy began 2011 in a strong state of health. The International Monetary Fund predicted moderate but meaningful growth, tourism receipts more than US\$8 billion (Dh29.3bn) were at a record high and set to rise, exploration for new oil and gas fields was under way.

Multimillion dollar international investment projects had started, including much-needed upgrades to dilapidated infrastructure.

The bullish optimism of Syria's monied classes was symbolised in the huge double tower block project under way in the centre of town: a high-tech steel and glass masterpiece for one of the world's most ancient cities. A vast excavation was dug out for the foundations, surrounded by billboards showing President Bashar Al Assad's face alongside the slogan "Together we build".

But work has stopped, leaving an enormous empty hole in the ground. If past unfinished Syrian building projects were an indicator, it may stay that way for many years – a perfect symbol of the current crisis now gripping the nation.

Tellingly, the posters of Mr Al Assad have also been covered by the authorities, replaced by images of the Syrian flag.

There was always something deceiving in such glittering projects, as well as the proliferation of Beirut-style upmarket cafes and nightclubs in the richer parts of town and the

Porsche and Range Rover dealerships.

The well-connected elite never had it so good. But the poor were sliding deeper into poverty, passed over by the brave new world of a market economy and buried beneath a landslide of corruption.

A crippling drought pushed more than a million farmers and their families off the land and tens of thousands were suffering from malnutrition. It was a disaster the authorities preferred not to acknowledge and their failure to act surely played a role in the uprising.

It is no coincidence that the provinces and slum-like neighbourhoods around major cities revolted. How could a million impoverished refugees and wiped-out farming communities be anything but angry at the authorities who had turned their backs on them in their time of greatest need?

As the uprising gained momentum through the year and the violence grew, the most profitable areas of the tourism sector evaporated, with only low-spending Iranian pilgrims left.

Economic sanctions have hit hard, most significantly the isolation of banks and European bans on the small but crucial oil sector – oil and tourism accounted for more than \$12bn of Syria's approximately \$50bn gross domestic product.

Fuel shortages and long power cuts are routine across the country, unemployment has soared to 30 per cent according to officials, while the Syrian pound has lost 30 per cent of its value against the US dollar, driving up the prices of the cheap imports that have all but wiped out Syria's own uncompetitive manufacturing industries.

Rapid inflation has eroded the spending power of public-sector employees who were already just

scrapping by. State overtime payments have been stopped and many staff confess to turning up at work largely to drink tea and enjoy the warmth of a heated building after freezing nights at home, rather than to do anything productive.

Budget cuts mean that even that small luxury may end.

Independent Syrian economists are now more inclined to ask not if the final collapse will come, but when and in what form.

Officials and pro-government analysts have looked hard for a silver lining. They claim Syria has weathered economic isolation before and will do so once again, thanks to self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs and help from international friends such as Iran, Russia and neighbouring Iraq.

There have even been optimistic declarations that the economic incineration will leave behind a fertile ground for renewal; that Syrian industries will rise from the ashes – although businessmen have been surreptitiously moving their money abroad, rather than paying to modernise factories at home.

Then there is the strategic reserve of hard currency, a foundation stone for the regime to fall back on. September's panic measures to buy imports and save precious US dollars did nothing to shore up confidence that the government was being honest in valuing its funds at \$18bn – Syrian economic data being notoriously disreputable – but whatever does remain of the reserve should be enough to see the country through several more months of hardship.

At best that will be a temporary price. Syrian economists warn. The money will run out in the end and what happens then?

foreign.desk@thenational.ae

## “Nothing frightening” seen in Syria protest hotbed: monitor

BEIRUT (Reuters) — Arab League monitors checking Syria said they saw “nothing frightening” in an initial visit to the protest hotbed of Homs, although a longer investigation would be needed.

“Some places looked a bit of a mess but there was nothing frightening,” Sudanese General Mustafa Dabi, chief of the monitoring contingent, told Reuters by telephone from Damascus.

“The situation seemed reassuring so far,” he said on Wednesday after his team’s foray into the city of one million people, the epicenter of anti-Assad upheaval inspired by the fall of several other Arab auto-

crats in uprisings this year.

“Yesterday was quiet and there were no clashes. We did not see tanks but we did see some armored vehicles. But remember this was only the first day and it will need investigation. We have 20 people who will be there for a long time.”

Monitors were to pay a second visit to Homs Wednesday and also go for the first time to the city of Hama, another hotspot of unrest, the Idlib region on the northwest border with Turkey where anti-Assad insurgents have battled security forces, and Daraa in the south, the cradle of the nine-month-old revolt.

Syria president Bashar al-Assad says he is fighting an insurgency by armed terrorists who have killed 2,000 soldiers and police. State television Wednesday flashed news that Syria has freed 755 people detained in the unrest “whose hands were not stained with Syrian blood.”

Releasing detainees is part of Assad’s pact with the Arab League to defuse the crisis. Dabi led the first group of monitors to Homs escorted by Syrian authorities. They were shown destruction in the district of Baba Amr, where tanks fired into residential areas the day before, according to amateur video recorded by activists.

SYRIA

## ‘Nothing frightening’ seen

Arab League monitors checking if Syria is ending a military crackdown on popular unrest said they saw “nothing frightening” in an initial visit to the protest hotbed of Homs, although a longer investigation would be needed.

Given the brief and limited nature of the monitors’ tour on Tuesday, the comment by their chief may alarm opposition activists who fear the mission could end up cloaking Damascus in respectability, whitewashing President Bashar al-Assad’s record.

► Syria urged to give observers free hand

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visit to Homs yesterday and also go for the first time to the city of Hama, another hotspot of unrest, the Idlib region on the northwest border with Turkey, and Deraa in the south, the cradle of the nine-month-old revolt.

However, activists charged that the army had pulled back heavy armor from the Homs flashpoint neighborhood of Baba Amro ahead of Tuesday’s visit by the monitors, accusing the regime of deception.

More bloodshed was also reported yesterday, where army defectors killed at least four soldiers in the southern province of Daraa, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Activists say about a third of the estimated 5,000 people killed in unrest in Syria since March died in Homs. But President Bashar al-Assad says he is fighting an insurgency by armed terrorists who have killed 2,000 soldiers and police.

Dabi’s comments came as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lav-

rov urged Syria to give the observers maximum freedom as they go about their mission in the violence-wracked country.

“We constantly work with the Syrian leadership calling on it to fully cooperate with observers from the Arab League and to create work conditions that are as comfortable and free as possible,” Lavrov said yesterday.

France yesterday also complained that Arab League observers have not been allowed to determine the real situation in Homs.

“The Arab League observers must be allowed to return without delay to this martyr city, to travel everywhere in it freely and to have the necessary contact with the public,” Valero said.

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Reuters – AFP