

Le Monde (France)

Dans la tête de « Sam », alias Bachar Al-Assad

Sont-ils authentiques ? Le *Guardian*, qui révèle jeudi 15 mars le contenu d'e-mails privés échangés par le président Bachar Al-Assad et sa femme Asma, assure après vérifications être fondé à le croire. Un total de 3 000 courriels a été intercepté par des opposants syriens en 2011 et jusqu'à février 2012. Ces opposants avaient pu se procurer les codes nécessaires grâce à une source interne. Leur observation attentive a duré jusqu'à ce qu'une attaque informatique très médiatisée mais aussi très malencontreuse du groupe international Anonymous alerte la direction syrienne et signe la fin du piratage.

Les stratèges occidentaux qui espéreront découvrir à la lecture des messages arrivés ou partis des adresses sam@alshahba et ak@alshahba les arcanes d'un régime opaque seront certainement déçus. La mise à nu du couple présidentiel syrien et de son petit groupe de conseillers média (les échanges ne concernent qu'à la marge les questions sécuritaires) est sans précédent.

C'est au détour d'un courrier envoyé par Bachar Al-Assad à sa femme qu'on pourra mesurer le peu de cas que fait le président syrien de ses propres promesses de réformes. Apprenant un jour de juillet 2011 qu'Asma sera libre dès 17 heures, le président ironise : « *C'est la meilleure réforme dont pourrait rêver un pays. On va l'adopter au lieu de ces lois de pacotille sur les partis, les élections, la presse...* » qu'il multiplie au même moment pour tenter d'infléchir le mouvement de contestation né quatre mois plus tôt. Six mois plus tard, c'est la mission d'observateurs arabes qui est tournée en ridicule par le président.

Cette plongée dans l'univers ouaté des Assad, loin des bains de sang devenus la norme dans les bastions contestataires révèle les préoccupations de la première dame du pays, manifestement très éprise de son président de mari (« *Si nous sommes forts ensemble, nous triompherons de cela ensemble, (...) je t'aime* », écrite en décembre 2011).

Asma Al-Assad fait ses courses par correspondance pour contourner les sanctions internationales visant le régime via une société écran basée à Dubaï, aux Emirats arabes unis et dépense ainsi des milliers d'euros en décoration. De son côté, son mari, enregistré sous un autre nom à New York, multiplie les achats sur iTunes témoignant de goûts musicaux assez mondialisés (Chris Brown, Right said Fred, the Cover Girls, mais aussi New Order...).

Plus stratégiquement, les courriers dévoilés témoignent de l'influence du régime de Téhéran sur le président syrien, qui prépare en décembre un discours avec des conseillers politique et média de l'ambassade iranienne à Damas. User d'un ton « *puissant et violent* », mettant en avant « *nos capacités militaires* » pour convaincre ses adversaires de sa détermination et de ses capacités, tels sont les conseils prodigués, manifestement suivis à la lettre par le président qui se tient par ailleurs informé en février de la présence de journalistes occidentaux à Homs, entrés clandestinement par le Liban.

Quant à la suggestion d'exil prodigué par une princesse du Qatar, « *c'est un bon moment pour partir et recommencer une vie normale* », elle est restée lettre morte. ■

GILLES PARIS

L'armée syrienne utilise des drones contre les insurgés

L'origine de ces avions sans pilote est inconnue. De même ignore-t-on s'ils sont armés ou pas

C'est un bruit caractéristique que tous ceux qui ont travaillé un jour à Gaza connaissent bien : celui, entêtant, d'une lointaine tondeuse à gazon invisible qui va et vient dans le ciel. Javier Espinosa, l'envoyé spécial du quotidien espagnol *El Mundo* pendant le siège de Homs, ne s'y est pas trompé : il a reconnu le vrombissement d'un drone dans le ciel syrien. Le recours à des avions sans pilote dans la répression de l'insurrection par l'armée syrienne est confirmé par des sources diplomatiques, des témoins syriens et étrangers, ainsi que des experts militaires.

À la faveur du soulèvement qui a débuté il y a un an, l'armée syrienne semble en avoir fait usage pour la première fois de son histoire. Ces drones pourraient d'ailleurs avoir été utilisés pour guider le bombardement du centre de presse improvisé dans le quartier de Baba Amro, à Homs le 22 février, causant la mort de Marie Colvin et de Rémi Ochlik, et blessant Edith Bouvier ainsi que Paul Conroy. Il faudrait pour cela que les engins utilisés puissent transmettre des images en direct. Une information impossible à confirmer pour l'instant. Tout comme le fait qu'ils sont armés ou pas, même si c'est peu probable.

L'origine de ces drones est difficile à établir. Ont-ils été fabriqués localement ou achetés à l'étranger, et à qui ? D'après *The Aviationist*, un blog spécialisé dans ce domaine, qui reprend des informations du site israélien *Ynetnews.com*, la Syrie produit ses propres drones, qui ne sont en fait que des répliques de modèles iraniens. Qu'il ait fourni la technologie ou les drones eux-mêmes, l'Iran, allié stratégique de la Syrie, a une expérience reconnue en la matière. Téhéran fabrique plusieurs types de drones, tels que le Mohajer-4, vu au-dessus de Homs, l'Ababil, le Mirsad-1 et le Pahpad (acronyme d'avion sans pilote en persan), filmé à Kafr Batna, dans la banlieue de Damas.

Ce n'est pas la première fois que la technologie iranienne est déployée dans la région. Il y a quelques années, le Hezbollah, parti chiite libanais, avait réussi à envoyer un Mirsad-1 au-dessus du nord d'Israël. Par la suite, en 2005, la milice armée alliée à l'Iran avait même intercepté des communications d'images entre des drones israéliens en vol au-dessus de Beyrouth et leur base en Israël. Il se peut donc que les drones utilisés en Syrie soient actionnés par des techniciens iraniens ou libanais.

La presse arabe, notamment le site d'opposition *al4syria*, a émis l'hypothèse que la Russie avait livré à la Syrie des drones achetés à Israël. Pour Emile Hokayem, spécialiste des questions de sécurité au Proche-Orient au sein de l'International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), il y a peu de chances que le matériel utilisé soit d'origine russe : « La Russie fait très attention au type de matériel qu'elle fournit à la Syrie. Elle possède des drones israéliens mais les revendre porterait gravement atteinte à sa réputation. »

D'autres médias arabes hostiles au régime syrien, mais aussi des sources militaires françaises évoquent la possibilité d'appareils directement achetés à Israël, pourtant en état de guerre avec la Syrie mais principal producteur mondial de ce type d'engins.

L'un de ces avions sans pilote équipés de caméras s'est écrasé en février à Homs ; les rebelles de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) assurent l'avoir abattu. Après l'entrée de l'armée dans Baba Amro, la télévision officielle syrienne s'est empressée de montrer les restes calcinés en les

Les drones pourraient être actionnés par des techniciens iraniens ou libanais

présentant comme la preuve du « soutien sioniste » à la cause des « gangs terroristes » qui ensanglantent la Syrie, selon la version officielle du régime. Comme dans le cas de certains massacres et des bombardements de zone civile, le régime retourne contre ses ennemis les accusations dont il fait l'objet, en une étrange forme d'aveu.

Il est probable que des drones américains, et probablement israéliens, opèrent dans le ciel syrien. Mais ils volent à une telle altitude qu'ils sont difficiles à atteindre et impossibles à voir ou à entendre.

Reste à savoir pourquoi le régime recourt à des drones alors qu'il dispose d'avions de chasse et d'hélicoptères en nombre. « L'une des choses que Bachar Al-Assad a apprises de Kadhafi, c'est qu'utiliser de l'aviation militaire contre des civils pouvait provoquer une mobilisation internationale, note M. Hokayem. Il reste donc prudent. » D'autant que si les insurgés parvenaient à abattre un hélicoptère de combat, cela aurait des conséquences désastreuses sur le moral des troupes. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

Le Figaro (France)

La Russie s'agace de l'intransigeance syrienne

Moscou est intervenu, en vain, pour tenter d'infléchir la réponse du régime de Damas aux propositions de Kofi Annan.

ALAIN BARLUET

DIPLOMATIE L'émissaire de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe en Syrie, Kofi Annan, rendra compte aux membres du Conseil de sécurité, aujourd'hui par visioconférence depuis Genève, de sa toute récente mission au Proche-Orient. Le détail de ses deux entretiens, le week-end dernier à Damas, avec Bachar el-Assad et les réponses que ce dernier a faites à ses propositions sont très attendus. Sans dévoiler la présentation de l'ex-secrétaire général de l'ONU, son entourage laissait peu d'espoir, jeudi, d'une percée sur trois exigences essentielles : un cessez-le-feu, l'envoi d'aide humanitaire aux populations civiles, l'amorce d'un dialogue politique en Syrie, où les violences, depuis un an jour pour jour, ont causé plus de 9 000 morts.

Un diplomate onusien était, lui, plus abrupt, jeudi, pour qualifier la réponse des autorités syriennes à la démarche de Kofi Annan : un « bras d'honneur à l'ONU, au Conseil de sécurité et à la Russie ». L'exposé qui sera présenté aujourd'hui au Conseil de sécurité donnera en effet la température sur une question clé : l'état des relations entre Moscou et son allié syrien, bénéficiaire jusqu'à présent d'un soutien sans faille. De ce compte rendu dépendra donc, aussi, la relance des négociations pour une nouvelle résolution du Conseil de sécurité à laquelle les Russes, et les Chinois, ont jusqu'à maintenant toujours fait barrage. Selon plusieurs sources diplomatiques, la Russie est intervenue à plusieurs reprises auprès de ses interlocuteurs syriens pour qu'ils assouplissent quelque peu leur posi-

tion dans le sens de l'ouverture. Des pressions face auxquelles le régime syrien a fait la sourde oreille, manifestement persuadé que la solution militaire et la reconquête progressive des poches de résistance l'emporteront.

À Moscou toutefois, cette intransigeance commence à embarrasser. Mercredi, le chef de la diplomatie russe, Sergueï Lavrov, n'a pas caché son irritation devant la Douma, mettant en garde Damas contre un risque d'escalade s'il n'écouait pas davantage les conseils de son allié russe. « Est-ce que Moscou va choisir de s'entêter dans la protection d'un allié incontrôlable ou bien va-t-il commencer à envisager d'autres options, telle est la question ? », s'interroge un diplomate onusien.

Tous les pays arabes du Golfe ont fermé leurs ambassades à Damas jeudi soir

Mardi, Kofi Annan recevait une première réponse des Syriens à ses propositions. Une réponse « positive », selon le porte-parole du ministère syrien des Affaires étrangères. Réponse « inacceptable », selon un diplomate onusien. Parmi les « idées » de Damas : l'obligation pour la rébellion de déposer les armes en échange d'une éventuelle amnistie. Lors d'un deuxième échange, la demande de clarification formulée par Kofi Annan aurait suscité une attitude « un peu moins fermée » de la part du régime syrien, dixit

un diplomate. Pas suffisamment en tout cas pour complaire à Moscou, d'où le coup de griffe donné par Sergueï Lavrov.

Doutes sur la survie du régime

Damas refuse notamment de reconnaître toute affiliation de Kofi Annan avec la Ligue arabe, manière de signifier que les propositions contenues dans son plan du 22 janvier sont nulles et non avenues. Les Syriens insistent en outre pour que le seul interlocuteur soit le chef de leur diplomatie, Wallid Mouallem, et non Bachar el-Assad, là encore pour indiquer que la position du raïs syrien ne saurait être remise en cause, ce que prévoit pour sa part le plan arabe pour engager une transition politique.

L'agacement de Moscou n'augure en rien d'un virage sur l'aile de la Russie à l'ONU. Certes, Sergueï Lavrov, dans ses conversations avec ses homologues occidentaux, n'a pas caché ses doutes sur la survie à terme du régime de Bachar. L'option jusqu'au-boutiste de Bachar n'est pas plus satisfaisante pour les Russes, qui redoutent de devenir les tuteurs d'un allié ombrageux, tel que la Chine l'est pour la Corée du Nord.

Pour autant, Moscou refuse toujours de voir l'affaire syrienne traitée à l'ONU. Et le précédent libyen reste un repoussoir, du moins un constant prétexte. Sur le terrain, une mission humanitaire devrait se déployer le week-end prochain, sous la houlette du gouvernement syrien, de l'ONU et de l'Organisation de la coopération islamique (OCI). À Paris, on continuait à récuser une résolution qui ne serait qu'humanitaire. ■

Ce que révèlent les e-mails piratés du couple Assad durant la répression

FLORENTIN COLLOMP
CORRESPONDANT A LONDRES

LE 23 JUILLET 2011, Asma el-Assad, épouse du dictateur syrien, écrit à sa cousine Anna à propos d'une commande de bijoux à Paris et termine ainsi : « J'espère que vous deux et ne vous inquiétez pas, nous allons bien ! ». Fin décembre, elle adopte un ton plus grave dans un e-mail à son mari : « Si nous sommes forts ensemble, nous triompherons de cela ensemble... Je t'aime... »

Quelque 3 000 courriers électroniques privés de Bachar el-Assad et de son épouse interceptés par l'opposition syrienne ont été révélés hier par le *Guardian*. Si des doutes peuvent subsister

des dizaines de milliers d'euros, et un président occupé à télécharger des chansons et des vidéos sur iTunes et YouTube pour se distraire avec son iPad. Parmi ses choix musicaux : Chris Brown, New Order, LMFAO (« Sexy and I know it »). Sur sa table de chevet : la biographie de Steve Jobs. Le DVD du dernier Harry Potter était aussi très convoité.

Bachar el-Assad n'utilise pas cette adresse mail uniquement pour ses loisirs mais aussi comme moyen d'accès direct pour certains de ses conseillers. On apprend qu'il avait été informé du passage de journalistes occidentaux en Syrie par la frontière libanaise et que des reporters se trouvaient dans le quartier Baba Amr de Homs. En novembre, il a ordonné de « renforcer le contrôle sécuritaire » sur la ville.

Le mois suivant, un de ses conseillers en communication laisse entendre que le régime a reçu les conseils de l'ambassade iranienne dans la gestion de la crise et suggère au président d'adopter un dis-

4000 euros
pour des escarpins par l'épouse du dictateur



Asma et Bachar el-Assad, à Paris, en juillet 2008. YVES HERMAN/REUTERS

cours « fort et violent parce que les gens veulent voir un président puissant qui défend le pays » et de montrer qu'il apprécie le soutien des « États amis » face à l'op-

conseiller, il envoie une vidéo satirique illustrant avec des jouets et des biscuits la manière dont les chars syriens bombardent les bâtiments abritant les rebelles.

« Des lois pourries sur le multipartisme »
Pendant ce temps, sa femme échange des amabilités avec Mayassa al-Thani, l'une des filles de l'émir du Qatar. Plus lucide qu'elle, celle-ci lui suggère de s'enfuir et de venir se réfugier à Doha. « A voir la vague de l'histoire et l'escalade des événements récents, lui dit-elle, on a vu de très mauvais résultats : des leaders démissionner et s'exiler ou des leaders se faire brutalement attaquer. Je pense que c'est une bonne opportunité pour partir et débarquer une nouvelle vie. » Mais le couple préfère laisser libre cours à son idylle plutôt que d'envoyer le pire. Quand sa femme lui écrit, en juillet, qu'elle sera libre à 17 heures, le despote lui répond : « Que tu me dises où tu seras est la meilleure réforme qui existe, nous allons l'adopter plutôt que des lois pourries sur le multipartisme, les élections, les médias. » ■

Nibras Chehayed, jésuite et poète de la révolution

PIERRE PRIER

LA RÉVOLUTION syrienne a son poète. C'est un jésuite. On sait peu de chose du père Nibras Chehayed, originaire du sud du pays et à peine âgé de 30 ans. Il a étudié à Homs, où l'ordre possède une maison, et vit aujourd'hui en exil au Liban. Sa voix est en train de devenir celle des révoltés. Une voix humaine, forte et bouleversante. Ses textes, écrits dans une langue à la fois simple et soutenue, possèdent la puissance des grands poèmes de la Résistance française.

L'une des dernières parutions, publiée dans le quotidien libanais *al-Safir*, évoque immédiatement le célèbre texte de Louis Aragon, *La Rose et le Révéla*, sur la mort

Il est tombé sans ciel pour étendre sur lui sa protection

PÈRE CHEHAYED

crovait pas... » Aragon le communiste franchissait les lignes idéologiques en évoquant le sacrifice d'un chrétien. Chehayed le chrétien ose célébrer celui d'un « sans Dieu », dans une région où il est culturellement presque impossible de se dire athée.

Sous le titre « La Syrie entre les monts de Dieu et les noms de la mort » le père Chehayed rapporte l'assassinat d'un manifestant parmi d'autres.

Les évêques interpellés

« L'un des millions de martyrs syriens est mort sans religion. Il criait avec les manifestants : « Nous trions au paradis en martyrs par millions ! » Il criait parce qu'il était avec eux. Il criait parce qu'il les aimait, pourtant il n'était pas croyant. Une balade... Ça fait mar-

bouche de certains de nos prédicateurs les mois cloquent comme autant de balles... »

Avocats du pouvoir

Aucun responsable chrétien de haut niveau, il est vrai, n'a remis en cause le régime. Certains s'en font même les avocats, au nom de la protection des chrétiens, qui figurent pourtant parmi les victimes, écrit le jésuite : « Comme si jamais aucun chrétien ou aucun laïque ne sortait des mosquées le vendredi (pour se joindre aux manifestations), comme si nous n'étions pas voisins, comme si nous n'avions aucun passé en commun, comme si nous n'avions jamais partagé le pain, le sel ou le café... » Derrière la virulence de Nibras Chehayed se profile toute-

fois la crainte de voir la réalité re-

REPÈRES

UN AN DE RÉPRESSION

Le bilan humanitaire

● Le bilan de la répression par le régime syrien du soulèvement populaire qui a commencé le 15 mars 2011 est d'environ 8 000 morts, au moins 200 000 personnes déplacées en Syrie et 31 000 réfugiées au Liban, Turquie et Jordanie, selon des estimations des Nations unies.

L'opposition

● Conseil national syrien (CNS). Fondé en octobre 2011 et présidé par Burhan Ghalioun, le CNS est considéré comme la principale mouvance d'opposition. Il prône l'intervention militaire étrangère pour faire tomber le régime. L'influence des islamistes sur le Conseil, qui pourraient détenir jusqu'à la moitié des sièges, et le caractère peu représentatif de sa composition, sont souvent mis en question. Le CNS a été reconnu comme un « interlocuteur légitime » par la France.

● Groupe patriotique syrien (GPS). Créé en février 2012 par l'avocat Haytham Al Maleh, Kamal Al Labwani et Catherine Al Talli (entre autres), le groupe a fait sécession mardi du Conseil national syrien. Plus radical que le CNS, le GPS prône un soutien matériel direct à l'insurrection armée, en renforçant les liens entre l'opposition politique et l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL).

● Comité national de coordination pour le changement démocratique (CNCCD). Coprésidé par Haytham Al Manna et Hassan Abdul Hazim, il regroupe plusieurs autres figures de l'opposition comme l'économiste Aref Dalila. Le CNCCD (fondé en juin 2011) est opposé à toute intervention étrangère, prône la résistance pacifique et, dans une moindre mesure, le dialogue avec le régime. Il bénéficie d'un certain écho auprès de la population syrienne, en particulier auprès des minorités et des classes moyennes de Damas et Alep.

● Conseil pour le changement national (CCN). Créé par et autour d'Ammar Al Qurabi, il se définit d'abord par opposition au CNS, dont il critique l'influence islamiste. Prônant un soutien direct à l'insurrection armée, le CCN est assez proche des thèses du GPS. Ammar Al Qurabi et Kamal Al Labwani se sont d'ailleurs rencontrés la semaine dernière à Istanbul.

● Construire la libération (CLL). Fondé mercredi dernier par le cheikh Nawaf Al Bashir, chef de la tribu Al-Baqara, le mouvement s'oppose au CNS dont il dénonce l'impuissance et l'absence de soutien au sein des militants sur le terrain.



Kofi Annan (au centre), lors de son passage en Syrie, a rencontré les autorités religieuses du pays. L'émissaire de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe doit rendre compte, aujourd'hui, au Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, des premiers résultats de sa mission de médiation.

Après un an d'insurrection, les scénarios pour la Syrie

▶ La répression s'accroît, la contestation s'étend.

▶ Impasse, solution négociée, guerre civile aboutissant à une « reconstitution » du pays, *La Croix* examine les trois scénarios plausibles.

1. L'impasse

Les diplomates européens le reconnaissent : « On est dans une impasse totale en Syrie. » Sur le terrain, la répression s'accroît, la contestation s'étend. Ce constat éloigne toute perspective de négociation et de résolution pacifique de ce conflit. L'équilibre des forces est clairement en faveur du régime : « L'armée syrienne est toujours très soudée, confie un Syrien. Les officiers qui l'encadrent sont presque tous alaouites. Ils détiennent le pouvoir du feu. La troupe, elle suit. »

Le pouvoir s'est lancé avec succès dans la reconquête des villes et zones abandonnées à l'opposition et les verrouille : Homs, Idlib et Deraa aujourd'hui. L'armée syrienne s'inspire de la stratégie militaire russe, éprouvée pendant la guerre en Tchétchénie : bouclage des quartiers périphériques et carrefours, bombardements massifs pour effrayer les civils, afin qu'ils quittent la zone avant de donner l'assaut.

Les insurgés n'ont plus d'autres choix que de se retirer comme ils l'ont fait à Baba Amr, à Homs ou à Idlib. En même temps, l'armée

s'emploie à sécuriser ses frontières avec le Liban et la Turquie en les minant pour empêcher les livraisons d'armes à l'opposition et le passage des combattants.

Le rapport de force entre l'armée régulière et l'opposition armée est totalement déséquilibré. L'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) est mal encadrée, pas formée et peu équipée. Elle est composée de civils qui ont pris les armes et de quelques soldats qui ont fait défection. Même si les promesses de l'Arabie saoudite et du Qatar de lui fournir armes et munitions se concrétisent, le rap-

« Beaucoup de Syriens ne bougent pas. Ils ont peur. Ils voient leur pays aller à vau-l'eau... »

port de force n'en sera pas bouleversé avant longtemps. Armer l'opposition reviendrait, selon des diplomates, à entrer dans le jeu de la confrontation, ce que souhaite le régime qui ne cesse de dénoncer ces « groupes terroristes armés » soutenus par l'étranger.

Sur le plan politique, les tentatives de contraindre le président Assad au départ – particulièrement française et américaine – ont échoué. D'autant que ni la France ni les États-Unis n'ont caché qu'ils n'interviendraient pas militairement.

Trois résolutions ont été proposées au Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, toutes rejetées par la Russie et la Chine, qui ont opposé leur veto.

Le plan de sortie de crise, proposé en janvier par la Ligue arabe, qui appelle le président à déléguer « des prérogatives au vice-président pour traiter avec un gouvernement d'union » nationale avec « une personnalité de consensus » à sa tête, qui préparera des élections législatives et présidentielle « pluralistes et libres », a lui aussi été rejeté par Moscou.

Un homme d'affaires syrien résume assez bien l'ambiance dans son pays : « Beaucoup de Syriens ne bougent pas. Ils ont peur. Ils voient leur pays aller à vau-l'eau. Le clan Assad ne fait pas de quartier. Il tient tout et décide de tout. Le gouvernement n'existe plus, les ministres se taisent. Personne n'ose lever la tête, personne n'ouvre la bouche. Le pouvoir a acheté le silence des grandes familles commerçantes sunnites, en échange de leur sécurité. Très nationalistes, les Syriens redoutent un éclatement du pays et l'immixtion des militants djihadistes dans le conflit. L'opposition est hétéroclite. Burhan Ghalioun, chef du Conseil national syrien (CNS), est un intellectuel, pas un homme politique. »

2. La solution négociée

Seule une solution politique peut stopper le cycle de la violence. L'émissaire de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe, Kofi Annan, s'y emploie. « Il

est le mieux placé pour obtenir quelque chose du régime syrien, car il connaît tous les acteurs de ce conflit, confiait un diplomate à l'ONU. Mais si dans quinze jours il n'obtient rien, le scénario du pire est à craindre. »

Kofi Annan doit rendre compte aujourd'hui au Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies des premiers résultats de sa mission de médiation en Syrie. Il a reçu une réponse de Bachar Al Assad à ses propositions de règlement de la crise syrienne, mais il a souligné que « des questions » demeureraient et qu'il avait demandé des clarifications. Il a réclamé un arrêt immédiat des violences et des meurtres, un accès pour les organisations humanitaires et un dialogue politique.

Mené par des dirigeants politiques européens de premier plan, le Conseil européen des relations étrangères (ECFR) propose, quant à lui, un schéma de négociation qui passe « au minimum par l'assentiment de la Russie ». « Sans la pression de Moscou, estime-t-il, le régime syrien n'acceptera ni de réduire la répression, ni d'entrer dans un processus politique. »

Moscou doit être considéré moins comme un obstacle que comme une courroie de transmission et de dialogue avec les forces de Bachar Al Assad qu'il arme. D'autant que les Russes ont montré des signes d'exaspération devant la lenteur des réformes en Syrie et ont annoncé qu'ils étaient favorables ●●●

●●● à une solution négociée, à condition qu'elle ne se fasse pas au détriment de ses intérêts.

L'ECFR fait le constat que, bien que Bachar Al Assad soit politiquement et économiquement affaibli, son départ peut prendre des mois, voire des années. Le coût humain n'en sera que plus élevé. L'instauration d'un dialogue politique favoriserait automatiquement l'opposition, à condition qu'elle s'ouvre davantage aux minorités du pays (chrétiens, alaouites, druzes), et, à terme, pourrait conduire au départ de Bachar Al Assad.

Une situation qui peut conduire vers une « fragmentation de la Syrie et un affaiblissement de l'axe chiite ».

Les experts de l'ECFR préconisent la formation d'un groupe de contact avec des représentants de la Russie, du régime syrien, de l'opposition et des voisins de la Syrie, auquel il fixe trois objectifs : établir un consensus international ; déconnecter la crise syrienne d'objectifs stratégiques plus large (pour l'Occident et certains pays du Golfe, affaiblir l'influence de l'Iran par la chute du régime Assad, et, pour l'Iran et le Hezbollah, maintenir un régime qui protège leurs intérêts) ; et renforcer l'opposition politique.

3. La guerre civile et confessionnelle et la création d'un « réduit » alaouite

Gilles Renève, ancien des services de renseignements, est un expert du monde arabe. Dans son livre *Le Réveil du monde arabe, douze scénarios d'avenir* (1), il estime qu'à court terme, si la situation de confrontation sur le terrain perdure, on s'achemine vers une « fragmentation de la Syrie et un affaiblissement de l'axe chiite ». Dans ce schéma, dit-il, « l'opposition au régime se militarise (grâce à l'aide extérieure) et s'étend à l'ensemble du territoire, la contestation évolue en une guerre civile, marquée par des luttes confessionnelles. Les communautés se regroupent dans des zones où elles se sentent en sécurité. » Selon lui, la minorité alaouite (dont est originaire le clan Assad), pourrait alors migrer vers sa région d'origine (Lattaquié) où ils sont majoritaires pour y créer un « réduit alaouite. Fortement militarisée et autonome, cette région, pour être viable, encadrerait le Djebel Ansariyah, avec, à l'ouest, la plaine littorale et, à l'est, la plaine du Ghab qui suit la vallée de l'Oronte vers le sud, jusqu'à la frontière libanaise. » Cette reconstitution laisserait le reste du pays sous l'autorité des sunnites, majoritaires. Une région majoritairement kurde s'établirait le long de la Turquie et dans la région nord-est de la Djezirah.

Et les chrétiens ? « Pour ceux qui n'auront pas choisi l'exil, ils seraient, selon lui, regroupés dans quelques îlots, des zones refuges comme le Golan (sous protection israélienne) ou en zone alaouite. »

AGNÈS ROTIVEL

(1) Éditions du Cygne, 159 p., 16 €.

VU DE L'OPPOSITION SYRIENNE

La division s'installe entre les mouvements

► L'opposition en exil et celle de l'intérieur sont en désaccord sur la question de savoir s'il faut ou non dialoguer avec le régime.

► Certains prônent l'intervention étrangère, d'autres soutiennent l'insurrection armée.

ISTANBUL, AMMAN

De notre correspondant

De son bureau au neuvième étage du World Trade Center d'Istanbul, l'homme d'affaires Samir Nachar, membre du bureau exécutif du Conseil national syrien (CNS), regarde la pluie tomber. Damas a beau être loin, peut-être s'y voit-il déjà tenant un ministère. Sa conviction pour faire basculer le régime syrien : l'intervention militaire.

« L'idéal serait la création par la Turquie d'une zone tampon en territoire syrien, couplée à des frappes aériennes de l'Otan », expose-t-il en substance. Les veto russe et chinois ? Pas un problème. « A-t-on eu besoin d'une résolution du Conseil de sécurité pour intervenir au Kosovo et en Irak ? », argumente-t-il.

Nachar incarne cette opposition en col blanc qui aimerait régler la crise syrienne « par le haut », au plus vite et depuis l'extérieur. À mots couverts, il se méfie de cette insaisissable Armée syrienne libre (ASL) et craint de voir l'insurrection armée tourner à la guerre civile.

Une filiosité critiquée par une frange plus radicale, emmenée par le vétéran Haytham Al Maleh et le bouillant Kamal Al Labwani. Partisans d'un soutien franc et direct à l'insurrection armée, ils viennent avec une vingtaine d'autres membres d'annoncer leur défection du CNS pour créer un nouveau Groupe patriotique syrien (GPS). « Le CNS est totalement déconnecté



Nawaf Al Bashir, chef de la tribu Al-Baqara.



Samir Nachar du Conseil national syrien (CNS).



Ammar Al Qurabi, de l'Organisation des droits de l'homme syrienne.



Mohammed Farouq Tayfour, numéro deux des Frères musulmans et membre du CNS.

de la base des manifestants et ne représente pas le peuple syrien, ni ne relaie sa volonté », confiait déjà Al Labwani il y a quelques semaines, à Amman.

Un sentiment partagé par cheikh Nawaf Al Bashir, chef de la tribu Al-Baqara. Il a lui aussi claqué la porte du CNS pour annoncer mercredi la création de son propre mouvement, Construire la libération (CLL). L'homme, dont la tribu compterait plus d'un million de membres en Syrie, déplore l'incursion du Conseil, là où il lui suffit d'une intervention télévisée pour soulever plusieurs milliers de personnes dans

sa ville de Deir Ezzor (est) : « Les gens du CNS ne comprennent pas ce qui se passe en Syrie et marginalisent les activistes sur le terrain. »

Critique renforcée par le nombre important de Frères musulmans que compte le CNS. Bannis du pays après l'insurrection islamiste du début des années 1980, la plupart vivent depuis en exil. « Le CNS est un pur produit des Frères musulmans », critique Ammar Al Qurabi, président de l'Organisation nationale des droits de l'homme en Syrie. « Où sont les libéraux ? Où sont les chrétiens, les alaouites, les Kurdes ? », s'emporte celui qui vient lui aussi

Les chrétiens veulent le maintien de la pluralité religieuse

► Souvent perçus comme des soutiens du clan Assad, les chrétiens de Syrie sont otages du régime.

Vu d'Europe, le rôle des chrétiens en Syrie fait parfois l'objet de raccourcis hâtifs : soutiens inconditionnels du régime de Bachar Al Assad, opposés à toute forme d'évolution... La réalité semble plus complexe : « Les chrétiens, comme la plupart des Syriens, ont traversé cinquante ans de dictature ; plus personne n'a le souvenir d'un autre régime », analyse Mgr Philippe Brizard, directeur de l'Œuvre d'Orient de 2001 à 2010.

Selon lui, les chrétiens ne défendent pas le régime en tant que tel, mais la laïcité qui a prévalu jusqu'ici en Syrie, fondée sur une citoyenneté unique, sans distinction religieuse : « Ce qu'ils redoutent, c'est un scénario à l'irakienne, avec une chute brutale du régime, qui laisserait place à un vide dangereux. »

Leur rôle est d'autant plus difficile à apprécier que le christianisme syrien apparaît extrêmement morcelé. Selon les sources, ils seraient entre 1 100 000 et 1 500 000, soit entre 5 % et 7 % de la population, relevant de diverses traditions : orthodoxes bien sûr, mais aussi arméniens apostoliques, melkites (grecs-

catholiques), syriens-orthodoxes et syriens-catholiques, maronites... À cette pluralité s'ajoute une répartition diffuse sur l'ensemble du territoire : « On les retrouve dans les deux grandes villes que sont Damas et Alep, mais aussi dans les campagnes, explique l'historien syrien Samir Arbache, professeur à l'Université catholique de Lille. Mais ils n'occupent pas un territoire propre. » Selon cet observateur, les déclarations du clergé local sont à prendre avec précaution : « D'une certaine façon, les chrétiens sont otages du régime. La majorité d'entre eux « vit dans la peur ».

Beaucoup appartiennent aux classes modestes et n'ont pas les moyens de s'exiler. De nombreux jeunes chrétiens soutiennent les insurgés. D'autres ont rejoint les partis d'opposition.

« Chrétiens et musulmans n'entretiennent aucun contentieux historique en Syrie, assure Samir Arbache. Le danger d'attaques antichrétiennes peut venir de prédicateurs sectaires de type salafiste. D'où la nécessité de promouvoir une solution négociée et progressive, qui permette d'éviter une situation de chaos. » Pour Mgr Brizard, « personne, en Syrie, ne veut des extrémistes. La plupart espèrent la démocratie. Il faudra encore du temps pour que les gens modérés, qui constituent l'immense majorité, parviennent à s'organiser. »

FRANÇOIS-XAVIER MAIGRE

de fonder son Conseil pour le changement national (CCN), selon lui plus représentatif de la société syrienne et de sa diversité confessionnelle et ethnique.

Des attaques balayées par Mohammed Farouq Tayfour, numéro deux des Frères musulmans syriens et représentant de la confrérie au CNS. « Nous n'avons pas plus de 10 à 15 % des sièges au sein du Conseil. » « Il est vrai que nous sommes dans l'opposition depuis plus longtemps que les autres partis. C'est pourquoi on nous attribue un rôle plus important que celui que nous jouons en réalité », dit-il.

En dépit de ses divisions, cette opposition de l'extérieur est unie autour d'un même objectif : Bachar Al Assad doit partir. Ce qui la distingue fondamentalement de l'opposition de l'intérieur, dont le Comité national de coordination pour le changement démocratique (CNCCD), d'Haytham Al Manna et Hassan Abdul Hazim, constitue la principale structure.

Pour promouvoir une solution négociée avec le régime, et pour s'opposer à toute intervention étrangère, le CNCCD est souvent accusé par le reste de l'opposition d'être un mouvement fantôme et d'entretenir des liens secrets avec le pouvoir à Damas. « Une accusation injuste », estime Hassan Al Assad, membre du mouvement. « Haytham Al Manna s'adresse d'abord aux minorités silencieuses, celles qui ne sont pas pour le régime mais qui ont peur de le voir s'effondrer, analyse cet avocat de Deraa (sud). Même s'il est vrai que, parfois, Manna donne l'impression de vouloir construire sa propre légende, comme s'il voulait qu'on se souvienne de lui comme du Mahatma Gandhi syrien. »

ARNAUD HOC

PAROLES MÉGO TERZIAN

Responsable des urgences chez Médecins sans frontières

« Notre aide reste très minime »

« Médecins sans frontières (MSF) tente depuis le mois d'avril 2011 d'intervenir en Syrie. Sans succès. Nous n'avons toujours pas réussi à obtenir les autorisations nécessaires. Notre aide aux populations syriennes reste très minime : nous appuyons des centres de santé privés à l'intérieur du pays. La seule organisation humanitaire qui arrive aujourd'hui à acheminer de l'aide, de la nourriture ou des médicaments dans plusieurs villes est le Croissant-Rouge syrien, épaulé par le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge (CICR). De son côté, MSF soigne des blessés syriens dans son hôpital chirurgical d'Amman, en Jordanie. Il n'y a pas d'autres exemples récents de crises où notre organisation n'a pu intervenir. »

RECUEILLI PAR OLIVIER TALLÉS

Libération (France)

Les mails accablants du couple Al-Assad

SYRIE Des échanges récupérés par des opposants éclairent l'autisme du despote et de son entourage.

On peut être un dictateur responsable d'une répression qui a fait plus de 8 000 morts en un an et télécharger des chansons de New Order sur Internet. C'est l'un des enseignements tirés de courriers électroniques publiés mercredi par le quotidien anglais *The Guardian* et attribués au président syrien Bachar al-Assad et à sa femme, Asma. Le journal a récupéré 3 000 mails que lui ont transmis des opposants. Les messages, à l'authenticité non garantie mais jugé crédible par le journal, dévoilent le quotidien d'un despote et de son entourage immédiat.

«**Sam**». En septembre 2011, six mois après le début du soulèvement populaire, et alors que la Syrie est soumise à des sanctions internationales, sa femme, Asma, se désespère de ne pas recevoir les chandeliers, les tables et le lustre commandés pour plus de 35 000 euros en début d'année à une société basée à Dubaï. Le 3 février, elle transmet à l'un ou l'une de

ses amis des photos de la dernière collection de chaussures d'une grande marque. Dans un rare signe qu'elle a conscience de la révolution en cours, elle assure son mari de son soutien : «*Si nous sommes forts ensemble, nous triompherons de cela ensemble... Je t'aime...*»

Quand il ne récupère pas des vidéos parodiques sur YouTube, Al-Assad, surnommé «**Sam**» dans les mails, se moque de ses propres promesses de réforme, qualifiées de «*lois de pacotille sur les partis, les élections, la presse...*» Le Président reçoit également des recommandations émanant de proches conseillers. Celui chargé de la communication le presse d'utiliser, lors d'un discours programmé en décembre, un «*langage puissant et violent*» et de montrer qu'il apprécie le soutien des «*pays amis*». Il estime également que le régime devrait «*divulguer davantage d'informations sur [ses] capacités militaires*» pour décourager les opposants. Selon le chargé de

communication, ces conseils se fondent sur des consultations avec «*le conseiller politique de l'ambassadeur iranien*». Cette précision n'est pas surprenante : les opposants dénoncent depuis le début de la révolution le soutien de Téhéran au régime.

Exil. Sur le plan militaire, un conseiller de la présidence, Khaled al-Ahmed, incite Bachar Al-Assad à «*renforcer sa politique sécuritaire pour restaurer le contrôle [...] de l'Etat dans les provinces d'Idlib et de Hama par tous les moyens possibles*». Le même conseiller prévient également que des journalistes français et allemands sont entrés clandestinement à Homs en passant par le Liban.

Dans un message adressé à Asma al-Assad, Mayassa al-Thani, fille de l'émir du Qatar, propose, elle, un exil au couple présidentiel : «*Je prie pour que vous convainquiez le Président de considérer cela comme une opportunité de s'en aller sans s'exposer à des poursuites.*»

LUC MATHIEU

E-mailverkeer van Syrisch dictatorenstel Assad wijst op luxelevens tijdens moordpartijen



● Bashar al-Assad en zijn vrouw Asma. E-mails schetsen een beeld van een familie die mijlen ver weg lijkt te staan van de opstand waarbij al duizenden burgers omkwamen. © YVES HERMAN / REUTERS

Terwijl het bloed vloeit, koopt Bashar popsongs en Asma design

LODE DELPUTTE
BRUSSEL

Terwijl buiten de oorlog woedt, leven de Syrische president Bashar al-Assad en zijn vrouw Asma in een luchtbel die hen van de realiteit afsnijdt. Dat blijkt uit 3.000 gehackte e-mails van het stel, die via een oppositant bij *The Guardian* belanden. De onthulling valt samen met de eerste verjaardag van de opstand.

De krant kreeg duizenden e-mails aan die verstuurd waren van en naar sam@alshahba.com en ak@alshahba.com, de adressen van respectievelijk Bashar al-Assad en Asma Akhras, zijn vrouw. De redactie ontving de mails van oppositanten van het regime, die zelf konden rekenen op de hulp van een mol in de inner circle van het koppel. De domeinnaam alshahba.com verwijst naar een in Londen geregistreerd bedrijf uit Dubai. Daarlangs verrichtten zowel het Syrische regime als het echtpaar Assad aankopen in het buitenland.

Sommige mails zijn van een luchtigheid die danig vloekt met de mensenrechtenschendingen en het bloedvergieten in Homs en Idlib. Zo bestelde Asma, van Britse komaf, een designlamp van Armani in het Londense warenhuis Harrod's, kocht ze juwelen en halsnoeren in Parijs en meubelen in Damascus. "Als we samen sterk zijn", schrijft ze aan haar man, "dan komen we hieruit" - een verwijzing naar de toestand in het land.

Ook Bashar heeft verstrooiing nodig. Via derden in New York slaagt hij erin de sanc-



De Assads bestellen een nieuw fondueset

Asma Assad plaatst in februari een bestelling voor tafels en kandelaars in Parijs. Waarde: 12.000 euro

Meubels ter waarde van duizenden euro's worden verscheept vanuit Groot-Brittannië. In een e-mail wordt er geklaagd over een commode

Een e-mail toont dat Bashar Assad bijzonder gretig is om het laatste deel van het Harry Potter-reeks te bemachtigen

Asma en haar vrienden chatten over Louboutin-pumps van duizenden euro's het paar

In november stuurt de first lady in Londen een e-mail over het werk van Nick Jeffrey. Tegelijk toont ze ook interesse in andere kunstwerken

stuurde zijn communicatieadviseur hem een lijst met aan te halen onderwerpen. De president ontving de informatie op basis van een reeks "raadplegingen met enkele personen, alsook met de politieke en mediaraadgever van de Iraanse ambassade", zo leest de mail. "Ik denk dat de toespraak sterk en krachtig moet klinken, want de mensen willen een machtig staats-

hoofd zien dat zijn land vertedigt." Ook, gaat de adviseur verder, moeten "bevriende staten" horen dat er naar hen geluisterd wordt. In het schrijven krijgt Assad voorts de aanbeveling "meer informatie vrij te geven over onze militaire capaciteiten", kwestie van de opinie aan de slagkracht van het regime te herinneren.

Op zeker ogenblik toont Bashar al-Assad zich ook amper onder de indruk van de hervormingen die hij zelf aangekondigd heeft. In juli vorig jaar, in antwoord aan Asma die het had laten weten dat ze "om 17 uur" vrij zou zijn, schrijft de president niet zonder ironie dat "dit de beste hervormingen zijn waar het land van kan dromen. We gaan die hervormingen aannemen in plaats van de rommelwetten over partijen, verkiezingen en pers."

In andere mails gaat het over de noodzaak om "het veiligheidsbeleid te versterken om de controle en het gezag van de staat te versterken", of nog, over Europese journalisten "die het gebied zijn binnengekomen nadat ze de Libanese grens waren overgestoken". Door pseudoniemen als sam en ak te gebruiken, wilden

de Assads kennelijk ook hun eigen veiligheidsdiensten omzeilen.

Hoewel *The Guardian* niet alle correspondentie op haar authenticiteit kon checken, contacteerde het dagblad meerdere personen wier adressen in de mails opduiken. "Onze checks doen vermoeden dat de boodschappen echt zijn, al konden we niet alle correspondenten verifiëren."

De berichten bestrijken de periode tussen juni vorig jaar, luttele maanden na het uitbreken van de opstand, en 7 februari dit jaar, toen de Assads onraad roken en hun accounts afsloten. Inlichtingen die al te privaat bleken, foto's bijvoorbeeld van vrienden en verwanten die niets met de oorlog te maken hebben, gaf *The Guardian* niet vrij. De onthullingen over de Iraanse adviezen en levensstijl van Assad en zijn vrouw achtte het blad wel van algemeen belang, zeker nu het conflict intussen meer dan 8.000 dodelijke slachtoffers heeft gemaakt.

The Guardian kreeg geen officiële reactie uit Damascus. Wel reageerde de Syrische staatsomroep vorige maand al toen bekendraakte dat hackers in het mailverkeer van het regime waren ingebroken. De televisie had het toen over "kinderachtige spelletjes".

ITUNES

De muzieksmaak van Bashar Assad

Te zien aan de iTunes die Bashar al-Assad de voorbije maanden aankocht, heeft hij een gevarieerde en zeer westerse smaak. Een overzicht:

- De song 'God Gave Me You' van de Amerikaanse countryster Dixie Chicks.

De Standaard (Belgique / Belgium)

Syrische deserteurs walgen van hun daden



Syrische Koerden vluchten wel naar het 'onveilige' Irak, omdat ze weten dat ze bij de Iraakse Koerden onderdak zullen vinden. © Yahya Ahmed

Tientallen jonge Syrisch-Koerdische dienstplichtigen zijn de afgelopen weken naar Iraaks Koerdistan gevlucht. Gedeserteerd, of de oproep negerend om zich voor de dienstplicht te melden. Ze hebben verhalen over bruut geweld, angst en rebellie.

VAN ONZE CORRESPONDENTE
IN IRAK

JUDIT NEURINK
ERBIL/DUHOK

Het Syrische leger zou leeglopen als meer soldaten de kans zouden hebben om contact te maken met het Vrije Syrische leger, zeggen deserteurs die naar Iraaks Koerdistan zijn gevlucht. Probleem was dat ze niet wisten hoe dat contact te maken. 'Officieren vergaderden er zelfs over in het geheim', zegt Wisam (24). 'Maar ze zagen dat de kans op slagen te klein was, dat ze die strijd niet konden winnen.' Wisam vluchtte onlangs uit Homs naar de Koerdische hoofdstad Erbil, waar hij met veertien lotgenoten een huis huurt. Toen het Syrische verzet soldaten begon te vermoorden, nam het animo om zich bij hen aan te sluiten af, vertelt hij. 'En niemand wil Rifaat Assad (Bashars oom die het Vrije Syrische Leger aanvoert, red.) vanwege de moorden in Hama in 1982. Ze willen geen Assad meer.' 'Alleen de angst dat ze er niet in slagen over te lopen en dan opge-

pakt zullen worden en gedood, weerhoudt soldaten ervan', zeggen ook vier jonge Syrische Koerden die genieten van de eerste lentezon in een tuin in 'Klein Kamisli'. Zij besloten de dienstplicht te ontduiken en naar de Koerdische regio van Irak te vluchten. Nabij Duhoek worden ze opgevangen door Syrische Koerden die daar, na hun vlucht uit Syrië acht jaar geleden, hun eigen dorp hebben kunnen bouwen.

Liefdadigheid

Matas (23) kwam een week geleden aan. Na zijn universitaire studie moest hij zich melden voor de dienstplicht, die vanwege de strijd onbepaalde tijd duurt. 'In het leger is de keuze doden, of gedood worden. Je wordt nu zelfs zonder training naar Homs en Hama gestuurd.' Je niet aanmelden betekende vertrekken. 'Jongeren van mijn leeftijd horen soldaat te zijn. Op straat word je gevraagd waarom je dat niet bent. Dan eindig je in de cel, of nog erger.' Matas is een van de circa honderd

jonge Syrische mannen die in het dorp onderdak hebben gevonden. 'Er zijn er momenteel nog vijftig onderweg', vertelt Abu Jihad, die zelf uit Syrië vluchtte na de onlusten in Kamisli van 2004. In totaal zouden de afgelopen weken tussen de honderd en vijfhonderd Syriërs naar Irak zijn gevlucht. Dat aantal is veel kleiner dan naar andere buurlanden, en beperkt zich voornamelijk vooral tot Syrische Koerden. Voor Syrische vluchtelingen is Irak niet de eerste keuze, omdat het niet wordt gezien als een veilig toevluchtsoord vanwege de vele aanslagen die er gepleegd worden. Syrische Koerden vluchten er daarentegen wel naartoe, omdat ze weten dat ze bij de Koerden in Irak onderdak zullen vinden. Eind februari kregen de eerste dertig soldaten een vluchtelingenstatus omdat ze 'Koerdisch zijn en onze bescherming nodig hebben', aldus de bekendmaking in Erbil.

'Ik wilde niet meer tegen mijn eigen mensen vechten'

De deserteurs moeten het vooral hebben van liefdadigheid; de Koerdische overheid gedooft ze, maar biedt geen financiële hulp, klaagt Wisam. Hij leeft in Erbil van wat zijn ouders hem sturen.

Zijn ouders zonden hem weg omdat ze voor zijn leven vreesden. Hij was tot voor kort dienstplichtluitenant op een tank in Homs, waar in de wijk Baba Amr een bloedige strijd is gestreden tussen leger en verzet. 'Wij vormden de controleposten als de speciale troepen de huizen daar doorzochten.' Hij walgt van de manier waarop allawitische officieren soennitische burgers mishandelen en doodden. 'Ik wilde niet meer tegen mijn eigen mensen vechten.'

Kinderen met wapens

In Homs vielen duizenden doden. Wie na de avondklok van vijf uur buiten was, werd doodgeschoten, vertelt hij. Als het leger erachter kwam dat je foto's had verstuurd via je mobiel, werd je huis gebombardeed. Gewonden en zwangere mochten niet naar het ziekenhuis. Bij huiszoekingen werden mensen beroofd. 'Het leger dwingt de mensen indirect lid te worden van een militie om zich te verdedigen', zegt hij. 'Zelfs kinderen lopen met wapens.' Toen de waarnemers van de Arabische Liga naar Homs kwamen, moesten de tanks naar de kazernes, vertelt hij. 'Wij moesten uit het uniform. Zo gauw ze weg waren, waren de tanks weer op straat.' Wisam en Matas hopen dat de strijd in Syrië snel beslecht is, al lijkt die kans na de val van Homs kleiner dan ooit. 'Als Assad weg is, ben ik de volgende dag terug', zeggen ze allebei vastberaden. En in de tussentijd? 'Een verblijfsvergunning, werk en afwachten.'

Bizarres vom Assad-Clan

SYRIEN | Tausende von geleakten privaten Mails des syrischen Präsidentenpaares offenbaren die Absurdität eines Diktatoredaseins und den großen Einfluss Irans

BERLIN taz | Zum Jahrestag des Aufstandes gegen den Assad-Clan in Syrien sind Kopien von E-Mails aufgetaucht, die das ebenso abgehobene wie bizarre Leben des Diktatorenehepaares an der Spitze des syrischen Staates bloßstellen. Nach eigenen Angaben hat die britische Zeitung *Guardian* mehr als 3.000 private E-Mails aus dem Umkreis der Assad-Familie erhalten, die sowohl banale als auch hochpolitische Vorgänge beleuchten sollen. Diese E-Mails wurden laut *Guardian* allerdings nicht von Hackern geknackt, sondern von einem „Verräter“ im inneren Zirkel der Macht an die Öffentlichkeit weitergeleitet. Im Kern besagen die Schriftstücke, dass Präsident Baschar al-Assad sich vom verbün-

deten Iran Rat einholte, wie der Aufstand am besten zu bekämpfen sei. Zum anderen geht aus dem digitalen Schriftverkehr hervor, dass sich Assads Ehefrau Asma einen ausschweifenden Lebensstil leistete, während die Menschen in Syrien dem Hunger und allzu oft auch dem Tod preisgegeben waren.

Am Vortag einer geplanten öffentlichen Rede im Dezember sollen iranische Quellen dem syrischen Präsidenten geraten haben, eine „kraftvolle und gewalttätige Sprache“ zu benutzen, um seine persönliche Entschlossenheit unter Beweis zu stellen. Auch sollte Assad die „militärischen Fähigkeiten des eigenen Regimes“ nach außen lancieren, um den Eindruck zu bestärken, dass er in der Lage sei, den Aufstand auch militärisch zu be-

zwingen. Laut den E-Mails soll auch der Berater der iranischen Botschaft Assad aufgefordert haben, die „Sicherheit zu verschärfen“ und die staatliche Kontrolle über bestimmte Regionen wiederzuerlangen. Demnach war Assad auch von Beginn an über die Anwesenheit ausländischer Journalisten in Homs und insbesondere im Stadtteil Baba Amr informiert. Im Februar waren zwei Journalisten aus den USA und aus Frankreich bei Angriffen der syrischen Armee ums Leben gekommen. Dieser Stadtteil wur-

de im März von den Truppen Assads nach wochenlanger Belagerung eingenommen.

Namentlich erwähnt der *Guardian* ferner den libanesischen Geschäftsmann Hussein Mortada, der Assad im Auftrag des Irans den Rat gegeben haben soll, einen doppelten Autobombenanschlag in Damaskus nicht länger al-Qaida zuzuschreiben, weil dies „ein katastrophaler taktischer propagandistischer Fehler“ sei. Diese Weisung sei sowohl von Iran wie auch von der Hisbollah gekommen.

Assads Frau Asma soll sich laut den Mails Dutzende Designerwaren über das Internet bestellt haben. Dazu zählten Kerzenhalter, Tische, Kronleuchter und andere Luxuswaren. Selbst im britischen Edelkaufhaus Harrods soll die First Lady aus Damaskus problemlos eingekauft haben, wie aus einer Shopping-List hervorgeht. Geldsorgen hatte die Sippschaft dabei nicht. 10.000 britische Pfund für Kronleuchter, eine Blumenvase für 2.650 Pfund und 3.800 Pfund für diamantbesetzte Damenschuhe gingen über den Counter. Neben den Shopping-Eskapaden soll Asma al-Assad auch eine interessante Korrespondenz mit der Tochter des Emirs von Katar aufrechterhalten haben. Demnach soll die Tochter namens Majassa al-Thani dem Ehepaar Assad nahegelegt haben, doch das Land zu verlassen und die Macht in Syrien aufzugeben. Angeblich schrieb sie am 11. Dezember 2011: „Die Gelegenheit für einen wirklichen Wandel und für eine neue Entwicklung wurde vor langer Zeit verpasst. Nichtsdestotrotz, wenn sich ein Fenster schließt, geht ein anderes auf. Ich hoffe, es ist noch nicht zu spät für neue Überlegungen und das Aufgeben des Status der Negation.“ Leider wurde dieser Ratschlag bislang von den Assads ignoriert.

Während seine Frau auf Shoppingtour war, suchte der präsidentiale Ehemann nach einem Lied für seine Angetraute. Auf iTunes soll er ein Lied des US-Country-Sängers Blake Shelton gekauft haben. Und zwar genau einen Tag nach einem der furchterlichsten Bombardements der Stadt Homs, bei dem Hunderte Zivilisten ihr Leben verloren. In dem Song heißt es: „Ich bin ein wandelnder Herzschmerz / Ich habe es ganz schön verbockt / Der Mensch, der ich jetzt bin / Ist nicht der, der ich sein will.“ **GB**

„Die Gelegenheit für einen Wandel wurde verpasst“

MAJASSA AL-THANI



Soldaten der Freien Syrischen Armee (oben) und Gedenken in Sydney an die Opfer des Aufstands Fotos: reuters

Erster Jahrestag der Proteste: Kämpfe und Demonstrationen

SYRIEN II Das Regime erhöht den Druck auf die Gegner. 1.000 fliehen in die Türkei. Dutzende Tote

BEIRUT *dapd/rtr/dpa/taz* | Anlässlich des ersten Jahrestags des Beginns der Proteste gegen den syrischen Präsidenten Baschar al-Assad sind am Donnerstag Tausende Regimeanhänger in Damaskus auf die Straße gegangen. Gleichzeitig verstärkten die Regierungssoldaten ihre Präsenz in den Oppositionshochburgen, wo Großkundgebungen gegen Assad geplant waren.

Oppositionelle warfen dem Regime vor, Menschen zur Teilnahme an Pro-Regierungs-Demonstrationen zu zwingen. Bei der Kundgebung in Damaskus am Donnerstag protestierten die Assad-Anhänger gegen die nach ihrer Ansicht seit einem Jahr andauernde Verschwörung gegen ihr Land. Sie werfen ausländischen Kräften und Terroristen vor, hinter den Unruhen zu stecken. Die Syrer gingen erstmals Mitte März des vergangenen Jahres auf die Straße, um politische Reformen einzufordern.

Immer mehr Menschen fliehen angesichts der Lage in die Nachbarländer. Innerhalb von nur 24 Stunden seien mehr als 1.000 Syrer in die Türkei geflohen, sagte der türkische Außenministeriumssprecher Selcuk Ünal am Donnerstag. Damit seien nun mindestens 15.000 syrische Flüchtlinge im Land. Den Vereinten Nationen zufolge sind seit Beginn der Proteste mehr als 8.000 Menschen ums Leben gekommen.

Am Donnerstagmorgen wurden aus drei Stadtteilen der Hauptstadt Damaskus Gefechte zwischen den Regierungstruppen und oppositionellen Kämpfern gemeldet. Der Nachrichtensender al-Dschasira veröffentlichte ein Video, in dem bewaffnete Gegner des Regimes aus der Ortschaft Duma die Freilassung aller Gefangenen aus Duma fordern. Die Bewaffneten drohten, einen angeblich von ihnen gefangen genommenen General der Armee zu töten, falls diese Forderung nicht binnen 72 Stunden erfüllt werden sollte.

Nahe der syrischen Stadt Idlib sind am Donnerstag nach Angaben von Aktivisten mehr als 20 Leichen mit Spuren schwerer Folter entdeckt worden. Wie die im Exil ansässige Syrische Beobachtungsstelle für Menschenrechte mitteilte, waren den insgesamt 23 getöteten Menschen die Augen verbunden und die Hände gefesselt worden. Sie starben durch Kopfschüsse.

Ein Jahr nach Beginn der Massenproteste in Syrien haben 200 Nichtregierungsorganisationen aus 27 Ländern eindringlich ein Ende der Gewalt im Land gefordert. Der UN-Sicherheitsrat werde aufgefordert, schnellstens eine Resolution zu verabschieden, die ein Ende des Blutvergießens verlange, heißt es in der am Donnerstag veröffentlichten Erklärung. Die internationalen Organisationen forderten in ihrer Erklärung ein sofortiges Ende der Bombardierung ziviler Stadtteile, willkürlicher Festnahmen und der Folter. Humanitäre Helfer, Journalisten, internationale Beobachter und Vertreter von Menschenrechtsgruppen müssten ungehinderten Zugang zu den Konfliktgebieten erhalten. **GB**

BÜRG
IN S



Trauerfeier in der Stadt Idlib für einen

Junge Welt (Allemagne / Germany)

»Zeit ist wichtig«

Positive Resonanz aus Damaskus auf Vorschläge Kofi Annans. **Von Karin Leukefeld**

In vielen syrischen Städten versammelten sich am Donnerstag Hunderttausende Menschen, um für die nationale Einheit und gegen ausländische Einmischung zu demonstrieren. Auf Transparenten und bei Reden unterstützten sie auch das Reformprogramm von Präsident Baschar Al-Assad, der für Mai Parlamentswahlen angekündigt hat. Gleichzeitig berichteten die Menschenrechtsorganisation Human Rights Watch und die syrische Auslandsopposition unter Verweis auf »Aktivisten« über neue militärische Offensiven des syrischen Militärs vor allem in der Region Idlib mit vielen Opfern. Nach Angaben internationaler Hilfsorganisationen und Nachrichtensender würden »Ströme von Flüchtlingen« in die Türkei kommen.

Der Sonderbeauftragte von UN-Generalsekretär Ban Ki Moon und der Arabischen Liga, Kofi Annan, erhielt derweil aus Damaskus eine erste Reaktion auf die Vorschläge, die er am vergangenen Wochenende dem syrischen Präsidenten zur friedlichen Beilegung der blutigen Unruhen in Syrien vorgelegt hatte. »Angesichts der schwierigen und tragischen Situation« müsse man verstehen, daß zur Lösung der Konflikte »Zeit wichtig« sei, teilte ein Sprecher Annans in einer ersten Reaktion mit. Es gebe noch »Fragen, auf die er sich Antworten« erhoffe, sagte der Sprecher weiter, ohne auf Einzelheiten einzugehen. Nach zwei Gesprächsrunden mit dem syrischen Präsidenten Baschar Al-Assad hatte Annan am vergangenen Sonntag erklärt, er habe die syrische Führung »zu Reformen« ermuntert. Auch über die Möglichkeit eines Waffenstillstandes und dem Beginn eines politischen Dialogs sei gesprochen worden. Zudem vermittelte Annan die



Anhänger von Präsident Assad bei einer Demonstration am Donnerstag in Damaskus

Forderung, »humanitäre Organisationen« uneingeschränkt in Syrien arbeiten zu lassen.

Bei einem Treffen mit dem Vorsitzenden des Syrischen Nationalrates (SNR) Burhan Ghalioun am Dienstag in Ankara hatte Kofi Annan erneut alle Seiten aufgefordert, die Gewalt umgehend einzustellen. Wie Rußland hat auch China seine Vermittlungsbemühungen intensiviert. Der chinesische Sonderbeauftragte Zhang Ming traf am Dienstag zu Gesprächen mit der Arabischen Liga in Kairo ein.

Der Sprecher des syrischen Außen-

ministeriums, Jihad Makdessi, war am Mittwoch vor Journalisten in Damaskus ausführlich auf die Vermittlermission Kofi Annans eingegangen. Syrien begrüße »jede Initiative, die hilft, eine politische Lösung zu finden«, sagte Makdessi. Aufrufe, die Aufständischen zu bewaffnen, behinderten den Auftrag Annans. Der Erfolg seiner Mission, der von der syrischen Regierung unbedingt gewünscht sei, hänge auch davon ab, welche Befugnisse Annan habe und wie weit »andere mit ihm kooperieren«. Die Vorschläge Annans seien nicht offiziell gewesen, so Makdessi,

dem habe die syrische Antwort entsprochen. Eine politische Lösung sei nur durch die Wahlurne möglich. Weder Sabotage, ausländische Intervention noch bewaffneter Kampf seien akzeptabel. Syrien sei entschlossen, humanitäre Hilfe zu leisten und habe mit der UN-Beauftragten Valerie Amos vereinbart, diese Hilfe in Zusammenarbeit mit der Regierung in Damaskus, dem Internationalen Komitee vom Roten Kreuz und dem Syrischen Arabischen Roten Halbmond zu organisieren. Dabei müsse die Souveränität des Landes sichergestellt sein.

Die Presse (Aurtriche / Austria)

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ANZIEHEND

Modestrecke. Frühlingsdoppel: Weiche Marken sich mögen, wer mit wem gut aussieht. **SCHAUFENSTER**



Einblick in die virtuelle Welt der Assads

Syrien. Der „Guardian“ legte den E-Mail-Verkehr des Diktorenpaars offen. Sie erhielten Ratschläge aus dem Iran und ein Exilangebot aus Katar.

Von unserer Korrespondentin
JULIA KASTEIN

[LONDON] Ein isolierter Diktator, der seine eigenen Zugeständnisse an die Opposition als „Müll“ bezeichnet, von Freunden zum Gang ins Exil aufgefordert wird – und sich im Übrigen weniger für die Zustände in seinem Land als für die Beschaffung von Luxusgütern interessiert: Dieses Bild des syrischen Präsidenten Bashar al-Assad und seiner Frau Asma leitet sich aus rund 3000 privaten E-Mails des Ehepaares ab, die dem britischen „Guardian“ angeblich von syrischen Oppositionellen zugespielt wurden.

Die Botschaften, die zwischen Juni 2011 und Anfang Februar 2012 geschrieben und empfangen wurden, sollen von zwei E-Mail-Adressen stammen, die sich das syrische Herrscherpaar bei der Dubaier Firma „al-Shahba“ einrichten ließ. Laut „Guardian“ nutzten die Assads das Unternehmen, das auch ein Büro in London unterhält, um trotz Sanktionen Regierungsgeschäfte und Einkäufe im westlichen Ausland abzuwickeln.

So belegen die E-Mails, falls sie authentisch sind, dass der Iran über einen libanesischen Mittelsmann, Hosein Mortada, Bashar al-Assad mehrfach über den Umgang mit dem Aufstand beraten – und auch mit Kritik nicht gespart hat: etwa, als das Regime einen Bombenanschlag kurz vor Weihnachten



Die Assads (im Bild bei einem Besuch in Paris 2010) haben Sinn für die Freuden des Lebens. (APF)

in Damaskus al-Qaida in die Schuhe schob. Das sei „ein gravierender taktischer Fehler“, so Mortada am 24. Dezember an Assad. Nach Rücksprache mit Vertretern der Hisbollah und der iranischen Regierung sei man der Meinung, es wäre besser, die USA und die Opposition zu beschuldigen. „Das ist in deinem Interesse“, heißt es am Ende. „Also mach bitte Gebrauch davon, Syrien.“

Ein weiteres Mail vom 31. Dezember 2011 von Assads Medienberaterin Hadeel al-Al zeigt, dass das Regime offenbar routinemäßig iranische Regierungsmitglieder um Rat gebeten hat. So beim Formulieren von Assads erster öffentlicher Rede als Reaktion auf die Unruhen am 10. Januar, in der er ausländische Kräfte für die Aufstände verantwortlich machte und Durchgreifen mit „eiserner Faust“ an-

kündigte. Asma al-Assads E-Mails aus dieser Zeit drehen sich weitgehend ums Shoppen – mit einer bezeichnenden Ausnahme: Eine Freundin, die Tochter des Emir von Katar, drängte das Paar im Januar, „bevor es zu spät ist“, das Land zu verlassen und beispielsweise in Doha ins Exil zu gehen.

Laut „Guardian“ konnten die oppositionellen Hacker vom „Supreme Council of the Revolution“ („Obersten Revolutionsrat“), denen die Zugangsdaten bereits im März 2011 von einem niedrigrangigen Regierungsmitarbeiter zugespielt worden sein sollen, den E-Mail-Verkehr der Assads über Monate quasi in Echtzeit verfolgen. Die daraus gewonnenen Informationen hätten sie beispielsweise genutzt, um ihre Verbündeten im Land vor drohenden Aktionen des Regimes zu warnen. Im Februar wurden die Zugangsdaten für die beiden E-Mail-Adressen dann auch von der Hackergruppe „Anonymous“ geknackt. Der E-Mail-Verkehr erlosch prompt.

„Das syrische Volk ist ihnen egal“

Syrische Oppositionelle reagierten empört auf den Inhalt der Mails: „Es ist nicht der Umstand, dass das Regime engen Kontakt mit dem Iran hat – das hat es seit 30 Jahren, das ist nichts Neues. Und es ist auch nicht neu, dass sie shoppen gehen“, so Rime Allaf, syrischstämmige Expertin beim renommierten Londoner Thinktank „Chatham House“ zur „Presse“.

„Aber dass sie nichts Besseres zu tun haben, als darüber nachzudenken, wo sie ihr Schokoladen-Fondue-Set herkrigen, während sie gleichzeitig den Kindern im Land die Milch verwehren und die Leute verbluten, weil das Regime keine medizinische Versorgung zulässt – das beweist, was wir die ganze Zeit vermutet haben: Das syrische Volk ist ihnen ganz egal.“

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(Foto: Marko Heston/Reuters)



Shoppen bis zum Umsturz

Luxus. Was sich die Assads per Internet bestellen.

[LONDON/IK] Die größten Sorgen des Ehepaares Assad, während Syriens Volk den Aufstand probte? Wie kommt man trotz Sanktionen an iTunes, Schmuck, Designerschuhe und andere Luxusartikel? Das jedenfalls suggerieren die 3000 E-Mails von und an Bashar und Asma al-Assad, die der „Guardian“ veröffentlicht hat.

So schickte Bashar al-Assad am 5. Februar 2012, einen Tag nach den ersten Bombenangriffen auf die Stadt Homs, seiner Frau ein Mail samt iTunes-Datei: Darin das Liebeslied „God Gave Me You“ des US-Country-Sängers Blake Shelton. Die erste Textzeile lautet übersetzt: „Ich bin der wandelnde Kummer, ich habe alles falsch gemacht. Der, der ich bin, will ich nicht sein.“

Der Diktator hatte sich einen falschen Namen und eine Adresse in New York zugelegt, um sich mit seinen Lieblingssongs versorgen zu können – darunter „Don't Talk Just Kiss“ der britischen Popband „Right Said Fred“. Eine Freundin bat er,

ihm doch den neuesten „Harry Potter“-Streifen auf DVD zu besorgen.

Seine Frau war offenbar primär am Shoppen interessiert: Ein Londoner Vertrauter sollte für sie eine Vase für 2600 Pfund bei Harrods kaufen, eine Pariser Freundin Preziosen. Auch Links zu ihren Lieblings-YouTube-Filmen – darunter einer, der sich über die arabischen Beobachter im Land lustig machte – sandte sich das Paar. Und eine Durchhalteparole: „Wenn wir gemeinsam stark sind, stehen wir das durch. Ich liebe dich“, so Asma Ende Dezember an Bashar.

Vor ein paar Wochen schickte sie einer Freundin eine „Wunschliste“ mit diamantenbesetzten Schuhen für über 3000 Pfund. „Gefällt dir was davon?“, fragte Asma. Die Freundin, offenbar mit mehr Realitätsinn ausgestattet, antwortete: „Ich glaube nicht, dass die in nächster Zeit besonders nützlich sein werden.“

Schuhe von Christian Louboutin für Asma Assad. (Louboutin)



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Die Presse (Australien / Austria)

Medien. Der britische „Guardian“ bekam die E-Mails angeblich von der syrischen Opposition zugespielt. Das Blatt lässt die Leser an der Entstehung seiner Artikel teilhaben. VON ANNA-MARIA WALLNER

Offen für alles: Wie der „Guardian“ zur Story kam

Der „Guardian“ hat sich vorbereitet. So viel steht fest. Das Dossier über die 3000 E-Mails des syrischen Diktators Bashar al-Assad liefert auch Antworten auf kritische Fragen von Skeptikern, mit denen das Blatt rechnen musste. In dem Erklärstück „How the Assad e-mails came to light“ schildert die Redaktion, wie syrische Aktivisten vor etwa einem Jahr an die Zugangscodes zweier E-Mail-Konten gekommen waren, die offenbar dem syrischen First Couple gehörten. Neun Monate lang überwachten und kopierten die Aktivisten mit Hilfe von Hackern die E-Mails, bis das Regime Anfang Februar von der Abhöraktion Wind bekam und die E-Mail-Konten stilllegte.

Der „Guardian“ erhielt die E-Mails von syrischen Oppositionellen zugespielt und machte sich danach selbst an die Arbeit, die Echtheit und Richtigkeit der E-Mails zu überprüfen. Wie das funktioniert hat, beantwortet die Redaktion in einer ebenfalls zum Dossier gehörenden Fragen- und Antwortenliste („How do we know the Assad e-mails are genuine?“). So bestätigten zehn Personen, die als Adressaten der Mails aufscheinen, Zeitpunkt und Inhalt der gesicherten Mails. Dennoch kann auch der „Guardian“ nicht ausschließen, dass sich unter den 3000 Mails eine Fälschung befindet, wie er selbst einräumt. Alles in allem ist die Aufbereitung des Assad-Dossiers ein Musterbeispiel dafür, was der „Guardian“ unter modernem Nachrichtenmachen versteht. Über allem steht das Motto: Gib dem Leser jede Information, die du gesichert hast. Er soll sich selbst ein Bild machen.

Besuch vom „Guardian“ in Wien

Während die britische Zeitung Mittwochnacht die Assad-E-Mail-Bombe platzen ließ, war einer der kreativsten Köpfe des „Guardian Digital“-Teams zu Gast in Wien, um zu erklären, was sein Blatt unter „Open Journalism“ versteht. Chris Moran versucht als Digitalexperte beim „Guardian“ laut Eigendefinition, „unsere Redakteure zu animieren, digital zu denken“. Er achtet darauf, dass die Artikel aus der „Guardian“-Werkstatt auf allen Onlinekanälen optimal wahrgenommen werden.

Obwohl das 1821 gegründete Blatt seit Jahren gegen schwindende Printauflagen und massive Finanzprobleme (mit Verlusten bis zu 50 Mio. Euro pro Jahr) kämpft, ver-

sucht es, online bei Innovationen ganz vorne dabei zu sein. Mittlerweile sieht sich der „Guardian“ nicht mehr als Zeitungshaus, sondern als „Digital-First-Unternehmen“, sagt Moran im Gespräch mit der „Presse“.

Der gläserne Newsroom

Oberste Grundregel der „Guardian“-Redaktion ist seit geraumer Zeit: Schaffe Transparenz. Die jüngste Errungenschaft im gläsernen Newsroom des „Guardian“ ist die „Open Newslist“: Seit Oktober 2011 stellt die Redaktion ihre Themenliste online und lädt Leser ein, sich an der Entstehung der einzelnen Artikel zu beteiligen. „Das Interesse an der Themenliste ist noch nicht so groß, wie wir dachten“, sagt Moran. Weshalb seit einiger Zeit ein eigener Begleitblog einzelne Themen aus der Newslist herausgreift und genauer erklärt, was die Zugriffe gesteigert habe.

Noch eine Grundregel verrät Moran: „Die Geschichte sollte nie mit dem Artikel enden. Der Artikel kann oft erst der Anfang sein.“ Diese Regel befolgt die Redaktion auch bei der Assad-Story. Am Donnerstag lief auf der „Guardian“-Webseite ein Live-Ticker, der mit Reaktionen auf das Assad-Dossier und aktuellen Nachrichten aus Syrien aktualisiert wurde. Aus der Newslist ging hervor, welcher Reporter an der Geschichte „Assad reactions“ arbeitet, sein Name wird direkt mit seinem Twitter-Account verlinkt. Dieser einfache Zugang zum einzelnen Reporter soll dem Leser eine offene Tür suggerieren. Dabei sei die Idee der offenen Tür beim „Guardian“ längst nicht neu, erklärt Chris Moran. Die Zeitung habe schon seit 30 Jahren einen unabhängigen Ombudsmann. Die Kolumne hieß von Anfang an: „Open Door“.

Zur Person



Chris Moran arbeitet seit 1999 für die Onlineausgabe des „Guardian“, heute ist er SEO Editorial Executive (Search Engine Optimization). Er war Mittwoch und Donnerstag auf Einladung des Forums Journalismus und Medien in Wien. [C. Fabry]

Bachar el-Assad dévoilé par ses e-mails privés

«The Guardian» a eu accès à des milliers d'échanges avec des proches et son réseau personnel d'informateurs

Andrés Allemand

Asma serait-elle accro aux spécialités culinaires suisses? Selon le quotidien *The Guardian*, la femme de Bachar el-Assad aurait commandé récemment un set de fondue sur Amazon! Ce détail très helvétique figure apparemment dans l'un des trois mille courriels privés du couple présidentiel, auxquels le célèbre journal britannique dit avoir eu accès par l'intermédiaire d'un groupe d'opposants syriens. Des documents révélateurs du système Assad: influence de Téhéran, réseaux d'informateurs parallèles, surveillance des journalistes étrangers à Homs, cruelle indifférence à l'égard de la souffrance des Syriens...

Tout a commencé il y a un an exactement, au début de la contestation. Un jeune fonctionnaire syrien griffonne nerveusement quatre codes sur un bout de papier. Ce sont les noms d'utilisateurs et mots de passe de deux courriels: *sam@alshahba.com* et *ak@alshahba.com*. Imaginez la surprise des opposants en découvrant les adresses confidentielles de Bachar el-Assad et de sa femme Asma! De juin à février, l'on a pu suivre cette correspondance sur-réaliste, alors que s'abattait sur le pays une répression féroce, qui aurait fait à ce jour plus de 9000 morts selon l'Observatoire syrien pour les droits de l'homme.

Sur son e-mail confidentiel, Bachar el-Assad est par exemple prévenu de l'entrée illégale de journalistes étrangers par la frontière libanaise. Ceux-là même dont il affirma ignorer la présence à Homs. Comme son père Hafez el-Assad, il semble avoir développé un réseau personnel d'informateurs qui travaillent à l'écart de la police, de l'armée, des services secrets, du parti et même du clan Assad. Histoire que tout le monde se sente toujours surveillé.



Dans les courriels de Bachar, on voit la main de Téhéran guidant le président syrien. A. TAHERKENAREH/EPA

On découvre aussi, raconte *The Guardian*, la banalité de l'influence iranienne. Avant de rédiger un discours, tel collaborateur propose une liste de thèmes en précisant qu'il a consulté le conseiller politique de l'ambassadeur d'Iran à Damas. De son côté,

l'homme d'affaires libanais Hussein Mortada, proche du régime des mollahs, prévient le président syrien que Téhéran juge maladroit d'imputer à Al-Qaïda les attaques contre les forces loyalistes au lieu d'accuser les rebelles d'être à la botte des puissances occidentales.

Bachar el-Assad trahit aussi son double jeu en évoquant ces «foutaises de lois sur les partis, les élections et les médias». Celles-là même qu'il a soumises à référendum. Par ailleurs, ses échanges avec deux conseillères en communication formées aux Etats-Unis montrent sa volonté de «manipuler» l'opinion occidentale.

Dans les courriels de Madame, on apprend que son «amie» Mayassa al-Thani, fille de l'émir du Qatar, l'a exhortée à accepter la défaite, fuir Damas et trouver refuge à Doha. Mais leur amitié a pris fin quand l'émir al-Thani a proposé, au début de l'année, d'armer la rébellion syrienne.

Surtout, les e-mails d'Asma el-Assad révèlent qu'elle a dépensé sans compter durant l'année 2011, malgré les privations endurées par son peuple.

Démonstration de force

● Un an après le début du soulèvement contre le pouvoir, le régime de Bachar el-Assad a fait défiler hier des milliers de personnes brandissant des portraits du président et des drapeaux syriens dans les grandes villes du pays. La télévision d'Etat a ainsi diffusé des images d'une foule immense rassemblée dans le centre de Damas. Le même genre de démonstration de force a été signalé à Alep, deuxième ville du pays, ainsi qu'à Souweïda dans le sud, à Lattaquié sur les rives de la Méditerranée et dans la ville kurde d'Hassaka. De nombreux drapeaux russes

étaient également visibles durant ces manifestations. En effet, c'est Moscou - et Pékin - qui bloquent à l'ONU toute initiative visant à exercer des pressions conjointes sur Bachar el-Assad.

Les forces loyalistes reprennent le contrôle de la ville d'Idlib, après avoir bombardé ce bastion de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), proche de la frontière turque. Selon l'Observatoire syrien pour les droits de l'homme, 23 corps ont été abandonnés dans une fosse commune. Menottés, yeux bandés, certains portaient des traces de torture. Tous auraient été tués par balle. **ATS**

Lire aussi en page 12

Notre dossier sur la crise en Syrie sur www.syrie.tdg.ch

Tribune de Genève (Suisse / Switzerland)

Les réseaux pro-Assad

Le président syrien a des soutiens à Genève et Paris. A l'extrême droite, mais pas seulement

Olivier Bot

La Syrie de Bachar el-Assad n'a pas que des ennemis dans les pays démocratiques. A Genève aussi, le président syrien a trouvé des avocats pour défendre sa cause et nier les crimes qu'on lui reproche. Leurs profils politiques sont très divers, avec une surreprésentation des courants de la droite révolutionnaire.

Sur le site de «Genève non conforme» - un groupuscule d'extrême droite - la première émission de Léman noir TV, datée du 22 janvier dernier, s'ouvre sur la situation dans ce pays. Un jeune militant portant le masque d'Anonymous dénonce «les agents étrangers soutenus par les Etats-Unis» qui veulent déstabiliser le «méchant dictateur» pour «donner le pouvoir en Syrie aux islamistes ennemis de l'Europe».

Soutien aux régimes autoritaires

Cette parole se veut d'abord «non conforme» en effet, dénonçant la «désinformation» de médias manipulés qui ne disent pas la vérité. Pourquoi ces jeunes militants identitaires genevois focalisent-ils leur énergie militante sur ce pays? Ce choix n'est évidemment pas le fruit du hasard. «Il y a d'abord une longue tradition de soutien de l'extrême droite européenne aux régimes autoritaires arabes, note le politologue Jean-Yves Camus. Mais leur horizon se rétrécit avec la chute de Saddam Hussein en Irak et la mort de Kadhafi en Libye. Alors ils se raccrochent à Bachar el-Assad et à la Syrie, un régime présenté comme un phare de la lutte contre un ordre mondial qui serait dominé par l'Empire américano-sioniste qu'ils combattent.»

Tous insistent sur le caractère «nationaliste et socialiste» du régime baasiste au pouvoir à Damas. «La Syrie est le seul pays qui compte dans son Parlement des représentants d'une formation ouvertement antisémite, le Parti social nationaliste syrien (PSNS), un parti chrétien dont le discours sur les juifs est probablement le plus violent et moyennageux au monde», ajoute Jean-Yves Camus.

La théorie du complot

A Genève, l'équipe de Léman noir TV donne ensuite la parole à Thierry Meyssan, le pape de la théorie du complot, qui s'est fait connaître en mettant en cause la réalité du 11 Septembre dans son livre *L'effroyable imposture*. Sur la Syrie, un discours niant la réalité des massacres d'Homs est d'ailleurs en train d'émerger, comme après le 11 Septembre. «C'est un trait psychologique des négationnistes ou des conspirationnistes: plus les faits sont lourds, plus ils en dénoncent l'évidente mise en scène», commente le chercheur associé de l'Institut des relations internationales et stratégiques (Iris) à Paris.

Le Français Thierry Meyssan, qui dirige le site Réseau Voltaire, s'est aussi fait une spécialité de répercuter le discours officiel d'Etats qualifiés de «voysous» par les Etats-Unis comme l'Iran, la Syrie ou le Venezuela. «Meyssan séjourne très souvent en Syrie et s'est installé au Liban, où il intervient régulièrement sur Al Manar, la chaîne du Hezbollah, le mouvement pro-iranien libanais», raconte Jean-Yves Camus.

Le vice-président du Réseau Voltaire est d'ailleurs un Libanais partisan de la



Manifestation
Le 12 mars dernier, à Paris, des partisans syriens et français de Bachar el-Assad ont exprimé leur soutien au régime. MAXPPP

explicitement référence à ceux du Ille Reich.

Antisionistes, FN et négationnistes

Dans l'émission de Léman noir TV apparaît ensuite Alain Soral, qui fut invité dans la Cité de Calvin par «Genève non conforme», le 25 février dernier. Venu du Parti communiste et passé par le Front national, Alain Soral a fait le voyage en Syrie. Colistier de Dieudonné aux dernières élections européennes pour le Parti antisioniste, il a été reçu avec le comédien par le président du PSNS à Beyrouth, à l'été 2006. La rencontre a été organisée par Frédéric Chatillon.

«Sa société Riwal, installée à Paris et en Syrie, est le principal prestataire de services en communication du Front national depuis que Marine Le Pen est aux commandes, explique Jean-Yves Camus. Son épouse, Marie d'Herbais, est une des meilleures amies de la candidate du FN à la présidentielle.» Marine Le Pen est prude sur la Syrie, parlant de guerre civile sans prendre fait et cause pour le régime alaouite. Son père, Jean-Marie, est plus direct, «ne trouvant pas anormal que l'Etat syrien se défende» et relativisant volontiers les bombardements de civils («Oh, vous savez, on a bombardé des populations civiles dans bien d'autres circonstances»).

C'est Riwal, la société de l'ancien membre du GUD (créé en 1968 à Paris pour casser du gauchiste) Frédéric Chatillon, qui a créé le site Infosyrie, «agence de réinformation sur l'actualité en Syrie», en juin dernier, un site qui pourrait faire figure d'agence officielle du pouvoir syrien. Le 30 octobre encore, Frédéric Chatillon manifestait sous des banderoles pro-Bachar à Paris. Lors d'un nouveau voyage au Proche-Orient en 2008 avec Dieudonné et Meyssan, le même Frédéric Chatillon posait devant un objectif en compagnie de Manaff Tlass, général syrien proche du pouvoir. Manaff est le fils de Moustapha Tlass, qui fut ministre de la Défense d'Hafez el-Assad, le père de Bachar. «Ce personnage était le principal pourvoyeur d'écrits antisémites et négationnistes par l'intermédiaire de sa maison d'édition Dar Tlass à Damas, avant que ce type de publication ne soit éditée en Iran», commente Jean-Yves Camus.

A gauche et sur Facebook

C'est aussi par cette famille que le régime Assad a «recruté» des défenseurs à gauche, comme l'ancien ministre socialiste Roland Dumas et l'avocat provocateur et ex-maoïste Jacques Vergès qui affirme qu'en Syrie «il faut défendre le régime actuel». Il se trouve aussi des partisans de Bachar à l'extrême gauche, chez les sympathisants de Castro et Chavez du site Le Grand Soir, chez des souverainistes de gauche au Comité Valmy ou dans les rangs d'organisations de défense des Palestiniens qui dénoncent l'apartheid de l'Etat d'Israël. Ginette Skandrani, une ex-Verte exclue pour ses propos négationnistes, est par exemple très active dans la défense d'Assad. Parmi ces organisations, il y a aussi Palestine Solidarité, dont une des plumes est la Suisseuse Silvia Cattori qui tient également un blog, largement consacré à la Syrie et dont les articles sont relayés par le Collectif syrien. Sa dernière interview, datée du 13 mars, est intitulée «En Syrie, les auteurs d'atrocités sont les opposants armés». On ne sait pas si ces voix d'horizons si divers se retrouvent sur «Tous avec Bachar el Assad», une page qui est désormais ouverte sur Facebook pour annoncer les rassemblements à Paris, Bruxelles et dans les autres capitales

«Il y a une longue tradition de soutien de l'extrême droite européenne aux régimes autoritaires arabes»

Jean-Yves Camus Politologue

«Oh, vous savez, on a bombardé des populations civiles dans bien d'autres circonstances»

Jean-Marie Le Pen Front national

Parole de Genevois

«Assad ne doit pas laisser le chienlit s'installer»

«A Homs, il n'y a pas eu de massacres, mais une riposte raisonnable pour en finir avec un foyer d'une insurrection armée par les pays du Golfe et les Occidentaux.» Le Dr Constantin Sayegh, Genevois depuis cinquante-sept ans, un chrétien d'origine syrienne, ne veut rien retirer de ses propos concernant les événements en Syrie. Au mois d'août, il avait qualifié de «détail» la répression du régime de Bachar el-Assad et avait suscité la controverse au sein de son parti, le PDC, dont certains membres se sont dits choqués. Celui qui est retourné régulièrement en Syrie, jusqu'à il y a deux ans, fait d'abord état d'une déception: le Printemps arabe est venu stopper une évolution du pays qui allait dans la bonne

«révolte organisée et financée par les Etats-Unis et leurs alliés» pour «déstabiliser, appauvrir et affaiblir le pays». Quand on lui parle de victimes civiles, il répond qu'il y en a dans toutes les guerres. Quand on lui parle de chars tirant sur des immeubles, il parle «d'insurgés armés de lance-roquettes RPG, noyés dans la population». Et la torture? «Il y en a des deux côtés.» Il ajoute que deux mille soldats et membres des forces de sécurité sont tombés. «Il va de soi que le gouvernement en place ne doit pas laisser le chienlit s'installer», ajoute l'élu de la Constituante. «Assad n'a pas déclaré l'état d'urgence comme il aurait pu le faire, il a mis en place une nouvelle Constitution», termine-t-il, regrettant que

Le Temps (Suisse / Switzerland)

Editorial

Les vices et dénis des tyrans

Par Angélique Mounier-Kuhn

Nul ne le savait encore, mais pour Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, c'était déjà le début de la fin. Diffusé le 7 décembre 2010 par WikiLeaks, un câble diplomatique américain intitulé «Ce qui est à toi est à moi», révélant à la face du monde les pratiques «quasi mafieuses» du pouvoir, s'était répandu comme une traînée de poudre sur les réseaux sociaux tunisiens. L'écart abyssal entre les préoccupations cupides d'un régime autiste et la réalité sociale de plus en plus désolante endurée par ses sujets avait largement contribué à la désinhibition des Tunisiens.

Le contexte syrien est différent:

depuis un an, le peuple ne faiblit pas. La brutalité de la répression perpétrée par le clan El-Assad, dont les mains sont déjà tachées du sang de 9000 Syriens, a affermi, semaine après semaine, la volonté des contestataires. Mais la correspondance internet privée de Bachar el-Assad et de son épouse, Asma, révélée jeudi par *The Guardian*, ne devrait pas manquer leur détermination à risquer leur vie dans l'espoir de lendemains meilleurs. Ces courriels ajoutent une nouvelle strate d'abjection à l'ignominie des massacres. Que nous apprennent-ils? Pendant que leurs sbires s'évertuent à exterminer les frondeurs, Madame croque des diamants, s'équipe d'un caque-

lon à fondue, lorgne le dernier modèle d'escarpins Louboutin. Monsieur, lui, commande un DVD d'Harry Potter, raille ses propres réformes, méprise les meneurs de l'opposition et brocarde Washington. Les deux échangent des mots d'amour, dans un déni vertigineux de la gravité de la situation dans leur pays et des souffrances qu'ils infligent aux 20 millions de Syriens. Voilà, plus crûment que jamais, exposée aux yeux du monde entier, la laideur du tandem au pouvoir à Damas: futile, condescendant, aveugle. Nul ne peut plus prétendre, de Moscou à Pékin et jusque dans les cercles les plus proches du couple, être dupe de ses mensonges. Le vrai début de la fin, ces courriels? ► **Page 4**

Le couple El-Assad trahi par ses courriels

> Syrie l'opposition a piraté 3000 messages confidentiels
> «The Guardian» en publie des extraits

Boris Wabillard

Alors que le peuple syrien souffre sous le joug conjugué de la répression et de la récurie, l'épouse du président, Asma el-Assad, acquiesce le 20 janvier dernier sous un nom d'emprunt à une question à fondue sur *Amor.com*. Le journal britannique *The Guardian* a publié dans son édition de jeudi des révélations basées sur 3000 messages échangés par le couple présidentiel avec leur entourage le plus intime, des amis, des parents et des conseillers. Les courriels de cette correspondance tantôt futile, tantôt politique, et qui s'échelonnent entre juin 2011 et début février, ont été interceptés par une organisation de l'opposition syrienne qui les a transmis au *Guardian*. Un long travail d'enquête a permis aux journalistes de se prononcer en faveur de l'authenticité des messages. Ces fuites ouvrent plus qu'une fenêtre sur le régime, elles permettent une immersion hallucinante.



Badjar et Asma el-Assad lors d'une visite en France. La photographie a été prise le 13 mai 2009.

Asma s'émervaille devant une paire de chaussures incrustées de cristal à plus de 5500 francs

Les courriels interceptés montrent les préoccupations de la première dame, qui dépense sans compter des milliers de dollars sur Internet pour acquérir les nouvelles d'un designer branché, ou pour 15 000 francs de chandeliers de bougeoir et de tables. Pendant que son mari surfe sur le Net à la recherche de morceaux de musique, ce qu'il relâche est sélectionné et va de la pop anglaise de New Order aux chansons de la star américaine Britney Spears. Pour contourner les sanctions qui leur interdisent toute transaction avec la plupart des pays occidentaux, le couple utilise des prête-noms et des intermédiaires. Le nom de do-

maine «Abhabab», une compagnie qui possède la famille Assad, héberge leurs messages.
Dans un échange avec l'une de ses amies et parentes à qui elle envoie un lien vers l'offre exclusive d'un bottier branché, Asma el-Assad s'émervaille, le 3 février, devant une paire de chaussures, incrustées de cristal, à plus de 5500 francs: «Ne te tapent-elles pas dans l'œil? Elles ne sont pas faites pour Monsieur Tout-le-monde!» Son interlocutrice lui répond le lendemain: «Je les adore! Elles sont vraiment cool... Mais je ne pense pas qu'elles vont être utiles les prochains mois». Est-ce la faute aux talons de 16 cm ou une prise de conscience des difficultés à venir? Le même jour commence le pilonnage de Bab Amro, à Homs.
Au gré des mois doux que le couple échange, Asma el-Assad apparaît totalement solidaire de son mari: «Si nous sommes forts ensemble, nous surmonterons

Assad donne à la chaîne américaine ABC. Elle ne manque pas de lui expliquer comment d'habitude les fuites publiques sont gérées par les médias américains. Les fuites publiées contiennent aussi le rôle joué par des conseillers occultes qui font le relais avec Téhéran. Un d'entre eux, Husseïn Mortada, met en garde le président après l'annonce d'un siège des services secrets à Damas dans lequel 43 personnes ont péri le 23 décembre: «Ce n'est pas dans notre intérêt d'accuser Al-Qaïda, parce que cela dégage l'opposition et les États-Unis de toute responsabilité. [...] Nous devons dire que l'administration américaine, l'opposition et les États qui ont illégalement infiltré des armes dans le pays sont derrière l'attentat. Ainsi, nous pouvons attaquer». Encore plus compréhensif, le président aurait été averti de la présence de journalistes étrangers à Homs dès le mois de novembre. Son bras droit dans la région, Khalid Ahmad, lui enjoint de «renfor-

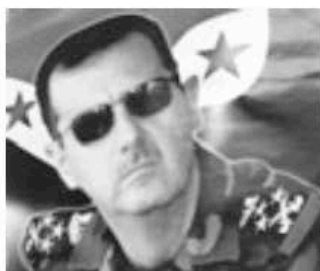
Démonstration de force du régime
Des dizaines de milliers de Syriens ont manifesté jeudi en soutien au président Bachar el-Assad, une démonstration de force du régime le jour du premier anniversaire de la révolte populaire qu'il réprime dans le sang. Les forces du régime ont néanmoins poursuivi leur offensive meurtrière sur les bastions rebelles, notamment à Lattaïk (nord-ouest), où 16 personnes et disparus des manifestations anti-régime, notamment à Alep (nord-ouest) et à Douma (13 km de Damas), selon des militants. Au total, l'Observatoire syrien estime que les violences ont fait plus de 9000 morts, en majorité des civils, depuis le 15 mars 2011. **APF**

SIRIA/IL CAPO DELLA COMMISSIONE DI INCHIESTA

L'Onu: «Un'operazione Nato impensabile»

Finalmente due parole sensate: «Un'operazione Nato in Siria è impensabile». A dirlo il presidente della Commissione Onu di inchiesta sulla Siria, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, in un incontro con la stampa ieri a Bruxelles. «Pensiamo che un intervento militare non avrebbe successo: le vittime non sarebbero centinaia ma migliaia. Cerchiamo di essere più sobri su questo punto. La comunità internazionale deve dare il suo pieno sostegno a Kofi Annan». Per Pinheiro, alcuni Stati «dovrebbero astenersi dal praticare lo "scetticismo automatico" verso la missione di Annan, appena all'inizio, perché «l'unica soluzione è il dialogo».

L'unica speranza, per quanto labile, è la missione di Kofi Annan per una «soluzione negoziata»



Senza contare poi che le forze armate in Siria «non sono un'armata Brancaleone», come potevano essere quelle libiche «e la catena di comando è rimasta intatta» dopo un anno di rivolta (nonostante le notizie ricorrenti sulla diserzione di qualche generale). «Aumentare la militarizzazione e fornire armi non è una soluzione», ha aggiunto Pinheiro, riferendosi all'eventuale rifornimento di armamenti all'opposizione. «Per noi quello che rimane centrale - ha concluso - è la protezione dei civili» e quindi puntando sul cessate il fuoco e sull'accesso degli aiuti umanitari. I primi due punti su cui sta lavorando Kofi, con il terzo a seguire: negoziati fra tutte le parti del conflitto.

Le stesse parole del segretario generale Ban Ki moon: governo e opposizione (attenzione: anche l'opposizione) fermino le violenze e cooperino con Kofi Annan per trovare una soluzione negoziata alla crisi. Appello anche di 200 gruppi che si occupano di diritti umani, alla «comunità internazionale» perché «si unisca» (ossia a Russia e Cina perché rinuncino a veti e distinguo) e «aiuti i siriani a metter fine all'orrore» e dia il suo «pieno sostegno» a Kofi. Per il momento una «missione umanitaria» formata da governo siriano, Onu e Oci (l'Organizzazione per la cooperazione islamica) inizierà entro la settimana una visita in diverse città siriane colpite dalla guerra (Homs, Hama, Deraa) per valutare la situazione. Il conflitto e le violenze che non cessano (anche ieri i morti sarebbero decine, secondo le fonti dell'opposizione) ingrossano il flusso di profughi siriani che cercano scampo nei paesi vicini: Libano, Giordania e soprattutto Turchia (dove sono già più di 15 mila ma se ne temono addirittura mezzo milione). Un vicepremier turco, Besir Atalay, ha accusato Damasco di disseminare di mine le zone di confine. Affermazioni non confermate da fonti indipendenti. Tanto più che da anni le mine erano (o forse sono ancora) piazzate su entrambi i lati del confine.

Ieri era l'anniversario dello scoppio della rivolta, il 15 marzo 2011, e il regime - che si sta dimostrando più solido e tosto di quello gheddafiano - ha organizzato grandi manifestazioni a Damasco, Aleppo, Latakia e altre città in appoggio ad Assad. Due giornalisti turchi «dispersi» sarebbero stati presi dalle milizie del regime *Shabiha* e passati all'intelligence siriana. Ieri, dopo Italia, Francia, Spagna, Usa, Arabia Saudita e Bahrain, anche l'Olanda (in segno di «repulsione di fronte all'atroce violenza del governo siriano») ha chiuso l'ambasciata a Damasco. La guerra continua. **m.m.**



Mujeres y niños refugiados llegan ayer a la localidad turca de Reyhanli, en la frontera con Siria. / AFP



EL MUNDO
EN CLAVE

ANA ROMERO

La banalidad del mal

Ayer hizo un año que Trinidad Jiménez se sentó en Damasco con Bashar Asad y éste le dio su palabra: «Lo tengo claro. Voy a hacerlo». Se refería el oftalmólogo a la transición política. La ex ministra –última representante occidental en pisar tierra siria antes de la carnicería– también se entrevistó con su mujer, Asma, moderna, occidental, amiga de nuestra Reina, amante de los Louboutin.

Finalmente, Jiménez visitó la grandiosa mezquita Omeya. A sus puertas, la secreta se llevó en volandas a la joven Marwua al Gamyán por su grito de «¡Viva Siria libre!». Un cámara de televisión española que acompañaba a la ex ministra grabó el momento en que Marwua desaparecía. Hasta hoy.

Jiménez pensó que ese incidente era un hecho aislado. También Occidente apostó hasta julio de 2011 por Asad como piloto de esa imaginaria transición. A partir del verano, con la cuenta de muertos subiendo, los árabes entraron en acción y la ONU naufragó por culpa de China y Rusia.

Comienza ahora el Año II en punto muerto, con más de 8.000 muertos sobre la mesa y una tercera fase diplomática. La lidera Kofi Annan –¿hay alguien que confíe en la capacidad de liderazgo del ex secretario general de la ONU?–. La diplomacia occidental espera ahora que el núcleo duro de los Asad sea retirado de la circulación, como los Saleh en Yemen, de manera que el sector moderado pueda negociar una salida que respete sus intereses. Ese sector *baasista* moderado, si es que existe, representaría aproximadamente al 30% de la población siria.

Ante el previsible fracaso de Annan, *voilà* las dos opciones: guerra civil –teóricamente aún no existe porque no hay correlación de fuerzas: unos tienen tanques y otros Kamlashnikov– o modelo Hama –eliminar al mayor número de opositores, como hizo Asad *el Viejo* en Hama, donde Tom Friedman cree que fueron laminadas 30.000 personas–.

Araud de Borchgrave, el periodista americano que tanto protagonismo tuvo en la Transición española, lo compara con la guerra civil española. Advierte Borchgrave que en España murieron 500.000 personas. A la pregunta de cuántos pueden caer en Siria, los diplomáticos son cautos. Algunos hablan de 100.000.

¿Acabará este Año II y comenzará el Año III y todo seguirá igual? Quizá. Arabia Saudí seguirá apoyando a los rebeldes mientras China-Rusia sigan respaldando la alianza Siria-Irán. En medio, un melancólico Occidente hará de espectador.

Esto nos suena. Hannah Arendt lo llamó la banalidad del mal. Son los *emails* interceptados del dulce matrimonio Asad. Las lámparas importadas de París. Los Louboutin. La normalidad en medio de la muerte.

anaromero@elmundo.es

El terror causa otro éxodo sirio

● Turquía prepara nuevos campos ante la avalancha de refugiados

JAVIER ESPINOSA
Corresponsal en Oriente Próximo

La suerte de dos periodistas turcos desaparecidos en Siria podría agravar las diferencias entre los gobiernos de los dos países si se confirma, como anunció la agencia Anatolia, que han sido capturados por las tropas de Damasco y que uno resultó herido y fue torturado.

Adem Ozkose, corresponsal de una revista y un diario turco, y Hamit Coskun, un cámara independiente, habían entrado en Siria de forma ilegal el pasado día 5 y se establecieron en la región de Idlib. Su último contacto con sus familiares y el diario *Milat* para el que trabaja Ozkose data del pasado día 10, coincidiendo con el inicio de la ofensiva que ha lanzado el ejército sirio en esa zona del norte.

Según Anatolia, los *shabiha* (milicias pro gubernamentales) descubrieron su escondite en la aldea de Al Fua, no lejos de la ciudad de Idlib –que fue recapturada esta semana– y arrestaron a la pareja a los que se llevaron a bordo de dos vehículos blindados. El mismo medio de comunicación anunció que Coskun podría ser el herido y que fue torturado.

Su desaparición ya había generado movilizaciones públicas en Turquía, una nación que mantiene una creciente pugna con Damasco –antao aliado– desde el inicio de la revuelta en la nación árabe. Ankara teme que la guerra civil siria acabe por desestabilizar su

propia zona fronteriza donde reside una sustancial minoría alauí que no ha ocultado nunca sus simpatías con el Gobierno sirio.

La ofensiva de los acólitos de Bashar Asad ha incrementado la huida de sirios hacia el vecino territorio turco a donde han llegado más de 1.000 en poco más de 24 horas. Las autoridades locales han informado de que abrirán un nuevo campo de refugiados el próximo mes con capacidad para 10.000 personas y están construyendo un segundo para 20.000.

Según el presidente de la Media Luna Roja turca, Ahmet Lütfi Akar, Turquía intenta hacer frente a una previsible avalancha de refugiados que en su estimación más catastrófica podría rondar el medio millón de fugitivos. Akar recordó que ello llevaría a una emergencia humanitaria similar a la que ya se vivió en la misma región en 1991, cuando la dictadura de Sadam Husein obligó a

huir a una cifra similar de kurdos tras aplastar su sublevación.

El vicepresidente turco, Bessir Atalay, también recuperó el aspecto de aquella experiencia en la que las naciones occidentales obligaron por la fuerza a Bagdad a detener su ofensiva y crearon una zona de contención donde se agruparon los desplazados protegidos por sus fuerzas militares. «La cuestión de una zona *tampón* podría ser considerada según se desarrollen los acontecimientos», aseveró el político turco.

A un año del inicio de la sublevación popular, expertos en Siria como Joshua Landis o el periodista Nir Rosen, el informador que ha cubierto de forma más profunda la presente crisis, coinciden en que el régimen dista mucho de encontrarse al borde del colapso como señaló durante semanas la oposición y muchos gobiernos occidentales. Para Rosen, Asad puede «sobrevivir durante un

largo tiempo incluso si pierde terreno de forma paulatina» algo que ahora mismo no está ocurriendo.

Incluso antes de la serie de debacles militares que han sufrido en las últimas semanas, la oposición política establecida en torno al Consejo Nacional Sirio (CNS) y la Coordinadora Nacional habían sido incapaces de fusionarse tras las conversaciones en tal sentido que mantuvieron en diciembre.

Pese a los esfuerzos de muchos opositores, la influencia creciente del sectarismo en la revuelta no es un secreto para nadie y resulta evidente cuando se analizan los nombres de los nuevos grupos armados que se han establecido para luchar contra la dictadura.

Uno de ellos adoptó en febrero la denominación de Batallón Yazid ibn Muawiyah, una de las figuras más controvertidas de la historia del Islam. El califa Yazid es un personaje



OSMAN ORSAU/REUTERS

Más ataques a periodistas. Cientos de personas se congregaron ayer frente al consulado sirio en Estambul para pedir la liberación de los dos periodistas turcos detenidos en Siria (en la imagen, manifestantes sostienen pancartas con sus fotos). Adem Ozkose y Hamit Coskun fueron detenidos por las milicias pro Asad en Idlib.



Refugiados sirios, principalmente mujeres y niños, a su llegada ayer a la frontera turca en su huida de las tropas de Assad

Un año después, Assad ahoga en sangre los últimos feudos de la revuelta siria

► Los rebeldes capturan a un general y dan un ultimátum de 72 horas al régimen para que libere a varios detenidos si quiere evitar su ejecución

DANIEL IRIARTE
CORRESPONSAL EN ESTAMBUL

Cuando se cumple un año del inicio de la revuelta contra el régimen sirio, el presidente Bashar al Assad ahoga en sangre los últimos reductos de la oposición. Tras los bombardeos de Homs e Idlib, el Ejército castiga ahora Daraa, la ciudad-símbolo en la que se produjeron las primeras protestas contra el régimen. El Ejército consigue así arrebatar a la oposición sus principales feudos a sangre y fuego. Según testigos en Daraa, las tropas gubernamentales llevan a cabo violentos registros casa por casa. «Varios edificios están recibiendo fuego aleatorio de ametralladoras, lanzacohetes y misiles antitanque», declaró ayer Mohamed, un habitante de Daraa, a la cadena Al Yasira.

Frente a la represión del régimen, la oposición aparece cada vez más dividida y sin estrategia. Los insurgentes del Ejército Sirio Libre (ESL) son incapaces de resistir la acometida de las tropas regulares. Y la falta de un liderazgo claro en la insurgencia ha

provocado la aparición de milicias armadas en ciudades como Homs, responsables de acciones criminales, asesinatos sectarios y secuestros.

Y para demostrar que sigue fuerte, ayer una facción del ESL anunció la captura del general Naim Jalil Oda, a quien amenazó con ejecutar si pasadas 72 horas no son liberados «los detenidos en las sedes de los servicios de la Inteligencia Aérea en Duma». «De lo contrario, será ejecutado en público», asegura un miembro del ESL en una grabación en internet.

El vídeo ha sido autenticado por Malek al Kurdi, un alto responsable de la guerrilla. «Dado que las brigadas de Assad detienen y matan, algo tenemos que hacer para frenarlos», alegó Kurdi. En este año, la violencia ha causado al menos ocho mil muertos y casi un cuarto de millón de refugiados, según cifras de Naciones Unidas. Ayer, unos mil refugiados sirios cruzaron a Turquía en un solo día. Hasta ahora el número de refugiados llegados a Turquía era de unos doscientos o trescientos al día. Pero la oleada de desplazados aumenta a medida que crece la represión. «Seguirán llegando mientras continúe la

El «wikileaks» de Damasco

► **La conexión iraní**
Teherán aconsejó a Damasco cómo reprimir las revueltas, según los «emails» de Assad que publica «The Guardian»

► **La esposa del dictador**
Asma gastó miles de euros en candelabros y mesas en París. Usó además para compras de la familia una empresa de Dubái

► **Qatar**
La hija del emir de Qatar aconsejó a los Assad que dejaran el país y dio a entender que podría acogerlos

► **Contactos con Homs**
Assad tiene contactos en feudos opositores como Homs que le informan directamente

en futuro gobierno de transición tras una eventual caída de Assad, ha sufrido tres grandes escisiones. La última este mismo miércoles, cuando el veterano opositor Haizam el Maleh anunció su renuncia. Los delegados kurdos también abandonaron el CNS en diciembre para formar su propio grupo opositor. Y los activistas de base reniegan del Consejo por la importancia desproporcionada que en él tienen los Hermanos Musulmanes, así como por su negativa a pedir una intervención internacional.

Cierre de embajadas

Pero hay también algunos indicios de desgaste en el régimen, que podría no ser tan sólido como aparenta. «Agentes de la Policía secreta y policías locales confraternizan con los rebeldes en algunos puestos de control, les proporcionan información y, a veces, munición», nos explica Michael Weiss, especialista en Siria de la Sociedad Henry Jackson de Londres.

Y mientras, sigue la presión internacional contra el régimen de Assad. Anoche, los países miembros del Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo (CCG) decidieron cerrar sus embajadas en Damasco y retirar todo su personal. Aseguran que la decisión se debe a la «insistencia del régimen en matar y torturar a los sirios indefensos».

operación en Idlib», declaró un funcionario turco. Entiéndase «operación» como sinónimo de represión.

Pero si el ESL se bate en retirada, la oposición pacifista también aparece débil y fraccionada. El Consejo Nacional Sirio, que aspira a convertirse

KOSMO
vemás

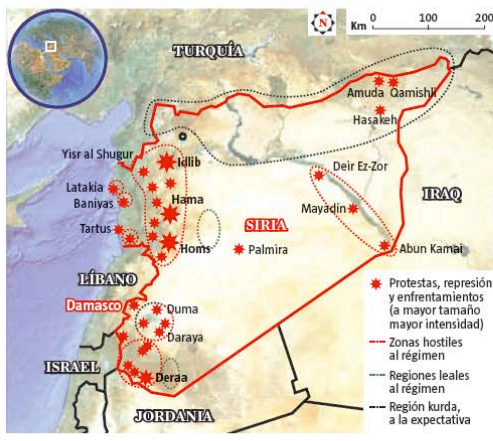
Videoañálisis sobre la situación en Siria

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

El Asad, un año contra el mundo

El régimen sirio resiste y la oposición es incapaz de unirse

La fragmentación del territorio sirio



FUENTE: Google Earth

LA VANGUARDIA

TOMÁS ALCOVERRO
Beirut. Corresponsal

Nadie hubiese podido creer hace un año, cuando empezó la revuelta antigubernamental en Deraa, localidad fronteriza con Jordania, que el conflicto sirio hubiese llegado a este extremo de crueldad y de incertidumbre. Oriente Medio, y los pueblos del levante en particular, son tierra por antonomasia de minorías, comunidades confesionales y étnicas, que deben establecer siempre complejas, ambiguas relaciones con la mayoría.

En Siria desde 1963, tras el gol-

peo ejerciendo su poder sin graves problemas pese a las revueltas populares, gracias al apoyo de la Arabia de los saudíes y de EE.UU., que protegen a sus aliados con trono y corona.

Nadie hubiera podido suponer hace un año que el enfrentamiento del régimen de Bashar el Asad y las diversas fuerzas de la oposición, divididas entre las que están empeñadas en derribarle a toda costa y las que preferirían aceptar un compromiso que evitase la anunciada catástrofe de una guerra civil atroz, se convertiría en un conflicto cada vez más internacionalizado.

La excepción siria, vana pretensión del presidente que heredó esta república, aupado a la jefatura del Estado en el año 2000 tras la muerte de su padre, que creía que su nación estaba inmunizada contra las primaveras árabes, desbarata cálculos y estrategias prematuras. Toda la sangre derramada en estos meses (8.000 víctimas, según algunas organizaciones internacionales y grupos de la oposición, a los que hay que añadir otros mil militares, de acuerdo con el Gobierno) no ha servido para alcanzar ningún acuerdo ni siquiera en la urgente ayuda humanitaria.

Ayer el ejército sirio volvía a bombardear a los insurrectos de Deraa, como en un eterno retorno, como hizo antes en Hama, en Homs, en Idlib. En Damasco, en Sueida -localidad de la minoría drusa- y en Hasakeh, ciudad kurda, miles de seguidores de El Asad se congregaron para expresar su adhesión.

"Dejad Siria en paz", exclamaba en la televisión de Damasco una manifestante. El régimen es



KHALED AL HARRI / REUTERS

Los leales. Partidarios de Bashar el Asad, ayer en la plaza de los Omeyas, de Damasco. En la foto, una bandera de Rusia, aliada del régimen, junto a la bandera siria

"DEJAD SIRIA EN PAZ"

El Gobierno se apoya en el ejército, el miedo al caos y la división suníes-alauíes

¿EN VANO?

Ocho mil muertos después, Siria no es una excepción a las 'primaveras árabes'

pe de Estado que dio un vuelco a su historia, la minoría alauí se impuso a la mayoría suní de la población. En Iraq, entonces también con el partido Baas en el poder, hasta la derrota de Saddam Hussein por las tropas estadounidenses en el 2003, en cambio, la minoría suní gobernaba sobre la mayoría chií. En el diminuto reino de Bahrein, en el estratégico golfo Pérsico del petróleo, su monarca de antigua familia suní conti-

implacable al insistir en que se enfrenta a "grupos terroristas armados". Su represión brutal en muchas ocasiones, con matanzas, torturas, que han desplazado a por lo menos 250.000 personas por el interior del país, ahuyenta-

do a otras 30.000, refugiadas en Turquía, Líbano y Jordania, ha provocado una vasta condena en el mundo. Si no fuese por sus valedoras, Rusia y China, el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU ya habría adoptado una severa resolución contra su Gobierno.

El régimen se mantiene con la fuerza de sus soldados, de sus agentes de seguridad, de una parte de la población que le apoya, del miedo que sienten los sirios al caos y a la guerra intestina entre suníes y alauíes, en una sociedad de grupos heterogéneos. Creyendo que con sus armas puede erradicar todos los focos de la oposición beligerante, haciendo oídos sordos a poderosos países occidentales y árabes, Bashar el Asad no cede en un ápice en su forma de tratar a sus adversarios. La oposición sigue escandalosamente dividida, sin ningún programa de acción común. El Ejército Libre Sirio ha sido derrotado en Hama, en Homs, en Idlib, aun-

que algunos de sus combatientes, refugiados en el norte de Líbano, ya estén dispuestos a volver a luchar a su tierra.

"La victoria -dijo en enero el rais El Asad- está muy próxima". Sólo la militarización de los insurrectos, la intervención armada extranjera, cambiaría la relación de fuerzas en favor de los rebeldes. Bashar el Asad, tras la abrogación de la ley de excepción, la declaración de una amnistía, la celebración de un referéndum para una nueva Constitución, ya ha anunciado elecciones generales en el próximo mes de mayo. Estados Unidos reconoció que Al Qaeda se había infiltrado entre los insurrectos islamistas.

En Damasco, corazón de los árabes, se ha abierto bruscamente la caja de Pandora de todos los complicados y peligrosos conflictos de Oriente Medio. Su balcanización, su iraquización, su libanización, sólo un milagro es capaz de evitarlas.●

FRANCIA

"Si les damos armas será aún peor"

■ "El pueblo sirio está profundamente dividido, y si damos armas a cierta fracción de la oposición, eso será la guerra entre cristianos, alauíes, suníes y chiíes", afirmó ayer el ministro de Exteriores francés, Alain Juppé, a la radio France Culture. Añadió: "Sería una catástrofe incluso mayor que la que existe hoy".

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

Primer aniversario de la revuelta El Asad, un año contra el mundo

Las luchas sectarias son sólo una parte de una rebelión armada que no acaba de eclosionar

La guerra civil que no es



BULENT KILIC / AFP

Más refugiados en Turquía. Jóvenes y niños ocultan el rostro al llegar ayer a la frontera turca en un camión. La nueva ofensiva de El Asad provocó la huida ayer de un millar de personas, entre ellos un general desertor, por caminos minados

FÉLIX FLORES
Barcelona

La deriva de la revuelta siria hacia una guerra civil tiene mucho de profecía autocumplida, todos los días un poco más, a menos que Bashar el Asad aplaste la insurgencia con sus últimas ofensivas.

La ONU calcula un promedio de cien muertos diarios, en una progresión incesante desde la matanza de Yisr al Shugur, en junio del 2011. Fue la *primera sangre* digna de consideración que encarriló las acciones posteriores de Damasco. Se habló de 120 policías muertos. Asesinados por terroristas, según el régimen; asesinados por los soldados de Maher el Asad, hermano del presidente, ya que los policías eran desertores, según testimonios de algunas

de las 12.000 personas que huyeron de la ciudad hacia Turquía.

Las -escasas- imágenes del aún reciente bombardeo de Homs pueden hacer olvidar cómo empezó todo hace un año. Pero los innumerables vídeos grabados por ciudadanos -o mejor sería decir súbditos- sirios durante semanas de manifestaciones pacíficas son incontestables. En muchos de ellos se ve a la fuerza armada disparar sobre la multitud, se ve a los *shabiha* (los fantasmas o gángsters) del régimen haciendo lo mismo contra las tropas para sustentar el argumento de que el país se enfrenta a terroristas.

Existen informes, elaborados por observadores independientes, de asesinatos y represalias entre comunidades sunies y alaúes, en la región de Hama, por ejemplo, o en Homs. La situación permite que se salden viejas

cuentas pendientes, y el hecho de que los alaúes sean la minoría dominante -en un estado autoritario y policial- no deja de ser un factor añadido para las venganzas. Estos hechos han tenido su

Los alaúes que abominan del régimen afrontan un castigo todavía más duro

eco al otro lado de la frontera de Líbano, en Trípoli, entre vecindarios de las dos confesiones religiosas. La línea fronteriza libanesa está muy cerca de Homs.

Sin embargo, no parece menos cierto que los alaúes que abominan del régimen afrontan un cas-

tigo aún más duro que los sunies por *traidores*. Y esos argumentos de guerra civil no desvirtúan la naturaleza de la lucha armada contra el sistema de la familia El Asad. Los elementos la que complican son otros. En primer lugar, el hecho de que la élite económica vinculada al poder -sin formar parte del núcleo duro- no le ha dado la espalda. En segundo lugar, el factor internacional.

Desde que, el pasado julio, el Ejército Libre Sirio (ELS), formado por desertores, se constituyó como oposición armada, su ambición ha sido conseguir un espacio liberado junto a las fronteras. En los términos que manejó, meses atrás, el Gobierno francés, se trataría de abrir un corredor "humanitario" y una zona de refugio para la población civil. Pero a nadie se le escapa que el objetivo no es otro que permitir la entrada de

armas y suministros, repitiendo la operación de los libios de Bengasi, con lo que el escenario de guerra quedaría realmente establecido.

El asedio brutal del barrio de Baba Amro en Homs -el más cercano a la salida hacia la frontera libanesa- tenía como fin evitar esa posibilidad. El ataque en curso a Deraa, junto a la frontera de Jordania, va también en ese sentido. A finales de diciembre las fuerzas de El Asad hicieron lo mismo en los pueblos y aldeas de

Bashar el Asad trata de impedir una zona 'liberada' en las fronteras de Siria

la región montañosa entre Idlib y la frontera turca, y ahora lo repiten. El martes, el régimen recuperó la ciudad de Idlib tras varias jornadas de bombardeo.

La actitud turca ha ido variando con el correr de los meses, desde la beligerancia verbal (aquel "a Turquía se le acaba la paciencia" de Erdogan el pasado agosto) al silencio. Las insinuaciones de Turquía de que aceptaría la creación de la susodicha zona "de contención" en territorio sirio -a fin de evitar una llegada en masa de refugiados- animó al ELS, que pensó que eso le permitiría aumentar sus efectivos. Su comandante, Riad el Asad, los cifraba entonces en 15.000 hombres.

Tanto el Consejo Nacional Sirio (CNS) como el ELS tienen sus bases en Turquía. El ELS acordó con el CNS que se limitaría a proteger a los manifestantes civiles de los ataques de El Asad, pero el entendimiento entre ese bloque político fraccionado -que, además, no está en el origen de la revuelta- y esa fuerza militar con vocación unitaria ha ido a menos.

Desde que el 28 de enero se *desinfló* la misión de observadores de la Liga Árabe, Qatar y Arabia Saudí insisten en que hay que armar a la rebelión. Pese a todos los rumores de tráfico de armas, los sublevados no parecen disponer de las mínimas necesarias. ●



O casal presidencial: ela encomenda lustres e castiçais de Paris, ele compra música nos EUA

'E-mails' mostram como revolta não afeta os Assad

Síria. No aniversário da revolta, grupo de oposição interceptou três mil documentos que desvelam ligações internacionais e gostos caros

ALBANO MATOS

No dia em que o regime sírio pôs dezenas de milhares de pessoas nas ruas em apoio de Hafez al-Assad, assinalando à sua maneira o primeiro aniversário do início da revolta popular, o diário britânico *The Guardian* revelou dezenas de *e-mails* do Presidente, parte dos cerca de três mil documentos a que garante ter tido acesso.

Os *e-mails* terão sido interceptados entre junho de 2011 e fevereiro de 2012 por um grupo de oposição, o Conselho Supremo da Revolução, com a ajuda de uma "toupeira" no círculo de Assad. Dos textos não sobressaem grandes novidades em matéria de objetivos, formulação de estratégias ou manobras táticas de combate aos revoltosos internos ou às críticas crescentes da chamada comunidade internacional; mas eles são

reveladores do desconcerto de um regime que tardou em encontrar as respostas que considerava mais eficazes ao desafio de uma oposição mobilizada com meios inesperadamente superiores aos de revoltas anteriores. Além disso, da leitura dos *e-mails* revelados pelo *Guardian* destacam-se ainda com clareza as ligações internacionais do Presidente com países e personalidades que o aconselham sistematicamente. É ainda visível a vida luxuosa (e, em certa medida, descontraída) que o casal Assad continuava a manter, apesar das sanções internacionais em vigor desde maio de 2011.

Este último talvez seja o aspeto mais chocante: os *e-mails* em que a senhora Assad, Asma, encomendava a Paris castiçais, velas e lustres por mais de 12 mil euros e pedia a um colaborador que lhe comprasse um *fondue* na Amazon. Para contornar a barreira das

sanções, Asma utilizava uma empresa com base no Dubai e escritório em Londres. O marido, por sua vez, servia-se de alguém, nos Estados Unidos, para comprar música e aplicações do iTunes.

Os *e-mails* provam também a importância do embaixador do Irão na definição das respostas à revolta e a importância do papel desempenhado por um empresário libanês, Hussein Mortada, intermediário entre Assad, o Irão e o Hezbollah. Alguns conselhos dados ao Presidente: que mande ocupar as praças nas horas mais importantes do dia (entre as 15 e as 21) para evitar a concentração de manifestantes; que, num determinado discurso, deve usar uma linguagem "poderosa e violenta" e agradecer o "apoio dos Estados amigos" (eufemismo para designar o Irão).

Nas ruas, este primeiro aniversário da revolta foi fundamental-

Diário de Notícias (Portugal)

Rebeldes ameaçam matar em público general sírio

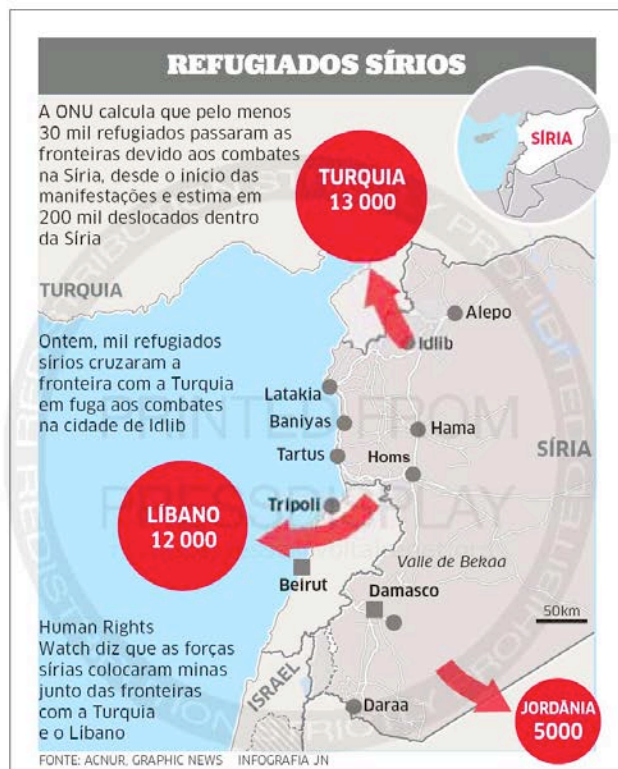
Assad aconselhou-se com o Irão sobre a melhor forma de reprimir a revolução

Fátima Mariano
fmariano@jn.pt

OS REBELDES sírios ameaçaram, ontem, executar em público o general Naim Jalil Oda – capturado na véspera durante uma operação em Duma – caso o regime não liberte, até amanhã, os cidadãos detidos na sede dos Serviços de Inteligência Aérea daquela localidade. No dia em que se assinalou o primeiro ano da revolta popular, o número dois do Exército Livre da Síria avisou que “este é só o começo” e que poderão repetir-se ações deste tipo, segundo a agência de notícias espanhola Efe.

Aqueles serviços secretos são considerados os que reprimem com maior brutalidade as manifestações populares contra o regime de Assad.

Também ontem, o jornal



britânico “The Guardian” revelou o conteúdo de diversos e-mails recebidos e enviados pelo presidente sírio e pela mulher, Asma, interceptados

por membros do Conselho Supremo da Revolução entre junho do ano passado e fevereiro deste ano. Segundo o jornal, Assad ter-se-á aconselhado

com Teerão sobre a melhor estratégia para reprimir as manifestações antigovernamentais. Em resposta, foi aconselhado a utilizar uma linguagem “poderosa e violenta” e a mostrar respeito pelo apoio dos “estados amigos”.

Os mais de três mil documentos revelam uma família totalmente isolada dos acontecimentos – que já provocaram a morte a mais de nove mil pessoas e uma vaga de refugiados – e que continua a alimentar uma vida de luxo. A mulher de Assad gastou milhares de dólares na compra de produtos de design através da Internet, enquanto o presidente comprou música através do iTunes.

O Observatório Sírio para os Direitos Humanos, com sede em Londres, afirmou terem sido encontrados 23 corpos junto a Idlib (controlada desde quarta-feira pelas forças do regime), com sinais evidentes de tortura. As vítimas, que estavam vendadas e algemadas, foram mortas com uma bala na cabeça. ●

Publico (Portugal)

Entre músicas country e declarações de amor, os Assad vivem em negação

Três mil mensagens enviadas e recebidas pelo casal presidencial mostram um líder ora nostálgico ora em negação. E comprovam que recebe conselhos de responsáveis iranianos

Síria
Sofia Lorena

Um dia depois de ter ordenado o bombardeamento da cidade de Homs, que logo nas primeiras horas fez 200 mortos, a 4 de Fevereiro, Bashar al-Assad enviou por *email* à mulher a letra de uma canção country do norte-americano Blake Shelton, acompanhada do ficheiro áudio que descarregara do iTunes. "Tenho andado desgostoso/ A pessoa em que me tornei/ Não é quem quero ser", ouve-se nos primeiros versos.

Antes, a 29 de Dezembro, na semana em que os monitores da Liga Árabe chegaram ao país para tentar impor um cessar-fogo, o Presidente da Síria partilhou com uma das suas conselheiras, Hadeel al-Ali, um vídeo do YouTube que ridiculariza a incapacidade dos enviados árabes para descobrirem os tanques do regime. No vídeo, um edifício de Homs são quatro bolachas empilhadas e o tanque é um carro de brincar com uma colher de sobremesa a fazer de canhão. "Hahahahaha, OMG!!! Isto é fantástico", responde Ali.

Estes *emails* são duas entre três mil mensagens electrónicas a que activistas da oposição conseguiram aceder pirateando as contas privadas de Bashar e de Asma al-Assad. O diário britânico *Guardian*, que recebeu os ficheiros, contactou dezenas de pessoas com as quais o casal se correspondeu ou que são referidas nas mensagens e concluiu que não têm razões para desconfiar da origem.

Deixando de fora informações ou fotos pessoais, o jornal considerou relevantes "as provas de que Assad recebe assessoria do Irão". Para além disso, "dada a natureza da brutal repressão exercida pelo regime contra o povo" acredita que também têm interesse público "o panorama pomenorizado dos segredos do círculo interno de Assad que os *emails* oferecem, e a forma como a sua mulher consegue manter o seu luxuoso estilo de vida", enquanto a ONU estima que 1,4 milhões de sírios precisam de ajuda alimentar urgente.

Já desconfiávamos que os Assad

vivessem em negação. Relatos de jornalistas que visitaram Damasco nos últimos meses sugeriam que Bashar continua a jantar fora, por exemplo. Sempre que fala aos sírios, o Presidente insiste estar a combater "terroristas" e saber que "a vitória está próxima". Asma deixou de aparecer e até surgiram rumores de que deixara a Síria. Mas com o país a ferro e fogo, vimo-los, sorridentes, votarem juntos no referendo constitucional de 26 de Fevereiro.

O retrato que os *emails* permitem fazer parece confirmar o estado de negação, de que as luxuosas encomendas de Asma são exemplo; alternadas com momentos de melancolia e vitimização - sugerida, por exemplo, pela letra da canção de Shelton -, e com momentos de consciência de perigo. Um dia depois de Assad partilhar o vídeo dos tanques, Asma enviou ao marido opções para coletes à prova de bala disfarçados de blazer e de casaco desportivo.

Oferta de exílio

Para além das amigas, de vendedores e da família, Asma corresponde-se com a filha do emir do Qatar, Mayassa al-Thani, a única que tenta acordá-la para a realidade. "O meu pai continua a ver o Presidente Assad como amigo, apesar das tensões actuais. A oportunidade para uma mudança real perdeu-se há muito tempo. Fecha-se uma oportunidade e abrem-se outras - e espero que não seja demasiado tarde para reflectir e sair do estado de negação", escreveu Thani a Asma a 10 de Dezembro.

O Qatar tem sido, com a Arábia Saudita, o país árabe mais duro com Assad. Em Janeiro, foi o primeiro Estado a pedir uma intervenção militar árabe para pôr fim à repressão que o regime tem imposto à população.

"Se formos fortes juntos, vamos ultrapassar isto juntos... Amo-te...", escreve Asma a Bashar no fim de Dezembro. Não é possível saber se a mensagem tem a ver com a situação no país ou com algum acontecimento íntimo do casal. Mas já em Janeiro, Thani volta a escrever à primeira-dama e desta vez, oferece exílio ao casal. "Tenho seguido os últimos



Membros do Exército Livre da Síria mortos por milícias leais a Assad em Idlib

"Se formos fortes juntos, vamos ultrapassar isto juntos... Amo-te..."

Asma al-Assad
Email enviado no fim de Dezembro ao Presidente sírio



acontecimentos e... com toda a honestidade - olhando para a história - vemos dois resultados - ou os líderes abandonam o poder e procuram exílio político ou são brutalmente atacados. [...] Rezo para que convença o Presidente a aceitar a oportunidade de sair sem enfrentar acusações. [...] Tenho a certeza de que há muitos sítios possíveis, incluindo Doha."

Jornalistas europeus

Também já tínhamos percebido que Bashar se tem inspirado no pai, recorrendo às mesmas táticas de terra queimada e usando unidades militares nas quais confia em absoluto para as missões difíceis. Estes *emails* sugerem que, tal como Hafez, Bashar criou um núcleo duro de conselheiros próximos com os quais partilha o que oculta de todos os generais e chefes dos serviços secretos - pessoas de quem precisa, mas que, tendo em conta o seu próprio

poder, serão capazes de o desafiar.

É então, "entre amigos" e através de contas de *email* pessoais, que Bashar procura e recebe conselhos para os seus discursos, incluindo iranianos, ou avisos sobre a situação.

Em Dezembro, antes de um discurso, os seus conselheiros de *media* prepararam uma longa lista de temas, baseando-se em "consultas com várias pessoas, incluindo os conselheiros do embaixador iraniano". Hussein Mortada, um empresário libanês com laços a Teerão, insiste com Bashar para que deixe de culpar a Al-Qaeda pela violência, defendendo que é "contraproducente", e explicando que está em contacto com o Irão e com o Hezbollah libanês, e que ambos partilham esta opinião.

Khaled al-Ahmed, que parece ser conselheiro especial para as regiões de Homs e Idlib, onde a oposição ao regime é maior, avisa Assad de que jornalistas europeus "entraram na

Publico (Portugal)

4500

euros é o preço de um par de sapatos Christian Louboutin a que Asma se refere num email. Responde uma amiga: "Infelizmente, penso que não serão úteis proxicamente".



Turquia pondera zona-tampão para gerir vaga de refugiados

A Turquia levantou a possibilidade de criar, com a colaboração da Liga Árabe, uma "zona-tampão" no interior da Síria para assim fazer frente ao crescente número de refugiados que têm passado a fronteira.

Apesar das minas colocadas pelo regime de Bashar al-Assad, só entre quarta e quinta-feira pelo menos mil sírios chegaram à Turquia, em fuga dos ataques das forças do regime contra as zonas em que vivem. Segundo o porta-voz do Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros de Ancara, Selcuk Unal, entre os últimos fugitivos está um general, o sétimo oficial de alta patente que se sabe ter desertado.

"Preparamo-nos para qualquer cenário", disse Unal numa conferência de imprensa. Oficialmente, o número de refugiados está perto dos 15 mil – só na Turquia; dezenas de milhares de sírios fugiram para o Líbano e para a Jordânia. "A expectativa é de que o número cresça. O que pedimos é o fim da situação política e de insegurança que leva as pessoas a fugir. Mas de momento não vemos que isso vá acontecer."

O recente aumento dos refugiados nesta fronteira está ligado às operações do regime contra cidades e vilas na província de Idlib.

"Claro que a Turquia tem muita experiência neste campo. A criação de uma zona-tampão é uma das opções para os próximos tempos", afirmou o vice-primeiro-ministro, Besir Atalay, numa entrevista à televisão turca NTV. Ancara já fez o mesmo ao longo da fronteira com o Iraque no início dos anos 1990, quando dezenas de milhares de iraquianos fugiram para território turco.

No dia em que se assinalou um ano de revolta, não houve apenas sírios a tentar chegar à Turquia. Um "comboio da liberdade" composto por centenas de activistas, na maioria sírios exilados, foi impedido pelas autoridades turcas de alcançar a fronteira e de entrar na Síria. A ajuda humanitária que transportavam foi, em vez disso, entregue para ser distribuída nos vários campos de refugiados da zona.

Considerando-se fortalecido pelas recentes vitórias militares – as operações em Idlib seguem-se à tomada

de controlo de Homs – o regime assinalou o 15 de Março com manifestações de apoio, principalmente na capital, Damasco.

Ao mesmo tempo que milhares de sírios agitavam bandeiras nacionais e russas (e cartazes onde se agradecia a "Moscou o seu apoio") e retratos do Presidente Assad, as forças que lhe continuam leais intensificavam a sua ofensiva em Idlib, matando 13 pessoas, e dispersavam com gás lacrimogéneo várias manifestações contra o Governo, incluindo em bairros de Damasco e de Alepo, a segunda cidade mais importante do país.

Ao todo, as organizações não-governamentais sírias estimam que a violência do último ano matou já nove mil pessoas, a maioria civis.

Em Nova Iorque, o secretário-geral da ONU não quis deixar em



Só entre 4.ª e 5.ª pelo menos mil sírios chegaram à Turquia, em fuga dos ataques contra as zonas em que vivem

branco a data, exprimindo a sua "solidariedade com o povo sírio e as suas aspirações legítimas à dignidade, liberdade e justiça". "É urgente pôr fim ao ciclo de violência, às operações militares contra os civis e evitar uma maior militarização do conflito", afirmou Ban Ki-moon, apelando ainda a Assad para colaborar com o enviado especial da ONU e da Liga Árabe para a Síria, Kofi Annan.

Annan visitou Damasco no fim-de-semana e deixou ao líder sírio uma série de propostas, às quais o regime já respondeu. Hoje, Annan dará conta dessas respostas aos membros do Conselho de Segurança.

Para já, o regime não parece ter sequer concordado com o acesso humanitário sem limites às zonas mais afectadas que tinha sido pedido. Uma equipa das Nações Unidas vai participar pela primeira vez numa visita a algumas cidades, incluindo Homs, Hama e Deraa, para avaliar as necessidades da população. Mas a visita será liderada pelo Governo de Assad. S.L.

zona atravessando a fronteira libanesa". A repórter do *Sunday Times* Marie Colvin e o fotógrafo francês Rémi Ochlick foram mortos em Homs num bombardeamento do regime a 22 de Fevereiro.

Os emails param antes do ataque. O último é de 7 de Fevereiro, altura em que o grupo de *hackers* Anonymous revelou a existência desta conta do Presidente e em que as contas de Bashar e de Asma deixaram de receber e de enviar mensagens.

Sobre as reformas políticas que Bashar tem anunciado repetidamente como solução para pôr fim ao conflito, a sua opinião fica clara num email enviado a Asma. Em Julho, esta escreve-lhe que estará despachada às 17h. "Esta é melhor reforma que qualquer país pode ter, tu dizeres-me onde vais estar", responde o Presidente. "Vamos adoptar isto em vez das leis da treta de partidos, para as eleições e para os media..."

Syria torn between armed and peaceful struggle



MICHAEL JANZEN

ANALYSIS

The year-old rebellion in Syria is very different to the uprising that toppled Egypt's Mubarak

SYRIAN OPPOSITION activists, determined to regain the initiative from rebel groups unsuccessfully battling the army, have called for demonstrations today to commemorate the first anniversary of the revolt against

the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. But it may be too late for protesters to resume their

people-power campaign modelled on the peaceful mass-action Egyptian uprising. Since late last year, the Syrian revolt has been taken over by armed rebels seeking to replicate the Libyan model by drawing outside powers into the struggle to topple the regime by force.

The regime has fought back on a no-holds-barred basis. And so far, the international community has exhibited little appetite for direct involvement in another Middle Eastern war.

While Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait favour providing the rebels with arms and money – and are already doing so – it is feared that militarisation will simply prolong Syria's agony and could destabilise neighbouring Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.

The rise of the rebels and marginalisation of popular protests in Syria was inevitable

because from the outset that country's revolt was very different from the uprising in Egypt.

While there were small, scattered protests in Syria during January and February last year, these were inspired by local grievances and not organised by internet-connected activists with a common goal, as was the case in Egypt.

The initial Egyptian event was an organised popular rally against the regime; the spark that ignited protests across Syria was, again, a local grievance: the detention and abuse of 15 teenagers in the southern city of Deraa. They had inscribed on walls the stirring and provocative slogan of the Egyptian uprising: "As-Shaabi/Yarabi! Eskat el-irzani!" (The people! want! the end of the regime!).

Demonstrations in Syria never reached the critical mass of those fuelling the uprising in Egypt. Thousands of Syrians took part, but their rallies did not attract the hundreds of thousands of

protesters who participated in Egypt – totalling 11 million out of a population of 85 million.

Residents of Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's main cities, did not join the protests, while in Egypt people in all the major cities took part. Cairo's Tahrir Square became a global icon of protest.

The protests in Syria had little leadership. From the outset, they were infiltrated by violent elements and were soon dominated by Sunni Muslim fundamentalists viewed with suspicion by secularists and minority Christians, Alawites, Druze and Kurds.

The managers of the Egyptian uprising were secular, liberal, educated young men and women who kept protests peaceful and won the support of people from all backgrounds and opinions.

Muslim Brothers and puritan Salafis took part in demonstrations but were not dominant. There was no armed component of the uprising.

In Syria the revolt has been largely fuelled by resentment felt by the urban and rural poor against the regime: rich who became richer after the government shifted from a social to a "social market" economy in 2005. This was not the case in Egypt, where the poorest sections of the population did not take part in the protests.

The Syrian revolt has gone on for 12 months: the Egyptian uprising lasted 18 days. The Syrian army and security forces remain loyal to Assad. While several colonels and brigadiers have deserted, most defectors come from the ranks.

Egypt's military, fearing defections from middle-level officers and conscripts, staged a coup against Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. The uprising also resolved a dilemma the Egyptian military command faced: the proposed appointment of Gamal Mubarak, the president's son, as his successor, a move even loyal generals resisted. The Syrian

succession is not an issue. Suffering has not dissuaded the authorities from cracking down hard in either country. The UN puts the death toll in Syria at 8,000 civilians. In Egypt 846 were killed in 18 days, 47 people a day. If the uprising had continued for a year, the toll could well have been more than 17,000.

So far, neither protests nor rebel warfare has brought down the Syrian regime and it seems the struggle for Syria will continue for some months, taking more lives and wreaking increasing destruction unless UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan brings an end to the violence.

His aim is to commit both government and rebels to a simultaneous ceasefire, install monitors to oversee it, ensure the delivery of humanitarian supplies to those in need, and initiate negotiations that will end the political stand-off between the regime and the deeply divided opposition-cum-rebels.

'A good chance to leave' ... the Qatari email message to Mrs Assad

By **Adrian Blomfield and David Blair**

A FROSTY email exchange between Syria's first lady and the Emir of Qatar's daughter has lifted the veil on what appears to have been a secret diplomatic initiative to persuade President Bashar al-Assad to go into exile.

As a scion of the Qatari royal family, which has been more hostile to the Syrian regime than any other Arab government, Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani might seem an unusual choice to open a private channel of communication with the Assad family.

But the 14th child of the Emir of Qatar appears to have been in regular email contact with Asma al-Assad, the Syrian leader's British-born wife. The two women were clearly friends, perhaps arising from the holidays the Assad family would occasionally take in Doha, the Qatari capital, before the uprising.

"Dear Asma," wrote Sheikha Mayassa on Dec 7 last year. "In a recent trip to Turkey, the wife of the pm asked for your email address: she would like to write to you. I said id ask you first...best - m."

Remembering how Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, has publicly denounced her husband, Mrs Assad gave a cold reply. "I would prefer she did not get my email - I use this account only for family and friends. It would be difficult at this stage to consider her in either category after the insults they have directed towards the president."

But Sheikha Mayassa, 28, gently persisted. "How can I help you?" she wrote again to Mrs Assad.

"I can't imagine you agree with what is going on - you've done such great work, it can't all be lost on the basis of weeks of bad policy."

In her final email, part of a trove

obtained by the Arabic news service Al Arabiya and *The Guardian*, she appeared to offer the Assad family sanctuary in Qatar. "I honestly think that this is a good opportunity to leave and re-start a normal life - it can't be easy on the children, it can't be easy on you," she writes.

"I only pray that you will convince the president to take this as an opportunity to exit without having to face charges - I am sure you have many places to turn to, including Doha."

There is no sign of a response to this final email, dated Jan 30, suggesting that Sheikha Mayassa misjudged Mrs Assad's mood and that Syria's first lady remained stubbornly loyal to her husband.

These messages were exchanged despite the fact that Qatar closed its embassy in Syria and recalled its ambassador on July 17 last year. While having no formal diplomatic ties with Damascus, Qatar's ruling family kept open this channel to Syria with the apparent aim of using Mrs Assad, 36, to ease her husband out of power and into exile.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait all announced yesterday they would follow suit by closing their own embassies.

"The Assads had often been in Qatar and they had established channels of communication with the al-Thanis [Qatar's royal family]," said Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a Gulf specialist at the London School of Economics. "This was clearly an attempt to find a backchannel to communicate and try and resolve the issue under the table."

Other emails betray the irony that Mrs Assad spent much of her time shopping online, notably from Harrods, which is effectively owned by Qatar.

Theodore Dalrymple: Page 25

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

SICKLY SWEET, AND DEADLY

Reports that President Assad sent his wife sentimental pop lyrics come as no surprise to Theodore Dalrymple. It perfectly fits the profile of a modern despot

Some men are born evil, some achieve evil, and some have evil thrust upon them. Bashar al-Assad of Syria falls into the third category; but from the point of view of his victims, it hardly matters. For them, evil is evil and death is death. The psychological origins of a man's crimes don't make them less real or horrible to those who suffer from them.

The emails exchanged between the Syrian dictator, his wife and their immediate circle, published by the *Guardian* this week with good but not legally watertight evidence that they are genuine, are those of a kind of people physically isolated from the hardships and horrors of their own country and who are given alternately to self-pitying sentimentality and callous flippancy. In other words, the emails are entirely plausible as a picture of life in the court of Bashar al-Assad.

The science of physiognomy, that of detecting character in the face, is by no means an exact one, but we all instinctively resort to it when judging others; and when you look at pictures of Assad you see a weak man, when you would expect to be a pettifogger rather than a brute. But push a pettifogger to the wall and he is capable of the greatest obliquity, which is the strength of the weak. A cornered rat, that normally resides incognito, is a ferocious and dangerous beast, even if he remains in essence weak and highly vulnerable.

Bashar al-Assad was never intended for the dictatorship. That role was reserved for his far more extrovert, flashy and outwardly vicious brother who, however, was killed in a car accident caused by his typically intemperate driving. A man who lapsed from an early age that he will inherit supreme power is inclined to believe that even the laws of physics will bend to his will, and that he can therefore drive like a lunatic with impunity. Bashar was not like this; on the contrary, he was shy, retiring and anxious to succeed in his own profession, that of ophthalmology.

When he was in London learning his profession, therefore, he made no waves; he lived modestly if comfortably; by all accounts he was a quiet, polite and careful doctor who was nice to his patients and respectful of his seniors. It is even probable that when he returned to Syria as heir-apparent he harboured genuinely reformist ideas and intentions.

But once he returned home, the logic of the situation was all against him. His father was a brutal, vicious mass murderer, the leader of a brutal, vicious, mass-murdering political movement. If Bashar had been a strong and brave man, he would have refused the poisoned chalice; but, having accepted it, he had to drain it to the dregs. Latin American gangsters give people a choice: *plata o plomo*, silver or lead, money or the bullet; for Bashar al-Assad, it was power or total extinction, not only for himself, but for his entire group.

His wife, the beautiful, educated, anglicised daughter of a successful Syrian physician exiled in London, was no more destined by nature for the role of dictator's wife than he for that of dictator. Her metamorphosis from Mrs Assad to Eva Peron and then to Elena Ceausescu was by a process not altogether of her choosing. Furthermore, power not only corrupts but insulates from reality, both physical and moral. Bad actions come to be rationalised as necessary and then even as good.

At the same time, however, an appreciation that all is not well cannot be altogether avoided, however strong the forces of self-deception. So when I read that Assad had sent his wife the lyrics of a saccharine and sentimentally self-pitying country and western song, Blake Shelton's *God Gave Me You*, I was not surprised; it rang entirely true to his psychology and his situation.

I've been a walking heartache, I've made a mess of me, The person that I've been lately Ain't who I wanna be.

Another of his favourites, apparently, is *We Can't Go Wrong* by the Cover Girls, a song with the following lines:



In good company: President Assad and his wife, Asma, and Elena Ceausescu, left, and Kim Jong-il, right



There was a time when things were better than the way they are today. But we forgot the roses we made and love got lost along the way.

Psychopathic, then, meets ruthlessness. The vague and imprecise confession that things were not supposed to turn out like this is certainly not intended as a confession that they turned out like this because of anything that I did, but to exculpate me from the suspicion, including my own, of being a bad man.

In other words, Bashar al-Assad reveals himself as a kind of Bastard Mr Blair, infinitely nastier because of the political traditions and situation of the country in which he finds himself. You can just hear him saying, Blairishly, "Surely you can't think that I ordered the deaths of all those people, at least not unless I thought it was really necessary for the good of my country and the rest of humanity."

This is all very sick, but it is not the pathology of the Middle East alone. It is what happens when the contemporary psychology of the Real-Me (the notion that no matter what I do or how I behave, my inner goodness, my original virtue, remains intact), which since the 1960s has become so profoundly Western, intersects with a vile political tradition.

As for the Assads' sumptuary expenditure, on such things as vases, chandeliers and jewellery, in the midst of their country's increasing penury, there is nothing at all surprising about it. The Marquis de Custine, in his book on Russia in 1839, remarked on the tendency of despots to demand extreme sacrifices to bring forth trilles, but at least hereditary monarchs usually (not always, of course) had taste, and created monuments of lasting aesthetic value.

Modern dictators, who lack the legitimacy conferred by the hereditary principle even when they inherit their dictatorship, but rely instead on demotic and demagogic self-justifications, generally go for the most obvious kitsch. Whole books have been written on this subject; and Saddam Hussein, for example, made King Farouk look like Bernard Berenson or Kennedy Clark. It is a striking fact that not a single modern dictator, no matter the expenditure of money and effort, has left behind him a monument of any lasting aesthetic value, unlike many an incompetent and nincompoop monarch.

In short, dictators and their consorts behave, at least from the point of view of interior decoration and the other trappings of success, like footballers' wives who have been elevated into a position in which the availability of money exerts no constraint on their fantasy of the good life. If you want to bathe in an ivory bath with platinum taps, then you just send out for one, even if it has to be to the uttermost ends of the earth (in practice, usually Paris or Harrods). And such is the wickedness of the human mind, that extreme luxury is the more enjoyable in proportion to the hardships of everyone else. Who wants to be a billionaire if everyone else is a billionaire?

Dictators often hoard for their own consumption what they deny to everyone else. Stalin, Hitler, Ceausescu, Kim Jong-il, and others, loved the trashiest output of Hollywood, but only in the privacy of their own kitschy retreats. For Kim there was no greater luxury, or pleasure, than drinking a 1947 vintage while two million of his people were starving. No doubt his tastes became ever more refined as the condition of his country deteriorated.

But we have in the West no reason to be complacent. Let us consider the following exchange of emails, as reported in the *Guardian*:

"Check out this video on YouTube."
"Halaluhahahaha, OMG!! This is amazing!"

This could be any two young members of the British middle classes communicating with one another by email. In fact, it is Bashar al-Assad and his wife. Shallowness is international, and if it may be permitted a Sam Goldwyn paradox, getting deeper.

Theodore Dalrymple is the author of 'Spill Notions: Toxic Sentimentality', (Gibson Square).

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Exclusive: secret emails lift lid on life of Assad's inner circle

- Syrian leader advised by Iran during uprising
- President privately mocked promised reforms
- Wife spent thousands on internet shopping

Robert Booth
Mona Mahmood
Luke Harding

Bashar al-Assad took advice from Iran on how to handle the uprising against his rule, according to a cache of what appear to be several thousand emails received and sent by the Syrian leader and his wife.

The Syrian leader was also briefed in detail about the presence of western journalists in the Baba Amr district of Homs and urged to "tighten the security grip" on the opposition-held city in November.

The revelations are contained in more than 3,000 documents that activists say are emails downloaded from private accounts belonging to Assad and his wife Asma.

The messages, seen by the Guardian, are said to have been intercepted by members of the opposition Supreme Council of the Revolution group between June and early February.

The documents, which emerge on the first anniversary of the rebellion that has seen more than 8,000 Syrians killed, paint a portrait of a first family remarkably insulated from the mounting crisis and continuing to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle.

They appear to show the president's wife spending thousands of dollars over the internet for designer goods while he swaps entertaining internet links on his iPad and downloads music from iTunes.

As the world watched in horror at the brutal suppression of protests across the country and many Syrians faced food shortages, Mrs Assad spent more than £10,000 on candlesticks, tables and chandeliers from Paris and instructed an aide to order a fondue set from Amazon.

The Guardian has made extensive efforts to authenticate the emails by checking contents against established facts and contacting 10 individuals whose correspondence appears in the cache. These checks suggest the messages are genuine, but it has not been possible to verify every one.

The emails also appear to show that: ● Assad established a network of trusted



Bashar al-Assad, accompanied by his wife Asma, casts his vote during a referendum on a new constitution in Damascus this February. The emails appear to show a couple remarkably detached from the mounting crisis in Syria Photograph: EPA/SANA

The Assad emails

Sweet talk and tough laws

Jul 6, 2011, 2:29 pm, ak@alshahba.com wrote: will be finished at 5pm. love u

sam@alshahba.com replied: This is the best reform any country can have that u told me where will you be, we are going to adopt it instead of the rubbish laws of parties, elections, media.....

aides who reported directly to him through his "private" email account - bypassing both his powerful clan and the country's security apparatus.

● Assad made light of reforms he had promised in an attempt to defuse the crisis, referring to "rubbish laws of parties, elections, media".

● A daughter of the emir of Qatar, Hamid bin Khalifa al-Thani, this year advised Mr and Mrs Assad to leave Syria and suggested Doha may offer them exile.

● Assad sidestepped extensive US sanctions against him by using a third party with a US address to make purchases of music and apps from Apple's iTunes.

● A Dubai-based company, al-Shahba, with a registered office in London is a key conduit for Syrian government business and private purchases of Mrs Assad.

Activists say they were passed username and password details believed to have been used by the couple by a mole in the president's inner circle. The email addresses used the domain name alshahba.com, a group of companies used by the regime. They say the details allowed uninterrupted access to the two inboxes until the leak was discovered in February.

The emails appear to show how Assad assembled aides to advise him on media strategy and how to position himself in the face of increasing criticism of his regime's attempts to crush the uprising, which is now thought to have left 10,000 dead.

Activists say they were able to monitor the inboxes of Assad and his wife in real time for several months. In several cases they claim to have used information to warn colleagues in Damascus of imminent regime moves against them.

The access continued until 7 February, when a threatening email arrived in the

Continued on page 5 >>>



Music, self-pity and shopping:

Haul of messages show extraordinary buying habits of first lady as country is rocked by her husband's crackdown

Robert Booth and Luke Harding

As the international community struggled to absorb the bloodiest episode yet in Syria's brutal crackdown in Homs, Bashar al-Assad was in Damascus composing a private email to his wife, according to a cache of what appear to be emails from the Syrian first couple obtained by the Guardian.

It was 5 February 2012, and the previous day the president's artillery had pounded the restive city as never before, killing several hundred civilians and blowing up a makeshift hospital, according to opposition activists. In the capital, government forces reportedly took the lives of about a dozen mourners at a funeral. The UN security council was drawing up plans to act against the dictatorship.

But Assad's email, using the pseudonym Sam, reflected none of the bloody turmoil facing his country. In a bizarre message apparently from the Syrian leader, he sent his wife the lyrics of a country and western song by the US singer Blake Shelton, and the audio file downloaded from iTunes.

Laden with self-pity, the communication appeared to exemplify the cocooned life of denial that Assad, his family and inner circle were leading while the country erupted. The first verse reads: "I've been a walking heartache / I've made a mess of me / The person that I've been lately / Ain't who I wanna be."

The note was one of dozens revealed in a cache of what Syrian activists claim are emails from the inboxes of Assad and his wife, Asma, that expose how Assad's cocoon continued to enjoy a gilded lifestyle insulated from the slaughter around them.

The emails appear to show how tens of thousands of dollars were spent in internet shopping sprees on handmade furniture from Chelsea boutiques. Tens of thousands more were lavished on gold and gem-encrusted jewellery, chandeliers, expensive curtains and paintings to be shipped to the Middle East. While the country was rocked by Assad's crackdown on dissent, his inner circle was concerned about the possibility of getting hold of a copy of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II, or a new chocolate fondue set.

The details of the Assad's high living are likely to infuriate many Syrians who have had to negotiate shortages and other hardships in conflict-hit areas of the country. Anger over the profligacy

The Assad emails

The online jewellery order

On 19 July 2011, at 18:36pm.

AK wrote:

Hello [XXXXXXXXX]

Sorry I took so long to reply, but I have only just got back the final requests for the beautiful lips:

1 Turquoise with yellow gold diamonds and small pave on side

1 Coraline with yellow gold diamonds and small pave on side

1 Full Black Onyx with yellow gold diamonds and small pave on side

1 Amethyst with white gold diamonds and small pave on side.

Many thanks, aaa

On 19 July 2011, at 11:48pm.

[XXXXXXXXX] wrote:

Dear Asma,

The workshop is closing, so I can launch your order mid August to get it done by mid september not before, tell me if it is ok. What do you call small pave? the "one" diamond as a Marilyn Monroe motif?

of leaders' families has been a feature of revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

On 19 July 2011, Asma al-Assad could be found placing orders with her cousin Amal for jewellery made by a small Paris workshop. She requested four necklaces: "1 turquoise with yellow gold diamonds and a small pave on side" as well as a coraline, "full black onyx" and "amethyst with white gold diamonds" of similar design. Amal replied that she would "launch" the order in mid-August with a view to getting it done "by mid-September". On 23 July 2011 Asma said she didn't mind the delay and added self-deprecatingly: "I am absolutely clueless when it comes to fine jewellery!" She signed off as "aaa" with: "Kisses to you both, and don't worry, we are well!"

Others items that caught the fancy of Syria's first lady included a vase priced £2,650. On 17 June 2011 she sent details to the family's London-based fixer Soulieman Marouf, and added: "Pls can

abdulla see if this available at Harrods to order - they have a sale at the moment." Marouf replied with good news: "He bought it. Got 15% discount. Delivery 10 weeks." He added: "Today you should be receiving an Armani light... If you need anything else please let me know."

The emails suggest a woman preoccupied with shopping - but also with an eye for a bargain. She was eager to claw back VAT on luxury items shipped to Damascus, it emerges, and complained when a consignment of table lamps went missing in China. Emails sent from her personal account also concern the fate of a bespoke table, after it arrived with two "right" panels instead of a right and a left one. More than 50 emails to and from the UK deal with shopping.

Some of Asma al-Assad's prospective purchases arouse polite comment from her friends. On 3 February 2012, she was browsing the internet for luxury shoes, according to an email titled "Christian Louboutin shoes coming shortly".

She wrote to friends sharing details of new shoes on offer, including a pair of crystal-encrusted 16cm high heels costing £2,795. She asked: "Does anything catch your eye - these pieces are not made for general public." One friend replied: "I don't think they're going to be useful any time soon unfortunately."

Most jarring were the occasions when the world was hearing news of the worst incidents of violence and bloodshed and the Assad family could be found shopping or joking online, often using pseudonyms. An adviser to the Assad inner circle, Lamis Omar, appeared to acknowledge that the first couple risked seeming too detached and sent Assad a link to an article in the US magazine Businessweek that described the president's "life in a cocoon".

Emails from the Syrian first lady's account are typically signed off with "AAA" - corresponding to Asma al-Assad - or "Alia Kayali", which is the name of the secretary whose identity activists believe Asma hid behind. In email correspondence with shops in Paris and London, the sign-off "Alia" predominates.

In July, "Alia" is found placing an order for about £10,000 worth of candlesticks, tables and chandeliers to be shipped from a Paris designer through a state company in Dubai. In early November, as protests continued, a London art dealer received a message asking about the availability and price of works costing between £5,000 and £25,000 each. In late January "Alia" unpacked a pair of bedside tables shipped from a Chelsea cabinet maker, only to discover a mistake. She complained they had "different finishes and they have different colour draws".

In Britain, suppliers said they were unaware that the woman behind the email account was Syria's first lady. Tony Carpenter, who runs a furniture firm in Billingshurst, West Sussex, sold "Alia" a designer Baxter Gilbert table in November. The table cost £16,257. "I had no idea," Carpenter said. "She gave me a London address. The furniture went to Dubai. I assumed the job was in Dubai."

Carpenter added: "She was a very charming lady to deal with. I spoke to her once or twice, though it was mostly by email. She paid the bill very promptly." The table was oval-shaped and marble-topped, he added.

The shopping lists were not always pure luxury and sometimes hinted at the impact of events on the family. On 30 December, while protesters demonstrated in Aleppo, Hama, Damascus and Deira, Mrs Assad appears to have sent the president options for bullet-blocker armoured clothing, disguised as a blazer, and a link to the VIP Armour website.

Assad himself kept up a flow of personal, loving emails to his wife using the



disguised accounts, at times revealing a flippant attitude towards reforms he had promised the country earlier that year.

In July when she emailed that she would be finished at 5pm, her delighted-sounding husband replied: "This is the best reform any country can have that I told me where will you be, we are going to adopt it instead of the rubbish laws of parties, elections, media..."

Sometimes he searched the internet for video clips that impressed him, on one occasion sending her a clip from America's Got Talent of "the best illusion of all time" - a man appearing to saw another man in half and then putting him back together again.

The emails also paint a picture of a relationship under great stress. In late December the Syrian first lady told her husband simply: "If we are strong together, we will overcome this together... I love you..."



The first lady has been advised by prominent PR firms, culminating in a feature in Vogue

Assad's emails reveal his inner fears and suspicions. On 16 October, as the UN high commissioner for human rights, Navi Pillay, called for international action to avoid "full-blown civil war" in Syria, Assad circulated an article alleging that the US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, was responsible for "recruiting Arab death squads" from al-Qaida-affiliated units in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Chechnya to fight against Syrian military and police."

He sent another rabid article to his wife on 23 July that described Rupert Murdoch as a Jew and an Israeli citizen and "pretty much" Satan.

The emails shed light on the circle of young advisers around Assad who share jokes, TV clips and press cuttings about the crisis with the president on a regular basis and communicate with him informally. Mostly female, they refer to him variously as Sir and "his Excellency", and on one occasion - in a note not meant for his eyes - as "the dude".

Sheherazad Jaafari, the daughter of Syria's ambassador to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, took the role of strategic media adviser and can be seen organising an hour-long ABC interview with Assad. On another occasion she emailed him a photo showing Nicolas Sarkozy standing on a box next to George W Bush, with the subject line: "Funny!"

Hadeel al-Ali, another media adviser, reported back on the reaction of a group of friends who watched the president's speech in January. She summed up their feelings as if he were a pop star: "We love him soooooo much!!! We're so proud of him and his strength, wisdom, charisma and of course his beauty."

Video shared

Monitors' hunt for tanks mocked

On 29 December, in the week Arab League monitors arrived in the country and shortly after activists released film of Syrian army tanks in Homs, Bashar al-Assad appears to have shared a YouTube video with his one of his closest advisers that lampoons the monitors for their inability to spot regime armour.

"Check out this video on YouTube," Assad wrote to his media adviser, Hadeel al-Ali, using the sam@alshahba.com account. "Hahahahahahaha, OMG! This is amazing!" she responded.

"Everybody was talking about Ghalion and his theory about the tanks." By Ghalion she meant Burhan Ghalion, the leader of the opposition Syrian National Council, who had remarked that Arab League observers' movements were being restricted. The regime was reported to have hidden some of its tanks during the Arab

League's visit to Homs. In the four-minute video, which appears to have been produced by a regime sympathiser to lampoon both Ghalion and the Arab League mission, a toy car crudely modified to look like a tank shoots at a pile of biscuits that represents a collapsing Homs tower block. Enter the monitor - represented by a plastic toy man who bears a passing resemblance to the Fat Controller in the Thomas the Tank Engine books. The toy "tank" is then disguised by having its barrel removed.

"Now, as the Arab monitor comes to check whether the Syrian regime has complied with the Arab initiatives or not... He does not know what is going on," the voiceover says, concluding: "This is a short summary about the way to hide a tank and inshallah we will do more videos in the series to explain more tricks by the Syrian regime."



Inside Assad's gilded cocoon



La belle vie
Asma and Bashar al-Assad walk down the streets of Paris during an official visit in December 2010. Photograph: Miguel Medina/AFP/Getty Images

Secret emails lift lid on Assad inner circle

« continued from page 1

inbox thought to be used by Assad after the account was revealed when the Anonymous group separately hacked into Syrian government email addresses. Correspondence to and from the two addresses ceased on the same day.

The emails appear to show that Assad received advice from Iran or its proxies on several occasions during the crisis. Before a speech in December his media consultant prepared a long list of themes, reporting that the advice was based on "consultations with a good number of people in addition to the media and political adviser for the Iranian ambassador".

The memo advised the president to use "powerful and violent" language and to show appreciation for support from "friendly states". It also advised that the regime should "leak more information related to our military capability" to convince the public that it could withstand a military challenge.

The president also received advice from Hussein Mortada, an influential Lebanese businessman with strong connections to Iran. In December, Mortada urged Assad to stop blaming al-Qaida for an apparent twin car bombing in Damascus, which took place the day before an Arab League observer mission arrived in the country.

He said he had been in contact with Iran and Hezbollah who shared his view. "It is not out of our interest to say that al-Qaida is behind the operation because this claim will [indemnify] the US administration and Syrian opposition," Mortada wrote. "I have received contacts from Iran and Hezbollah and they directed me to not mention al-Qaida is behind the operation. It is a blatant tactical media mistake."

Iran and Hezbollah have been accused of providing on-the-ground support to the crackdown, including sending soldiers to fight alongside regime forces and technical experts to help identify activists using the internet. Iran and Hezbollah deny offering anything more than moral support.

Among those who communicated with the president's account were Khaled al-Ahmed who, it is believed, was given the task of advising about Homs and Idlib. In November Ahmed wrote to Assad urging him to "tighten the security grip to start [the] operation to restore state control in Idlib and Hama countryside".

He also advised Assad that he had been told European reporters had "entered the area by crossing the Lebanese borders illegally". In another mail he warned that "a big shipment of weapons coming from Libya will arrive to the shores of one of the neighbouring states within three days to be smuggled to Syria".

The emails offer a rare window into the mind of the Syrian leader, apparently lurching between self-pity, defiance and flippancy as he swapped links to amusing video footage with his aides and wife.

Throughout 2011, his wife appears to have kept up correspondence with the Qatar emir's daughter, Mayassa al-Thani. But relations appear to have chilled early

this year when Thani directly suggested that the Syrian leader step down.

She wrote on 11 December: "The opportunity for real change and development was lost a long time ago. Nevertheless, one opportunity closes, others open up - and I hope it's not too late for reflection and coming out of the state of denial."

A second email on 30 January was more forthright. "In all honesty - looking at the tide of history and the escalation of recent events - we've seen two results - leaders stepping down and getting asylum or leaders being brutally attacked. I think this is a good opportunity to leave and re-start a normal life. I am sure you have many places to turn to, including Doha."

The direct line of reporting to Assad, independent of the police state's military and intelligence agencies, was a trait of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria for three decades. Assad Sr was renowned for establishing multiple reporting lines from security chiefs and trusted aides in the belief that it would deny the opportunity for any one agency to become powerful enough to pose a threat to him. His son has reputedly shown the same instincts through his decade of rule.

Much of Assad's media advice comes from two US-educated Syrian women, Sheherazad Jaafari and Hadeel al-Ali. Both regularly stress to Assad the importance of social media and the importance of intervening in online discussions.

Several weeks after the Assad email was compromised in February, a new Syrian state TV channel broadcast two segments denying the email address had been used by Assad. Opposition activists claim that this was a pre-emptive move to discredit any future leaking of the emails.

Key correspondents

The small but influential circle around Syrian leader

The list of those who corresponded with the sam@alshabba.com email address was small but influential, activists believe. It was used as a primary source of strategic advice by Assad's fledgling media team, especially his hand-chosen advisers, whose access to the president became increasingly regular throughout the second half of last year. Significant people included in the email archive are believed to include:

Bashar al-Assad

The Syrian president appears in the emails under the pseudonym "Sam", the activists say. While the sam@alshabba.com account was being monitored, activists noticed that "Sam" was highly conscious of security and deleted emails from his outbox quickly and regularly. His inbox, however, contained more than 1,000 emails, including advice on speeches and security issues.

Asma al-Assad

The Syrian first lady emailed from the ak@alshabba account. The "ak" in the address is believed to refer to the family's confidante Alia Kayali Marouf, but emails to this account are frequently addressed to "Dear Asma" and signed Asma or with her initials, as well as with the name Alia. Activists believe the real Alia had no access to the account. Unlike her husband, Asma al-Assad was not in the habit of deleting emails, making them easy pickings for the activists who had the couple's usernames and passwords. The email exchanges between the pair reveal a close marriage under the strain of a heavy workload. However, they do not reflect the violent nature of the battle for Syria going on outside the palace walls.

Sheherazad Jaafari

In her early 20s, Jaafari is understood to have been an intern at the New York-based PR firm Brown Lloyd James for three to six months after graduating from a US college. Afterwards she moved to Damascus where she was recruited as one of Assad's top media advisers. "It seems like she got into the inner circle," a former associate told the Guardian. "She was in the communications office, setting up interviews for the president." She soon emerged as the 46-year-old president's key aide, heading a small team of inexperienced personal media advisers all of whom were young and clearly fond of him.

Jaafari kept in touch with former colleagues at Brown Lloyd James intermittently, on several occasions forwarding emails from Mike Holtzman, the BLJ executive she described as "my previous boss", to Assad. A Brown Lloyd James source suggested she was using

Guns, gangs and trusted sources

A trusted source who met leaders of groups in Baba Amr today said a big shipment of weapons was coming from Libya ...

The journalist [redacted] was able to get into Baba Amr and he has told me that many western media delegations have entered the area by crossing the Lebanese borders illegally ... and that fighters are touring the streets. I suggest the formation of a special operation room to supervise the barricades ...



Sheherazad Jaafari: Assad's key aide

her connection to the firm to bolster her PR credentials in the eyes of Assad. In one exchange, Jaafari sent Holtzman a YouTube clip of Assad addressing a crowd and Holtzman replied: "How are [Assad and his wife] doing? Feeling more confident in the outcome?" Jaafari replied: "They are doing great and yes the outcome will be shocking to everyone. I have always told you. This man is loved by his people." Holtzman replied: "Great. I'm proud of you. Wish I were there to help."

A BLJ source confirmed that the emails had been sent by Holtzman but said he was merely trying to encourage a former intern. The firm, which is under separate ownership from Brown Lloyd James, says it has not offered the Assads any advice since helping to organise an interview with Asma al-Assad in December 2010. Jaafari returned to New York in disgrace after the backing of Syrian emails by Anonymous in February revealed she had given Assad advice on how to "manipulate" US public opinion.

Hadeel al-Ali

A second media adviser who supplemented the work of Jaafari. She took an interest in daily media coverage and developed a close relationship with Assad, giving him regular feedback on how his speeches were being perceived by supporters. She passed on requests for interviews from journalists deemed to be acceptable to the regime.

Luna Chebel

The third media adviser and a former al-Jazeera anchor. She gives strong support to Assad and takes perhaps the hardest line on how to tackle media dissent. She also offers counsel on how to keep the uprising under control.

Khaled Ahmad

A key player in the correspondence. He provides a regular overview of the deteriorating situation in Homs, which, as a former senior regional official, he is tasked with supervising. He is believed to have links to the Syrian Socialist Nationalist party, a political party/militia that has remained staunchly supportive of the regime for more than 40 years. He reaffirms the regime narrative that Islamic terrorists backed by foreigners are responsible for the uprising.

Hussein Mortada

The head of the Iranian-backed al-Alam satellite channel, which gives an Arabic-language Iranian perspective on the Arab world. Boasts of links to Hezbollah and Iran and offers strong advice, which he claims represents them both. A key figure in spreading the regime narrative.

A glimpse into the inbox of a dictator



A family flees fighting between rebels and government troops in Idlib, Syria. Opposition hackers say they are targeting the Assad family to 'show what this regime is like' Photograph: Rodrigo Abd/AP

Activists tell how email passwords were revealed Messages gave real-time view of Assad's inner circle

Rob Booth and Mona Mahmood

In late March last year, Syrian opposition activists say, a young government worker in Damascus nervously handed a scrap of paper to a friend. On it were four handwritten codes that the friend was instructed to pass to a small group of exiled Syrians who would know what to do with them.

The paper contained two email addresses: sam@alshahba.com and ak@alshahba.com. They are thought to have been the personal email usernames and passwords of the president, Bashar al-Assad, and his wife, Asma.

For the next nine months they were to offer a cell of activists an extraordinary window into what appeared to be the private lives of Syria's first family and their attempts to turn around the country's steady descent towards the abyss.

In June - three months later than the

original mole had intended - the email details found their way to two Syrian professionals in a Gulf state. Both had recently become active in the nascent opposition movement in exile after spending most of their adult lives as silent opponents of the regime.

The uprising in the southern Syrian city of Deraa on 15 March had empowered them, as it had hundreds of thousands of others in the totalitarian state. They were now determined to do what they could to bring an end to more than four decades of rule by the Assad clan.

"It was clear who we were dealing with," said one of the activists. "This was the president and his wife. There was no doubt."

At first, the activists say, the emails came in slowly, one or two a day to each account. Assad, as could be expected, was busy with himself with affairs of state. His wife was occupied with family life - and shopping.

By the end of the summer, they say, the email traffic to the inboxes had markedly increased. In Assad's case, this coincided with the marked increase in violence that followed the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which last year fell in August.

As 2011 ground on, the situation deteriorated in many parts of Syria. By autumn, Assad had assembled a team of advisers who would help him with the international press and give frank reckonings about sensitive subjects, including the blazing insurgency that had taken hold in Homs and the views of Syria's allies, Iran and Hezbollah.

The media advisers were Sheherazad Jaafari, the daughter of Syria's envoy to the United Nations, Bashar Jaafari, and Hadeel al-Ali, a young Syrian woman studying at a US university.

Both flew to Damascus to advise Assad personally. They demonstrated their contacts in the US by passing on details of conversations with executives from the New York Times, NBC and ABC, all of whom had shown an interest in interviewing the Syrian president.

The two women became regular fixtures in the sam@alshahba.com inbox, with both of them using email addresses that they had used to communicate with journalists and editors.

The activists intensified their efforts as Assad cracked down, monitoring the email accounts 24 hours a day from the comfort of their living rooms.

Some days it was slow going, but the

Frankness, honesty and friends

Dec 7 2011.

Al Mayassa Al Thani wrote:
dear asma ... in a recent trip to turkey, the wife of the pm asked for your email address; she would like to write you. i said id ask you first ... best - m

Dec 11, ak@alshahba wrote:

Hi I would prefer she did not get my e-mail - I use this account only for family and friends. It would be difficult at this stage to consider her in either category after the insults they have directed towards the president ... Take care - aaa

Dec 14, ak@alshahba wrote:

My Dear Mayassa, I don't have a problem with frankness or honesty ... Life is not fair my friend - but ultimately there is a reality we all need to deal with!!! Take care aaa

activists were kept enthused by the hope that morsels might arrive that would give them intelligence for use in the field or, better still, help them oust the most impenetrable regime in the Middle East.

They soon noticed differences in the way the couple used their email accounts. "We had to be quick with Bashar's emails," one of the activists said. "He would delete most as soon as they arrived in his inbox, whereas his wife wouldn't. So as soon as they went from unread to read we had to get them fast."

Deleting emails as soon as they arrive shows a degree of awareness of web security. So too did the fact that Assad never attached his name or initials to any of the emails he sent. However, many of the emails that arrived in his inbox are addressed to him as president and contain intimate details of events and discussions that were not known outside of the inner sanctum and would have been very difficult to manipulate. "We were watching everything closely," the activist said. When Assad was notified about the presence of western journalists in Homs, they were able to warn opposition activists there.

By mid-December, the correspondence to Assad's inbox had become increasingly interesting. There were notes for an election speech, daily world media briefings, glowing tributes from acolytes and chatter from media advisers. But the devastating revelation that the activists had all been hoping for continued to elude them.

"There was no 800-pound gorilla," one said. "But the body of evidence was still very strong."

In January came the Anonymous leaks: a group of hackers had accessed the Syrian ministry of public affairs website and trawled through more than 80 email addresses stored on the ministry's server. It is suspected that this leak spread the two usernames and password details beyond the small group of activists who were monitoring them. Somehow, someone searching through the ministry's emails was able to establish that the Sam email belonged to the president.

On 7 February, a threatening email in Arabic was sent to the Sam email address. Traffic to the account stopped on the same day. And so did the extraordinary ability to monitor the inner sanctum in real time.

"Now we just want to show the world what this regime is like," said the activist. "We just want him to go."

The presidential playlist

'A man of surprising tastes' ... Assad's iTunes account

Michael Hann and Matthew Taylor

The emails between Bashar al-Assad's account and iTunes give an insight into the Syrian president's state of mind and reveal a man with wide and sometimes surprising tastes.

Alongside songs from the Lebanese actor and singer Nasri Shamseddine, who remains popular in the Arab world almost 30 years after his death, there is an eclectic mix of artists from the 1990s British duo Right Said Fred to the US singer Chris Brown.

The fact that the United States last year imposed sanctions against Assad and

other Syrian government officials, prohibiting "US persons" from engaging in transactions with them, may explain why Assad's iTunes account is registered to another name and a New York address.

One of the more unusual purchases, made through an American Express account, occurred on 5 February when Assad sent his wife, Asma, an iTunes file of the US country star Blake Shelton singing God Gave Me You.

There is not a huge country music fanbase in the Middle East and a look at the lyrics reveals a conventional tale

of life's ups and downs in the US. Assad sent the file a day after the shelling of Homs had begun. A day later, Syrian forces would fire more than 300 rockets into the city.

Just before Christmas Assad underlined his leftfield tastes when he ordered Don't Talk Just Kiss by Right Said Fred, a band that shot to fame with the hit I'm Too Sexy.

Days earlier he highlighted his interest in UK pop by buying Bizarre Love Triangle by New Order. In the same month he ordered We Can't Go Wrong by the Cover Girls, a New-York-based urban girl group of the 1980s and early 1990s. The song includes the line:

"There was a time when things were better than the way they are today. But

we forgot the vows we made and love got lost along the way."

As the conflict in Syria intensified Assad continued to add to his eclectic playlist, ordering Hurt by Leona Lewis.

In January he bought a number of songs by the popular US dance group LMFAO including their hit Sexy and I Know It.

Assad's iTunes emails also reveal a limited interest in books, gaming and films; among his purchases were a Harry Potter film and several apps. In November, he ordered one of the Harry Potter films, Deathly Hallows Part II, as well as several Harry Potter apps.

The next month the Syrian president ordered the biography of Apple founder Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson.

Inside Assad's inner circle
View a selection of the emails
guardian.co.uk/world

Why we are publishing the emails, and how they were verified

Why does the Guardian believe the emails are genuine?

The cache of 3,000 emails passed on by a source in the Syrian opposition reveals a wealth of private information - including family photographs and videos, a scan of the president's identity card and a birth certificate belonging to a family member - that would be difficult for even the best resourced hoaxer or intelligence agency to gather or fabricate. The sam@alshabba.com and ak@alshabba.com accounts that activists say were used by Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, communicate regularly and in affectionate terms with the wider family and advisers, some of whose email addresses are easily verified. Events and speeches mentioned in the emails tally with the timings of real events. The "sam" and "ak" accounts were also monitored contemporaneously by activists who say the protagonists reacted in real time to events on the ground in Syria.

What has the Guardian done to verify the emails?

The Guardian has contacted 10 people whose emails appear in the cache. All have confirmed the time and content of the emails or refused to deny they are genuine. People contacted include Thomas Nagorski, ABC News's managing director of international coverage, who emailed Sheherazad Baafar while trying to arrange an Assad interview with Barbara Walters, and Sir Andrew Green, Britain's former ambassador in Syria. Two of Green's messages feature in the email haul: one, dated 6 October 2011, was to Assad's father-in-law; the other, dated 26 June 2011, was to members of the British Syrian Society. Green confirmed that the emails were genuine. Also copied in was Lord Powell, Lady Thatcher's former foreign policy adviser and one of the society's trustees. Asked about the email, Powell

said: "It sounds familiar but no time to search my records."

Asma al-Assad used the email address ak@alshabba.com and is believed to have used the pseudonym Alia Kayali when ordering expensive designer goods from Britain. All four British suppliers mentioned in the emails and contacted by the Guardian confirmed that the email exchanges were real.

The Lebanese businessman Azmi T Mikati - a friend of Asma al-Assad who features in many of the emails - refused to deny the veracity of the emails when contacted by the Guardian despite being offered the opportunity to do so. Only one figure, who asked not to be named, said he did not recognise a mail from himself that appeared in Assad's inbox, though he acknowledged that he had sent a number of emails that appeared in a different string. The Guardian also made attempts to contact Waif Saïd, the Syrian-born businessman and philanthropist, who features briefly in the email trail, and Hussein Mortada, a pro-Iranian businessman whose emails appear in the cache, but neither returned calls.

The Guardian also consulted Abdul Halim Khaddam, the former interim president of Syria, now in exile in France, who was unable to confirm the authenticity of the emails. In other cases the Guardian has checked facts set out in the cache. In one email, a partner at a law firm suggested to one of the extended Assad family that he demand a published apology over an article about him. The partner informed his client in another email that the apology would be published that day, and the newspaper did so, including much of the exact wording demanded.

Does the verification process rule out the possibility that there are fake emails in the cache?

No. It would be impossible to contact

everyone who is mentioned in the emails, and members of the inner circle have not responded to the Guardian's inquiries. However, none of the checks we have conducted has contradicted activists' claims about the emails.

What is the evidence that "Sam" is Bashar al-Assad and that "Ak" is Asma?

There are several email conversations in which "Sam" and Bashar are clearly identified as the same person. In November, for example, Hadeel al-Ali, Assad's press assistant, emailed sam@alshabba.com about an interview Assad had given to a student activist, Hussam Arian, six months earlier. She attached a picture of Arian with Assad, and screenshots of the student's Facebook page, which featured the article. She said to "Sam": "I took many shots of the page of Hussam Arian and the article he wrote about you."

Another email to the address from Asma relates: "Fares closed all your twitter accounts!" Fares Kallas is Asma al-Assad's assistant, and other emails in the chain show that he had asked Twitter to close several fake accounts purporting to belong to Bashar.

In Asma's case, there are a host of emails sent between ak@alshabba.com and Asma al-Assad's family which offer compelling proof. Many emails sent to "ak" from her family begin "Hi Asma", and one of her family's email headers lists ak@alshabba.com as Asma Akhras, Asma al-Assad's maiden name.

There are many other examples of family members sending affectionate emails to Asma at the "ak" account. On 21 November 2011, one of her brothers sent her photos of their father's recent birthday party, with the subject line "Dad's birthday 2011". The photos show Asma together with identifiable family members standing in a kitchen. The brother also circulated the photos to her other brother.



Barbara Walters interviewed Bashar al-Assad last year for ABC News

Could a third person be using either of the accounts?

Emails from the "ak" account sometimes sign off with "Alia", Syrian opposition activists say this is Asma borrowing the name of a company secretary, Alia Kayali, who works at al-Shabba's London office. They say the real Kayali had no access to the "ak" account. The Guardian has been unable to contact the real Alia Kayali to verify this, but it seems unlikely that such an intimate email account would be available to an underling. In a conversation with her friend Shelkha al-Mayassa al-Thani, the daughter of the emir of Qatar, Asma was asked if al-Thani could pass Asma al-Assad's private "ak" email address to the wife of Turkey's prime minister, who wanted to get in touch. Asma al-Assad replied four days later: "I would prefer that she did not get my email - I use this account only for family and friends."

Asma al-Assad signed herself "aaa". It would appear that Asma is shopping under a nom de plume. In correspondence relating to at least two different purchases, mails to suppliers are signed Alia Kayali, but other mails to Asma's associates are unsigned. Bashar also appears to borrow an identity - that of Ayman Mikati of Fifth Avenue, New York - to shop on iTunes.

Why does the Guardian believe it is justified in publishing private correspondence?

We believe a number of disclosures, including evidence of Assad taking advice from Iran and receiving detailed briefings on the situation in Homs, are of clear public interest. Given the nature of the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on the Syrian people, we believe the more detailed picture of the workings of Assad's inner circle that emerges, and the extent to which he and his wife have managed to sustain their luxurious lifestyle, are also of public interest. The Guardian did not solicit the material. We have chosen not to publish personal information, including photographs and video footage belonging to the wider Akhras family, that does not relate to the activities of the first family and the way Syria is governed. We have redacted details of third parties in the emails we have published online and in print.

What does the Syrian government say?

When the passwords to 72 email accounts in the Syrian ministry of presidential affairs were published by hackers in February, state TV dismissed the hack as a joke and a "childish game". They denied that sam@alshabba.com was Bashar al-Assad's private email. Syrian officials contacted by the Guardian have refused to comment. **Robert Booth, Luke Harding, Angelique Chrisafis and Matthew Taylor**

Revealed: London doctor who advised Assad during crackdown

Robert Booth

A Harley Street cardiologist has been acting as a close adviser to the president of Syria during his regime's brutal crackdown on anti-government activists, according to a cache of what appear to be emails sent and received by Bashar al-Assad and his wife.

Dr Fawas Akhras, who is the father of Assad's wife, Asma, used a private email channel to the Syrian leader to offer advice on how the regime should spin its suppression of the uprising, including how best to rebut graphic video footage appearing to show the torture of children by Syrian forces.

The 66-year-old west London-based consultant has until now been regarded as a modernising influence on his son-in-law. He is co-chair of the British Syrian Society, which has said it is "saddened and appalled at the violence and loss of life in Syria", where more than 8,000 people are believed to have been killed since the uprising against Assad's rule began a year ago. But a collection of several thousand

messages to and from the Assads' private email accounts obtained by the Guardian appears to show that as the violence escalated in recent months, Akhras offered the Syrian president detailed political and media handling advice as well as moral support in dozens of emails direct to his personal inbox.

The emails were intercepted by members of a Syrian opposition group between June 2011 and February 2012. The Guardian has made extensive attempts to verify their authenticity by cross-checking information in them and contacting individuals whose mails appear in the cache.

The Guardian contacted Akhras at his surgery yesterday and also approached him via intermediaries inviting him to comment. At the time of publication he had not responded.

But last night, in comments to the Telegraph Akhras compared the Syrian regime's crackdown in Homs with last year's London riots. "When the London

4-5»

Continued on page 5 »

The Guardian (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Assad emails

No more banquets with the Queen for

Cardiologist was at centre of relations between UK and Syria until crackdown

Robert Booth

Just a few months before his son-in-law launched the bloody crackdown on dissent in Syria that has shocked the international community, Fawaz Akhras was invited to dinner with the Queen.

The Harley Street cardiologist and his wife, Sahar, were asked to attend a state banquet given by the monarch in honour of the Emir of Qatar in October 2010.

The invitation to Windsor Castle was a high-water mark in Akhras's rise in both British and Syrian society. On the British side, he could satisfy himself that he was on a guest list that included David Cameron and the Prince of Wales. On the Syrian side, he could reflect that his daughter, Asma, had been married to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, for nearly 10 years and her reputation was growing as a glamorous and moderating influence on a regime George Bush included in his "axis of evil". A PR push would soon end with Vogue dubbing her a "rose in the desert".

At 65, Akhras was at the fulcrum of British-Syrian relations, but with the Arab Spring about to unfurl he was to face an extreme test of his principles. The revelation of his apparent role in advising his son-in-law in mitigating negative coverage of his crackdown will stretch his links to the UK establishment to the limit.

In his day job he was a respected cardiologist at a private clinic and the Cromwell hospital in west London. But through his position as Assad's father-in-law and by dint of his trustworthy style, he had become a political gatekeeper for Damascus in London and had gathered around him a group of influential supporters. These included the Conservative party donor Wafiq Said, Margaret Thatcher's former chief of staff Lord Powell, and several MPs and business people. But within months, as the bodies piled up in Syria, that support would start draining away, leaving Akhras besieged by criticism.

Akhras was born in Homs. He emigrated to London in 1973 where he met his wife, Sahar Otri, an official at the Syrian embassy. Asma was born in 1975 and they raised her in Acton, attending a local school and then Queen's College, a private school on Harley Street. He completed postgraduate studies at King's College hospital and lectured at several London medical schools before spending three years in the 1990s chairing the cardiothoracic department at the King Fahed military hospital in Jeddah.

To some observers, his departure from Syria was typical of a generation of educated Syrians who felt that to progress they needed to leave the country, which was then led by the repressive Ba'athist president, Hafez al-Assad. Akhras's daughter's alliance with Assad's son Bashar, an eye doctor whom Akhras reportedly met in London, would allow him to become a leading figure among the exiles in rebuilding bridges with their mother country.

Nadim Shehadi, associate fellow at Chatham House, said: "When Bashar came to power there was optimism among the expats that there was going to be a change, so they started to engage with him. Bashar allowed them not to do military service so they could go back to Syria again. Akhras became a figurehead of the British Syrians making connections again."

Akhras was mixing with Arab expats in London, according to Shehadi, but he was not overtly political. "The Syrians in



The Assad emails

Advice from the father-in-law

Fawaz Akhras' 10 December 2011 email, to sam@alshahba.com and akk@alshahba.com, details 13 points that helped him to rebut criticisms of the Syrian regime and 'direct the argument toward the other side'. The points included...

"Total deaths in Libya according to their figures was over 102,000 people. Why did the UN Human Rights Council not meet at the time and now are so concerned about the Syrians' death ...
 "... Advocating free speech should not provoke harsh and inhuman attacks on demonstrators in Wall Street and London."

London were low-profile but the atmosphere changed when Bashar took over and started engaging with them," Shehadi added. "They were able to go back to Syria and get involved with charities that Asma was setting up. They were very optimistic about Bashar. Akhras was part of that."

Akhras established the British Syrian Society, securing the backing from British establishment figures, among them Lord Steel, the former Liberal leader and Sir Andrew Green. Akhras's involvement in Syrian affairs grew again and he became a board member of the centre for Syrian studies at St Andrews, and in September 2010 he set up the Syria Heritage Foundation "to promote and advance education in the arts, culture and heritage of Syria". Lord Powell joined as a trustee.

But as the violence began in Syria around a year ago, the edifice Akhras had built started to crumble. "When they started shooting children it was disgusting and that was the end of it for me," said Lord Spring, a Conservative peer, who resigned from the society last year. "Fawaz is an agreeable, modest, understated individual and he is one of the world's leading cardiologists. I don't know anyone who dislikes him. I think he must be aghast."

Spring said he got involved in the society in 2002 amid hopes that Assad would be a reformer. "In the end, those people who said he was never going to reform were proved right," he said. "The whole thing has descended into absolute tragedy."

The Labour MP Roger Godsiff also quit last year, the society's records show.

In June 2011, Said complained in an email to Akhras that "the situation in Syria is simply unacceptable and the continuing killings and violence are indefensible". He said he would have resigned "had you not been our chairman, as you are my dear friend and I do not want to put you in an awkward or embarrassing position".

Asked about Akhras, Green said: "I have a high opinion of him. He has been a good colleague and I don't want to go further than that."



Fawaz Akhras with his daughter, Syria's First Lady Asma al-Assad, pictured in Syria in 2004. Akhras 'must be aghast' at the crackdown.

Syrian reaction

Activists angered at revelations in emails as

Martin Chulov Beirut

Syrian activists and opposition figures reacted with outrage yesterday to the email cache revealed by the Guardian, saying that they showed President Bashar al-Assad and his ruling circle were blasé about the uprising in their country.

The regime's brutal attempts to put down the revolution continued yesterday on the first anniversary of the uprising, which broke out in Deraa.

Demonstrators again took to the streets of the town now hailed as the birthplace of the revolution, despite the presence of a vast number of security personnel who have deployed there in recent days.

The Guardian's website was also reported to have been blocked in much of



Assad's supporters rally in Damascus

Syria yesterday in an apparent attempt to prevent citizens from reading the Assad emails. Pan-Arab satellite channel Al Arabiya, which has also obtained the leaked emails, reported significant interference with its transmission signal this week.

Large pro-regime rallies were held in Damascus and in Aleppo, Syria's second city. Opposition activists claimed government workers had been instructed to attend to show support for Assad, who retains a firm hold on power despite the protracted challenge to his authority. The leader appears to have made inroads into flashpoint areas in the rest of the country, especially Homs and Idlib, which were opposition strongholds until they capitulated in the face of military assaults.

Opposition activists believe Deraa will be the next target for the military. Tanks

Eyewitness
Refugees protest against Syrian president
at a camp in Turkey Pages 26-27

Assad father-in-law



said Richard Spring, a Conservative MP who knows him Photograph: Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty

The London doctor who advises Assad

« continued from page 1 »

riots burst out and David Cameron said he would get the army out, now would you compare that to Homs?" he said.

When it was pointed out that the British police had not killed anyone in the riots, he said: "We are not as sophisticated as the Metropolitan police or Scotland Yard."

The revelation that Akhras has taken such an active role helping the Syrian regime will create embarrassment for a number of establishment figures with links to him. Fellow directors of the British Syrian Society include Sir Andrew Green, former UK ambassador to Syria, and Sir Gavin Arthur, former lord mayor of London, while Lord (Charles) Powell, Margaret Thatcher's former chief of staff, is a trustee of the Syria Heritage Foundation, a British charity set up by Akhras.

The string of emails between Akhras and Assad over a nine-month period appear to show that the doctor was particularly concerned about how better to present the regime's actions internationally. They also reveal a frank and friendly relationship between the two men, with many signed off by Akhras "warmest".

Late last December, Akhras advised Assad to respond to a Channel 4 film showing video-evidence of civilians, including children, being tortured in Syria, by suggesting it could be dismissed as British propaganda aimed at triggering a Syrian genocide. In a direct email to the president he attached an article suggesting as much and said it "might be of some help towards drafting the embassy's response to [the] Channel Four video".

Earlier that month he had sent the president and the first lady a 12-point rebuttal of criticisms of the regime, which he said he had drafted to help him in "directing the argument or the discussion toward the other side".

He questioned why the UN should be



Akhras sent an email to Bashar and Asma Assad's email accounts which read: 'What is the difference between Sarkozy, Netanyahu and Obama?' The photograph above was one of three attached to the email

so concerned about the death toll in Syria given that so many people had died in Libya before the UN security council convened, and suggested the west was hypocritical in criticising the regime, given recent "harsh and inhuman attacks on the demonstrators in Wall Street and London".

He also recommended highlighting difficulties faced by the "revolutionary democracies" that emerged from the Arab spring: "They are unable to agree on naming a Minister of Interior in one country and failed to form a cabinet for a long time in others and now we see that the majority in some new parliaments are refusing to join or be part of the government programme." In the same email he suggested the BBC operated a "facts distortion policy", deliberately suppressing an interview which suggested the Free Syrian Army had only a small number of supporters.

He advised highlighting US torture of prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib to counter allegations of torture by Syrian forces.

On 16 January this year, as international pressure grew on Assad to stand down and the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, described the casualties as "unacceptable", Akhras urged Assad to launch an English language Syrian state news network "to enable us to address the world of our case in their own language and mentality".

Concern over Akhras's links with the regime had already been growing in private among his British associates. The emails reveal that in June, Wafiq Said, the billionaire Syrian-born businessman and director of the British Syrian Society, told Akhras "the current situation in Syria is simply unacceptable and the continuing killings and violence are indefensible". He said the society should become dormant.

While others associated with the British Syrian Society have distanced themselves from the Assad regime, Akhras has continued to help his son-in-law.

He also sent the president risqué jokes from his iPhone, including one about the relative penis sizes of Nicolas Sarkozy, Binyamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama.

Peter Beaumont, page 38 »
Leader comment, page 40 »
Eyewitness, pages 26 and 27 »

regime persists with crackdown

yesterday remained on the outskirts of the besieged town and clashes were sporadic and confined to areas near demonstration flashpoints. Activists said about 40 people were killed nationwide in clashes yesterday. The daily death toll in Syria has been at, or higher, than that level for much of the past six months as a series of rolling protests steadily transformed into a blazing insurgency that pitched an almost exclusively rebel army of defectors and armed citizens against a loyalist military, whose leaders are drawn largely from the Assad clan's Allawi sect.

The insurgency has clearly faltered in recent weeks, with the Free Syria Army withdrawing from its stronghold in the Baba Amr district of Homs as regime troops advanced. The northern city of Idlib, also a rebel bastion, fell earlier this week after a short battle.

There is also growing concern about the faltering diplomatic track, with Syria's fractured main opposition movement further weakened this week by the resignation of key member, apparently dejected by the government's recent advances.

A year after the popular protests in Deraa, the Syrian opposition remains unable to provide a viable alternative to the four decades of clan rule in the country and its executive committee remains divided on key strategic issues.

Western and Arab diplomacy has also failed to make inroads, with Russia, China and Iran providing unwavering cover to Assad who faces no credible threat of a Libya-style military move to oust him.

Instead there are increasing western moves to engage elements of the Syrian regime, who fear a future without Assad but are not unconditionally aligned to his regime. "There is the Sunni business elite and others in the regime who are more distant from the family itself," said a western diplomat this week, explaining that efforts

'There is the Sunni business elite and others in the regime who are more distant from the family itself'

are being mounted to communicate with them. They need to feel that they are not in the same corner as Assad. We are not saying that the entire machine has to be dismantled. That was the great lesson of Iraq: de-Ba'athification was not a great day-after strategy."

Kofi Annan, the UN special envoy for Syria, is yet to respond in full to a response he received from Damascus yesterday to his push this week to broker a peace deal. The Syrian response is believed to have conditioned a ceasefire on opposition militias also downing their weapons.

During weekend meetings in Damascus with Assad, Annan said a solution to the crisis lies in "political settlement".

Opposition activists have repeatedly said they will not negotiate with the regime and will accept nothing less than Assad surrendering power.

Harvard inquiry

Asma al-Assad's inbox offered a tantalising hint that she may have been contemplating a professional change of direction. Six of the emails she received were apparently sent after she registered for information from Harvard Business School.

A spokesperson for the school confirmed that the emails were sent to individuals who had explicitly requested information about the school's "executive education" programmes.

They were among dozens of marketing circulars from companies, including many British retailers such as Smythson, the luxury goods store famous for employing Samantha Cameron, and the supermarkets Waitrose and Tesco. **Paul Lewis**

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)



Mona and Ali at the Islamic Group's refugee centre; below: refugees protest against the Assad regime
ALESSIO FOMENZI

'The children can escape the country, but they can't escape the conflict and fear'



Syrian refugees, many heart-breakingly young, are flooding into Lebanon. By Liane Wimhurst in Baalbek

Mona flinches each time she hears a bang in the chaotic refuge in the Lebanese mountains that has been her home for a week. The five-year-old wears several layers of baggy, boys' clothes and clutches a ragged, blue bear. "I always get scared. My father is in Syria so I worry a lot about him," she says. Bed-wetting and terrorised walls are nightly features of the lives of the 30 children who fled Homs and Qusayr, a nearby village, with their five mothers in two convoys last week.

Some of the children are boisterous and grapple for attention. Others sit in silence, their eyes dart around and their heads jolt each time the louder ones clap or smack the floor. Others sit in the centre of the room, frenziedly banging the carpet and imitating the chant leaders so familiar in videos of Syria's protests.

"I know what they say at the demonstrations," shouts Mona. In perfect unison they sing a chant about the revolutionaries of every Syrian town: "In Latakia they are safe, thank God; in Homs are the brave." Each new rhyme they recite is more sinister – calling for the

Shabiha, the regime's militias, and Bashar al-Assad, to be hanged, for Muammar Gaddafi's fate to befall them. The children belt out the words with a tragic glee. "We will not sleep until the ass steps aside," cries 11-year-old Ala. When he grows up he insists he will be "the great leader of the revolution".

Mona wants to become a doctor to help the wounded. "I was shot in the back," she shouts, clapping a hand over her spine. She lifts her top to reveal her back is unscathed and giggles. The family says she wants to be like her mother, who has shrapnel from mortars lodged in her arm. They gather around a cast iron heater in the snow-capped mountain town. All live in three rooms, housed by a local NGO called the Islamic Group.

The assault on Homs and Qusayr intensified two months ago. When the breaks between the children's screams narrowed and shrapnel burst in through the windows, five families decided to flee. They left the two neighbouring towns for the Baalbek mountains in Lebanon, smuggled across by those they describe as "good people".

"We changed cars every six minutes," says Ala. His mother says it was every 15, during a three-hour, 100km journey.



Men who intimately knew their patch and the sniper positions bundled the children into a desperate relay of vehicles until they reached safety. The men stayed behind to defend the town. During a break in the bombardment the women packed a few possessions and left. Nearby buildings had been gutted

"We know the children here in Lebanon are just the tip of the iceberg. There are many still in Syria"

by blasts and it was only a matter of time before their homes would be hit.

For months the children had not dared to go outside. Their homes were often immersed in total darkness as the electricity failed. They lived off meagre rations from last year's harvest and had limited supplies of water as shells had hit the tanks on the roofs.

"Even if the children can escape the country, they often can't escape the conflict and the fear it creates," says Andrew Wander, emergencies media manager at Save the Children. His organisation is scrambling to create projects to support the vast influx of children into countries bordering Syria. Some of the children have been orphaned; others have only one parent left.

Two of the children in the cramped Baalbek home have a rare condition they call *sumak* – or fish – because it turns skin grey and scaly. It is an extreme form of psoriasis that has been left untreated for months. Ala, one of the sufferers, is prematurely aged, his raw and angry skin stretched over his bones. He perpetually forces a smile through cracked skin, but his face falls when he believes no one is looking. Every medical facility had closed in Qusayr, and Lebanese doctors

are unsure what to prescribe – they have never seen such a severe case. He has the gravelled and wizened voice of an old man: "In Syria life is miserable," he says.

"We know the children here in Lebanon are just the tip of the iceberg; there are many still in Syria and to get to them we need full humanitarian access," says Mr Wander, who is desperate for the Syrian government to permit the creation of an aid corridor to reach those most in need.

Ala's older brother, 14-year-old Mohammed, sits sullenly disengaged in the corner. He only looks up when the homeowner says he is unsure how long he can host them. It is clear he feels the burden of responsibility for his sprawling family, catapulted into this position by the grim turn of events. When questioned Mohammed gives curt, often untrue, answers. Asked if he joined the demonstrations, he says he did not. But his mother, 42-year-old Tfaha, says: "He did, he went every day – I encouraged him."

Mohammed later admits he would like to join the Free Syrian Army. Would he not be scared? "No, I'd know I was defending our honour and our country."

"If they had enough weapons we would all join," says Tfaha.

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

AN ANNIVERSARY MARKED BY DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

By ALASTAIR BEACH

After more than 8,000 civilian deaths, a full-scale bombardment of one of the country's largest cities and renewed fears of all-out civil war, the first anniversary of Syria's uprising was marked by flag-waving rallies from regime supporters in Damascus yesterday – and more death and destruction in the country's northern borderlands.

As thousands of President Bashar al-Assad's supporters demonstrated in the centre of the capital to declare their allegiance to Syria's embattled leader (opposition activists claimed they had been bussed in), Baathist troops continued their campaign against rebel forces holed up in towns and villages along the northern border with Turkey.

Officials in Ankara, the Turkish capital, said that at least a thousand refugees had fled through the mountainous terrain of Idlib province over the past 24 hours, despite reports that Assad's soldiers had mined the area. Turkey's Interior Minister suggested yesterday that a "buffer zone" could be created to protect civilians from advancing troops, though he did not say how exactly it would work.

"The [Syrian] soldiers are taking the women and children and lining them up in front of them as a human shield," said one 22-year-old refugee, speaking to Reuters. "They are setting shops and homes on fire." Another said that troops in the countryside around Idlib were hunting down defectors and besieging towns suspected of harbouring dissidents.

Fresh allegations of atrocities emerged yesterday, days after news broke of the Syrian regime's brutal campaign to quell Homs.

According to The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 23 corpses were found dumped on the outskirts of Idlib city. The bodies had been blindfolded and handcuffed and some showed signs of torture, said the rights group.

Yesterday's renewed violence came as President Assad tried to crush the last remnants of resistance from the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

After his generals brutally snuffed out the FSA's main base in Homs, the renewed push against fighters in Idlib marked an attempt to score a decisive victory against the Syrian government's remaining enemies.



First Lady's caring image unlikely to recover

Anger at leaked details of extravagant shopping in midst of bloodshed. By Cahal Milmo

ASSAD EMAILS

As recently as January, Asma al-Assad continued to polish her image as a thoroughly modern, caring and liberal-minded consort to an awkward dictator. In a rare public statement, she affirmed her support for her husband and underlined her "very busy agenda" working for charity, as the blood of protesters soaked into Syrian soil.

For a decade, the British-born first lady of Syria devoted considerable energy to convincing the world of her role as a counterweight to Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian instincts, softening the hard edges of his regime with her penchant for haute couture and informed opinions on economic reform.

But this façade of enlightened engagement, which had already begun to slip after Mrs Assad claimed from her Damascus hideaway to be comforting the victims of Syria's undeclared civil war, fell away this week with the revelation that while her husband's military was engaged in savage repression, she was devoting her energies not to charity, but to shopping.

The 36-year-old daughter of a west London cardiologist is shown, in the thousands of personal emails apparently intercepted by the Syrian opposition, to be more interested in the acquisition of Christian Louboutin shoes, items in the Harrods' sale and the lat-

For years she convinced the world she was a moderating influence on her husband. Now the mask has slipped

est Harry Potter movie than the "dialogue" she has professed to be pursuing to help resolve the conflict.

Through the steady flow of invoices from Chelsea cabinet makers and Parisian interior design stores, a picture emerges of a woman closer in spirit to Imelda Marcos and Leila Trabelsi, the notoriously acquisitive wife of deposed Tunisian despot Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, than the moderating counsellor to her husband's excess that she might have been.

Ensnared in the three-storey presidential apartment in Damascus, Mrs Assad appears through her emails to have spent tens of thousands of pounds on internet shopping, while violence erupted across Syria.

When told that her order for four gold and diamond necklaces from a Paris workshop would be delayed, the former Deutsche Bank hedge fund executive with a degree in computer science replied: "I am absolutely useless when it comes to fine jewellery!"

While the Syrian Army rained artillery shells on her parents' home-

town of Homs in February, Mrs Assad was preoccupied with an exclusive preview of Christian Louboutin shoes, asking friends: "Does anything catch your eye?"

In November 2011, she was in touch with the nephew of the Lebanese prime minister. Their exchange might conceivably have touched on the strategic importance of Lebanon and the threat posed to the Assad regime by Iranian-backed Hamas. Instead, Asma,

the mother of three sons, wanted to know if his planned arrival date in Damascus would allow him to bring a newly-released DVD of the latest Harry Potter film. In another message, an aide is asked to buy a fondue set from the Amazon website.

What the emails necessarily fail to reveal are the face to face conversations between the Assads which might challenge the overwhelming image of a woman who at best is displacing concern at the bloodshed being carried out in her husband's name by worshipping Mammon – and at worst seems to revel in luxury amid the Syrian regime's calculated acts of murder.

It is, however, a close marriage that is being placed under considerable strain.

In one email sent last December, Mrs Assad wrote to her husband: "If we are strong together, we will overcome this together... I love you."

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The Scotsman (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

How Coventry shopkeeper is world's source of news from war-torn Syria

MARIA GOLOVNINA

RAMI Abdulrahman, a Syrian shopkeeper in Coventry, has become, for many, the most reliable source of information about the revolt against president Bashar al-Assad. He is a lone warrior.

Thousands of miles away from home, in a small rented house, Mr Abdulrahman runs Syria's most prominent activist group, which has become central to the way the uprising is being reported.

With foreign observers and journalists banned from Syria, his network of more than 200 activists scattered around the nation's most violent corners is the most cited, yet the most disputed, source of information on the year-long conflict.

His group is known globally as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, yet he works almost entirely on his own, with just a handful of aides to take witness statements, cross-check data and scrutinise amateur videos from scenes of clashes.

In the lonely quiet of his study, telephone conversations with contacts on the ground are often punctuated by the sound of gunfire and explosions on the other end of the line.

"I am a simple man," said Mr Abdulrahman, who does not use his real name to protect his family. "I work in my office - here is my laptop, here are my phones. I don't need many people."

Attacks come from all sides. Assad's government says he is lying and its powerful propaganda machine has unleashed a campaign against him on Syrian state television. Assad supporters have publicly threatened to kill him.

A constant feeling that Assad's agents are probably watching, even in Britain, overshadows his work. A UK citizen, Mr Abdulrahman is bombarded by menacing e-mails. "When you are

sides, that means you are on the right track," he said. "When you say the truth, you have many enemies."

Some opposition supporters accuse him of being too cautious with casualty figures. Others blame him for including Assad forces in his figures, which they say has marred their cause.

Mr Abdulrahman, 40, says he feels confident, not least because he has the backing of rights groups such as Amnesty International which have strongly endorsed his work as reliable. Most foreign news organisations also use his figures.

Mr Abdulrahman, who moved to Britain in 2000 after serving a jail term for political activism, says his team of contacts in Syria is a trusted, well-trained force.

Yet his critics are relentless. One blog post accused him of re-

"When you say the truth, you have many enemies"

Rami Abdulrahman

ceiving funding from British intelligence as well as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Russia - a staunch ally of Assad - has added fuel to the fire by describing Mr Abdulrahman's group as untrustworthy. "[It] is headed by a certain R Abdurahman [sic] who has no training in journalism or law or even a complete secondary education," a Russian foreign ministry spokesman said.

Mr Abdulrahman has denied all accusations. "The Syrian regime says I get money from MI6, others say I get it from the Gulf. I don't receive funding from anyone in the world," he said.

"I don't want to get money from any country. No one gives money for nothing. I want to be independent. When you are independent, you can say what



by Ian Birrell

AMONG a stash of emails that emerged yesterday, apparently sent by the Syrian president and his wife, it is the small details that are so damning: the desperate search for a Harry Potter DVD, the concern over getting hold of a new chocolate fondue set, or swapping details with friends of crystal-encrusted designer shoes costing nearly \$4,000.

Even the language is toe-curling, with snippets of text-speak amid shocking insouciance to the slaughter, torture and rape of their fellow Syrians as they rose up against their bloodstained regime — or were merely caught in the crossfire of a deadly conflict.

'I am absolutely clueless when it comes to fine jewellery,' witters Asma al-Assad, the president's 36-year-old British-born wife, to her cousin as she awaits delivery of gold, onyx and diamond-encrusted necklaces being made for her in Paris. 'Kisses to you both, and don't worry, we are well.' She signs off 'aaa'.

On June 17, 2011, Asma's thoughts had turned to a £2,650 vase she wanted. In an email to the family's London 'fixer', Souleiman Marouf, she wrote: 'Pls can Abdulla see if this is available at Harrods to order — they have a sale.'

Other purchases in the email traffic show how last July, Asma was placing an order for £10,000 worth of candlesticks, tables and chandeliers which were to be shipped from a Paris designer through a company in Dubai.

And in November 2011 — as the violence tipped into armed conflict on the streets of Syria — Asma was asking a London art dealer about works costing between £5,000 and £35,000.

However, in January of this year she was less than happy after unpacking a pair of bedside tables shipped by a Chelsea cabinet-maker as she complained they had 'different finishes and they have different colour draws (sic)'.

Five months ago, Asma was in contact with a bespoke furniture supplier in Billingshurst, Sussex, as she ordered a £6,257 marble-topped table.

The electronic documents emerged on the first anniversary of the Syrian uprising and were apparently intercepted by the Supreme Council of the Revolution Group. The emails were published yesterday by The Guardian, which admitted it has been impossible to verify whether all the messages are genuine. But the damage is done.

With this damning leak, this brilliant woman — a former banker who speaks four languages and was styled as her nation's answer to Princess Diana — has been cast in a far harsher light: as the Marie Antoinette of the Middle East.

SHE comes across as a shallow ingenue, focused on internet shopping rather than the horrific plight of the people she professes to care for.

What makes it all the more shocking is that her own family comes from Homs, the city at the centre of the uprising that has been brutally battered by her husband's regime.

There is often much that is tawdry when we glimpse the humdrum humanity behind dictators. Their public self-aggrandisement makes them appear one-dimensional monsters, yet even Adolf Hitler was fond of painting watercolours.

Now, we learn that Bashar Assad, 46, likes country music and the gloomy Manchester band New Order. In the newly released cache of messages, there is an extraordinary email — typed as the conflict entered a new stage with the massacres in Homs early last month — in which the president sent his wife the lyrics of a country and western song by American singer Blake Shelton.

He wrote: 'I've been a walking heartache / I've made a mess of me / The person that I've been lately / Ain't who I cannot be.'

Of course, though these messages appear genuine, they have not been independently verified beyond doubt.

Yesterday, Syrian national television said they were the work of a hoaxer, though that's what you'd



expect it to say. Certainly if they are accepted as being sent by the Assads, these messages are devastating. In particular, they crush the carefully constructed image of Assad's wife as perhaps the most sophisticated woman in world politics, a modern mother-of-three who was dedicated to her charities while determined to modernise Syria.

Paris Match called her the element of 'light in a country full of shadows', and, even after the revolt began last year, Vogue drooled over her as 'a rose in the desert' in one of the most fawning magazine articles ever written.

As protesters demanding the most basic human rights were being beaten to death, she was quoted talking about her 'wildly democratic' family. 'We all have a stake in this country; it will be what we make it,' she said with no trace of irony.

Her pose fooled politicians and celebrities. When French president Nicolas Sarkozy was warned by aides that Bashar Assad was an appalling tyrant, he replied that

'with a wife as modern as his, he can't be completely bad'.

Meanwhile, Asma was seen joking about her supposed lack of security protection with Brad Pitt when he visited Syria with Angelina Jolie, while a long-standing apostle of human rights such as Sting was happy to be pictured laughing beside the president and his wife.

Now Asma can be seen for what she always was: the glamorous facade of a vicious, vile regime.

'We put a lot of faith in her being able to reform the system,' says Andrew Tabler, a U.S. writer who lived in Syria for nearly a decade and worked for one of Asma's charities. 'But she was used to get Western powers to engage with Syria.'

Like many others, Tabler fell for Asma's easy-going charm and apparent candour. It's hard not to like her — she's a very affable person, he says. 'The trouble is that she married Bashar and he is leader of this terrible, corrupt system that has hijacked her.'

The daughter of a Harley Street cardiologist and his diplomat wife, Asma grew up in the London suburb of Acton. Though a Muslim, she went to a Church of England school, where friends called her Emma.

After studying computer science and French literature at King's College, London, she was working as a banker at JP Morgan in the Nineties when she started secretly dating Bashar, the nerdy former eye doctor being groomed to succeed his despotic father in Syria.

'What do you say? — "I'm dating the son of a president?" You just don't say that,' she later told an interviewer. 'Then he became president, so I tried to keep it low-key.'

There was concern in Damascus over their union, because she is a Sunni Muslim, like the majority of Syrians. Her husband's family are members of the minority Alawite sect — one reason there are fears this secular country may implode into

sectarian civil war, fuelled by anger at their brutal kleptocracy.

When Bashar took power in 2000, there were hopes he would relax the regime and its shadowy network of feared security forces. While he dropped heavy hints of reform, his Westernised wife threw herself into good works.

But it was a mirage, and there were few real changes. The country remained as corrupt as ever, and one insider compared her charities to those run by Colonel Gaddafi's favourite daughter, Aisha, in Libya — used to extend state control with favours for supporters.

TABLER believes Asma — who he says is 'very smart' — meant well, but 'became sucked into the system. Underlining the impression given out by the vacuous tone of many of the leaked emails, he adds that she became increasingly obsessed by the world of haute couture.'

'She may be trapped,' Tabler said. 'But at the end of the day, life is about choices and your character is determined by these choices.'

After the uprising began a year ago, there were rumours Asma had fled the country. But in January she made a rare appearance at a rally addressed by her husband, then last month sent an email to The Times claiming she was busy supporting her charities and comforting families caught up in the violence.

It was yet more artifice. Clearly, she has decided to stand by her husband, despite his actions in hastening such a pivotal nation's descent into civil war.

In one of the most revealing online exchanges, Asma refused a request from the Emir of Qatar's daughter to pass on her private email address to Emine Erdogan, the wife of the Turkish prime minister.

'I use this account only for family and friends,' she said coldly, adding that she no longer considered Mrs Erdogan a friend after the insults directed towards her husband by the Turkish leader.

If the emails are accepted to be genuine, unfortunately for her it is no longer just her family and friends who have seen her private thoughts. The world has seen them — and Asma al-Assad appears to be a callous fraud, shopping online for designer baubles while her fellow Syrians die in the most terrible circumstances.

In this digital age, it is a new twist on an old story: the awful banality of evil.

Massacres, emails and a modern Marie Antoinette

Leaked messages show British wife of Syrian tyrant shopped for baubles at Harrods as her husband slaughtered thousands



Style icon: Asma al-Assad and (inset) with husband Bashar

Pictures: ICS / EYEWNE

The National Post (Canada)

Thousands rally in support of Syria's Assad regime

DEATH TOLL HITS 9,100

DAMASCUS • Huge rallies showed support for Syria's President on Thursday despite a new "massacre" report and a refugee exodus to Turkey, as a deadly anti-regime revolt entered a second year.

International peace envoy Kofi Annan, meanwhile, demanded answers from President Bashar al-Assad's regime before the UN Security Council re-enters the fray in a conflict that monitors now say has cost more than 9,100 lives.

State television showed tens of thousands of people waving Syrian flags and Mr. Assad's portrait in squares in Damascus, the northern city of Aleppo, Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, Suweida to the south and Hasaka in the northeast. The cities have been relatively unscathed by the deadly crackdown on dissent.

The authorities, which have blamed the bloodshed on foreign-backed "terrorist gangs," announced a "global march for Syria" to counter anti-regime demonstrations being organised this week by the opposition across the world.

Against a backdrop of a sea of flags, including the colours of Syria's Russian and Iranian allies as well as Lebanon's Shiite group Hezbollah, a bugler played in Damascus before a military band struck up the national anthem.

"We are not scared of death. We are ready to sacrifice ourselves for you, O Syria," the demonstrators chanted, many of them singing and dancing, and shouting: "Long live the army!"

In a breakdown of 9,113 deaths in the past 12 months, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the toll comprised 6,645 civilians, 1,997 members of the security forces and 471 rebels.

In Aleppo and on the outskirts of Damascus, security forces broke up scattered anti-regime protests, according to the Local Coordination Committees, which organise demonstrations.

"Bashar, get out," women chanted at a rally in the Jubar district of eastern Damascus, in a video posted by activists on the Internet.

The Observatory, meanwhile, said 23 mutilated corpses were found near the protest city of Idlib in northwest Syria that was seized by regime forces this week. The victims had been blindfolded and handcuffed before being

The New York Times / International Herald Tribune (USA)

Weighing the perils and promise of Syria

ISTANBUL

Reluctant to intervene, Turkey feels pressed by refugees and reputation

BY DAN BILEFSKY

The intensifying crackdown by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has prompted more than 1,000 Syrians to

cross into Turkey during the past 24 hours, Turkish officials said Thursday, amid growing fears of a refugee crisis spilling into the country.

The yearlong uprising in Syria has proven both deadly and intractable, confronting the world with the potential for a regional war and a humanitarian crisis even as the international community is accused of looking the other way.

The spiraling crisis in Syria has presented Turkey with an opportunity, both perilous and promising, to show its

heft to the world as the large Muslim country of 79 million people strives to become a regional leader. But so far Turkey has been largely stymied in its efforts to influence events within Syria.

Despite heavy deployment by Syrian forces along the Turkish border, frightened Syrians are continuing to

ASSAD'S SUPPORTERS MARCH 'FOR SYRIA'
Thousands gathered in Damascus against the uprising they portray as led by terrorists and foreigners. *PAGE 4*

flee, with more than 14,700 now sheltered in five camps in Hatay, a Turkish province on the border.

"There has been an increase in those fleeing from Syria to our country," the Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Selcuk Unal said Thursday. "Yesterday, the number of people who had come was 13,700. This morning, the number is 14,700."

He said that a top Syrian general was among the newest refugees, the seventh *TURKEY, PAGE 4*

TURKEY, FROM PAGE 1

high-ranking military officer to have defected. Turkish officials said Ankara was making contingency plans in the event of a massive inflow of Syrians; it had built a camp of prefabricated houses to host 15,000 people in Kilis, an eastern border town. Another camp was being built in Sanliurfa province, along the border with Syria, to house up to 20,000 people.

While the Syrian opposition remains hopelessly divided and the world has been unable to unify against the Assad regime amid intransigence by Russia and China, a Europe distracted by economic malaise and a United States reluctant to become mired in a volatile region, Turkey has intensified its criticism of the Syrian regime.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey recently likened Mr. Assad to Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian strongman who plunged his country into an ethnically driven civil war.

Yet for all of its bluster and resolve, Turkey has also been reluctant to intervene, insisting that it will not take unilateral military action and that any such initiative should come from the Arab League or the United Nations.

Proposals to create a buffer zone or a humanitarian aid corridor within Syria as well as to arm the rebel Free Syrian Army or to establish an Arab peacekeeping force are expected to be discussed at a Friends of Syria meeting set for April 2 in Istanbul.

Turkish officials say they have not ruled out having its military participate in an international plan to create a buffer zone in the event that Mr. Assad continues to slaughter his own people and an even larger influx of refugees ensues.

Turkish officials say privately that Ankara will not act unilaterally in imposing such a zone because Russia and Iran are backing Syria, making the risks too high.

Analysts say Turkey is also extremely

wary of taking military action partly because of concerns that sectarian strife in Syria could migrate to Turkey. Turkish officials fear that Turkish boots on the ground could undermine Turkey's popularity in a region where memories of Ottoman rule still run deep.

Despite its limited room to maneuver, Turkey has been jockeying to position itself as a country that can influence a post-Assad Syria. It is hosting the Syrian opposition, including the Syrian National Council, and the rebel Free Syrian Army, a group of some 10,000 soldiers that is being housed in an army camp in Turkey near the Syrian border.

But as Mr. Assad continues to cling to power, Turkey risks finding itself the patron of a failed revolt while also being saddled with a refugee crisis or, worse, a civil war on its doorstep.

"The stakes are very high for Turkey in Syria," said Soli Ozel, columnist for Haberturk, a leading Turkish newspaper. "If Turkey proves to be ineffectual

"The stakes are very high for Turkey in Syria."

in resolving the Syrian conflict, then all of the claims of its regional prowess will take a big hit."

Turkey has been playing a leading role in marshalling a coalition to put pressure on Syria in the Arab League. At the same time, aides say, the Syrian crisis has made Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan an indispensable ally to President Barack Obama.

The conflict in Syria, however, has laid bare the limits of Turkey's power in the region. Just a year ago, Turkey was emerging as one of Syria's closest allies, with the two countries holding joint cabinet sessions and Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Assad even vacationing together. Turkey's 910 kilometer, or 500-mile, border with Syria is its longest, and trade between the two countries had more than tripled to \$2.5 billion in 2010.

Despite years of diplomatic engagement and economic investment, Turkey could not persuade Mr. Assad to back down.

The conflict in Syria is seen as a crucial test for Turkey as it struggles to carry out its newly muscular foreign policy in the region. Turkey's aspirations to join the European Union are all but dormant. The conflict with Cyprus appears as intractable as ever. Efforts to reach a solution over Armenia are at an impasse.

Meanwhile, diplomatic ties with Israel are frozen over an Israeli commando raid on a vessel that tried to reach Gaza from Turkey. Iran remains deeply suspicious of Turkey's agreement to host a NATO missile shield.

Bordered to the east by countries including Syria, Iraq and Iran, Turkey — with its majority Sunni population — risks becoming mired by the sectarian divisions convulsing its neighbors. While Syria is tipping toward civil war, Iraq is once again buffeted by sectarian strife and Iran has aligned itself firmly behind the Assad regime.

Sami Kohen, foreign affairs columnist at Milliyet, a leading Turkish newspaper, noted that sectarian divisions threatened to spill over into Turkey. The country is home to around 10 million Alawite citizens, some of whom are sympathetic to Mr. Assad, also an Alawite.

Meanwhile, Turkish officials express concern that Syria, backed by Iran, could seek to embolden the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., as a means to punish Turkey for supporting the Syrian opposition.

While Turkey could clearly benefit if Mr. Assad were overthrown, analysts note that Arab countries would be loath to see Turkey exert too much influence.

"Arab countries don't want Turkey to be the kingmaker in Syria," Mr. Ozel said. "Arabs are Arabs and Turks are Turks."

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

The New York Times / International Herald Tribune (USA)

For Syrians, Olympic bid has troubled backdrop

SOCCER AMMAN

BY JAMES MONTAGUE

King Abdullah International Stadium was nearly empty. Syria's soccer team, forced to play its home matches on foreign soil after an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, had about 20 supporters in attendance for an Olympic qualifying match against Malaysia.

Even the team's top goalie, Abdul-Baset Saroot, known as the singing goalkeeper, was absent. He gained widespread attention after posting videos of himself singing revolutionary, anti-regime songs when the unrest began last year, and now he is on the run from the Syrian authorities.

Despite the turmoil, Syria took another unlikely step toward qualifying for the London Games this summer, defeating Malaysia, 3-0, and advancing to a three-team playoff with Oman and Uzbekistan this month. The winner will play Senegal for an Olympic berth.

"It is well known everyone back home will be watching the match and they will be hoping for us to win," Syria's coach, Haitham Jattal, said the day before the match. "Of course, playing in your homeland in front of our own people would be much better than playing outside. But we have overcome this difficulty and turned it into an incentive to reach the Olympics."

Little else was said by Syria's soccer officials before or after the victory over Malaysia. The uprising in Syria has left 8,000 people dead, according to the United Nations and provoked talks about international military intervention.

"We can't answer about this," the team's spokesman said when Jattal and the captain, Ahmad al-Salih, were asked at a news conference Tuesday about the unrest. "No comment about that. I am in charge of the media for the team and I say you cannot ask that."

The team includes players from the country's most popular teams, Al Karama and Al Wathba, both based in the embattled city of Homs. The absent Saroot, 20, has become a symbol of the uprising.

It is unlikely Saroot will return to the squad anytime soon. His last video message on YouTube was posted more than three weeks ago. No one affiliated with the team knew where he was or whether he was alive.

"We hope that he will return," midfielder Thaer Krouma said. "He is a good goalkeeper, and he was also our friend before."

The Syrian players had thought they were on the verge of claiming an Olympic berth Wednesday. If they had defeated Malaysia by four or more goals and if Bahrain had beaten Japan, they would have been London-bound. But Japan won, forcing Syria to more rounds of qualifying.

A downbeat Jattal tried to see the positives in the victory and the extra matches, played thousands of miles apart in less than a month.

"Happiness, but not that much happiness, as we would prefer to go to England without the playoff," he said.

The players barely celebrated as they left the field, the pro-Assad chants from the handful of Syrian fans nearly drowned out by the drums of the few hundred Malaysian fans.

USA Today

Syrians remain resolute in fight for freedom

Revolution turns a year old

By Ruby Russell, Jabeen Bhatti and Michael Gunn
Special for USA TODAY

ORENTES RIVER, Syria — One year ago, a group of schoolchildren scrawled graffiti on school walls in the small city of Daraa. Excited over the uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere known as the Arab Spring, the boys wrote, "The people want the overthrow of the regime." The boys, who ranged in age from 10 to 15, were whisked away by the security forces of President Bashar Assad and beaten terribly. Some even had their fingernails pulled out by their tormentors.

The people of Daraa were outraged and mobbed streets in protest, the customary way in which many in the Arab world communicate with their dictatorial leaders.

This time it was different: Anger over one incident in one city spread to other cities rife with abuse, torture and repression under four decades of dictatorship. The outrage may have lost momentum eventually, if not for what Assad did in response.

"It was a shock," said Omar Al Muqaddad, an activist and journalist from Daraa. "They surprised us when they opened fire on the unarmed people in the streets. And really for the first three days it seemed like a nightmare."

One year later, the protests have hardened into a revolution that borders on civil war, making this uprising by far the bloodiest to emerge from the Arab Spring as army deserters have joined forces with civilians to topple the Assad regime. Assad says the opponents are thugs and terrorists and has refused international calls to end the violence.

The death toll has reached more than 8,000 dead, according to the United

Nations, as Assad's forces use their exclusive possession of artillery and tank shells to pummel opponents armed largely with rifles. Torture and imprisonment are widespread against opponents and those who try to help them, say groups such as Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders.

And yet, the opponents show little sign of backing down.

"When [Assad] put down Daraa, Hama erupted," said Syrian activist Abdul Omar from the United Kingdom. "When he put down Hama, Homs erupted; when Homs was put down, Damascus moved, and Idlib and so on. Legitimately, there was a heavy need for reform."

"But when people called for reform and were answered with tanks, they realized what we need is more than just reform: We need a complete change," he explained.

Syria analysts say it is the violence unleashed against opponents that has stiffened their resolve.

"Despite everything that has happened, the killing, the torture, the incarceration, Syrians are still on the street every day," said Fawaz Georges, director of the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics. "A psychological rupture has taken place in Syria whereby people are willing to die and they will continue to die in order to achieve freedom and dignity."

Activists say it is also impossible now to accept Assad's rule after what he has done to his people. Opponents know they are doomed if they back down now, so they may as well fight, activists say. "If the people go back and live obediently, they know it's only a matter of time before their front door is knocked down and they are arrested, thrown in jail, raped, tortured, exiled or killed," Omar said. "They can't go back to the lives they lived before. Even if they give up, the regime will not — it will go after them."

Georges says Assad's response has deepened the commitment to the



More seeking refuge: Syrian refugees arrive Thursday at Reyhanli, Turkey, near the Syrian-Turkish border.



Growing force: Armed Syrian rebels show a makeshift camp in northern Syria near the Turkish border. Many of the rebel force defected from the Syrian army.

uprising rather than weakened it as Assad had hoped.

"This is a popular uprising that includes many people from different walks of life. This is a nationwide rebellion," Georges said. "The bulk of the uprising is more of a nationalist uprising that calls for freedom and dignity."

"La révolution de la dignité": that is how a year later, the Tunisians remember their own uprising, in songs, on posters, on stamps. Middle East analysts say that in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the more force employed by regimes, the more determined opponents actually go and protest.

The protests have been non-violent, which opponents hoped would bring international support, said Sami Ibrahim of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, speaking from Homs via Skype.

"We thought the whole world would be with us because we remained peaceful for 10 months — without a stone in our hands," Ibrahim said.

With no help in the form of arms or military protection, an armed rebel force known as the Free Syrian Army has emerged to take on Assad's forces. The rebel army is made up largely of Syrian army soldiers who switched sides armed only with the guns they were issued.

"Syria needs freedom, but what made up my mind was being told as a soldier to kill our people," said Khalel Qadar, 30, who fights with the force after defecting from the Syrian army six months ago. "I saw them fall before my eyes in Hama city."

Qadar and others say they will keep fighting until Assad is no more. Assad has said sanctions levied by the United States and others against his regime will not deter him from his campaign.

"Will Assad win?" said Qadar, camped out on the Syrian-Turkish border. "Only God knows, but we fight on until either he dies or we do."

Russell and Bhatti reported from Berlin. Contributing: Louise Osborne in

Supporters of Syrian Regime Rally in Capital

Associated Press

Tens of thousands of government loyalists poured into the streets of the Syrian capital, Damascus, and other cities on Thursday in an orchestrated show of support for the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, as the military tightened its grip on rebellious areas for the one-year anniversary of the uprising.

Also Thursday, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that well over 8,000 people have died in Syria over the past year as a result of the government's bloody crackdown on protesters.

Activists planned marches across Syria and abroad to mark the day, but some were aborted by arrest raids and shelling by government forces. Some activists expressed regret that one year later their "revolution" against Mr. Assad's rule had become mired in violence.

"We know that this is a criminal regime, but we didn't expect it to reach this amount of killing," said activist Amer Mattar, who fled to

neighboring Jordan after being arrested twice.

Despite widening international condemnation and biting trade sanctions, the regime has remained stable, and intelligence analysts say the opposition has yet to pose a serious challenge to Mr. Assad's large army and sophisticated weapons systems.

Mr. Assad also has retained the support of many in the country's business classes and minority communities, who worry they would lose certain protections under a new regime.

Some of that support was on display Thursday. Tens of thousands rallied in central Damascus, waving Syrian flags and carrying posters of Assad. Syria's state news agency posted photos of similar rallies in other cities.

"Syria is strong and we will win and undermine this conspiracy," said Damascus shopkeeper Majed Youssef, 30 years old.

The rallies were largely government-orchestrated in an attempt to overshadow opposition plans to mark the anniversary.

An activist in the southern province of Daraa, where the uprising began, said Syrian forces stormed the village of Mawa early Thursday to round people up.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said residents in the same area had their identity cards confiscated at a military checkpoint and were told they could have them back after attending a pro-regime demonstration.

The Syrian government has prevented most media from operating inside the country, and activist accounts couldn't be independently verified. Western and Arab powers have

Numbers on the Syrian uprising

- ◆ More than 8,000 people killed, according to the United Nations
- ◆ 14,000 registered Syrian refugees in Turkey
- ◆ 230,000 Syrians displaced from their homes, including 30,000 who have fled abroad, according to the U.N.
- ◆ 2,000 soldiers dead, according to Syrian government Reuters



Above, pro-government demonstrators waved the Syrian flag and photos of President Assad during a rally in Damascus on Thursday. Below, refugees shouted slogans during a protest against Mr. Assad at a refugee camp in Antakya, Turkey.



The French foreign minister said Thursday that the international community shouldn't arm the opposition because that could lead to sectarian civil war.

The Washington Post (USA)

A Syrian boy stands behind a fence at the Reyhanli refugee camp in Antakya, Turkey. About 1,000 Syrian refugees had crossed into Turkey within 24 hours, the Foreign Ministry said Thursday.

Pro-Assad rallies mark year since revolt

Turkey suggests it may support 'buffer zone' to cope with refugees

BY CRISPIAN BALMER

BEIRUT — Huge crowds took to the streets of Syria's cities Thursday in an orchestrated show of support for President Bashar al-Assad on the first anniversary of a bloody revolt against his rule that shows no sign of ending.

Turkey hinted that it might consider supporting a "buffer zone" inside Syria to cope with a flow of refugees across its border that has increased sharply after a recent government offensive against rebels in the nearby Idlib region.

Opposition activists said pro-Assad forces shot at crowds in various locations when they tried to stage protests, but residents reported that demonstrators did gather in the affluent Shaalan district of Damascus to voice their anger.

The U.N.-Arab League special

envoy, Kofi Annan, continued to push his proposals to halt the violence, speaking to senior Syrian authorities and Russia.

"The door of dialogue is still open. We are still engaged with Syrian authorities" over the proposals, Annan's spokesman, Ahmad Fawzi, said in Geneva. However, Western diplomats privately expressed pessimism about Annan's chances of success.

Syria said Wednesday that it had given a "positive" response to Annan's approach, and a Middle Eastern diplomat characterized the reply from Damascus as "not a 'no.'" But a senior Western diplomat in the region said Damascus had spurned Annan's ideas.

State television showed thousands of people in central Damascus on Thursday, waving portraits of Assad and the flags of Syria, Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing have not joined Western nations in backing an Arab League plan for Assad to step aside.

"We sacrifice our blood and souls to you, Bashar!" the crowds chanted as three helicopters flew

past in a military salute, trailing the national colors on a blustery day.

Official news media announced that government forces had cleared "armed terrorists" from the northwestern city of Idlib, suggesting that the army was gaining ground against the uprising that the United Nations said Thursday has killed "well over 8,000" people and crippled Syria's economy.

Opposition activists said 23 bodies were found dumped on open ground near Idlib, some bearing signs of torture.

Besides Damascus, pro-government rallies were staged in numerous cities, including Daraa, near Jordan, which was the heart of the original protest movement last year but has been filled with security forces backed by tanks since Wednesday.

Critics said the government had bused in state employees to bolster the demonstrations and canceled a national school holiday to get students and teachers to join in.

— Reuters

The Washington Post (USA)

Get off the sidelines with Syria

BY MAX BOOT

It's easy to tell when the Pentagon is opposed to a military intervention. That's when we hear leaks saying how difficult such action would be. We heard them in the 1990s concerning Bosnia and Kosovo, we heard them last year over Libya, and we are hearing them now about Syria.

News reports cite unnamed "senior defense officials" saying that Syria has a sophisticated air-defense system and a 330,000-man army that would be hard to defeat; that we don't know enough to arm a Syrian opposition that lacks effective, unified leadership; that U.S. intervention could plunge Syria into civil war and embroil us in a "proxy war" against Iran and possibly Russia; and that international support is lacking for any move.

All of this is supposed to preclude a range of actions, including arming the Syrian opposition, enforcing "no-fly" zones, launching air strikes on regime targets and setting up humanitarian corridors where Syrians could seek refuge from a regime that has killed probably at least 10,000 civilians.

It is understandable, and laudable, that military leaders are reluctant to send their troops into harm's way. And just because defense officials tend to cry wolf doesn't mean that they are always wrong or that their warnings should be disregarded. Obviously, the George W. Bush administration should have listened more carefully to skeptics inside and outside government before the invasion of Iraq — even though senior military leaders signed off on every bad decision.

Today, in the case of Syria, any military action needs to be carefully thought through, but we should not refuse to act simply because of the worst-case scenarios being

Alawite soldiers, which is why the same units are used to attack one rebel stronghold after another.

The potential for starting a "proxy war" with Iran or Russia should be even less worrisome. Iran has been waging war — sometimes by proxy, sometimes directly — against us since taking our embassy personnel hostage in 1979. If we were to help topple Tehran's allies in Damascus, it would be merely a belated counterattack for all of Iran's aggression against the United States.

As for Russia, yes, Moscow has a naval station in Syria, but presumably U.S. aircraft would not target Russian facilities. Short of that, it's hard to see how anything we might do would start any kind of conflict with Russia. This isn't the Cuban missile crisis, and Russia would not go to war to defend the Assad regime.

What about the fractured nature of the Syrian opposition? That's a real concern — but one that could be alleviated by the provision of training and aid. U.S. personnel could play a critical role by using our largess to buttress the more moderate elements of the opposition while shutting out factions affiliated with extremist groups that receive support from Gulf Arabs. So far, however, news accounts suggest that we have not yet even provided communications equipment that the rebels could use to coordinate activities.

Aiding the rebels would hardly risk plunging Syria into civil war. Syria is already in a civil war, and it is getting worse. The more pressure we bring to topple Assad, the faster we can end that war and the more influence we can exert with a successor regime.

By contrast, if we stand on the sidelines, worst-case scenarios — such as Syrian chemical weapons falling into the wrong hands or groups such as al-Qaeda developing havens — are more likely to result because of

The Washington Times (USA)

SYRIA

Loyalists rally on revolt anniversary

Fearing a catastrophe, France rejects weapons request from opposition

FROM COMBINED DISPATCHES

Tens of thousands of government loyalists poured into the streets of the Syrian capital and other cities Thursday in an orchestrated show of support for the regime as the military tightened its grip on rebellious areas for the one-year anniversary of the uprising.

Activists planned marches across Syria and abroad to mark the day, but some were aborted by arrest raids and shelling by government forces. Some activists expressed regret that one year later their "revolution" against President Bashar Assad's rule had become mired in violence.

Meanwhile in Paris, France's foreign minister rejected weapons requests by the Syrian rebel forces, saying that arming the Syrian opposition could lead to catastrophic civil war.

"The Syrian people are deeply divided, and if we give arms to a certain faction of the Syrian opposition, we would make a civil war among Christians, Alawites, Sunnis and Shiites," Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said on France-Culture radio Thursday.

"The Syrian people are deeply divided, and if we give arms to a certain faction of the Syrian opposition, we would make a civil war among Christians, Alawites, Sunnis and Shiites."

— Foreign Minister Alain Juppe

Despite widening international condemnation and biting trade sanctions, Mr. Assad's regime has remained intact, and intelligence analysts say the opposition has yet to pose a serious challenge to his large army and sophisticated weapons systems.

The Syrian opposition is divided, and diplomatic efforts to end the conflict that has killed at least 8,000 people appear to be stalling.

In addition, Mr. Assad has retained the support of many in the country's business classes and minority communities, who worry they would lose certain protections under a new regime.

Some of that support was on display Thursday. Tens of thousands rallied in central Damascus, waving Syrian flags and carrying posters of Mr. Assad. Syria's state news agency posted photos of similar rallies in other Syrian cities.

"Syria is strong and we will win and undermine this conspiracy," said Damascus shopkeeper Majed Youssef, 30.

The rallies were orchestrated largely by the government in an attempt to overshadow opposition plans to mark the anniversary: Syria postponed the observance of Arab Teacher Day — usually a day off on the third Thursday of March — for one week, apparently so students could be brought to rallies.

An activist in the southern province of Daraa, where the uprising began, said Syrian forces stormed the village of Nawa early Thursday to

round up people.

"They put some of them on buses to take them to a demonstration," activist Raed al-Suleiman said by phone.

Many Syrian opposition members are in Paris, but divisions have kept them from forming a single unified force that the international community can rally behind.

Mr. Juppe's comments echoed those of President Obama when he warned that an international response could lead to more deaths.

"Our natural instinct is to act," Mr. Obama said Wednesday. "It's very important for us to make sure that we have thought through all of our actions before we take those steps."

Russia, a powerful ally of Syria's, is opposed to any new sanctions or international action in Syria but offered its support Thursday to former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his efforts to help end the violence.

Syria retains strong ties with Iran, and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent said Thursday that it had received aid from its Iranian counterpart and would distribute it throughout Syria's provinces.

Dallas Moring News (USA)

A year into revolt, Syrians rally for Assad

But fight to oust leader rages on, with death toll over 8,000

BEIRUT — Thousands of Syrians rallied Thursday in Damascus in a display of loyalty to President Bashar Assad, waving flags under a slate-gray sky to protest the anniversary of a rebellion that the government says is driven by terrorists, gangsters and extremists.

Outside the Syrian capital, however, tanks and snipers besieged opposition areas, including the southern city of Daraa where the uprising began a year ago, touched off by the arrest of a group of youths who scrawled anti-regime graffiti on a wall.

One year into the Syrian revolt, the fight to oust Assad is cascading toward civil war with more than 8,000 killed and no end in sight to the bloodshed. Worst-case scenarios are playing out in a country where many remain shackled by corruption, a suffocating security apparatus and a family dictatorship that rules over 22 million people.

"We know that this is a criminal regime, but we didn't expect it to reach this amount of killing," Amer Mattar, a 26-



Muzaffar Saiman/The Associated Press

Syrian riot police officers stood guard Thursday during a rally supporting President Bashar Assad in Damascus.

year-old activist, said from Jordan, where he fled to safety after being arrested twice in Syria.

Despite widening international condemnation and biting sanctions, Assad's regime has remained intact and intelligence analysts say the rebels have yet to pose a serious challenge to his powerful military.

Assad also has retained the support of many in Syria's

business classes and minority communities, who worry they would lose protections under a new regime. Still others harbor an understandable fear of the unknown, given the rampant divisions within the opposition.

Western and Arab countries have struggled to stop the bloodshed by calling on Assad to step down and imposing sanctions. But Russia and

China have protected Syria from censure by the U.N. Security Council. Many in the opposition say only military aid can bring Assad down, but no countries are openly arming the opposition.

Thursday's pro-regime rallies were orchestrated by the government to overshadow opposition plans to mark the anniversary. Still, the attendance was significant and a re-

minder that while the opposition movement has attracted an extraordinary backing, Assad still enjoys support.

As the Arab Spring protests got under way in Tunisia and Egypt last year, Assad insisted his country was different. He said the wave of uprisings, which had not yet reached Syria, signaled a "new era."

But he said his country was insulated from the upheaval because he understood his people's needs and had united them in common cause against Israel.

His early optimism quickly appeared wildly misplaced.

The arrest of a group of teenagers in Daraa for scrawling anti-regime graffiti on a wall sparked a wave of anger in the impoverished southern province. The government responded swiftly with force, setting off a cycle of rage and reprisal that spread across the country.

Activists and human rights groups say tens of thousands of Syrians have been arrested, imprisoned or tortured as the regime tries to crush its opponents. Refugees leave their homes daily, often under fire, to set out for neighboring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

Elizabeth A. Kennedy,
The Associated Press

Pro-Assad rallies mark anniversary of Syrian revolt Gov't forces say they are back in control of Idlib • Bodies found dumped near city, refugees flow into Turkey

• BY CHRISTIAN BALMER
and DOMINIC EVANS

BEIRUT (Reuters) – Flag-waving crowds took to the streets of Syrian cities on Thursday in an orchestrated show of loyalty to President Bashar Assad on the first anniversary of an increasingly bloody revolt against his rule.

Official media announced government forces had cleared “armed terrorists” from the northwestern city of Idlib, suggesting the army was gaining ground in the uprising which has cost at least 8,000 lives and crippled the Syrian economy.

Opposition activists said soldiers had fired on people trying to stage anti-regime protests in various locations and reported evidence of fresh atrocities, including the discovery of 23 bodies, some with signs of torture, near Idlib.

State television showed thousands of people in central Damascus, waving portraits of Assad and flags of Syria, Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing have not joined Western nations in backing an Arab League plan for Assad to step aside.

“We sacrifice our blood and souls to you, Bashar,” the

crowds chanted as three helicopters flew past in a military salute.

Television videoed rallies in numerous cities, including Deraa near the border with Jordan, which was the epicenter of the original protest movement last year but has been filled with security forces backed by tanks in the past 24 hours.

Critics said the government had based in state employees to the demonstrations and had made participation obligatory. There were no images from three cities where some of the worst violence has occurred in the past year, Hama, Idlib and Hama, and locals reported sporadic clashes in several places.

“The army is intensifying its attack on rebellious villages and firing on areas trying to hold [anti-Assad] protests,” said an Idlib resident, who refused to be named for fear of reprisal.

The UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan is due to report back to the Security Council on Friday on his efforts to end the violence and remains in contact with Damascus despite gloom among some Western diplomats over his chances of success.

“The door of dialogue is still

open. We are still engaged with Syrian authorities over Mr. Annan’s proposals,” Annan’s spokesman Ahmad Fawzi said in Geneva.

As the anniversary of the uprising neared, the government appeared to intensify its drive to oust lightly armed rebels from their strongholds, using heavy artillery to subdue first Hama, then Idlib, which lies close to Turkey.

“Security and peace of mind returned to the city of Idlib after authorities cleared its neighborhoods of armed terrorist groups which had terrorized citizens,” the state news agency SANA reported on Thursday.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 23 bodies had been found dumped in a rural area near the city. Some of the dead showed signs of torture and had been blindfolded and handcuffed.

Reports from Syria cannot be independently verified as the authorities deny access to rights groups and journalists. Turkey said 1,000 Syrians had crossed its borders in the last 24 hours, bringing the total of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey to 14,000.

Among those who fled was a Syrian general, the seventh to

cross into Turkey.

“The [Syrian] soldiers are taking the women and children from them as a human shield. They are setting shops and homes on fire,” said a 22-year-old man who reached Turkey overnight. He declined to give his name.

The United Nations says some 230,000 Syrians have been displaced from their homes, including 30,000 who have fled abroad, raising the prospect of a refugee crisis. The government has blamed foreign powers and terrorist gangs for the chaos and say 2,000 soldiers have died in the uprising.

Some 200 rights and aid groups, including Human Rights Watch and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, joined forces to urge Russia and China to back UN action against Syria.

China says it opposes foreign intervention in other states, while Russia, a long-time ally of Syria, is eager to maintain military cooperation with Damascus, including lucrative arms sales.

Assad confidently predicted at the start of 2011 that Syria was intimate from the “Arab Spring,” in which the autocratic leaders of Tunisia, Egypt,



SUPPORTERS OF Syrian President Bashar Assad attend a pro-regime rally at Umayyad Square in Damascus, yesterday. (Shahel Al Ham/Reuters)

Libya and Yemen lost power.

But on March 15, a few dozen protesters braved the streets of Damascus to call for more freedom. Days later riots broke out in Deraa, on the border with Jordan, to protest against the torture of local boys caught writing anti-government graffiti.

Despite a crumbling economy and tightening sanctions, Assad still seems to have significant support within Syria,

notably in its two top cities – Damascus and Aleppo. His ally Iran also remains supportive, though the levers of power. But internal divisions have hindered the rebel effort.

The opposition in exile, the Syrian National Council, is far from united. Three prominent opposition members resigned from the group this week saying they have given up on trying to make it a more effective player.

ulation of 23 million, is at odds with Assad’s Alawite sect, which represents 10 percent but controls the levers of power.

But internal divisions have hindered the rebel effort.

The opposition in exile, the Syrian National Council, is far from united. Three prominent opposition members resigned from the group this week saying they have given up on trying to make it a more effective player.



SYRIAN SOLDIERS attend the funeral of their comrades at a military hospital in Homs earlier this year. (Reuters)

Idlib province is a center for the Free Syrian Army and for anti-Assad sentiment. Since December, most of Idlib City (pop. 150,000) and a number of surrounding towns have been in the hands of the rebels. Because of its proximity to the Turkish border, many had hoped that Idlib might form the Syrian rebels' " Benghazi " – a place where a rebel army and a united opposition might begin to crystallize.

Assad's forces intervened precisely to prevent this possibility. By March 10, Idlib City was surrounded by government forces. In a replay of the Homs events, a four-day artillery assault began. On March 14, Assad's troops re-entered the city and began house-to-house searches.

Rather than make a bloody last stand in Idlib City, the Free Syrian Army men preferred to leave. They knew they had no chance against a frontal assault from the regime's armor.

Guerrilla resistance in Idlib Province is continuing. The Jebel Zawiyah area, in particular, remains the scene of fierce clashes. The regime has begun to sow land-mines along the border with Turkey, to prevent the escape of refugees and the smuggling of weaponry and supplies for the rebels. Assad's forces, meanwhile, moved on.

The third target, after Homs and Idlib, was the cradle of the uprising – the southern city of Dara'a. On March 13, artillery and anti-aircraft weaponry began to pound Dara'a. Massive blasts were reported by al-Jazeera in the Dara'a neighborhoods of Al-Mabassiya and Al-Arabain on Wednesday afternoon.

The evidence suggests that a clear decision has been made by Assad to seek to crush the armed opposition once and for all. The three main centers of the uprising have been singled out for attention. The regime is trying to break the back of the rebellion.

Can Assad succeed? Probably not. First of all, it should be noted that once the main regime assault on a particular area is over, resistance springs up again. This is currently the case in the Homs area. In Idlib Province, which is still hearing the brunt of the government assault, the ISA has not been destroyed. This pattern is likely to apply also to Dara'a.

Furthermore, areas of the country less obviously associated with the uprising – such as the largely Sunni Latakia city and the campus at Aleppo University – are also witnessing clashes between oppositionists and regime forces.

The fire is simply too large and powerful for the regime to extinguish in a single series of moves, as it is attempting to do this month. Assad's forces themselves may also be far less reliable than he would like to believe.

So the most likely prospect is that the regime assault will continue to move across the country, with the accompanying atrocities in which Assad specializes, but that the rebel forces and opposition activists will still be in existence when the government storm passes.

In the longer term, the Assad regime has a certain advantage in that an international coalition stands behind it, while the rebels have only Kofi Annan. For as long as this remains the case, the stalemate is set to continue. Assad will continue to hold meaningless referenda and fake elections and will continue to kill.

The opposition will try to hold on. But whatever the outcome, March 2012 will be remembered as the month in which the Syrian counter-revolution began in earnest.

The Syrian counter revolution begins

A year on from the start of the insurgency, Bashar Assad is hitting back at rebel forces and thanks to world indifference and the backing of Russia and Iran, he may well succeed

Recent days have witnessed the beginning of a determined counter-offensive by the Assad regime. Secure in the world's indifference and the backing of Russia and Iran, the Syrian dictator is now moving to re-conquer those areas of Syria which had been precariously held by the opposition and the Free Syrian Army.

Just a few weeks ago, the rebels were seizing temporary control of neighborhoods close to Damascus, and over-optimistic analysts were predicting the imminent demise of the Assad regime. All indications are that the regime, having held on, is now seeking to roll back the tide. If the Syrian opposition remains isolated, Assad may succeed.

The assault on Homs was the first stage of the Syrian counter-revolution. That city – and in particular the Baba Amr area – was the center of the uprising against the regime. Baba Amr alone was thought to contain around 1,000 ISA fighters.

The regime's assault was well thought out. For

Women and children were targeted in the neighborhoods of Karm al-Zeitun and Bab el-Sibaa. According to opposition sources, the killing took place at point-blank range. The Shabbiha used knives as well as guns. Hundreds have died and thousands more have been left homeless.

The conquest of Homs is still not complete. Pockets of resistance remain. The Khaldeya neighborhood, for example, fell to government forces on Wednesday.

But the main body of the regime's work in Homs was over by March 7. Analysts and Syrian oppositionists alike then waited to see if the assault on the city was indeed the beginning of a countryside move by the regime.

The answer was not long in coming. Opposition websites began to report that a force, including 100 tanks, was heading eastwards from Latakia in the direction of Idlib province.

Along with Homs, the largely Sunni-Arab northern

ARAB WORLD
• BY JONATHAN SPYER

On March 1, with no foreign reporters remaining in the city to bear witness, 7,000 troops of the loyalist 4th Armored Division began their assault.

They were accompanied into the city by the "Shabbiha," the Alawi irregular forces that have been responsible for many of the atrocities committed in Syria over the last year. Random executions of civilians predictably followed.

The para-militaries rampaged through Old Homs.

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

La Syrie marque dans le sang le premier anniversaire de la révolte

Crise Plus de 9 000 morts en un an, dont 72 tués hier ; des dizaines de milliers de partisans du régime manifestent à Damas.

La révolte en Syrie est entrée hier dans sa seconde année avec une escalade des violences face à un régime déterminé à l'écraser et enhardi par l'impasse diplomatique du fait des divisions internationales.

Pour l'occasion, le régime a intensifié ses offensives militaires contre les bastions rebelles, notamment à Idleb où seize civils ont été tués, et les corps de 23 personnes portant des marques de torture et d'exécution sommaire ont été retrouvés, a rapporté l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH). Des manifestations antirégime y ont également été dispersées, selon des militants. Neuf civils, quatre rebelles et un soldat ont donc été tués dans la province d'Idleb, selon l'OSDH. Selon la chaîne al-Jazeera, la Commission générale de la révolution syrienne a cité des militants faisant état de 72 tués hier. Dans le même temps, des policiers ont tiré du gaz lacrymogène sur une manifestation d'étudiants antirégime à Alep, deuxième ville du pays, tandis qu'à Douma, les forces de l'ordre ont tiré sur les manifestants anti-Assad. Les militants avaient appelé à manifester pour réclamer une nouvelle fois le départ de M. Assad.

Parallèlement, Human Rights Watch (HRW) a dénoncé une politique de la « terre brûlée ». À Idleb, l'armée a tiré « sans distinction », avant de procéder « à des arrestations après avoir fouillé maison par maison, pillé des bâtiments et mis le feu à des habitations », selon HRW, citant des témoins et évoquant un bilan d'au moins 114 civils tués en quatre jours d'offensive. Au total, l'OSDH estime que les violences ont fait plus de 9 000 morts, en majorité des civils, depuis le 15 mars 2011, date de l'éclatement de la révolte dont le régime refuse de reconnaître l'ampleur l'assimi-

lant à du « terrorisme ».

Dans le même temps, des dizaines de milliers de Syriens ont manifesté hier dans plusieurs villes, dont Damas et Alep, en soutien au président Bachar el-Assad, démonstration de force du régime. Selon l'agence officielle SANA, « des millions de Syriens ont afflué (...) pour dire au monde que le peuple syrien a choisi l'unité nationale et la stabilité ». Dans une ambiance quasi festive, les manifestants prorégime agitaient des drapeaux syriens et russes pour « remercier Moscou de son soutien ». « Dans une démocratie, c'est la majorité qui tranche (...) Ces gens représentent un vaste mouvement. En face, ils (les antirégime) ne sont qu'une poignée », a commenté ainsi une analyste à la télévision d'État, dans un pays dominé depuis 50 ans par un parti unique qui a confisqué la liberté de presse et d'opinion.

Évaluation

Sur un autre plan, les Nations unies ont annoncé qu'elles allaient participer ce week-end pour la première fois à une mission d'évaluation de la situation humanitaire « menée par le gouvernement » syrien, selon la responsable des opérations humanitaires Valerie Amos. Des experts de l'ONU et de l'Organisation de la coopération islamique accompagneront cette mission qui visitera les régions de Homs, Hama, Tartous, Lattaquié, Alep, Deir ez-Zor, Deraa et les faubourgs ruraux de Damas.

Le secrétaire général de l'ONU Ban Ki-moon a par ailleurs exprimé hier sa « solidarité avec le peuple syrien et ses aspirations légitimes à la dignité, la liberté et la justice », estimant qu'il « est urgent de briser le cycle de la violence, de mettre fin aux opérations militaires contre les civils et



Ils étaient des dizaines de milliers à Damas seulement, manifestant en soutien à Bachar el-Assad.

Photo AFP/Handout

d'éviter une plus grande militarisation du conflit en Syrie ». Il n'était pas le seul à exprimer son appui aux militants démocratiques. Plusieurs centaines de personnes se sont ainsi rassemblées hier soir dans le centre de Paris « en soutien au peuple syrien ». « Vive la Syrie libre ! »

a aussi lancé devant l'Hôtel de Ville le maire socialiste de Paris Bertrand Delanoë. « Ce que vit depuis un an ce peuple comme souffrances, comme horreur, est insoutenable (...) Le dictateur utilise des armes de guerre contre son propre peuple. Il torture des enfants », a dénoncé le

maire de Paris.

La persistance des violences a en outre poussé Bahreïn à fermer son ambassade à Damas, emboîtant ainsi le pas à l'Arabie saoudite.

(Sources : agences et rédaction)

Paris demande à Damas de libérer le journaliste Mazen Darwich

La France a demandé hier au régime syrien de libérer le journaliste Mazen Darwich, arrêté le 16 février à Damas, a indiqué Bernard Valero, porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères. Mazen Darwich a été torturé et sa vie est en danger, avaient déjà affirmé mercredi

une quinzaine d'organisations internationales, arabes et syriennes de défense des droits de l'homme, qui ont également exigé sa libération immédiate. Parallèlement, l'agence de presse turque Anatolie a rapporté hier que les deux journalistes turcs portés dispa-

rus ont été remis aux services de renseignements syriens par la milice soutenant le régime. L'un des deux journalistes, le cameraman freelance Hamit Coskun, est blessé et aurait été torturé, a souligné l'agence, citant des sources locales et des témoins.

L'Iran envoie 40 tonnes d'« aides médicales »

L'Iran, un des rares alliés du régime syrien dans la région, a envoyé 40 tonnes d'« aides médicales » remises hier au Croissant-Rouge à Damas, a rapporté l'agence officielle IRNA. Selon Mohammad Reza Raouf Chibani, l'ambassadeur iranien à Damas, « trois autres

cargaisons comprenant des produits alimentaires, des ambulances, des tentes et des couvertures seront envoyées prochainement, en ayant à l'esprit les actions terroristes menées contre la population syrienne ». Toujours sur ce point, le

ministre algérien des Affaires étrangères a évoqué mercredi à Alger la possibilité d'acheminer « dans les prochains jours » de l'aide humanitaire dans « des conditions acceptables », sans toutefois donner de précision sur cette aide humanitaire internationale.

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Ankara redoute l'afflux de 500 000 réfugiés sur son sol

Un millier de Syriens fuyant le conflit dans leur pays se sont réfugiés ces 24 dernières heures en Turquie, selon le Croissant-Rouge. « Le nombre de réfugiés syriens a augmenté d'un millier en une seule journée et a grimpé à 14 700 », dont la majorité sont des femmes, jeunes et enfants, a précisé le porte-parole du ministère turc des Affaires étrangères Selçuk Ünâl lors d'un point de presse à Ankara, au jour anniversaire de la révolte en Syrie, pays voisin de la Turquie. Parmi eux se trouve un général de l'armée syrienne qui a rejoint les rangs des déserteurs en Turquie regroupés sous le drapeau de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) qui disposent d'une base à Hatay dans le Sud, où se trouvent les camps de réfugiés, a précisé le diplomate. « Avec ce général qui est arrivé hier (mercredi), nous accueillons à présent sept généraux », a-t-il affirmé. Un groupe de 700 réfugiés était déjà arrivé en Turquie mercredi, marquant une importante augmentation du nombre de Syriens se réfugiant en territoire turc depuis le début du mouvement de contestation.

Cette vague de réfugiés s'explique, selon les Turcs, par l'offensive menée par l'armée syrienne contre le bastion rebelle d'Idleb dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie et qui pousse les civils à fuir vers la Turquie. « Nous nous attendons à ce que d'autres (Syriens) arrivent en Turquie par la province frontalière



Près d'un millier de Syriens auraient traversé la frontière vers la Turquie en 24h.

Bulent Kilic/AFP

de Hatay. Il existe divers scénarios qui prévoient un chiffre pouvant aller jusqu'à 500 000 » personnes, a déclaré le président du Croissant-Rouge turc Ahmet Lütfi Akar, cité par l'agence de presse Anatolie, reconnaissant cependant qu'une telle situation relevait de l'« extrême ». La construction d'un nouveau camp d'une capacité de 20 000 places a quand même été entamée dans la province de Sanliurfa dans le Sud-Est. Un autre camp de réfugiés, composé cette fois de conteneurs, est également en cours de construction depuis l'hiver à Kilis, sur la route menant à Alep.

Le vice-Premier ministre turc Besir Atalay a par ailleurs accusé hier Damas de poser des mines à sa frontière pour barrer le passage

aux réfugiés.

D'autre part, le « convoi pour la Liberté » d'activistes syriens qui tentait hier d'entrer en Syrie depuis la Turquie s'est arrêté aux abords de la ville frontalière de Kilis et n'ira pas plus loin, selon plusieurs témoins. Ce convoi, composé de quelques centaines de personnes, pour la plupart des Syriens exilés ou de la diaspora, était parti hier matin de la ville turque de Gaziantep à destination de la frontière syrienne. Le but de la caravane était en principe d'apporter de l'aide humanitaire à la population syrienne mais, comme ce fut le cas lors d'une première tentative également partie de Gaziantep le 12 janvier, il n'a pas pu s'approcher du poste-frontière.

(Source : agences)

Today's Zaman (Turquie)



PHOTO © TODAY'S ZAMAN, MEHMET YAMAN

Members from the Özgür-Der held a demonstration in front of the Syrian Consulate General, asking Syrian authorities to return the two missing journalists to Turkey.

Missing Turkish journalists handed over to Syrian intelligence

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Earlier in the day, Foreign Ministry spokesman Selçuk Ünal also said Turkish authorities have contacted their Syrian counterparts to determine the whereabouts of the two journalists, but that there has been no information officially confirmed as to where they are and if they are safe.

Turkey also appears to be in contact with Syr-

ian ally Iran. Turkish officials told Today's Zaman that Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu phoned his Iranian counterpart, Ali Akbar Salehi, on Wednesday to discuss the missing journalists. Davutoğlu told Salehi that Syria should "avoid making a mistake." Özköse, a reporter from the Istanbul-based Gerçek Hayat (Real Life) magazine and the Milat daily, arrived with Coşkun,

a cameraman, in Syria on March 5. They were last heard from on March 10. Members from the Freedom Association (Özgür-Der) on Thursday held a demonstration in front of the Syrian Consulate General in Istanbul, asking Syrian authorities to return the two missing journalists to Turkey. The protesters also chanted slogans against the Syrian regime. **Istanbul** Today's Zaman

1.4m face risk of hunger in Syria due to unrest

DAMASCUS: Civil unrest is putting 1.4 million people at risk from hunger in Syria, which must raise cereal imports by around a third to offset a loss in local output, the United Nations' food agency said yesterday. "Continued civil unrest in the Syrian Arab Republic since mid-March 2011 has raised serious concern over the state of food security, particularly for vulnerable groups," the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) said. The agency said that last year's cereal production in Syria — estimated at 4.2 million tonnes — was about 10 per cent less than the previous five years' average, following late and erratic rains and widespread civil unrest.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

1,000 flee Syria in a day

FRANCE REFUSES TO ARM OPPOSITION AS 55 MORE ARE KILLED IN CONTINUING VIOLENCE

BY LAYELLE SAAD
GCC/Middle East Editor

Dubai As Syrians commemorated the first anniversary of their revolution yesterday, civilians fled the country following the past two weeks of an "indiscriminate" military campaign across the country.

Turkey which hosts over 10,000 refugees said nearly 1,000 people crossed the border in the past 24 hours, braving landmines placed by Syrian troops. The head of the Turkish Red Crescent warned that the number of Syrians arriving in Turkey could reach half a million if the military campaign continued.

At least 55 more deaths were reported yesterday with monitors saying that the death toll surpassed 9,000 yesterday. "A total of 9,113 people have been killed, including 6,645 civilians," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Troops backed by tanks were heading to Daraa, near the Syrian-Jordanian border, in a move seen as a preparation for a widescale attack on the province.

The surge in violence came as UN-Arab League special envoy, Kofi Annan, is scheduled to report to the UN Security Council on his diplomatic efforts to end the conflict today.

Pro-regime rallies

Due to the deteriorating security, Bahrain has decided to close its embassy in Damascus and to recall its diplomats, BNA news agency said.

In a setback for the oppo-

ECLECTIC MIX AL ASSAD'S MUSIC

Emails between Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's account and iTunes give an insight into his musical fancies as his country is torn apart, reports *The Guardian*.

Apart from songs by Lebanese actor and singer Nasri Shamseddine, there is an eclectic mix of artists from the 1990s British duo Right Said Fred to the US singer Chris Brown.

One of the more unusual purchases, made through an American Express account, occurred on February 5 when Assad sent his wife, Asma, an iTunes file of the US country star Blake Shelton singing *God Gave Me You*. As the conflict in Syria intensified Al Assad continued to add to his eclectic playlist, ordering *Hurt* by Leona Lewis, *Look at Me Now* by Chris Brown featuring Lil Wayne and Busta Rhymes.

— Gulf News Report

sition. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe rejected their weapons requests, saying that arming them could lead to catastrophic civil war.

The opposition fighters were bolstered by about 20,000 soldiers who have deserted the armed forces in less than a month, according to Turkish intelligence reports.

Pro-regime rallies were also staged yesterday across the country as state TV aired people gathering in Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Suweida and Hasaka.

See also Page 13



Seeking shelter

Refugees gather near the Turkish border at Reyhanli in Antakya yesterday. The head of the Turkish Red Crescent warned that the number of Syrians arriving in Turkey could reach half a million if Bashar Al Assad's regime keeps up its year-long crackdown on dissent.

Nato's lesson for Syria

Risk of the unknown makes intervention in Syria a remote possibility

PERSPECTIVE

John D. Podesta and Ken Gude

Nato's intervention in Libya one year ago helped to avert a humanitarian catastrophe and created the conditions for Libya's citizens to end Colonel Muammar el-Gaddafi's dictatorship. The military operation highlighted important improvements in European leadership since the Bosnian debacle in the 1990's, but the conditions underlying the Libya mission's success cannot be counted upon to exist again in the future. Indeed, NATO's accomplishment in Libya risks obscuring persistent weaknesses in Europe's military capabilities.

Europe's unity of purpose in Libya contrasts sharply with its divisions and indecisiveness as Yugoslavia disintegrated in the early 1990's. The United States had to coax many Western European countries into helping to stop the slaughter of innocents in Bosnia. And, though the transatlantic alliance was more unified and responsive during the subsequent Kosovo crisis, the US was still firmly in the driver's seat.

In Libya, the roles were reversed: Western Europeans had to push the US to take action. The manner in which President Barack Obama brought the US into the effort to protect Libyan civilians mollified European concerns about American hubris that had grown out of the Iraq War. It also made possible a broad coalition of countries, as well as the first-ever call for intervention from the Arab League. Obama's decision that the US should play a supporting role, with other Nato partners - particularly France and the United Kingdom - taking the lead, reinforced the global perception of the mission's legitimacy.

Today, the growing debate about a Syrian intervention raises legitimate questions concerning whether Libya was a unique situation. Libya's proximity to Europe both lowered barriers to participation and stimulated Europe's sense of responsibility. Moreover, many European countries have direct interests in Libya, and thus had a clear stake in the outcome. Libyans' opposition to Gaddafi was relatively well organised, was recognised by the international community, and had explicitly called for outside intervention.

While the conditions in Libya were certainly optimal, the situation in Syria is better described as uniquely complicated for any intervention. For starters, Syria's location in the Eastern Mediterranean is not as advantageous as is Libya's position in North Africa. Syria's borders with Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel also present unique challenges to regional security, given the



HOLDING BACK THE NATO CARD...UN-Arab League envoy for Syria Kofi Annan (L) and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem meet in Damascus on March 10 following a meeting with Syrian President Bashar Al Assad. — AFP

potential not only for international conflict, but also for destabilising cross-border flows of refugees. Syria also has allies - most importantly Russia, with its veto-wielding seat on the United Nations Security Council.

The significant obstacles to intervention, and the genuine risk of making an already terrible situation worse, makes direct military intervention in Syria a remote possibility at this time. That is tragic in many ways, but it does not mean that the positive post-Libya momentum towards the protection of civilians is entirely lost. Even though it ended in failure, the Arab League agreement with the Assad regime to allow observers into Syria to facilitate an end to the conflict was brokered, as Oman's foreign minister said, "to save the Arab world from Western intervention." That mission did not stop the killing, but it represented an escalation of pressure to end the slaughter.

For Nato, that leverage depends upon its members' ability to marshal the will and resources to intervene if necessary. In Libya, Europe finally had the will to lead, but it lacked the means, and still relied heavily on the US. Even though the US was not the first to call for military action, its participation in the mission was essential and confirmed its status as the one indispensable nation in the Western alliance.

With very small exceptions, the Libya campaign was exclusively an air war. True, the majority of strike sorties were carried out by non-US aircraft, with particular credit going to Denmark, Norway, and Belgium, which flew a disproportionate share of the missions. But European policymakers should not fool themselves into thinking that these numbers mean that their air-combat capabilities are sufficient to operate independently of America.

In addition to its air-strike deficiencies, Europe demonstrated serious shortfalls across all of the areas required to sustain any air campaign. As General Mark Welsh, Commander of US Air Forces in Europe, told top officers and industry executives at a gathering last summer, "We need more intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability, and we need it now."

Unfortunately, the ongoing economic crisis is exerting downward pressure on defence budgets across Nato, exposing the need for greater cooperation among the alliance's European members. The harm caused by budget cuts is likely to multiply if all European governments slash spending in the same areas. German Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Aarne Kreuzinger-Janik warns that this would create "even bigger gaps and shortfalls." European governments must now work to ensure that they invest their limited resources in the right areas.

The transatlantic alliance has reached a fork in the road. Down the path less traveled lies greater coordination on both strategic objectives and development of military capacity, particularly within Europe, where governments must better allocate resources among themselves in order to overcome the key deficiencies revealed by the Libya mission. The more familiar road leads to wasteful overlap and lower investment in key technologies, leaving wider gaps than ever in Europe's defence capability.

If Europe is to build on its success in Libya, it needs to take the road less traveled. It will make all the difference.

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The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Bashar exposed

■ Syrian leader's emails show him taking advice from Iran, joking about his reform promises

LONDON – Thousands of emails purported to be from the private accounts of Bashar Al-Assad and his wife show the Syrian president took advice from Iran on how to handle the uprising against his rule, joked about his promises of reform and bypassed US sanctions to shop on iTunes, the Guardian newspaper has reported.

The newspaper said Thursday it got the trove of emails from a member of the Syrian opposition whom it does not identify. The documents are said to have been intercepted by members of the Supreme Council of the Revolution between June and

early February.

There was no immediate response from Damascus.

The emails paint a picture of a ruling family that seems far removed from an uprising that has pushed the Arab nation to the brink of civil war, killing more than 7,500 people over the past year, according to international observers. According to the Guardian, the Syrian first lady, Asma Assad, spent tens of thousands of dollars buying luxury goods online, including gold jewelry laden with gems, as well as chandeliers and furniture.

The purported emails also of-

fer insight into the president's inner circle. According to the Guardian, the emails show that Assad has received advice from Iran. Ahead of a speech in December, Assad's media consultant said his advice to the president was based on "consultations with a good number of people in addition to the media and political adviser for the Iranian ambassador."

The memo advised Assad to use "powerful and violent" language and encouraged the regime to "leak more information related to our military capability" to convince the public that it could withstand a

military challenge.

According to the purported emails from Assad, the president also was briefed in detail about the presence of Western journalists in the rebel-held Baba Amr district of Homs, and he was urged to "tighten the security grip" there in November, the report said. Several foreign journalists were among the hundreds of people killed in Homs over the past year.

The Guardian published a lengthy explanation of why it believes the emails are genuine, saying the cache includes private information, such as family photographs

and videos, a scan of the president's identity card and other details that, it said, "would be difficult for even the best-resourced hoaxer or intelligence agency to gather or fabricate."

The sam(at)alshahba.com and ak(at)alshahba.com accounts that activists say were used by Bashar Assad and his wife "communicate regularly and in affectionate terms with the wider family and advisers, some of whose email addresses are easily verified," the newspaper said. Still, the Guardian acknowledged

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that the verification process does not rule out the possibility that there are fake emails in the cache. The shopping habits of the president and first lady are the subject of many of the missives. On July 19, according to the purported emails quoted by the Guardian, Asma Assad placed an order with her cousin for four necklaces made in a Paris workshop: "1 turquoise with yellow gold diamonds and a small pave on side" as well as a cornaline, "full black onyx" and "amethyst with white gold diamonds."

When she learned there would be a delay in the order, she wrote that she did not mind, the report said. "I am absolutely clueless when it comes to fine jewelry!" she wrote, before signing off: "Kisses to you both, and don't worry, we are well!"

The trove of quoted messages suggests a loving relationship between the president and first lady.

In one email cited, Asma Assad informs her husband she will be done at 5 P.M. The president responds by making light of the changes he has promised in Syria, saying: "This is the best reform any country can have that u told me where will you be, we are going to adopt it instead of the rubbish laws of parties, elections, media....."

Another email has Assad sending his wife a clip from America's Got Talent showing "the best illusion

Assad enjoyed music amid massacres

● Carnage marks uprising anniversary ● Bahrain shuts embassy ● EU diplomatic pullout likely



Flames and smoke rise following fresh bombardment by the Syrian regime in Hama. Right: Opponents of the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad stage a protest in Berlin on Thursday to mark the first anniversary of the uprising in Syria. Hundreds of protesters chanted anti-Assad slogans as they marched toward the Syrian Embassy. (AFP)

Damascus: Arab News

Syrian activists said yesterday they were sickened by e-mails which appeared to show Assad and his wife shopping for pop music and luxury items while the country descended into bloodshed.

Britain's Guardian newspaper said it obtained some 3,000 e-mails from Assad and his wife, Asma.

The e-mails, not all verified by the paper, yet showed Assad taking advice from Iran on countering the one-year revolt against his rule that has claimed thousands of lives. "He was downloading iTunes songs while his army was shelling us. His wife was buying expensive things from Amazon, that makes me feel sick," said an activist called Rami in Homs.

A new massacre report and a refugee exodus to

Turkey marked the first anniversary of the Syrian uprising yesterday. The Syrian Observatory said 23 mutilated corpses were found near Idlib in northwestern Syria that was seized by regime forces this week.

The victims had been blindfolded and handcuffed before being shot dead and the bodies dumped outside Idlib, it said, in an apparent repeat of a "massacre" of dozens of women and children

in the flash point city of Homs last weekend. Bahrain has decided to close its embassy in Damascus and to recall its diplomats, the official BNA news agency said yesterday. The government advised Bahrainis who were still in Syria to "be cautious and to immediately leave this country."

European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton wants the bloc's 27 governments to pull all

its ambassadors out of Syria going into talks among foreign ministers next week.

A meeting next Thursday and Friday will, for the first time, include Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu — who canceled a planned trip last month — and will focus on "possible closures of the EU embassies in Syria," a senior EU source told AFP.

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▶ 'Door of dialogue' with Syrian authorities still open: Annan's aide

Pro-Assad rallies mark anniversary of revolt

Flag-waving supporters of President Bashar al-Assad took to the streets of Syrian cities yesterday in an orchestrated show of loyalty to coincide with the first anniversary of an increasingly bloody uprising against his rule.

Official media announced government forces had cleared "armed terrorists" from the northwestern city of Idlib, suggesting the army was gaining ground in the revolt, which has cost at least 8,000 lives, according to the United Nations.

State television showed thousands of people in central Damascus, waving portraits of Assad and flags of Syria, Russia and China.

"We sacrifice our blood and souls to you, Bashar," the crowds chanted as three helicopters flew past in a military salute.

Rallies were also reported in Syria's second city Aleppo, in the southern town of Suweida, the coastal city of Latakia and the Kurdish town of Hassaka.

There were no images from three cities where some of the worst violence has occurred in the past year, Homs, Idlib and Hama, and locals reported sporadic clashes in several places.

"The army is intensifying its attack on rebellious villages and firing on areas trying to hold (anti-Assad) protests," said an Idlib resident, who refused to be named for fear of reprisal.

The UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan is due to report back to the UN Security Council today on his efforts to end the violence and remains in contact with Damascus despite gloom among some Western diplomats over

his chances of success.

"The door of dialogue is still open. We are still engaged with Syrian authorities over Mr. Annan's proposals," Annan's spokesman Ahmad Fawzi said in Geneva.

Britain's Guardian newspaper published what it believes to be genuine e-mails sent and received by Assad and

his wife between June and February, revealing a ruling family largely insulated from the gathering crisis.

The e-mails appeared to show Assad had taken advice from Iran and that he had ridiculed some of his reform pledges as "rubbish."

An e-mail purportedly sent by the emir of Qatar's daughter urged the As-



Syrian refugees at the Reyhanli Refugee Camp in Antakya, Hatay Province in southern Turkey, near the border with Syria. Photo: AFP

sads to seek refuge in Doha.

Yesterday, Turkey said 1,000 Syrians had crossed its borders in the last 24 hours, bringing the total of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey to 14,000. Among those who fled was a Syrian general, the seventh to cross into Turkey.

Reuters

Dialogue Syria's best hope, but chances slim

Editor's Note:

The UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan has just left Syria, after actively seeking dialogue opportunities between the Assad administration and the opposition. Did his visit achieve anything? What does the Syrian public think? Global Times (GT) reporter Gao Lei talked to Sami Moubayed (Moubayed), a Damascus-based political analyst and editor-in-chief of Forward magazine, on these issues.

GT: Did Annan's visit achieve anything concrete?

Moubayed: No. Different stakeholders in the Syrian crisis, who originally approved Annan's mandate, are still divided on what they want from Syria. Syrian officialdom is saying that no dialogue will succeed so long as "armed terrorist groups" are freely roaming the Syrian streets, insisting that military operations come first. The government is carrying out an extensive campaign in northern Idlib, similar to the one implemented in the embattled Baba Amro neighborhood of Homs.

So long as there is no UN resolution mandating implementation of the Arab League Initiative, then they will continue to ignore any calls to stop the military operations, or delegate powers to the vice president.

The Americans, busy with election year, are clearly not in a hurry to solve things in Syria, and apart from calling on Assad to step down, they have provided no road map as to how that can happen, and how the transition would look like in Syria.

The Arab League still thinks, however, that it can make it happen. UN blue helmets are no longer on the table for Syria. Nor is a coup, and certainly, nor is an Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya-like scenario.

Heavyweights like Qatar and Saudi Arabia are most interested in arming the Syrian opposition, which is being vetoed by the Americans and Europeans, who fear that these arms can find their way into the hands of Al Qaeda. The Russians don't want regime change



Sami Moubayed

in Syria. They are still willing to torpedo any UN resolution on such, as they did in October 2010 and last January.

Nor did the hard-line Syrian opposition abroad, like the Syrian National Council (SNC), want Kofi Annan to succeed. The SNC says that only a military option will work. With such a divided front, it was very hard for Annan to achieve any breakthrough.

GT: Annan has voiced his objection to further militarization of the Syrian opposition by foreign powers, concerning that this will worsen the situation in Syria. How has foreign military support to Syrian opposition altered the political situation in Syria?

Moubayed: I live in Damascus and wake up in the middle of the night hearing gunfire in the horizon, from the orchards of Mezzeh where battles are ongoing between the rebel Free Syrian Army and the Syrian army. There are stories of kidnapping, theft, assault, and murder taking place all around us. You can only imagine how chaotic the scene is in different cities and towns where higher militarization is under-

way, especially in border cities where smuggling of arms is easy, like Daraa, Tal Kalakh, and Zabadani.

It is unsafe to be out at night, because there are so many arms out there, and not all of them are in the hands of rebels. Many of those arms have found their way into the hands of criminals who are thriving at the chaos that is underway in Syria, and the government is completely incapable of imposing law and order.

No doubt, the government is to blame for the chaos, but as an ordinary Syrian living through the turmoil, I cannot accept further militarization and certainly not in a city that for ages has been hailed as one of the safest in the world. The more arms are smuggled in, the more we may run the risk of Damascus transforming into another Beirut or Baghdad.

Having said that, I need to stress that there were no arms on the streets when this all started in mid-March 2011. Back then, all stories of armed gangs were fabrications by the Syrian media. Arms began to appear by late summer 2011,

as the violence escalated, and today the situation is completely out of hand, and very unsafe.

GT: What is the ultimate obstacle to discussion between the Assad regime and the opposition?

Moubayed: In principle, I think it is wrong to say: "We refuse to talk." Dialogue is the essence of politics.

In 1925-27, the Syrians rose in revolt against the French Mandate. When they realized that ending the Mandate was close to impossible through military means, the Syrian National Bloc, the leading anti-French movement, was established by the country's notables, aimed at achieving independence through dialogue, rather than military force. And they eventually achieved that, through dialogue and political brinkmanship, rather than through bullets and war.

The opposition today can sit at the

table with the regime and say: "We want to change the regime – in full." What I am saying, however, is too utopian, and I think that even if the opposition agrees to sit down for dialogue, the angry street will not accept this. They will continue to demonstrate, demanding regime change.

Let us pretend, however, that dialogue does happen. If it does, the opposition will be asked to deliver, for example, calming the street in exchange for a phased transfer of power. But they can't do this, and it would be scandalous for them to take up this role given that.

As an ordinary Syrian living through the turmoil, I cannot accept further militarization.

Sami Moubayed

GT: How do ordinary people in Syria see the different stances by foreign countries on their crisis?

Moubayed: The Syrian people are divided. The pro-regime street is thrilled with China and Russia, for obvious reasons, failing to realize, however, that the two countries are supporting their own interests in Syria, rather than the regime itself.

The opposition street, of course, is furious with both China and Russia. They blame the two countries for all the ills currently underway, and claim that their double-veto only empowered the regime at their expense.

What the people want is a viable solution that can bring justice, rather than revenge, to the streets of Syria. They want justice, accountability, freedom, and democracy. Sadly, none of the stakeholders, whether China, Russia, the Arab League, the EU, or the US, have to date, been able to advance any of these claims.

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