Faced with competition from the SCO, will NATO choose diplomacy or arms?

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While the likelihood of a conventional war against Syria has been swept aside by the Russian and Chinese double veto, Westerners have been left with no alternative plan. Above all, they do not know how to handle the conflict pitting them against the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Should they use diplomacy, or are they in a position to start a proxy war?

The answer to this question depends on the acceptance or denial of the decline of the U.S. empire. The war party is considering a form of low intensity conflict with militant groups operating from bases in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Realists will not fail to point out that in such a case the war will spill beyond these three states and fatally engulf Israel.

In the absence of a defined strategy, each side is trying to consolidate its positions. The Syrian National Council is heading to Qatar in the hope of being recognized by the Gulf States as the sole representative of the Syrian people instead of the Syrian Arab Republic. For its part, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change has been received in Beijing, which has offered its mediation.

The Israeli press observes that the Free Syrian Army is a generic name for disparate groups of fighters whose number ranges between 4 000 and 7 000, far short of the advertised 40 000, among which Syrian army deserters make up only a small proportion. Many newspapers now accept that these fighters, whom they compare to the International Brigades, are mostly foreign Salafists, basically trained by British and Qatari instructors. They have put up a strong resistance to the offensive launched earlier this week by the Syrian National Army, but are now struggling due to lack of sufficient support among the population.

• The German press reported the expulsion of four Syrian diplomats from the Federal Republic, suspected of spying on Syrian opposition groups in Germany.

• The *Tagesspiegel* derides the diplomatic initiatives to circumvent the double veto. The action, it observes, has shifted from the battlefield to the phone.

• Under Guido Olimpio's signature, the *Corriere della Sera* from Washington confirms everything that *Voltaire Network* readers have known for two months: The Free Syrian Army is mainly composed of foreign fighters, especially from Libya. They are backed by the "Special Forces of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the West" (this list

does not include Turkey, which has just withdrawn from the device after signing a secret protocol with Syria and Iran during the visit of Sergey Lavrov).

• Writing in *El Mundo*, Javier Espinosa notes that the religious conflict is not between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority. Indeed, most Sunni support President Al-Assad. The religious rift is actually occurring within the Sunni community itself. The Great Mufti Ahmad Hassoun supports the government in the name of national unity, while, from Saudi Arabia, Adnan al-shaykh Arur calls for jihad. Hence, the Grand Mufti's son was murdered by the rebels.

• *ABC*'s José de Areilza deplores the attitude of Baroness Ashton. The High-Representative of the European Union has been incapable of crafting a common European position on Syria. Once again, the EU has proved useless. Though well-founded, this criticism is excessive, since Ashton has played a key role in obtaining the support of Brazil, India and South Africa for the Moroccan draft resolution at the Security Council. In addition, Baroness Ashton is hampered by the competition between Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron. Each claims ownership of the idea to hold a conference bringing together a contact group on Syria, while the suggestion actually came from Hillary Clinton.

• The *Daily Telegraph* pitches a possible counter-attack against revelations concerning the presence of foreign instructors in the Free Syrian Army: Iranians would do the same with regard to the Syrian National Army. In fact, following the lifting of the state of emergency and the recognition of the right to protest, Syria has adopted a police force capable of securing public demonstrations. In this context, it had to purchase suitable equipment. Subjected to embargo, it could only obtain it from Iran, but it has nothing to do with military instructors.

• *The Globe and Mail* examines four options: (1) sit back and wait, (2) create humanitarian enclaves and exert diplomatic pressure, (3) recognize and arm the opposition, (4) go to war without a UN mandate. He concludes that it is better to do nothing, hoping that the regime does not engage in mass murder.

• Jackson Diehl in the *Washington Times* supports the proposal by Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Joseph Lieberman to massively arm the Syrian opposition. Instead, the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* considers that this option will ultimately lead to disaster and calls for a diplomatic solution.

• Professor Marwan Kabalan notes in the *Gulf News* that the shift in the global balance of power has led to a regional realignment. Everything hinges on the improvement of relations between Iraq and Syria.

• The *Moscow Times* foresees only bad consequences for Russia if Bashar Al-Assad were to leave power.

The Washington Times (USA)

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Faute de résolution de l'ONU, l'UE veut durcir les sanctions contre la Syrie

Une série de mesures de rétorsion contre Damas devraient être adoptées d'ici à fin février

Bruxelles
Bureau européen

Les images quotidiennes de la violente répression qui s'exerce en Syrie font bouger la diplomatie européenne. Alors que le secrétaire général des Nations unies, Ban Ki-moon, évoque une réactivation de la mission d'observateurs de la Ligue arabe, en coopération avec l'ONU, les Européens s'activent pour préparer une éventuelle évacuation des milliers de ressortissants européens qui vivent dans le pays et dans la région. Ils recherchent la voie d'un dialogue avec le régime du président Bachar Al-Assad, sans pouvoir nier qu'il devient de plus en plus hypothétique.

Faute de mieux – et parce que la perspective d'une éventuelle opération militaire est toujours formellement écartée –, la diplomatie européenne prépare une série de sanctions qui devrait être approuvée à la fin du mois. Cette fois, ce sont la Banque centrale syrienne, les exportations d'or, de métaux précieux et de phosphates qui seront visées. Comme pour l'Iran, l'Union affirme vouloir punir les dirigeants sans mettre en péril ni la population ni l'ensemble des transactions commerciales avec la Syrie.

Ces sanctions seraient-elles plus efficaces que les précédentes, qui ont successivement privé les dirigeants syriens de visas, gelé leurs avoirs, interdit les exportations de pétrole, puis le sinvestissements dans le secteur des hydrocarbures ? Certains responsables ont, selon une formule consacrée, affirmé que le régime de Damas, serait *« touché au cœur »* par les mesures décidées. L'effet réel des divers embargos reste toutefois très incertain. En dépit d'une mesure similaire sur les armes adoptée tant par Bruxelles que par Washington, un diplomate européen indique qu'il dispose d'*« indications claires »* sur la poursuite de livraisons, essentiellement au profit du régime, alimentant un début de guerre civile que les Vingt-Sept espèrent encore circonscrire.

Sans doute conscients des limites de leur action, certains Etats veulent aller plus vite et plus loin. L'Allemagne a proposé une interdiction de tous les vols commerciaux vers et à partir de la Syrie. Une option jugée risquée parce qu'elle compliquerait une possible évacuation des ressortissants européens, ou issus de pays tiers, en cas d'aggravation de la situation.

Précédent libyen

Certains pays ont suggéré l'instauration d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne. *« Impossible à ce stade, car le précédent libyen est dans tous les esprits »*, commente un diplomate de haut rang. L'intervention de la coalition internationale contre le régime de Mouammar Kadhafi s'était appuyée sur un tel dispositif. La Russie et la Chine, qui s'étaient abstenues à l'époque, ont évoqué, entre autres, le précédent libyen pour justifier leur décision de mettre, le 4 février, au Conseil de sécurité, leur veto à un projet de résolution condamnant la répression en Syrie. Ce texte écartait toutefois l'option militaire et n'évoquait pas le départ du président Al-Assad, pourtant réclamé par les Occidentaux dès août 2011. *« Il faut relever que certains pays arabes et des pays émergents s'opposent, eux aussi, à toute allusion à la nécessité d'un changement de régime »*, insiste une source européenne pour mettre en évidence la complexité de la situation actuelle.

Bruxelles s'accroche dès lors au mince espoir d'une solution diplomatique. Elle se réjouit de l'annonce faite mercredi 8 février par la Turquie, qui a affirmé vouloir organiser *« dans les plus brefs délais »* une conférence internationale avec les acteurs internationaux et régionaux. Les Etats-Unis ont, de leur côté, dit vouloir se concerter avec leurs partenaires pour augmenter les pressions sur Damas et évoquer les questions humanitaires. Ankara et Washington rejettent toujours l'option militaire, même si la première dit son refus d'autoriser que la région *« s'enlise dans l'instabilité »*, tandis que la Maison Blanche précisait *« ne rien exclure dans un cas comme celui-là »*.

Outre les relations devenues tendues entre Damas et Ankara, la négociation que la Turquie tente de mettre sur pied pourrait se heurter à deux obstacles majeurs, analyse un diplomate bruxellois : *« L'opposition syrienne juge qu'il est trop tard pour discuter avec Assad, et Moscou ne renoncera sans doute pas à sa position intransigeante, du moins avant la présidentielle, dans trois semaines. »* ■

JEAN-PIERRE STROOBANTS

La prise du bâtiment de la Sécurité criminelle

PRÉSENT à Homs dans les quartiers contrôlés par l'opposition syrienne, le photojournaliste Mani raconte une ville en état de guerre :

« L'assaut contre le bâtiment de la Sécurité criminelle a été lancé le 6 février, à 4 heures du matin, par 200 soldats de l'Armée libre syrienne (ALS), assistés de nombreux civils du quartier. L'endroit, comme la poste voisine, qui s'est rendue sans combattre, et depuis lequel des insurgés ouvrent le feu sur les troupes loyalistes, abritait des snipers dont les tirs ont fait de nombreuses victimes dans la population. Les combats cessent vers 11 heures du matin, alors que plusieurs tirs d'obus de mortier provenant du quartier loyaliste de Nazha contraignent les membres de l'ALS à faire retraite. Ils reprennent dans l'après-midi, et les loyalistes seront définitivement défaits vers 18 heures. Bilan : plus de 15 morts et plus de 50 blessés chez l'ALS, et 17 morts et 9 prisonniers chez les loyalistes. Les deux bâtiments, désormais trop endommagés pour être utilisés par les combattants, ont été abandonnés. » ■

PHOTO : MANI POUR « LE MONDE »

Réseau Voltaire / Voltairenet.org / Voltaire Network

Le Figaro (France)

Syrie : la diplomatie toujours dans l'ornière

La Russie juge illégitime la création d'un « Groupe des amis » du peuple syrien, envisagée par la France.

MOYEN-ORIENT S'agit-il d'un petit signe porteur d'avenir dans la crise syrienne que Barack Obama a qualifiée, jeudi soir, de *« bain de sang atroce »* ? Un groupe d'opposition syrien a été reçu à Pékin par les autorités chinoises, qui, pourtant, ont opposé leur veto au plan de la Ligue prévoyant un dialogue entre toutes les forces du pays. Si la Chine, plutôt suiviste, prenait ses distances avec la Russie, celle-ci se retrouverait alors bien seule sur le dossier syrien.

On en est encore loin et Moscou ne désarme en rien face aux Occidentaux et aux Arabes. Tandis que se poursuivait le pilonnage meurtrier de Homs, la Russie a haussé le ton jeudi face à l'idée française de créer un *« Groupe des amis »* du peuple syrien. De tels formats sont *« illégitimes »*, a déclaré le porte-parole de la diplomatie russe, Alexandre Loukachevitch. Échaudée par l'intervention en Libye, où elle estime s'être fait forcer la main, la Russie rejette toute enceinte pouvant rappeler le « Groupe de contact » qui a supervisé l'aide internationale au profit des adversaires du colonel déchu Mouammar Kadhafi.

Au moins 110 tués

Jeudi, pour la sixième journée de suite, les tirs de roquettes et d'obus de mortier sur les quartiers de Homs aux mains de l'opposition ont fait au moins 110 tués, selon des activistes sur place. En plus des pilonnages, des blindés continuent à pénétrer dans cette ville martyre où les morts se comptent par centaines depuis une semaine. *« Des corps carbonisés se trouvent dans les maisons visées par les bombardements »*, racontait un militant joint au téléphone par l'AFP. Le sort des civils est au cœur des préoccupations de ceux qui s'inquiètent de la situation en Syrie. Les États-Unis disent étudier les moyens de leur faire parvenir vivres et médicaments. À Doha, les membres du CNS, qui regroupe les principales composantes de l'opposition, débattaient de la proposition de créer un *« Groupe des amis de la Syrie »* qui ne resterait pas *« les bras croisés »* devant le drame enduré par le peuple, selon l'expression d'Alain Juppé. Des dirigeants du CNS réclament des armes pour résister au régime, et le faire tomber ensuite. Officiellement, il n'en est pas question, rappelle-t-on à Washington et à Londres. Paris, de son côté, approuve le retour des observateurs arabes en Syrie, décidé mercredi par le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe, Nabil el-Arabi. Leur retour *« va dans le bon sens, à condition que ces derniers puissent exercer librement et entièrement leur mandat »*, selon le porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères. Les ministres arabes des Affaires étrangères se réuniront dimanche au Caire pour étudier une proposition d'envoi en Syrie d'une mission commune Ligue arabe-Nations unies, a indiqué jeudi un responsable de l'organisation panarabe.

Deux rebelles syriens évacuent un blessé, mercredi à Idlib. AP

Groupes armés

Le rapport mentionnait également l'existence de groupes armés s'en prenant aux forces gouvernementales et faisant parfois des victimes civiles. Jeudi, au moins sept membres des forces de sécurité ont été tués et douze blessés dans une embuscade tendue par des déserteurs sur la route reliant Deraa, au sud, à Damas. À Berlin, l'Allemagne a expulsé quatre diplomates syriens, deux jours après avoir arrêté deux hommes soupçonnés d'espionner des opposants pour le compte des services de renseignements de Damas. ■ **G.M.** (AVEC AFP ET REUTERS)

Frankfürter Allgemeine Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Berlin: Neue Syrien-Beobachtermission sinnvoll

Ohne einen Beschluss des Sicherheitsrats hatten die UN der Arabischen Liga schon vor einigen Wochen „technische Hilfe" für ihrer Beobachtermission angeboten; dabei geht es um die Vorbereitung der Beobachter. Die Liga hatte bisher keine Erfahrung mit solchen Einsätzen. Nach Angaben Bans schlug Arabi vor, auch ein neuer Syrien-Gesandter solle von den UN und der Liga gemeinsam ernannt werden.

Ein Sprecher des russischen Außenministeriums bezog derweil am Donnerstag vehement gegen den von Westerwelle ebenfalls befürworteten Plan westlicher und arabischer Staaten Stellung, eine „Gruppe der Freunde des demokratischen Syriens" ins Leben zu rufen. Nach amerikanischen Angaben soll das vorrangige Ziel der Organisation humanitäre Hilfe für die syrische Bevölkerung sein. Der Sprecher sagte in Moskau weiter, Russland lehne derartige Formate ab, weil diese nur der Einmischung von außen in den syrischen Konflikt Vorschub leisten sollten. Solche Gruppen hätten nicht das Recht, im Namen der Staatengemeinschaft Strategien für die Lösung schwieriger internationaler oder regionaler Probleme vorzugeben.

Russland und China hatten am Samstag mit ihrem Veto im UN-Sicherheitsrat die Verabschiedung einer Syrien-Resolution verhindert, mit welcher die Arabische Liga unterstützt werden sollte. Ban äußerte abermals scharfe Kritik daran, dass der Rat in der Syrien-Krise sprachlos geblieben sei. Offenbar mit Blick auf Assads Treffen mit dem russischen Außenminister Sergej Lawrow am Dienstag in Damaskus beklagte Ban: „Wir haben zu viele gebrochene Versprechen gehört, selbst innerhalb der vergangenen 24 Stunden." Ban machte seinen Abscheu gegenüber dem Assad-Regime deutlich, wollte aber nicht ausdrücklich dessen Rücktritt fordern oder ausschließen, dass es unter Assad zu einem Dialog mit der Opposition kommen könnte.

Die Arabische Liga fordert einen politischen Prozess in Syrien, für den Assad seine Machtbefugnisse zunächst seinem Stellvertreter übergeben solle; die von Moskau und Peking vereitelte UN-Resolution hätte den entsprechenden Plan der Liga unterstützt. Vertreter der Liga hatten russische Bedenken gegen einen Regimewechsel vorige Woche in New York mit der Erläuterung zu entkräften versucht, entscheidend sei zunächst, dass Assads Stellvertreter die Befugnis erhalte, einen solchen Dialog zu führen. Lawrow hatte nach seinen Gesprächen in Damaskus mitgeteilt, Assad habe das getan; Vizepräsident Faruk al Sharaa sei mit dem Dialog beauftragt. Bisher gibt es keine Anzeichen dafür, dass sich der oppositionelle Nationalrat ohne einen Rücktritt Assads auf Gespräche einlassen könnte.

Derweil sucht die chinesische Regierung das Gespräch mit der syrischen Opposition. Der stellvertretende Außenminister Zhai Jun teilte am Donnerstag in Peking mit, er habe erstmals eine Delegation von Oppositionellen empfangen. Ein Sprecher des Außenministeriums sagte, die Regierung in Peking wolle den Kontakt zu relevanten oppositionellen Gruppen aufrechterhalten. Die Delegation des Nationalen Koordinierungskomitees für Demokratischen Wandel reiste am Donnerstag ab. Die Oppositionsgruppe setzt sich aus überwiegend linksgerichteten Parteien und Gruppen zusammen, sie ist neben dem Syrischen Nationalrat eine der großen Dachorganisationen der Regimegegner.

Beweis: *Eine Granate in Homs* Foto dpa

In Syrien setzten die Truppen Assads auch am Donnerstag den schon eine Woche andauernden Beschuss der Protesthochburg Homs fort. Einwohner berichteten, zahlreiche Wohnhäuser seien von Granaten getroffen worden. Nach Angaben von Aktivisten wurden wieder Dutzende Menschen getötet. Demnach wurden Hunderte Soldaten und Dutzende Panzer und andere Militärfahrzeuge in die Stadt verlegt. Ein Oppositionsaktivist im Exil forderte die Türkei und die westlichen Staaten auf, die verzweifelte Bevölkerung der Stadt aus der Luft mit medizinischen Gütern und Babynahrung zu versorgen.

Die Türkei will zur Beendigung des Blutvergießens in ihrem Nachbarland eine internationale Konferenz zur Syrien-Krise abhalten. Außenminister Davutoglu sprach in einem Fernsehinterview von einem Forum unter Beteiligung aller wichtigen Staaten in der Türkei oder einem anderen Land der Region. „Man kann Syrien nicht seinem Schicksal überlassen", sagte er. Seine Regierung wolle möglichst bald einen Fahrplan zur Beilegung der Krise erarbeiten, sagte Davutoglu, der gegenüber der Nachrichtenagentur Reuters eine militärische Intervention ausschloss. „Noch ist Zeit für diplomatische Bemühungen", sagte der Außenminister. Die Zeitung „Zaman" zitierte namentlich nicht genannte Regierungsmitarbeiter, nach deren Angaben nicht mit der Planung für ein etwaiges Eingreifen begonnen wurde. Die türkische Initiative, die Ministerpräsident Erdogan angekündigt hatte, sei noch in der Vorbereitungsphase. „Früher oder später musst du für Homs die Rechnung bezahlen", hatte Erdogan an den syrischen Machthaber gerichtet gesagt. „O Baschar, es kommt alles zurück."

Russland befürwortet eine stärkere Rolle der Türkei bei dem Bemühen der Staatengemeinschaft um einen politischen Ausweg aus der Syrien-Krise. Auf Ersuchen Ankaras sprachen Erdogan und der russische Präsident Medwedjew am Mittwochabend am Telefon über den Konflikt. Ob Medwedjew die türkische Initiative billigte, ging aus den Berichten über das Gespräch nicht hervor.

Berlin weist syrische Diplomaten aus

joh. BERLIN, 9. Februar. Deutschland weist vier syrische Diplomaten aus. Das Auswärtige Amt teilte am Donnerstag in Berlin mit, der syrische Botschafter sei über die Entscheidung schon informiert worden. Genauere Angaben zu den Gründen für die Ausweisung machte das Auswärtige Amt nicht. Außenminister Westerwelle lies verlauten, die Entscheidung sei erfolgt, nachdem am Dienstag zwei mutmaßliche syrische Spione in Berlin festgenommen worden waren. Ihnen wird vorgeworfen, syrische Oppositionelle in Deutschland bespitzelt zu haben. Schon am Dienstag sei der syrische Botschafter ins Auswärtige Amt einbestellt worden. Dabei sei ihm zum wiederholten Mal klargemacht worden, dass ein Vorgehen gegen syrische Oppositionelle in Deutschland nicht hingenommen werde.

Schrille Töne: Der russische Wahlkampf und die Syrien-Krise

In Russland wird noch gerätselt, wozu die Mission von Außenminister Sergej Lawrow gut war. Hat die Führung einen Masterplan für die kontrollierte Beseitigung des Assad-Regimes durch eine Palastrevolution alawitischer Generäle unter Moskauer Regie? Will der Kreml so den russischen Einfluss und die Wirtschaftsinteressen in Syrien bewahren? Ging es darum, Assad klarzumachen, dass Russland nicht mehr für ihn tun kann, als es bislang unternommen habe, und es mittlerweile nur noch darum gehen kann, sein Leben und das seiner nächsten Umgebung zu retten? Fjodor Lukjanow von der Fachzeitschrift „Russia in Global Affairs" nannte eine Zusammenarbeit mit dem Westen als eine Möglichkeit, mit der Moskau trotz allen Streits das Geschehen in Syrien in seinem Sinne beeinflussen könne.

Solche moderaten Äußerungen sind im russischen Präsidentschaftswahlkampf kaum möglich, wo es immer schwieriger wird, der Öffentlichkeit mögliche Bemühungen Russlands zu vermitteln, sich mit dem Westen ins Benehmen zu setzen. Denn im Kampf um Wählerstimmen haben schrille Töne Konjunktur, in denen der heldenhafte „Kampf gegen den amerikanischen Imperialismus" beschworen oder den Menschen ein Weltmachtstatus Russlands vorgegaukelt wird, den das Land aber nicht mehr besitzt.

In dieser Art ließen sich sowohl der Ultranationalist Wladimir Schirinowskij oder Kommunistenchef Gennadij Sjuganow vernehmen. Putins Töne, der ansonsten verbale Attacken gegen Washington liebt und darauf auch einen Teil seines Wahlkampfes stützt, waren leiser. Er verurteilte ausländische Einmischung, sprach sich aber auch dafür aus, den Menschen in Syrien zu helfen und dafür zu sorgen, dass beide Seiten des Konflikts außerstande seien, Waffengewalt anzuwenden. Am deutlichsten wurde der Präsidentschaftskandidat Michail Prochorow. Moskau müsse Assad dazu bringen, den Artilleriebeschuss von Städten sofort einzustellen. Er kritisierte das Außenministerium, es habe sich in der Syrien-Politik von ideologischen Dogmen und antiamerikanischer Phobie leiten lassen. Das sei anachronistisch. (M.L.)

Handelsblatt (Allemagne / Germany)

„Mr. Njet“ richtet sich nach Putins Wahlzielen

Mathias Brüggmann

Moskaus Taktieren im Umgang mit Syrien und Iran zeigt vor allem eines: Wir brauchen ein Umdenken in Russland - und im Westen.

Bärbeißig und mit tiefem Bass tritt Russlands Außenminister Sergej Lawrow oft auf. Und vor allem entschlossen, egal, ob er sich und sein Land damit isoliert: Sei es bei dem vom damaligen Uno-Generalsekretär Kofi Annan verordneten Rauchverbot bei den Vereinten Nationen, dem Kettenraucher Lawrow paffend sein Nein entgegensetzte, oder sei es diese Woche das Kreml-Veto gegen eine Syrien-Resolution.

Moskau hat sich damit zwar nicht völlig isoliert, weiß der Kreml doch China an seiner Seite. Doch Russland verärgert mit seinem Veto nicht nur den Westen, sondern vor allem alle anderen arabischen Länder. Lawrow weiß dabei sehr genau, dass es falsch ist, Bashar el Assad zu stützen, weil sich der syrische Diktator vielleicht mit Moskaus Hilfe noch einige Zeit halten kann, aber am Ende doch stürzen wird. Das wird eine umso blutigere Lynchjustiz gegen die heute herrschende Minderheit der Alawiten zur Folge haben, je länger der Kampf noch dauert. Und die heutige Opposition wird dann Russlands Flottenstützpunkt in der syrischen Hafenstadt Tartus schließen.

Russland hat in Syrien etwas zu verlieren: den einzig verbliebenen direkten Zugang zum Mittelmeer und einen dankbaren Waffenkunden. Und das alles für den Beweis, bedrängten Freunden bis zuletzt beizustehen. Vor allem aber verliert Moskau endgültig seine Rolle im Nahen Osten, die seit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges ohnehin schleichend schwand. Und so setzt bei russischen Diplomaten beredtes Schweigen ein, wenn es darum geht, warum Lawrow nun den Nachfolger des sowjetischen Mr. Njet gibt, des früheren, fast alles ablehnenden Außenministers Andrej Gromyko. Sie deuten damit an, was Russland-Experten offen sagen: Das Nein im Sicherheitsrat zur Syrien-Resolution wurde von Premier Wladimir Putin diktiert. Er nutzt die offene Konfrontation mit dem Westen für seinen Präsidentschaftswahlkampf.

Aber der Preis für Putins innenpolitisch motivierte Syrien-Politik ist gewaltig: Katars Premierminister hat dem Kreml bereits offen angedroht, dass Moskau wegen des Vetos alle arabischen Staaten als Partner verliere. Das ist verständlich. Das kleine, aber politisch hochambitionierte Land hat in der Syrien-Frage alle Kraft eingesetzt, um die traditionell unter ägyptischer Vorherrschaft stehende und total zerstrittene Arabische Liga zu einen. Erstmals hat sogar das mächtige Saudi-Arabien der Forderung nach Abgang eines Herrschers aus der Region zugestimmt.

Und auch andere arabische Staaten sind hochgradig verärgert über Moskau, allen voran die Umbruchstaaten. Das aber ist brandgefährlich: Denn der Kreml-Konzern Gazprom, der ohnehin schon bei seinen Projekten in Libyen unter Druck steht, könnte dafür aus dem wichtigsten Ölförderland Nordafrikas gedrängt werden. Insgesamt droht Russland nun endgültig der Verlust des Einflusses in einer Region, in der es um Russlands einzige nennenswerte Assets geht: Öl und Gas. Nur Iran ist noch auf Zuspruch aus und auf Handel mit Moskau angewiesen.

Einzig der Verdruss über den Westen erklärt Putins verfehlte Außenpolitik: Als der Kreml im Sicherheitsrat eine Flugverbotszone in Libyen durch seine Enthaltung ermöglichte, überdehnte die Nato die Resolution zur Rechtfertigung für Angriffe auf Gaddafis Truppen. In der leidigen Frage eines Raketenabwehrschirms gegen Iran, wo Moskau miteinbezogen werden möchte, taktieren vor allem die USA. Europa schweigt wie fast immer. Dabei ist weder eine Isolation Russlands noch das Drängen in eine Daueralliance mit China für den Westen sinnvoll.

Vielmehr brauchen wir zweierlei Umdenken: im Westen hin zu einer vertrauensvollen Realpolitik mit Moskau. Und im Kreml weg von der Stützung von ihm freundlich gesinnten Diktatoren und der Verteidigung kurzfristiger Interessen hin zur Ausarbeitung einer Strategie zur langfristigen Positionierung Russlands auf der Weltkarte.

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Handelsblatt (Allemagne / Germany)

Die Spielregeln ändern

Frank Sieren

Diejenigen, die glauben, Russland und China stellen sich quer, weil Diktatoren nun mal Diktatoren stützen, machen es sich zu einfach. Abgesehen davon, dass im Fall Irans auch die Demokratien Indien und Südkorea Seite an Seite mit China agieren, sind für Peking vor allem zwei Punkte entscheidend: Syrien und Iran spielen beim Ausbau ihrer geostrategischen Macht eine zentrale Rolle, die sie mit der gleichen Härte durchsetzen wie die USA, allerdings ohne irgendwo einzumarschieren. Und der Westen verhält sich, zumindest aus der Sicht der Chinesen, scheinheilig.

Zunächst zum Einfluss: Während Iran einer der wichtigsten Öl- und Gaslieferanten Chinas ist, will Peking durch Syrien den Zugang zum Mittelmeer auf dem kürzesten Landweg. Die Seidenstraße, einst Chinas wichtigste Handelsroute, endete in Syrien. Neue Eisenbahnstrecken und Pipelines sind bereits geplant, zum Beispiel, um nordafrikanisches Öl nach Osten zu transportieren. Gleichzeitig versucht sich China mit Israel gutzustellen. Gemeinsam will man eine Bahnlinie vom Mittelmeer zum Roten Meer bauen, um den Suez-Kanal zu entlasten.

Aber auch in umgekehrter Richtung ist Syrien als Partner interessant. Syrien ist Mitglied der Mittelmeer-Union und für China eine Hintertür, sollte die EU Handelsbarrieren aufbauen. In diesen geostrategischen Fragen stehen die Vetopartner Russland und China in Konkurrenz: Die Russen haben in der syrischen Stadt Tartus einen Flottenstützpunkt, den sie ausbauen wollen.

Peking will sich nicht vorführen lassen. Auch deshalb stellt es sich in der Uno beim Thema Syrien quer.

Mindestens ebenso wichtig für das Veto ist aus chinesischer Sicht das Verhalten des Westens: In Fragen der Menschenrechte messe er mit zweierlei Maß. Bei Menschenrechtsverletzungen in Staaten mit antiwestlichen Regierungen wird härter durchgegriffen, zumal wenn es dort etwas zu holen gibt. Zudem hätten Afghanistan und Irak gezeigt, dass ein von außen erzwungener Regimewechsel nicht die gewünschten Erfolge bringe. Und daher will China seine Position als einer der letzten Gesprächspartner, denen Assad noch vertraut, nicht leichtfertig verspielen.

Allerdings hat Peking nun auch die Pflicht, diese Chance zu nutzen. Zumal die Chinesen überzeugt sind, dass die westlichen Alliierten im Falle Libyens die Uno-Resolution missbraucht haben: Die Durchsetzung eines Überflugverbotes für Gaddafis Flugzeuge wurde verabschiedet. Heraus kamen Luftangriffe auf die Regierungstruppen, die der Opposition zum Sieg verhalfen. Insofern fühlt sich Peking in seinen Befürchtungen bestätigt und sieht nun weniger Grund denn je zuzustimmen, solange sich nicht alle verpflichten, sich auch global an Spielregeln zu halten, die im Westen auf nationalstaatlicher Ebene längst Alltag sind.

Aus Pekings Sicht herrscht auf globaler Ebene noch das Unrecht des Stärkeren. Vor allem aber die USA haben kein Interesse, das zu ändern, weil sie davon profitieren. Insofern kann man nicht nur China Scheinheiligkeit vorwerfen, sondern auch dem Westen. Dass selbst der deutsche Uno-Botschafter Peter Wittig sich in den Chor der Empörten einreiht und mit Blick auf China und Russland von einer „schreienden Schande" spricht, ist schon erstaunlich.

Niemand glaubt ernsthaft, eine Uno-Resolution werde etwas an der verfahrenen Situation in Syrien ändern, die jeden Tag neue Todesopfer fordert. Die Empörung ist zudem ungeschickt: Die westliche Überheblichkeit verhindert die Verfeinerung der Spielregeln und schwächt damit ein Uno-Instrument, das wichtiger denn je ist. Ironischerweise sind es die Chinesen und die Russen, die auf Fortschritte in dieser Frage drängen. Das hat einen einfachen Grund: Die beiden politisch wichtigsten BRIC-Staaten China und Russland wollen sich nicht mehr vorführen lassen.

Der Bestsellerautor („Angst vor China") gilt als einer der führenden China-Kenner.
www.sieren.net/sieren@handelsblatt.com

Junge Welt (Allemagne / Germany)

Besuch in Daraa

Syrien: Im vergangenen März begannen in der Stadt an der Grenze zu Jordanien die bis heute anhaltenden Unruhen. **Von Karin Leukefeld, Daraa**

Seit mehr als einer Woche gehen die syrische Armee, Truppen des Innenministeriums und Geheimdienste mit einer Großoffensive gegen bewaffnete Aufständische vor. Die meisten der Satellitenstädte um die Hauptstadt Damaskus gelten inzwischen aus staatlicher Sicht als »befriedet«, auch wenn dort immer wieder Gewalt aufflammt. Schwerpunkt der Operationen ist inzwischen die Stadt Homs, in der Gruppen der »Freien Syrischen Armee« und andere Bewaffnete seit Wochen die Stadtteile Baba Amro und Khaldiye kontrollieren. Internationale Medien berichten unter Bezugnahme auf Angaben von Teilen der Opposition und von Aufständischen über viele Tote und große Zerstörung. Ausländische Journalisten dürfen zwar versuchen, auf eigene Faust nach Homs zu fahren, müssen jedoch beim Informationsministerium eine Erklärung hinterlassen, daß sie dies auf eigene Verantwortung tun. Das Risiko, zwischen die Fronten zu geraten, ist jedoch groß.

Besser zugänglich ist Daraa, das als Ausgangspunkt der Protestbewegung gilt. Auch dort sind die Folgen der gewaltsamen Auseinandersetzungen allgegenwärtig.

Bei der Ausfahrt aus Damaskus sind einige Kontrollpunkte der Armee zu passieren. Der Verkehr auf der breiten Schnellstraße wird auf eine einzige Spur geleitet. Manche Fahrzeuginsassen müssen ihre Papiere vorzeigen, doch die meisten werden ohne weiteres durchgewunken, so auch der Bus mit 25 Journalisten ausländischer Medien und drei Begleitern des Informationsministeriums. Der Verkehr in Gegenrichtung staut sich bedeutend länger.

Die Fahrt verläuft ruhig. Gut 100 Kilometer später ist der Ortseingang von Daraa erreicht. Ab hier wird der Bus von einem grün-weißen Fahrzeug begleitet, auf dem an den Seitentüren »Protokoll« steht. Offensichtlich handelt es sich um ein ausrangiertes Polizeifahrzeug aus Deutschland. Zwei zivile Fahrzeuge der Sicherheitsdienste schließen sich dem Konvoi an. Mit Sirenen geht es auf der Überholspur vorbei an den Autoschlangen, die vor dem Kontrollpunkt der Armee warten, um in die 300 000 Einwohner zählende Stadt fahren zu können. Durch ruhige Vororte geht es weiter, wenig Verkehr ist auf den Straßen.

AP

Krieg gegen Damaskus: Bewaffneter Kämpfer im nordwestsyrischen Idlib, 20 Kilometer von der türkischen Grenze entfernt

Direkt neben dem »Hotel zur Weißen Rose«, in dem bis vor kurzem eine Gruppe der Beobachterdelegation der arabischen Liga untergebracht war, liegt der Amtssitz von Gouverneur Mohammed Khaled Al-Hanous. Man könne die »sicheren Plätze« in Daraa besuchen, sagt er und räumt damit ein, daß es auch unsichere Gegenden in der Provinzhauptstadt gibt. Von dem energischen Mann erhält die Gruppe eine chronologische Darstellung der Ereignisse, die die Stadt seit Mitte März vergangenen Jahres erschüttert haben. Eine Gruppe von Schuljungen hatte damals regimefeindliche Parolen an eine Schulwand geschrieben, Direktor und Sicherheitsbehörden griffen hart durch. Die Jungen wurden festgenommen und nach Auskunft von Angehörigen mißhandelt. Das führte zu Protesten, die Regierung räumte Fehler ein, der damalige Gouverneur wurde abgelöst, und auch der Polizeipräsident von Daraa, ein Verwandter von Präsident Baschar Al-Assad, mußte gehen.

1,16 Millionen Menschen leben in der Provinz Daraa. Viele Familien haben Verwandte in Jordanien, der Grenzübergang nach Ramta ist nur wenige Kilometer entfernt. Seit Jahrhunderten wird hier Handel getrieben, doch heute dient der Grenzübergang auch dem Schmuggel von Waffen. Kämpfer werden ebenfalls durch ihn geschleußt. Auf der Al-Schohadaa, der zentralen Einkaufsstraße, scheinen hingegen Handel und Alltag ihren gewohnten Gang zu gehen. Die meisten Geschäfte sind geöffnet, vor den anderen haben sich fliegende Händler auf dem Gehweg niedergelassen und bieten Schals und Mützen, Strümpfe und Ohrenwärmer an.

Es folgt ein Fototermin bei der örtlichen Fernseh- und Rundfunkstation. Das kleine Gebäude wurde von Aufständischen in Brand gesteckt, nachdem der Sender über Waffen in den Händen der Regierungsgegner berichtet hatte, berichtet ein Begleiter. Aus Kreisen der Protestbewegung heißt es, der Sender sei wegen seiner Propaganda für das Regime attackiert worden. Vom Dach des Hauses blickt man über eine tiefe Senke auf den südlichen Teil der Stadt. Hier liegt die Omari-Moschee, Treffpunkt und Ausgangspunkt vieler Proteste. Auf der breiten Straße, die an dem Gebäude vorbei in Richtung Jordanien führt, sind provisorische Barrikaden mit Autoreifen und Steinen aufgebaut. Das Wohnviertel wirkt verlassen, vor einem Haus stehen zwei Frauen und blicken neugierig herüber.

Weiter geht es zum ehemaligen Gerichtsgebäude, das am 21. März 2011 in Brand gesteckt wurde. Ein Begleiter berichtet, daß Ende der 50er Jahre, als Syrien mit Ägypten in der nur drei Jahre bestehenden Vereinigten Arabischen Republik zusammengeschlossen war, der ägyptische Präsident Gamal Abdel Nasser vom Balkon des 1922 erbauten Hauses eine Rede gehalten hat. Vor dem Gebäude treffe ich den 47jährigen Dschihad Dschamous. Von den 15 Schreibern und Notaren, die früher auf dem Platz vor dem Gericht Bescheinigungen ausgestellt und beglaubigt haben, sei er als einziger geblieben, erzählt er. Seine Kollegen hätten aufgegeben, nachdem das Gerichtsgebäude ausgebrannt war. Sein kleiner Tisch unter den ausladenden Zweigen eines hohen Eukalyptusbaumes wird von zwei Schirmen gegen Sonne und Regen geschützt. Gerade beglaubigt Dschamous einem jungen Mann die ärztliche Bescheinigung, die Männer und Frauen vorlegen müssen, wenn sie heiraten wollen. »Gerichtsfälle gibt es hier keine mehr, die Leute heiraten nur noch«, lacht er, aber über Politik will er nicht reden.

Süddeutsche Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Deutschland weist syrische Diplomaten aus

Westerwelle: Wir dulden es nicht, wenn Oppositionelle unter Druck gesetzt werden / Wieder Dutzende Tote in Homs

Berlin – Als Reaktion auf die Festnahme zweier mutmaßlicher syrischer Spione in Berlin hat die Bundesregierung am Donnerstag vier Mitarbeiter der syrischen Botschaft des Landes verwiesen. Den beiden am Dienstag festgenommenen Männern, die inzwischen in Untersuchungshaft sitzen, wird vorgeworfen, Landsleute in Deutschland jahrelang ausspioniert zu haben. Solche Praktiken würden nicht hingenommen, sagte Außenminister Guido Westerwelle (FDP). Die Bundesregierung könne „in keiner Weise tolerieren, wenn für den syrischen Staat Tätigkeiten in Deutschland einen direkten oder indirekten Beitrag dazu leisten, die syrische Opposition unter Druck zu setzen". Die Bundesregierung behalte sich weitere Schritte vor.

Aus dem Außenamt verlautete, es gebe deutliche Hinweise darauf, dass die vier nun des Landes verwiesenen syrischen Diplomaten Aktivitäten nachgegangen seien, die mit dem Status von Diplomaten unvereinbar seien. In der diplomatischen Sprache wird so gemeinhin Agententätigkeit beschrieben. Hinweise auf Gewalttätigkeiten der Verdächtigen oder Anschlagspläne syrischer Vertreter in Deutschland gibt es nach Angaben der deutschen Sicherheitsbehörden allerdings weiterhin nicht. Die SPD forderte die Bundesregierung auf, noch mehr zum Schutz von Syrern zu tun, die vor dem Regime in Damaskus nach Deutschland geflohen sind und hier illegal leben. Alle Abschiebungen solcher Syrer müssten ausgesetzt, das Rücknahmeabkommen mit Damaskus müsse gekündigt werden, verlangte Außenexperte Rolf Mützenich.

Westerwelle plädierte dafür, bei den Vereinten Nationen einen neuen Anlauf zur Beilegung der Krise starten. Er unterstützte den Vorschlag der UN und der Arabischen Liga, die eine gemeinsame Beobachtermission nach Syrien schicken und einen UN-Sonderbeauftragten einsetzen wollen. Aus Regierungskreisen verlautete, die UN sollten zentraler Akteur in der Syrien-Krise bleiben. Solange Russland nicht zu einer Syrien-Resolution zu bewegen sei, müsse man die UN anderweitig involvieren.

Der Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga, der Ägypter Nabil al-Arabi, hatte am Mittwoch bei den Vereinten Nationen angefragt, ob diese UN-Beobachter nach Syrien schicken könnten, die dort dann gemeinsam mit arabischen Beobachtern arbeiten könnten. Die im Dezember begonnene Beobachtermission der Liga hat bisher nicht ihr Ziel erreicht, die Angriffe des Militärs auf die Zivilbevölkerung zu beenden und die Freilassung aller politischen Gefangenen zu überwachen. Deshalb waren die Beobachter am Mittwoch von der Liga aufgefordert worden, Syrien zu verlassen.

In der Stadt Homs hielt die Offensive syrischer Regierungstruppen am Donnerstag an, wieder wurden Dutzende Menschen getötet. Das sogenannte Revolutionskomitee gab die Zahl der Opfer mit 37 Menschen an. Am Vortag sollen in der Hochburg der Regimegegner 93 Tote gestorben sein.

Der Führungsstab des Syrischen Nationalrats (SNC), der wichtigsten Exil-Organisation der Opposition, traf sich im Golfemirat Katar, um darüber zu beraten, wie das Blutvergießen in Syrien gestoppt werden könnte. Unter arabischen Diplomaten wird erwogen, den Nationalrat als legitime Vertretung des syrischen Volkes anzuerkennen. Über diese Frage werde am Sonntag bei einem Treffen der Arabischen Liga in Kairo diskutiert, hieß es. (Seite 8) *SZ*

Tageszeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Deutschland weist vier syrische Diplomaten aus

SYRIEN Pro Asyl kritisiert: Warum geht Berlin erst jetzt gegen Schergen des Assad-Regimes vor?

BERLIN *dpa/taz* | Nach der Festnahme von zwei mutmaßlichen syrischen Spionen hat Deutschland am Donnerstag vier Diplomaten des Landes ausgewiesen.

Aus dem Auswärtigen Amt hieß es dazu, die vier Syrer wären an Aktivitäten beteiligt gewesen, die „mit dem Diplomatenrecht nicht vereinbar" gewesen seien. Die Ausweisung von Botschaftsmitarbeitern gehört zu den härtesten Strafen, die auf diplomatischem Gebiet möglich sind. Außenminister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) drohte zugleich mit weiteren Konsequenzen, sollten sich im Zuge der laufenden Ermittlungen neue Hinweise auf eine Einschüchterung von syrischen Oppositionellen in Deutschland seitens der syrischen Botschaft in Berlin ergeben.

Bereits am Dienstag war der Botschafter Syriens ins Auswärtige Amt einbestellt worden, nachdem in Berlin ein Deutschlibanese und ein Syrer festgenommen wurden. Sie stehen im Verdacht, in Deutschland lebende Oppositionelle bespitzelt zu haben, und sitzen inzwischen in Untersuchungshaft.

Die Flüchtlingsorganisation Pro Asyl kritisiert, die Bespitzelung von Syrern im Exil sei „seit Jahren bekannt", aber lange „einfach hingenommen" worden. Tatsächlich heißt es schon im Bundesverfassungsschutzbericht für 2010, syrische Geheimdienste führten von der Botschaft in Berlin aus ein Agentennetz, um Regimegegner zu überwachen. Sie schreckten dabei nicht vor Repressalien gegen diese und deren Angehörige in der Heimat zurück. Syrer in Deutschland, die in ihrem Visier stünden, müssten bei einer Rückkehr nach Syrien mit Festnahmen, Verhören und Misshandlungen rechnen. Auch die deutsche Staatsbürgerschaft schütze dabei nicht vor Repressalien.

Pro Asyl kritisiert in diesem Zusammenhang, dass Flüchtlingen aus Syrien hierzulande bis Mitte 2011 kaum Asyl gewährt worden sei. Dabei sei bekannt gewesen, dass abgeschobene Syrer in Syrien gefoltert wurden.

Unterdessen geht in Syrien das Töten offenbar weiter. Der Nachrichtensender al-Arabija meldete unter Berufung auf Regimegegner, landesweit seien am Donnerstag mindestens 126 Menschen von den Regierungstruppen getötet worden, davon allein 107 in der Protesthochburg Homs. Die UN prüfen nun die Entsendung einer Beobachtermission. **BAX**

Der Tagesspiegel (Allemagne / Germany)

GEWALT IN SYRIEN *Neue Initiativen nach dem Veto im Sicherheitsrat*

Kampf per Telefon

Die Türkei organisiert ein Treffen – und schließt auch eine Militärintervention nicht mehr explizit aus

VON THOMAS SEIBERT, ISTANBUL

Die türkische Regierung hat ihre angekündigte internationale Syrien-Initiative gestartet. Außenminister Ahmet Davutoglu warb für eine Syrien-Konferenz, die in der Türkei oder sonst wo in der Region stattfinden könne. Ministerpräsident Recep Erdogan seinerseits rief den russischen Präsidenten Dmitri Medwedew an. Ziel ist es, den Druck auf das Regime des syrischen Präsidenten Baschar al Assad weiter zu erhöhen. An die Adresse Assads, der derzeit die Stadt Homs mit Artillerie beschießen lässt, gerichtet, warnte Erdogan: „Früher oder später musst du für Homs die Rechnung bezahlen." Bei der Bombardierung von Homs wurden am Donnerstag laut Menschenrechtgruppen erneut dutzende Menschen getötet. Einige Beobachter halten als letztes Mittel das Eingreifen einer türkisch-arabischen Friedenstruppe für denkbar.

Vor einem Besuch in Washington, bei dem er unter anderem mit US-Außenministerin Hillary Clinton über die Lage in Syrien reden will, sagte Davutoglu, auch nach dem jüngsten Scheitern der Bemühungen um eine gemeinsame Haltung der Vereinten Nationen werde die Türkei das syrische Volk nicht seinem Schicksal überlassen. Ankara wolle eine internationale Syrien-Konferenz organisieren und halte eine Einladung in die Türkei ebenso für möglich wie ein Treffen in einem anderen Land der Region. Die Türkei bemüht sich seit Wochen um einen engen Schulterschluss mit der Arabischen Liga in der Syrien-Krise.

Erdogan hatte am Dienstag den Start einer neuen Initiative seiner Regierung angekündigt. In seinem Telefonat mit Medwedew zeigte sich der türkische Ministerpräsident nach Angaben seines Büros enttäuscht über das jüngste Moskauer Veto im UN-Sicherheitsrat. Die Außenminister beider Länder sollten sich künftig eng miteinander absprechen.

Dabei wird Davutoglu seinem russischen Amtskollegen Sergej Lawrow, der vor wenigen Tagen von Reformzusagen Assads sprach, möglicherweise von seinen eigenen Erlebnissen in Damaskus berichten. Auch ihm gegenüber habe Assad demokratische Veränderungen versprochen, sagte Davutoglu dem türkischen Nachrichtensender NTV: Im vergangenen August habe Assad ein Referendum bis Ende September und Wahlen bis zum vergangenen Dezember angekündigt – geschehen sei aber nichts. Das Ende der jahrelangen Freundschaft zwischen der Erdogan-Regierung und dem Assad-Regime lässt sich ziemlich genau auf jenen Davutoglu-Besuch in Damaskus im August datieren. Seitdem wendet sich Ankara immer mehr von seinem südlichen Nachbarn ab. Inzwischen unterstützt die Erdogan-Regierung offen die syrische Exil-Opposition und lässt auch die Anführer der gegen Assads Truppen kämpfenden „Freien Syrischen Armee" in der Türkei gewähren.

Wie weit diese Unterstützung noch gehen wird, ist unklar. „Wir möchten nicht über das Thema einer Militärintervention sprechen", sagte Davutoglu. Ein klares Dementi war das nicht.

Veysel Ayhan, Syrien-Experte bei der Ankaraner Denkfabrik Orsam, glaubt Hinweise darauf zu erkennen, dass die türkische Regierung sich mehr und mehr mit dem Gedanken an eine militärische Intervention anfreundet. „Davutoglu sagt nicht Nein", merkte Ayhan im Gespräch mit dem Tagesspiegel an. „Das ist eine klare Botschaft an das Regime in Syrien."

Zunächst werde Ankara versuchen, durch eine verstärkte Unterstützung der Opposition das Ziel zu erreichen, Assad zum Einlenken oder zum Machtverzicht zu bewegen, sagte Ayhan. Schon jetzt liegen Berichte darüber vor, dass in Syrien auffällig viele Waffen türkischer Herkunft auftauchen. Letzten Endes sei auch „eine gemeinsame Militäraktion der Türkei mit den Arabern" möglich, sagte Ayhan. Eine solche Intervention würde nach seiner Ansicht die logistische Unterstützung durch die Nato beinhalten. Türken wie Arabern ist aber daran gelegen, jeden Eindruck eines neuen Kolonialismus zu vermeiden.

Bei der „Freien Syrischen Armee" stoßen solche Gedankenspiele auf freudige Zustimmung. Offiziere der aus Deserteuren der regulären syrischen Truppen bestehenden Verbände fordern seit langem, die Türkei solle eingreifen. Vor allem die Einrichtung einer militärisch gesicherten Schutzzone auf syrischem Boden wird verlangt. Eine solche Zone würde den Zerfall des Regimes enorm beschleunigen, sagen die Assad-Gegner. Nach ihrer Einschätzung könnte das Regime in diesem Fall seine Sicherheitskräfte nicht mehr zusammenhalten.

Eine Intervention mit einem Sturz Assads ist freilich genau das, was Syriens Partner wie Russland und der Iran vermeiden wollen. Noch ist die türkische Regierung nicht so weit, trotz dieser Widerstände offen über einen Militäreinsatz zu sprechen. Nach Einschätzung des Orsam-Experten Ayhan könnte sich das aber ändern, wenn die Gewalt in Syrien anhält.

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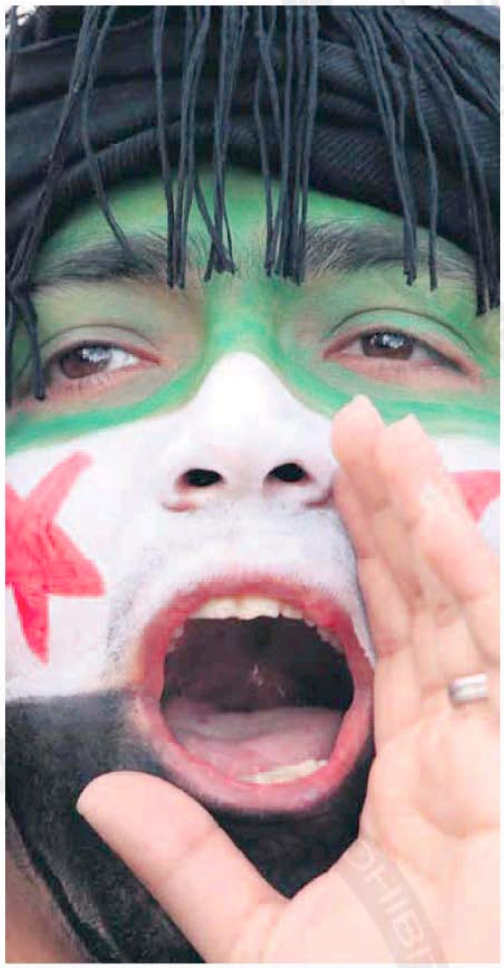

Solidarität. *Weltweit demonstrieren Menschen (hier in Doha) gegen die Angriffe der Armee auf die syrische Stadt Homs und beten für die Opfer.* Foto: Fadi al Assad/Reuters

La Tribune de Genève (Suisse / Switzerland)

Un plan pour contourner le veto sino-russe sur la Syrie

Les bombes ont encore plu hier sur Homs. La Ligue arabe et les Occidentaux sont en quête de nouvelles voies pour agir

Cathy Macherel

Des résidences visées au hasard par des obus, des familles décimées alors qu'elles se terrent dans leur maison. C'est la réalité que vit Homs depuis six jours, depuis que l'armée de Bachar el-Assad, dopée par le veto des Russes et des Chinois devant le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, pilonne la ville à l'artillerie lourde. Hier encore, 57 civils au moins ont payé de leur vie cette offensive qui frappe à l'aveugle les quartiers sunnites.

N'y a-t-il donc aucun moyen de mettre un terme au massacre? La Ligue arabe et les Occidentaux ont pris acte que passer par la voie du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU pour réclamer le départ d'el-Assad et la fin des violences même à l'impasse. Dimanche, échaudée par le «niet» de Moscou, la secrétaire d'Etat américaine Hillary Clinton lançait l'idée de travailler dorénavant avec «les pays amis de la démocratie en Syrie», une sorte de «club de pays», comme a dit Paris, apte à mettre en œuvre un soutien aux opposants syriens. C'est ce qui avait déjà été fait avec le groupe de contact sur la Libye. Une initiative que dénonce haut et fort la diplomatie russe, précisément irritée par le précédent libyen. Hier, son porte-parole Alexandre Loukachevitch l'a jugée «illégitime».

Concrètement, l'initiative pourrait viser la mise en place de zones de sécurité, notamment sur la frontière turque, permettant aux civils de se mettre à l'abri, et, moins officiellement, de sécuriser des poches de résistance, et très certainement de faciliter la fourniture d'armes aux rebelles (ce qu'a réclamé hier encore l'Armée libre). Ou encore d'ouvrir des corridors humanitaires qui, pour être mis en œuvre, nécessiteraient forcément une protection internationale. Autant d'idées déjà émises il y a plusieurs mois, qui se sont heurtées aux menaces russes, d'ailleurs réitérées hier par Vladimir Poutine. Mais Moscou, très critiquée pour son récent veto, est-elle encore en position de tergiverser sur l'humanitaire?

Les pays arabes, la Turquie et les Occidentaux, dont les violons sont accordés, veulent travailler sous légitimation de l'ONU, mais avec l'idée qu'il est possible de se passer de l'aval du Conseil de sécurité. C'est d'abord l'annonce hier par la Ligue arabe, qui se réunira dimanche, de son intention d'envoyer une nouvelle délégation d'observateurs en Syrie, mais dont elle exige cette fois qu'elle soit conduite «sous la supervision de l'ONU». C'est ensuite la volonté d'obtenir de l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU, qui avait déjà condamné les violences à une large majorité en décembre, de voter des mesures humanitaires exigeant un minimum d'interventionnisme, manière de contourner le veto sino-russe.

Dans l'histoire de l'ONU, il y a déjà eu un précédent. En 1950, c'est la voie qu'avaient choisie les Américains pour contourner le veto soviétique à une intervention en Corée. L'Assemblée générale avait alors constaté «le manque de cohésion du Conseil de sécurité menant à son incapacité à maintenir la paix» et décidé de créer une «Commission d'observation pour la paix», composée de quatorze pays.

Homs. Scène tirée d'une vidéo amateur, tournée hier et diffusée par Shaam News Network. AP

Qui en use? Qui en abuse?

● Le double veto sino-russe au projet de résolution du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU condamnant la répression en Syrie défraie la chronique. C'est la deuxième fois en moins de six mois que Moscou et Pékin mettent des bâtons dans les roues de cet organisme responsable du maintien de la paix mondiale et de la sécurité internationale. Mais d'où vient ce privilège concédé à certaines grandes puissances? Petit rappel: le Conseil de sécurité se compose de 15 membres, dont 5 membres permanents pourvus de ce fameux privilège – Chine, Etats-Unis, Fédération de Russie, France et Royaume-Uni – c'est-à-dire les principaux vainqueurs de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Les dix autres membres sont élus par l'Assemblée générale pour un mandat de deux ans. Pour qu'une résolution soit adoptée, il faut un vote positif de 9 membres, sans aucun vote négatif parmi les membres permanents. Précisons que l'abstention n'est pas synonyme de veto. Depuis la création de l'ONU, en 1945, la plupart des veto ont été exercés par l'Union soviétique. La tendance s'est inversée après la chute du mur de Berlin. Depuis, la palme revient aux Etats-Unis. Selon *Le Monde*, ce droit a été utilisé 272 fois entre 1946 et 1989, et seulement 30 fois depuis 1990, dont 17 fois par les Etats-Unis (presque exclusivement pour bloquer des résolutions condamnant Israël), 7 fois par la Russie et 6 fois par la Chine. Jamais par la France ou le Royaume-Uni. En revanche, la menace du veto comme arme diplomatique est régulièrement brandie, mais pas comptabilisée... **Y.W.D.S.**

Il Corriere della Sera (Italie / Italy)

Esteri

Guerra civile Ieri altre ottanta vittime a Homs

Brigate internazionali in azione in Siria a fianco degli insorti

Già caduti in battaglia diversi libici

WASHINGTON — La «legione» libica che combatte al fianco dei ribelli siriani ricorda i suoi «martiri». Sulla stampa di Bengasi è infatti apparsa la notizia della morte di tre jihadisti partiti dalla città nordafricana. I fratelli Talal e Ahmed Faitouri, insieme al loro amico Ahmed Aqouri, sono caduti in uno scontro a fuoco a Homs. Chi li conosceva ha raccontato che avevano lasciato la Libia in dicembre per entrare, via Libano, nel territorio siriano. Interessante la data. Perché è proprio allora che il patto tra le due rivoluzioni entra in una nuova fase. In quei giorni, il presidente del Consiglio nazionale siriano Burhan Ghalioun incontra a Tripoli i nuovi dirigenti. E scatta il piano d'azione che porta i volontari in Siria. Quanti? Secondo alcuni 100-200 uomini, quasi 600 per altre fonti, sparpagliati tra Homs, Idlib e Rastan. Nessuno li ha fermati e nessuno li fermerà. Come ha detto ieri il ministro degli Esteri libico Ashour Bin Kayal: «È impossibile controllare il desiderio del popolo». Damasco è ormai un avversario, tanto è vero Tripoli ha decretato l'espulsione dei diplomatici siriani.

Forze speciali
I ribelli anti Assad hanno l'appoggio delle forze speciali del Qatar, saudite e occidentali

Allora non stupisce che la missione di sostegno alla rivolta sia coordinata dall'ex qaedista Abdelhakim Belhaj, figura di spicco della nuova Libia, e dal suo vice Mahdi Al Harati. Quest'ultimo è un personaggio dalla storia singolare. Residente da 20 anni a Dublino (Irlanda), Al Harati è tornato in Libia per combattere Gheddafi e in poco tempo è diventato uno dei leader della Brigata Tripoli, composta da esuli provenienti da Gran Bretagna, Canada e Stati Uniti. Mille uomini, ben armati, con ottimo equipaggiamento che sono stati tra i primi a entrare nella caserma del Rais. In seguito, Al Harati è rimasto al fianco di Belhaj ma quando sono nati contrasti con il Consiglio ha deciso di partire per un viaggio tra Dublino e il Qatar. Parentesi accompagnata da un episodio controverso. Il libico ha denunciato il furto di una grossa somma di denaro che gli sarebbe stata consegnata da «un agente della Cia». Frase che, ovviamente, ha alimentato sospetti e teorie su chi sia veramente l'ex esule. Sicuramente è molto dinamico. Perché Al Harati, già alla fine di dicembre, è in Siria. Lo testimonia un reporter francese con il quale si muove nei villaggi al confine con la Turchia. Di nuovo, i libici mostrano di essere preparati per la guerra. Visori notturni, telefoni satellitari Thuraya e Kalashnikov. Fonti arabe sostengono che i volontari hanno risalito una filiera che si dirama tra Cipro, Libano (Tripoli, nel Nord), Iskenderun (Turchia) e forse anche Giordania per poi approdare in Siria.

Nuclei che avrebbero l'appoggio di piccoli gruppi di forze speciali del Qatar, saudite e occidentali (in particolari britanniche). I due Paesi arabi, oltre ai consiglieri, ci mettono anche i soldi. Denaro con il quale verrebbe acquistato materiale trasferito con aerei cargo proprio a Iskenderun. In questa città si parla anche della presenza di un «ufficio avanzato» gestito da 007 incaricati di assistere i gruppi di disertori siriani. Per ora la pipeline ha portato solo «gocce», ma è probabile che gli aiuti possano crescere. Negli Usa, infatti, c'è chi invoca una fornitura massiccia agli insorti.

I movimenti di combattenti «stranieri» non sono sfuggiti all'occhio attento dei russi. I servizi segreti sono immersi nella realtà siriana, hanno uomini ovunque. E ieri Mosca ha espresso il proprio «allarme». Il regime, invece, continua gli attacchi a Homs. Quasi 80 le vittime, falciate da un pesante bombardamento.

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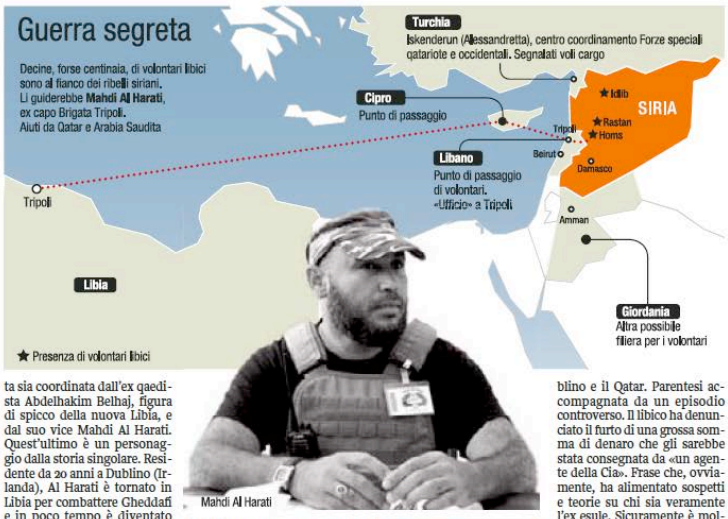
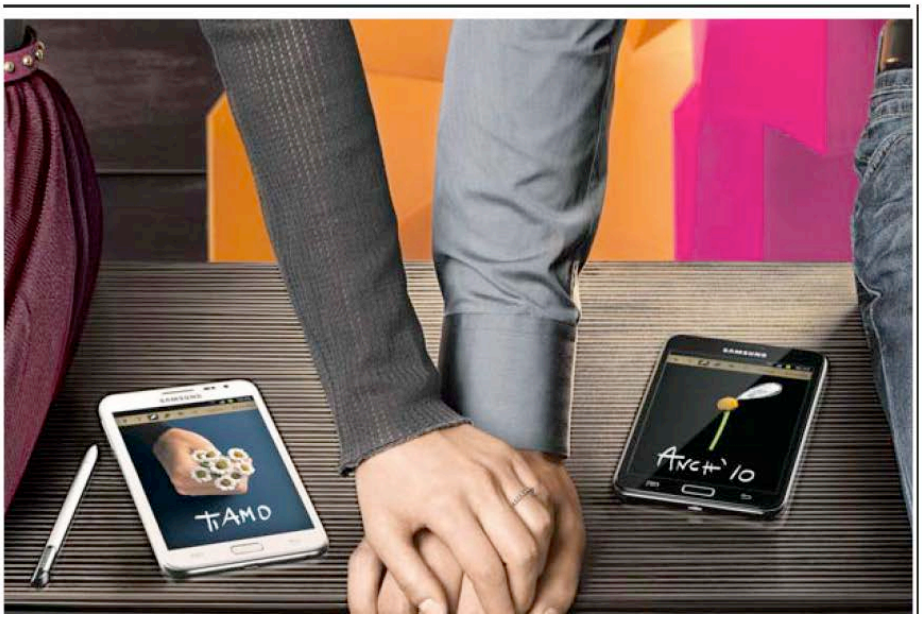


Mahdi Al Harati



Dissenso

L'accusa del poeta Adonis

LONDRA — Adonis, considerato da molti il più grande poeta arabo vivente, ha condannato la dittatura del suo Paese di nascita, la Siria, e definito «selvaggi» i recenti bombardamenti della città di Homs. Il poeta 82enne, alawita come il raìs Bashar Al Assad, dal 1956 vive in Libano e in Francia. Criticato da molti arabi per le sue posizioni elitarie e la mancata condanna esplicita dei regimi autoritari, già in giugno aveva in realtà scritto una lettera aperta a Assad su un giornale di Beirut, invitandolo a «sacrificarsi per lasciar decidere al popolo sul proprio futuro». Allora, come nelle dichiarazioni di ieri a Londra, Adonis ha però condannato «tutte le violenze», comprese quelle dell'opposizione.

Il Giornale (Italie / Italy)

«Teste di cuoio inglesi in Siria», la rabbia della Russia

Lo rivelano fonti vicine ai servizi segreti. E il Pentagono arma i ribelli

Un nuovo bagno di sangue. Mentre la Russia ribadisce la sua contrarietà a qualsiasi opzione militare, un nuovo agghiacciante bollettino arriva dalla Siria, segno più che evidente che il regime non intende fermare la repressione contro i suoi oppositori: sono 126 i ribelli uccisi in una sola, ennesima, giornata di guerra in Siria. E 107 delle vittime della mattanza sono nella città di Homs, una decina delle quali bambini. «Scene spaventose», le ha definite il primo ministro inglese David Cameron, ma anche «inaccettabili» da parte di un regime che «sembra essere determinato a uccidere i propri concittadini».

Il premier britannico esorta la comunità internazionale alla risposta più dura possibile, eppure dopo il veto di Russia e Cina all'Onu - definito disastroso dal segretario generale dell'organismo Ban Ki-moon - per la risoluzione in cui si chiedeva al presidente Assad di farsi da parte, le Nazioni Unite continuano a muoversi come un pachiderma in attesa di trovare un accordo comune e i governi convinti che la strage vada fermata prendono iniziative unilatareli per aiutare i ribelli. Secondo il sito israeliano Debka, generalmente bene informato sui movimenti dell'intelligicence, truppe stranieresarebbero segretamente già coinvolte nella guerra civile siriana.

A Homs, cuore della rivolta contro il regime di Bashar el Assad a 162 km da Damasco, stanno operando truppe speciali britanniche e qatariote al fianco delle forze dell'opposizione, ha rivelato il sito citando fonti militari e dei servizi segreti. I soldati di Londra e Doha - specifca Debka - non stanno combattendo direttamente contro le truppe di Assad ma, finora, stanno svolgendo il ruolo di consiglieri tattici, gestiscono le comunicazioni dei ribelli e i rifornimenti di armi e munizioni dalla Turchia. I due contingenti stranieri hanno organizzato a Homs 4 centri operativi nei sobborghi di Bab Amro, Khaldiya, Bab Deribe Rastan. Una notizia che ha fatto saltare sulla sedia i vertici russi, con Mosca che si dice «allarmata», mentre Ban Ki-Moon tenta di avvicinare la Lega araba all'asse anti-Assad e fa sapere che il Consiglio di Sicurezza Onu si riunirà nei prossimi giorni per discutere la possibilità di una missione congiunta di Onu e Lega Araba in Siria

Intanto continua il pressing per fermare la strage. Il ministero degli Esteri libico ha dato 72 ore di tempo ai diplomatici siriani per lasciare il Paese, pochi giorni dopo aver riconosciuto il Consiglio nazionale siriano che si oppone al regime di Bashar al Assad, consegnandogli l'ambasciata siriana a Tripoli. La Germania espelle quattro diplomatici siriani che lavoravano all'ambasciata di Berlino, dopo che due presunti agenti segreti - un cittadino siriano e un tedesco di origine libanese - sono stati accusati di aversvolto attività di spionaggio nei confronti di dissidenti siriani residenti nel territorio della Repubblica Federale.

NEL MIRINO Prende sempre più le sembianze di una guerra civile la battaglia per le strade di Homs, condotta dai ribelli anti regime (nella foto) [Ap]

La Stampa (Italie / Italy)

IL TIMES: FORZE SPECIALI DEL QATAR CON I RIBELLI

Nuova strage a Homs Ban Ki-moon: missione Onu-Lega araba

GIORDANO STABILE

Questa volta Ban Ki-moon non ha dosato le parole. «Il veto di Russia e Cina alla risoluzione sulla Siria ha permesso al governo di Damasco di scatenare la guerra contro il suo stesso popolo», ha detto il segretario generale dell'Onu. E ha aggiunto: «Quello che sta avvenendo a Homs è di una brutalità inaudita. E temo che il peggio debba ancora venire». L'unico piccolo spiraglio, dal punto di vista diplomatico, è la ripresa della missione degli osservatori della Lega araba, che con la loro presenza potrebbero almeno frenare la pressione delle forze armate regolari sulla resistenza a Homs. Ban ha rivelato ieri che la Lega araba vorrebbero riprendere la missione, «con l'aiuto dell'Onu».

Non c'è però una data, né la disponibilità dichiarata da parte di Bashar al Assad. Che invece sembra stringere sui tempi. Ieri le truppe si sono avvicinate alle zone attorno alla città vecchia di Homs, dove si concentra la popolazione favorevole agli insorti, in una area densamente popolata, fitta di palazzine. «Stanno piovendo proiettili da tutte le parti - è la testimonianza di Ali Hazuri, un medico del quartiere di Bab Amr, il più colpito -. C'è stata solo una breve tregua stanotte, ma ora è sempre peggio». Gli attivisti dell'opposizione hanno stilato un bilancio di cinquanta morti solo ad Homs, 95 in tutto il Paese, con la cittadina di Zabadani, 30 chilometri a nord di Damasco, pesantemente bombardata.

Nelle capitali occidentali la discussione è ormai su come aiutare materialmente gli insorti, dopo che gli Stati Uniti hanno respinto la proposta della Russia di riaprire il dialogo tra Assad e l'opposizione, a questo punto improponibile. Secondo il quotidiano londinese «The Times», il Qatar ha già rifornito i ribelli di tremila telefoni satellitari e sta per inviare equipaggiamenti per la visione notturna e razzi anticarro, di cui hanno disperatamente bisogno. L'Arabia Saudita fornisce invece denaro contante. E, per il sito israeliano «Debka», unità delle forze speciali qatariote e britanniche sarebbero addirittura già sul terreno, accanto ai guerriglieri a Homs.

Gli insorti non chiedono di meglio. Lo sceicco Zuheir Abassi, coordinatore logistico del «Libero esercito siriano» ha ribadito la richiesta di una zona cuscinetto protetta da una no-fly zone. «Se avessimo un'area sicura da dove lanciare attacchi - ha spiegato - la maggior parte dei soldati diserterebbe e si unirebbe a noi». Per Abassi sono già 40 mila i militari passati dall'altra parte: «Gli uomini non ci mancano, ma non abbiamo armi. Non chiediamo all'Occidente di intervenire ma di fornirci equipaggiamenti. Il resto possiamo farlo noi».

El Mundo (Espagne / Spain)

Asad bombardea los hospitales rebeldes

- La oposición al régimen sirio denuncia 110 muertes en una sola jornada en Homs
- El conflicto amenaza con extenderse al Líbano, Turquía y otros países fronterizos

JAVIER ESPINOSA
Corresponsal en Oriente Próximo

La crisis humanitaria que sufre la ciudad de Homs se agravó ayer ante el incremento de los bombardeos del ejército sirio y la incapacidad de Occidente y la Liga Árabe para hacer frente al bloque diplomático que se generó tras el veto ruso-chino en Naciones Unidas.

Un alto cargo de la organización árabe explicó a la agencia AP que el domingo sus miembros discutirán la posibilidad de reconocer al Consejo Nacional Sirio como legítimo representante de esa nación, en un gesto similar a lo que ocurrió en la revuelta libia.

El secretario general de Naciones Unidas, Ban Ki-moon, indicó que la Liga Árabe planea enviar otra misión de observadores en conjunción con la propia ONU, aunque dicha opción no pasa de ser un mero proyecto que todavía no cuenta ni con la aquiescencia de Damasco.

«Si enviamos otra misión, algo que estamos contemplando, tendría que ser algo mayor en número y con más equipo logístico», declaró el secretario general de la Liga Árabe, Nabil al-Arabi.

La organización Human Rights Watch (HRW) calcula que desde que comenzó el «brutal asalto» han muerto 300 personas. Una cifra muy inferior a la que ofrecieron los Comités Locales de Coordinación, que sólo durante la jornada de ayer dijeron que habían fallecido 137 sirios, 110 de ellos en Homs. El Observatorio Sirio para los Derechos Humanos rebajó esos números a 53 muertos en la *capital* de la revolución.

HRW denunció que los ataques han alcanzado al menos a tres de los improvisados hospitales que han establecido los residentes de la población y que se encuentran completamente desbordados por la afluencia de víctimas.

Testimonios tan desgarradores como el de Karim, que habló con HRW el pasado día 4, permiten hacerse una idea de la situación en dicho enclave. «Acabo de volver del hospital. Hay tres grandes habitaciones llenas de cadáveres. Hoy he visto más de 10 cuerpos. Los heridos se están muriendo porque no podemos tratarlos. Hay gente en la calle que todavía sigue herida. Han perdido trozos de su cuerpo. No podemos rescatarlos por los disparos. Morirán en la calle», declaró.

Otro de los personajes que se están significando como portavoces de la localidad, Omar Shakir, aclaró que hay «cuerpos carbonizados en las casas alcanzadas por los bombardeos» y que los residentes se han refugiado en los pisos inferiores, aunque en el caso de barrios como Bab Amro –el más afectado por la acometida– la mayoría de las viviendas carecen de sótanos.

La presente ofensiva comenzó después de que los elementos del Ejército Libre de Siria (ELS) extendieran sus dominios en la tercera ciudad del país amenazando con conseguir el control completo de la misma. La hipotética captura de Homs y su cercanía a la frontera libanesa –sólo 30 kilómetros–, donde se han asentado varias unidades del ELS, podría abrir una zona *liberada* al estilo también de lo que ocurrió en la revuelta libia, una posibilidad especialmente grave para el régimen de Bashar Asad.

Organizaciones como Amnistía Internacional y connotados activistas como Wissam Tarif, de la ONG Avaaz, alertan de que la situación debería calificarse ya como una «grave crisis humanitaria».

En un estremecedor vídeo difundido a través de YouTube, un doctor sirio en Homs solicitaba ayuda a la comunidad internacional junto a un cuerpo ensangrentando. «Pedimos que nos ayuden a trasladar a los heridos. Aquí los tenemos esperando a morir en las mezquitas», manifestó.

Con Siria prácticamente instalada en la guerra civil, los actores regionales temen ahora que la violencia pueda desbordar las propias fronteras y se extienda a países como el Líbano o Turquía, donde reside una amplia comunidad alauí. «Por eso tememos que se va a convertir en una guerra civil», señaló el embajador turco ante la Unión Europea, Selim Yenel, «y que esa guerra civil se podría transformar en un conflicto regional».

Cadáveres presentados por los activistas sirios como víctimas de los ataques del ejército en el barrio de Bab Amro, en Homs. / REUTERS

Embargo al dinero y las reservas naturales

Las nuevas sanciones europeas golpean al Banco Central y la exportación de fosfato

JAVIER G. GALLEGO / Bruselas
Corresponsal

La maquinaria de la diplomacia europea está trabajando intensamente para preparar un nuevo paquete de sanciones a Siria que se aprobará el 27 de febrero, cuando se reúnan en Bruselas los jefes de Exteriores de los Veintisiete. Ayer los embajadores permanentes ante la UE dieron por unanimidad el visto bueno a una serie de medias que pretende asfixiar al Gobierno de Bashar Asad, entre ellas la prohibición de comerciar con el Banco Central de Siria y el embargo de fosfato y determinados metales preciosos.

Estas sanciones van en línea con las que se aprobaron el mes pasado contra Irán, es especialmente la relativa al Banco Central, con el que establecerán prohibiciones para determinadas operaciones con el objetivo de no perjudicar a la población siria. En cuanto al embargo de ciertos productos que produce el país asiático, el principio de acuerdo se limita al fosfato, el principal material que produce Siria y que importa la UE. Según fuentes comunitarias, un 40% de sus ventas van a parar a países europeos.

La UE ya ha establecido el embargo de otros productos, como el petróleo, y pretende ahora ampliarlo a metales preciosos y materias primas para la producción industrial. Entre las medidas que se están debatiendo estos días a nivel técnico se incluyen también el oro y la plata.

Estas son las sanciones que han logrado generar un acuerdo entre todos los países europeos, aunque hay otras que también se han puesto sobre la mesa y tienen visos de prosperar, como ampliar la lista de personas y empresas a los que se les prohibirá viajar dentro de la Unión Europea y se les embargarán sus propiedades.

Además, se ha debatido otra medida más polémica que supondría prohibir a las compañías aéreas sirias que sobrevuelen el territorio europeo y obligarlas a suspender sus relaciones comerciales dentro de la UE. Esta idea habría sido propuesta por Alemania, aunque no cuenta con el apoyo suficiente por el perjuicio potencial que podría causar a los miles de ciudadanos europeos que aún permanecen en Siria o en países vecinos.

Una joven siria herida en Rastan (provincia de Homs). / AFP

El Mundo (Espagne / Spain)

Agua bendita en la guerra siria

Asad intenta ganar legitimidad religiosa en plena matanza de clérigos disidentes

JAVIER ESPINOSA / Trípoli (Líbano)
Enviado especial

Las fotos de la agencia Sana mostraban el lunes a Bashar Asad rezando junto a la máxima autoridad suní del país, el muftí Ahmad Hasun. Una imagen repetida mil veces en los últimos meses y que forma parte del esfuerzo publicitario del régimen por cimentar las credenciales religiosas del presidente.

Con más de 9.000 mezquitas en Siria y siendo éstas uno de los escasos enclaves donde los habitantes pueden reunirse sin promover la sospecha automática de las autoridades, la lucha por la legitimidad religiosa se ha erigido en otra de las principales pugnas de la revuelta.

En una crisis con incontables guiños a la historia reciente, el esfuerzo de Asad no resulta sorprendente. Durante la insurrección islamista que sacudió Siria entre 1976 y 1982, el entonces presidente Hafez Asad también se aseguró el respaldo del muftí Ahmad Kaftaro y de uno de los principales teóricos del país, Said Ramadan al Buti.

Junto a Hasun, el conocido ulema se ha erigido ahora en el principal sustento religioso del vástago de Hafez. En abril y tras una reunión del mandatario y Buti, el Gobierno anunció la clausura del único casino que existía en el país –su apertura a finales de 2010 generó notables críticas entre el clero local–, el retorno de las profesoras que habían sido expulsadas de la Universidad por utilizar el *niqab* (el velo que sólo permite ver los ojos), y la apertura de un canal de televisión religioso, en un claro gesto dirigido a los sectores más creyentes de la sociedad.

El jeque Zujeir Abazi fue uno de los alumnos de Buti. Ahora, refugiado en la ciudad libanesa de Trípoli, se cuenta entre sus detractores más acérrimos. «Antes éramos 1.500 estudiantes en su escuela. Ahora no deben ser ni 25 y seguro que todos son *shabihas* [milicianos alauíes]», explica el religioso en el apartamento donde reside, un habitáculo repleto de libros sobre el islam. «Hasun y Buti se criaron en los brazos del régimen. Los clérigos que les siguen son muy pocos. Los que se han beneficiado del régimen o los que han sido amenazados», añade.

Abazi forma parte del amplio sector de ulemas que se han sumado al levantamiento. Nativo de Deraa, familiar de los menores cuya detención fue el detonante del motín popular en marzo de 2011 y discípulo del carismático jeque Ahmad al Sayasneh –al que Damasco achacó la responsabilidad de las primeras protestas en esa villa–, Abazi tuvo que huir al Líbano en verano.

Una minoría con enorme poder

> La mayoría de los 21 millones de sirios son suníes (74%), aunque hay una significativa minoría de cristianos (10%) y de alauíes (10%), la secta chií a la que pertenece el presidente.

> Asad promovió una identidad secular para el Estado a fin de alejar al país de conflictos sectarios, aunque también concentró el poder en manos de su familia y de la comunidad alauí, otorgándoles gran poder en el Gobierno, el ejército y los negocios, según la BBC.

Poco después se unió al grupo fundador del Consejo Islámico de Siria (CIS), una alianza de clérigos opositores creada hace seis meses en la que ejerce como secretario y portavoz. «No sé cuántos ulemas forman parte del CIS en el interior de Siria, pero fuera somos unos 200», estima. El muftí es una suerte de figura diabólica para los opositores de Asad. Los manifestantes suelen corear eslóganes en su contra del tipo: «¡Escucha, Hasun, quítate el turbante y ponte cuernos!».

El 15 de enero el jeque Abdul Jalil al Said, que se identificó como responsable de relaciones públicas de Hasun –algo que negó el propio Hasun–, huyó al extranjero y explicó que «docenas» de eruditos musulmanes han escapado del país para unirse a los sublevados.

En una entrevista con el diario *Asharq al Awsat*, Said equiparó a Hasun con Gadafi y le acusó de «participar» en las reuniones de la cúpula militar responsable «de la represión de las protestas». Said adujo que desde el inicio de la revolución han sido detenidos 223 ulemas, aunque 115 fueron puestos en libertad más tarde. Una cifra que el jeque Zujeir considera muy inferior a los datos que maneja. El secretario del CIS habla de 800 «ulemas y estudiantes de religión» aún en prisión y casi medio millar en la clandestinidad o el extranjero para huir de las órdenes de captura en su contra. «El régimen ha asesinado al menos a 150 ulemas y estudiantes», afirma.

Entre las víctimas de esta rebelión figura el hijo de Hasun –Saria, de 22 años–, asesinado el 2 de octubre en una acción que su padre atribuyó a «radicales». Otro paralelismo con la insurrección del siglo pasado, donde los insurgentes mataron a una docena de religiosos que se atrevieron a cuestionar sus actividades. Días después de este suceso, el muftí amenazó a Europa y EEUU con «atentados suicidas» y sentenció: «A partir de hoy, ojo por ojo y diente por diente».

Asad y Hasun han identificado a los sublevados con grupos «terroristas» inspirados por portavoces de la ideología wahabí como el jeque Adnan al Arur, un religioso sirio exiliado en Arabia Saudí cuyas diatribas contra los alauíes desde el canal satélite en el que predica son un argumento recurrente de Damasco para excusar sus exacciones.

«No somos radicales, pero nos han forzado a usar las armas para defender a nuestros hijos y enfrentarnos a la opresión», dice el jeque Mohamed Ashab de Homs, miembro del CIS y devoto como gran parte del clero sirio de la corriente sufí, la más moderada del islam.

El presidente sirio, Bashar Asad, reza junto al muftí Ahmad Hasun en una mezquita de Damasco. / LOUAI BESHARA / AFP

ABC (Espagne / Spain)

ASHTON TOCA FONDO

JOSÉ M. DE AREILZA

Las urgencias de la crisis del euro hacen que con facilidad pasemos por alto el fracaso de la política exterior europea, en teoría reforzada con el Tratado de Lisboa. La primavera árabe ofrece varios estudios de caso sobre la ineficacia creciente de la acción europea, apoyada en un poder de atracción o «soft power» que no funciona ante las matanzas libias o la guerra civil en Siria. En Damasco, los rusos juegan en casa y quieren manejar una falsa transición que apuntale el régimen de los Al Assad, enviando al exilio si es preciso al actual dictador. Procuran que las atrocidades del presidente oftalmólogo no lleguen a las de su padre en 1982, cuando arrasó la ciudad de Hama y construyó un moderno parking sobre 15.000 muertos. Mientras Putin exporta su bochornosa versión de democracia, las sanciones occidentales a Siria no dan resultados y en Bruselas, Lady Ashton, Alta Representante, ha tocado fondo, lo que parecía difícil. Lo ha conseguido al negociar un acuerdo en el que las acciones de su servicio exterior quedan subordinadas a las autorizaciones burocráticas de los tres comisarios que compiten abiertamente con ella en el seno del ejecutivo europeo. España ha sido uno de los países que más ha empujado el desarrollo de una política exterior europea. Tanto la situación económica como el contexto internacional invitan a seguir haciéndolo. Con el drástico recorte al presupuesto de Santa Cruz, las delegaciones que nominalmente dirige Ashton suplirían incluso con ventaja aquellas representaciones más remotas para el tráfico de españoles en el mundo. Es cierto que los tres países más grandes de la Unión tienden a jugar la carta internacional por su cuenta y a valorar más la foto que el resultado. Pero también barruntan que si la UE no se convierte en un actor global capaz de defender los intereses comunes, nada garantizará la supervivencia del modo de vida europeo.

David Cameron quer "organizar rapidamente um grupo de aliados" para salvar os sírios

Rita Siza

Oposição diz que sexto dia de bombardeamento de Homs fez mais de cem mortos. Líderes internacionais denunciam catástrofe humanitária

● A comunidade internacional começou ontem a organizar-se num fórum diplomático alternativo para tomar decisões no sentido de aumentar a pressão sobre o Presidente da Síria, Bashar al-Assad, enquanto a cidade sitiada de Homs continuava sob intenso ataque das forças do regime. Segundo a oposição e as organizações de direitos humanos, a ofensiva em Homs e outros raides-relâmpago noutros pontos do país mataram mais de uma centena de pessoas.

Vários governos ocidentais denunciaram ontem a situação de catástrofe humanitária em Homs, sublinhando que o grau de violência e destruição a que está a ser sujeita a população síria impõe medidas urgentes. "Este é um regime que está absolutamente determinado em continuar a matar e mutilar a sua população e temos de tomar a posição mais dura possível. Precisamos de organizar rapidamente um grupo de aliados", declarou o primeiro-ministro britânico, David Cameron, prometendo acudir aos apelos de assistência da oposição síria.

A União Europeia está a estudar a possibilidade de endurecer as sanções já vigentes contra Damasco até ao fim do mês, admitindo entre outras possibilidades o congelamento dos bens do banco central, a interdição de voos com destino europeu e partida da Síria e a proibição da venda de diamantes, ouro e fosfatos.

Um dirigente da Liga Árabe disse ontem à Associated Press que a organização convocou os seus membros para uma reunião na próxima semana, para discutir o eventual reconhecimento do Conselho Nacional da Síria como legítimo representante da população síria, abrindo a porta ao estabelecimento de representações diplomáticas alternativas às actuais embaixadas. Esse foi o caminho seguido durante o conflito na Líbia - e o novo Governo de Trípoli foi ontem o primeiro a cortar oficialmente relações com o regime de Assad e a dialogar directamente com a oposição.

No imediato, a Liga Árabe pretende "reactivar" a sua missão de observação na Síria, cuja entrada tinha sido autorizada por Damasco. A deterioração da situação de segurança tinha levado a Liga Árabe a retirar a sua equipa de observadores do terreno no fim de Janeiro - o seu eventual regresso ao trabalho foi saudado pelo secretário-geral da Organização das Nações Unidas, Ban Ki-moon, que sem se comprometer, avançou a hipótese de haver um emissário conjunto. "Nos próximos dias vou manter consultas com o Conselho de Segurança", informou, lembrando que as negociações goradas para uma resolução contra a violência na Síria tinham já por base as propostas da Liga Árabe.

"Este é um regime que está absolutamente determinado em continuar a matar e mutilar a sua população", disse Cameron

O secretário-geral da ONU voltou a lamentar o fracasso do Conselho da Segurança em aprovar a resolução, criticando implicitamente a Rússia e a China, cujo veto terá encorajado o regime a intensificar a sua ofensiva militar contra os opositores de Assad, na sua interpretação. "Temo que a incrível brutalidade que estamos a testemunhar em Homs, onde bairros residenciais estão a ser destruídos por artilharia pesada, seja um prenúncio cruel do que ainda está por vir", desabafou.

O ataque do Exército sírio em Homs prosseguiu ontem pelo sexto dia consecutivo, com rockets e tiros de morteiros a ser disparados para os bairros ocupados pelas forças da oposição. Imagens de vídeo captados em Bab Amr, Khaldiyeh e al-Bayada mostravam as ruas desertas e dezenas de edifícios em ruínas, totalmente destruídos. Os relatos dos residentes dão conta de uma realidade quotidiana terrível: cercada pelas forças do regime, sem energia, sem mantimentos ou material médico e cirúrgico, a população definha sem apoio. "O que se está a passar é demasiado chocante para ser ignorado", escreveu o embaixador britânico na Síria, Simon Collins.

Réseau Voltaire / Voltairenet.org / Voltaire Network

The Irish Times (Irlande / Irland)

Ordinary Syrians feel the pinch as sanctions bite

THE GENERATOR choir sings on and off throughout the day, usually during scheduled power cuts. Their songs are loudest, the heat most insistent, on the narrow side streets of the capital, Damascus.

MICHAEL JANSEN

Troubles are driving up price of basic food and fuels, hitting business and home life in Syria

Generators, their covers bright yellow and red, hail from Korea and China. They come in several sizes, the most popular being the small portable model favoured by shopkeepers.

Ammar Daadouch says a few weeks ago his firm, which has showrooms in six cities in Syria, "sold 100 pieces a day". But now, due to the escalation of the troubles, this has fallen to 10. In some places the firm's shops can only open for a few hours.

"Soon we we will have problems with payments from China and other countries. Due to sanctions we cannot trade in dollars. Soon the euro will be blocked. Sanctions are hitting businessmen and the people. Not the regime."

Before the troubles there was little demand for generators in the country's cities and towns, he observes. "We didn't have power cuts." Some generators consume diesel, others petrol. But like electricity, these precious fuels are in short supply. Long lines of cars form outside petrol pumps, while jerrycans in red, blue, green and orange plastic queue under the watchful eyes of boys paid a few pounds by owners who drop off containers and pick them up later filled with diesel

The price of diesel has increased 40 per cent recently. Due to the cold weather, families are consuming more for heating homes. Few can afford the luxury of generators to make up for electricity outages. Cooking gas is also in short supply and the price has risen more than 40 per cent.

> Due to sanctions we cannot trade in dollars. Soon the euro will be blocked

Business is brisk at the Western Union branch at Youssef al-Azmeh square in the city centre. Although Syria's banks cannot deal with international financial institutions – again, due to sanctions – Syrians can receive remittances from abroad through Western Union, which has many offices throughout the country.

Millions of Syrians rely on transfers from sons, husbands and other relatives living and working the world over. "Payments are made only in Syrian pounds," remarks the young lady behind the highly polished wood counter. Two plain-clothes guards hover near the door to fend off daylight robbers.

Jewellery shops along this upmarket street have removed rich displays of gold from their windows. Shoe-shine lads who have staked out positions along the sidewalk clamour for custom. There are now six where one used to sit with his kit.

Damascus's many pharmacies remain well stocked. Imported medicines are not on sanctions lists and continue to be available.

However, if government revenues plunge, importers will not have the foreign exchange to buy essential medications from foreign suppliers. However, if the country's strategic reserve of such medications is exhausted, the International Committee of the Red Cross will step in to ensure Syrians are provided with what they need.

Syria, which manufactures pharmaceutical products, is self-sufficient in some medications but, again, could run out of cash to buy raw materials.

This is, of course, true for all types of manufacturing dependent on imported materials. Business could gradually grind to a halt.

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Regime 'hell-bent' on killing citizens, says Cameron

BRITISH RESPONSE

By a Daily Telegraph correspondent in Damascus and David Blair

DAVID CAMERON accused Syria's regime of being "hell-bent" on "murdering and maiming" its own people yesterday as scores more died in the bombardment of Homs, with many wounded being denied medical help.

The Prime Minister's angry denunciation of President Bashar al-Assad came on the sixth day of an assault on Syria's third city that has now claimed at least 300 lives. Tanks and heavy artillery have been used to pound large areas of Homs, inflicting some of the worst bloodshed since the conflict began 11 months ago.

"It's quite clear that this is a regime that is hell-bent on killing, murdering and maiming its own citizens," said Mr Cameron during a visit to Stockholm. "What we're seeing on our television screens is completely unacceptable." The appalling bombardment of Homs had created scenes of destruction, he added.

The Prime Minister urged the "toughest possible response" to ensure that "Assad stops his murderous tactics and that we see transition and change in Syria". William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, told Sky News that Mr Assad must depart, adding: "So much blood has been spilt on his orders and the orders of his henchmen that I don't think he can ever recover his credibility with his own country. All our efforts are being intensified to support an economic and diplomatic stranglehold on this regime."

Barack Obama last night decried the "outrageous bloodshed" in Syria.

The killing continued as it was disclosed that Wafic Said, a billionaire businessman and supporter of the Conservative Party, sebt a top British lawyer to Syria last summer to try to convince the regime to ends its violence.

Sir Jeffrey Jowell QC went to Damascus in July to give advice on democratic reforms but also to urge President Assad to end his attacks on protesters.

Inside Homs yesterday, a resident said that a makeshift field hospital was struck by shells for the third time since the onslaught on the city began. These rudimentary facilities are vital because Mr Assad's regime compels all government hospitals to report the names and injuries of wounded to the security forces. Anyone suspected of being an opposition supporter is arrested and denied care.

Doctors who disobeyed this instruction risked prosecution, said Francoise Bouchet-Saulnier, legal director of Médecins Sans Frontières, the French aid agency. "If they want to treat these patients, the doctors don't have any option except to lie about the name and lie about the wounds," she said.

Many wounded are too afraid to seek help at hospitals, even when they are accessible. Injured victims of the Homs bombardment are being treated inside mosques or in private homes.

The regime's denial of treatment to the injured was a breach of Article 3 of the Geneva Convention, she added. A person inside Homs said the work of "temporary field hospitals" was being obstructed by snipers. "The sniper shots are continuous and therefore no one can move inside the neighbourhood except with extreme precaution and risk to their lives." Another Homs resident said: "There is severe shortage in food and medical supplies. Even those who are not killed by the bombing are dying for lack of proper medical attention. Some of the wounded are hard to grab from the streets because the snipers are targeting anyone who tries to save them. They're not even letting people bury the dead, so they have to do it in the middle of the night."

The bombardment has targeted the largely Sunni areas of Homs where rebels of the Free Syrian Army have a strong presence, notably the district of Baba Amr. These quarters have effectively been sealed off by the army, leading to food shortages, while makeshift clinics often lack the most basic medical supplies.

A source in the city said that movement into or out of Baba Amr had been almost impossible for the past four days. "There is a massive lack in nutritional supplies and in bread-making ingredients, and all the connections are cut," they said.

Lebanon's military began reinforcing its northern border out of fear that the violence in Homs could spill over.

Human Rights Watch said that "government troops have fired hundreds of shells and mortars into populated neighbourhoods", killing at least 300 people since Feb 3.

The Arab League plans to revive an observer mission that was deployed in Syria last month. Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general, said this could develop into a joint initiative with the UN to the curb the violence.

Mr Ban voiced "deep regret" that Russian and Chinese vetoes had stopped the Security Council from agreeing a resolution that would have urged Mr Assad to step down. In total, 83 people were killed across the country yesterday.

Opposition Power rivalry

One reason the international community has not armed the rebels braving the firepower of the Syrian regime is the fractious nature of the opposition movement. A power struggle has broken out within the Free Syrian Army, a loose coalition of army defectors and civilians. The leadership of Col Riad al-Assaad, an early defector, has been challenged by Gen Mustafa al-Sheikh, who is more senior but a more recent convert to the cause.

The chief exiled civilian opposition group, the Syrian National Council, is reported to have attempted to broker a settlement, only for Col Assaad to denounce its members as "traitors". The row was typical of the personal rivalries that have beset the opposition.

The SNC has struggled to maintain unity. An umbrella group that reflects Syria's mosaic of ethnic, religious and political groups, it is led by a Paris-based sociologist, Burhan Ghalioun. Soon after its formation he blundered by comparing Syria's Kurds with Asian immigrants.

Others in the mix of opposition groups, include the National Coordinating Committee for Democratic Change, the Syrian Revolution General Commission and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Alex Spillius

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Iran advises Assad on how to quash protests

INTERNATIONAL LINKS

By Alex Spillius

THE head of Iran's elite Quds force is reportedly visiting Syria to advise the regime on repressing protests and the armed resistance, as consternation grew in Western capitals yesterday about Iranian and Russian meddling in the crisis.

Members of the opposition Syrian National Council said they had reliable intelligence that Qassem Suleimani was intimately involved with President Bashar al-Assad and his ruling coterie.

"It is his second visit at least," said Radwan Ziahdeh, an executive member of the council. "The Quds force is working mainly with training, helping militias and snipers."

William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, told his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, of his grave concern that Russia continues to sell arms to the government. In a testy phone call that followed Mr Lavrov's inconclusive diplomatic mission to Syria earlier this week, the Russian replied simply that there was "nothing illegal" about the sales.

The Quds, or Jerusalem, brigade, is a special unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for external relations that reports directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Western and Arab experts and diplomats estimate that the number of troops and advisers from the Quds force in Syria to be in the high hundreds or low thousands. They have set up at least one base in Zabadani near the capital Damascus.

A Foreign Office spokesman said: "We are deeply concerned by credible information that Iran is providing equipment and technical advice to help the Syrian regime quash protests in Syria. Such support is unacceptable." Help includes riot control equipment and technical advice on "how to quash dissent and how to flood areas with security forces".

29

The number of Iranians the Free Syrian Army opposition fighters claim to have captured during the Syrian uprising

Iran is also said to be providing support to improve the regime's intelligence gathering and monitoring of protesters' use of the internet and mobile phone network, including text messaging.

Opposition fighters of the Free Syrian Army claim to have captured 29 Iranians during the uprising and last week posted a video of five captives with their passports. Reports in the Arab media have claimed that snipers from Iranian-backed Hizbollah forces have been brought in from Lebanon to support government forces fighting the FSA.

The rebels yesterday appealed for the US to supply weapons, rocket launchers, body armour, night-vision goggles and other equipment. Identifying himself only as Mohammed, one rebel spoke via the internet to experts and journalists at a Washington think tank.

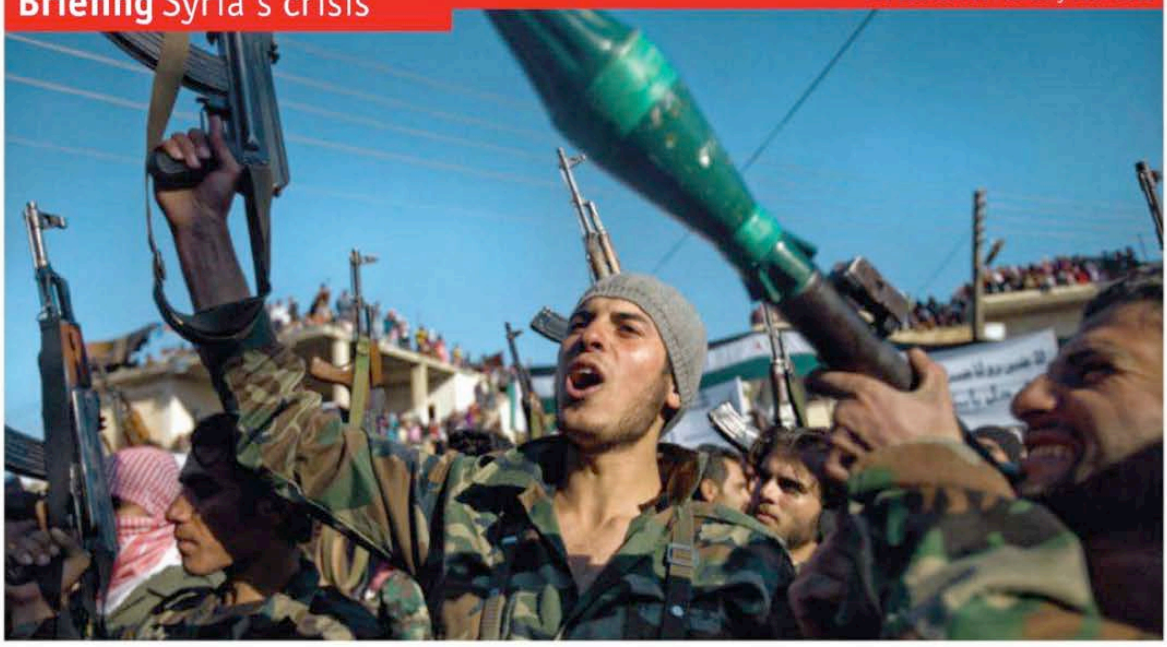
"The major point is logistical material support. We can do this ourselves, we're not asking for any troops," he said.

Faced with Russian and Chinese obstruction of a United Nations resolution, the international community has injected new urgency into its efforts to force the regime to stop the killing.

A State Department official has said that time was running out before the international community would have to "militarise" the situation, which would involve arming rebels or military protection for humanitarian aid.

Britain and other European states have temporarily withdrawn their ambassadors to Syria, while Germany has expelled four members of the Syrian embassy in Berlin for spying on regime opponents.

The Economist (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)



The long road to Damascus

DAMASCUS AND DERAA

There are signs that the Syrian regime may become still more violent

SECURITY men, most in plain clothes, speckle the main market square of Deraa, a town of 350,000 near Syria's border with Jordan. Yet in the brief time given for visiting journalists to stray from a scripted tour that highlights "terrorist" attacks on state property, a few ordinary citizens dare to speak. "We are so scared," says a woman clutching a boy's hand. "I come out to buy food, which costs more every day, but never know if I can make it home again." A young man with burning, bloodshot eyes lifts his shirt, revealing two bullet scars. "We will never give up," he declares as men in leather jackets approach to hustle him off. A middle-aged shopper pauses briefly before slipping into an alley. "God help us," he whispers in deliberate English.

It was in Deraa that Syria's uprising began last March, with riots protesting against the arrest and nail-pulling torture of teenage boys who, inspired by other Arab revolts unfolding on satellite television, had daubed a wall with the words, "The people demand the fall of the regime". An ongoing government crackdown has left perhaps 1,000 civilians dead in the town and surrounding villages, imposing an ice-thin calm. Most shops and schools are open only some of the time. Internet-video footage reveals daily combat between chanting, rock-throwing citizens and soldiers shooting live rounds. Officials speak of sporadic "terrorist" attacks on sandbagged checkpoints. As proof they parade a collection of captured pipe bombs and rusted firearms. Clearly though, should the government withdraw its armoured vehicles, combat troops, rooftop snipers and gun-toting thugs, then Deraa would swiftly revert to rebel rule.

The poison in New York

Meanwhile, the world looks on impotently. At the UN Security Council on February 4th, Russia and China raised Western ire by vetoing a mild resolution that would have urged Bashar Assad, the president, to adhere to a peace plan drafted by the Arab League. It pressed him to cede at least some unspecified powers to a deputy, pending the outcome of reconciliation talks. Russia objected to this, and more generally to the West imposing a diktat on a sovereign state it considers an ally.

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, accompanied by the overseas intelligence chief, Mikhail Fradkov, flew to Syria on February 7th. Mr Lavrov described their meeting with Mr Assad as productive, insisting that the Syrian president was committed to speedy reforms, including a new constitution and elections, an end to violence and dialogue with his foes. The Russians said that, as a first step, Mr Assad had directed a vice-president, Farouk Sharaa, to initiate talks with opposition groups. "Only Syria can decide the fate of Mr Assad," Mr Lavrov declared.

America and many of its European allies, along with Arab Gulf states, responded with outrage to the UN vetoes. Saying that Russia and China had granted Mr Assad a licence to kill his own people, they jointly withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus. Sanctions on Syria include export bans on American technology, a European ban on oil imports and strict financial controls, including a freeze on the overseas assets of members of the regime.

Diplomats now speak of further options to press Mr Assad's regime, such as tabling a vote of condemnation at the UN General Assembly, where no country wields a veto, and forming a contact group together with neighbouring Turkey and Jordan to co-ordinate stronger action. This might include the imposition of safe havens along Syria's borders as well as direct aid to the Free Syrian Army, a patchwork of guerrilla cells led by defecting soldiers that has harassed government forces across the country.

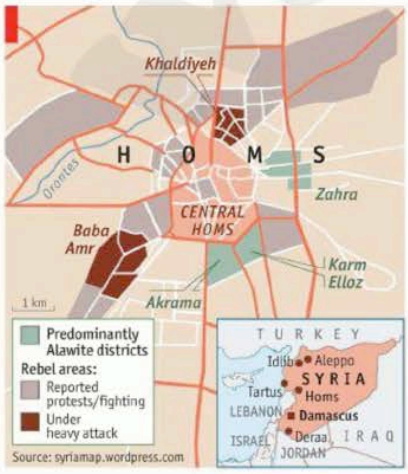
Even as international diplomacy has degenerated into a power tussle reminiscent of the cold war, Syrians are confronted with scenes of bloody wreckage in their own cities. Since the uprising began 11 months ago, the pattern has been for government forces to single out one rebellious village or urban district at a time for punishment. Some 7,000 civilians have perished as a result of such tactics. Since December frequent protests have taken place even in the heavily populated suburbs

ringing Damascus, the capital, and Aleppo, the second city and the country's commercial hub. Usually, government troops have then withdrawn, taking "terrorist" prisoners with them but leaving behind only token checkpoints.

More recently, the state-owned press has spoken ominously of the need to shift away from what it terms "restraint". A new security plan does indeed seem to have been launched on February 3rd, a day seared in Syrian memories as the anniversary of a merciless 1982 artillery assault on the then-rebellious city of Hama, during the rule of Mr Assad's father, Hafez, that left the ancient town's picturesque old quarter in ruins and some 20,000 dead.

Since that date, Bashar Assad's troops have mounted an unprecedentedly brutal show of force. They have showered artillery and rocket fire on Baba Amr and Khaldiyeh, two rebel-held districts of Homs, Syria's third-largest city and the hub of the current uprising. They have also attacked the nearby town of Rastan, the mountain resort of Zabadani, near the Lebanese border, the city of Idlib, close to Turkey, and other towns. Attacks have taken place simultaneously and relentlessly. Opposition sources say they think the shelling is a prelude to ground assaults on all these areas.

With up to several hundred projectiles raining into Homs every hour, the nationwide casualty toll has surged from around 20 a day to more than 50. Transport and telephone links, along with power, water and fuel supplies have been severed to many of the stricken areas, which were poor to begin with and have seen their incomes shrivel during the long months of unrest. With thousands of civilians choosing to abandon their homes despite cold winter weather, Syria is likely soon to confront a grave internal refugee crisis within its sealed borders. "We ask for nothing from the world, except for coffins, since there are not enough of them here for our bodies," declares a sarcastic tweet from Homs.



Foreign friends and foes

Syria's relations with selected countries

	Historical	Current
Iran	Strategic ties since 1979. Syria is transit route for weapons to Iranian proxies in neighbouring countries	Elite Iranian units advising regime on quashing protests and monitoring internet. Reportedly sent $9 billion to help Syria weather sanctions
Russia	Patron and supplier of weapons for four decades. Syria is its last toehold in the Middle East	Vetoed resolutions against Syria in the UN Security Council. Sold $550m of fighter jets to Syria in January
Turkey	After decades of mutual suspicion, relations warmed in recent years. This led to a trade pact in 2004 and visa-free travel in 2009	After initial attempts to mediate, turned against Assad regime. Hosts refugees, army defectors and helps opposition. Yet has failed to apply sanctions
Gulf states (Qatar/ Saudi Arabia)	Long suspicious over Syrian ties to Iran and interference in Lebanon but recent thaw in relations; Saudi ambassador withdrawn in 2008, returned a year later	Led Arab League efforts against Syria. Qatari emir suggested military intervention. May arm Syrian rebels
Europe	France led efforts to bring Syria back from international isolation after assassination of Lebanese PM, Rafik Hariri, in 2005	Keen to see Assad go. France has suggested safe havens. Britain says it will send secure communications equipment to rebels
America	Long-standing animosity. Ambassador returned to Damascus in January 2011 after five-year absence	Closed embassy on February 6th. Working with opposition but says it will not arm rebels. Suggested setting up contact group for rebel allies

Source: *The Economist*

Mr Assad's government seems to believe that such tactics will succeed in stanching the revolt. A Syrian businessman recounts that in a chance meeting with a senior security official at a posh gym he was told confidently that the current offensive would be decisive. It would in effect "decapitate" the Free Syrian Army, the official boasted.

There are nearby precedents for such success. Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi dictator, ruled for more than a decade following his brutal suppression of an uprising in the country's south after the first Gulf war. Turkey's army has put a fairly tight lid on Kurdish separatism, just as Israel has crushed two Palestinian intifadas. And Mr Assad's own father outlived the rebels in Hama.

There are other reasons why Mr Assad might feel he will prevail. The centre of Damascus does, on the surface, appear surprisingly normal. Shops and cafés are open, if largely empty. Traffic is busy at times. Syria's president felt secure enough recently to venture out to a restaurant.

Despite the rotting of state institutions under one-party rule, Mr Assad's army and security forces have, to general surprise, so far suffered relatively few defections. Conscripts typically serve far from their hometowns, and the army is believed to have culled potentially disloyal soldiers from active units. Nor has Syria's army yet unleashed its full array of firepower, which could include helicopter gunships and jet bombers. Despite making inroads, the rebels, who have briefly controlled areas close to Damascus, have as yet neither the supply lines, nor the communications capacity and heavy weaponry, to mount more than localised pinprick raids.

Perhaps more importantly, Mr Assad still enjoys at least tacit backing from a fair proportion of Syrians. The very brutality of his crackdown has, ironically but perhaps deliberately, bolstered loyalty among minorities that together make up a third of Syria's 23m people. The Assad clan, which has ruled since 1970, are Alawites, an esoteric branch of Shiism that dominates Syria's coastal mountains as well as the armed forces. Poor Alawites also make up much of the rank and file of more shadowy government militias, such as the plainclothes thugs known as the *shabiha*. Vicious government tactics have served to implicate the Alawites as a whole, raising fears of retribution should the regime fall.

Sectarian quicksands

Other minority sects, including half a dozen Christian groups as well as Shias and Druze, are less privileged by or attached to the state. Yet they have benefited from the regime's secularist doctrine, which has maintained a degree of religious freedom unique in the region. Although Syria's opposition leadership is cross-sectarian, on the streets it is the country's Sunni Arab majority that has suffered the brunt of the oppression.

It is no accident that the areas which have fallen under rebel control are almost entirely Sunni. In line with much of the region, Syria's Sunnis have grown religiously conservative in recent decades, and increasingly influenced by the harsh anti-Shia rhetoric propounded by Saudi Arabia. As in Iraq, the Sunnis' predicament has pushed many into outright radicalism. Comments posted below a YouTube video of an Alawite tank commander captured by the Free Syrian Army, for instance, proposed that he should be sodomised before being ritually slaughtered as an "infidel animal". Many of the rebel army's local brigades carry names associated with Sunni triumphalism. Mosque sermons in rebel areas habitually describe government forces as satanic hordes.

Such talk, seemingly reflecting a Sunni rage that has long simmered under the surface, frightens other Syrians—and with good reason. Alawites recall that what prompted the atrocity in Hama was a far smaller massacre of Alawite army cadets, carried out by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Fear of empowered Sunni radicals has pushed many Christians, who are keenly aware of the decimation of neighbouring Iraq's equally large and ancient Christian community, grudgingly to accept the government's characterisation of the rebels as terrorists. "We were all with the revolution so long as the demonstrations were peaceful," says a Christian housewife in Damascus. "But how can we support an armed criminal mob?"

For reasons of class, many Sunnis, particularly among the privileged business elite that has profited under the Assads, also fear the revolutionaries. Middle-class Syrians, too, are often warier of growing economic hardship than of oppressive rule. Even the country's long-repressed 15% Kurdish minority, which is mostly Sunni Muslim, has only tepidly embraced the uprising. "They are hedging bets," says a Syrian analyst. "What they want is guarantees of Kurdish national rights, and so long as the opposition cannot give these, they can hope Bashar will reward them for staying quiet."

Divided opposition

The fissures within Syrian society have stymied efforts to organise opposition to the regime. When Mr Assad succeeded his father 12 years ago, a flush of optimism emboldened intellectuals to demand democratic reforms in a movement known as the Damascus spring. Most were eventually jailed or exiled and have lost credibility. But even with much coaxing from Western powers, products of the uprising such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) and a rival group, the National Co-ordination Body (NCB), have gained little diplomatic traction. Neither do they have much influence in Syria, where local committees organise resistance. The two main opposition groupings have bickered over strategy, as the NCB at first counselled dialogue with the state and the SNC backed foreign intervention. In fact, neither course has proved fruitful. Some Syrians suspect the Muslim Brotherhood of being too powerful within the SNC, whereas others say it is a tool of America. Even the head of the Free Syrian Army has complained that the exiled opposition groups are dominated by plotters and traitors.

All this has comforted Mr Assad, who appears to reckon that he is not as isolated as some think. True, 19 of the Arab League's 22 member states now shun him, along with the West and even countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa. And Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that was long backed by Syria, has abandoned its Damascus headquarters. But two crucial neighbours, Iraq and Lebanon, are politically dominated by Shia parties with no love for Mr Assad's foes. Hizbullah, the powerful Lebanese Shia party-cum-militia, is a staunch friend. Strong rumours suggest that Iraq's prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, has quietly funnelled money to his beleaguered neighbour. And Iran, the Shia superpower and a longstanding ally, views Mr Assad's regime as its most important strategic buffer.

Two of Syria's other neighbours, meanwhile, may have little interest in seeing radical change. Israel would dearly love to break the axis linking Iran to Hizbullah. Yet despite Syria's rhetoric about liberating the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in 1967, the Syrian border has in fact been Israel's quietest for the past 40 years. Fearing that Syria's stockpile of missiles and chemical weapons could fall into less restrained hands, Israel may also calculate that maintaining a feeble, delegitimised Assad regime is in its interest. Despite his own family's history of tense relations with Syria, Jordan's King Abdullah, too, may prefer the devil he knows to the possibility of an Islamist republic next door, though he has publicly called for Mr Assad's ouster.

As for Russia, Mr Assad seems to believe that much as in his father's time, when Syria was a Soviet client state, the Kremlin will be willing to pay a high diplomatic price to prop him up. Syria has certainly been an avid customer for Russian arms—though whether it will have money to spend in future is another matter. It has encouraged Russia to revamp a naval station at Tartus that represents Russia's only military base outside the old Soviet Union.

Yet on all these scores, Mr Assad could be overplaying his hand. Russia is driven less by nostalgic delusions than by cold calculation. Perhaps it believes that, as in Chechnya, a scorched-earth policy can fix a deathly peace. Like Israel, it would prefer to see its southern flank bordered by weak and polarised states, rather than an emerging Sunni Islamist bloc dominated by an increasingly powerful Turkey. Russia may also be happy to cock a snook at Western powers it regards as hypocritically manipulative of public opinion, particularly in advance of next month's presidential election. But only if the price is right.

Look, no blood

The zombie regime

That price could soon rise, dramatically. Most independent observers in Damascus believe that indeed, in the short term, the Syrian regime's savage offensive may succeed in containing most forms of armed resistance. But if Deraa is any indication, Mr Assad has little chance of long-term survival. As in a vampire film, citizens go through the motions of daily life, fearful of contact with officials. In the eyes of most, the government is totally discredited, at best an evil to be suffered. The cold fury that clearly burns in many homes, linked now in many hearts to religious fervour, may flare at any time.

Even with the army's offensive at its peak, flash protests are frequently breaking out across Syria, including in the security-infested heart of Damascus. Over a recent weekend, protesters staged some 400 separate demonstrations. Israel's military-intelligence chief reported in a recent public briefing that only a third of conscripts answered the latest call-up for Syria's compulsory military service. He also cited intelligence of cracks in Syria's command structure, with officers speaking of the need to replace Mr Assad and his clan.

This may be disinformation, designed to dismay Israel's enemy, Iran. But in economic terms Syria is pitching into a deepening crisis. The central bank's reserves are believed to have topped $20 billion before the uprising. Since then they are thought to have fallen by as much as two-thirds. Syria's currency has slipped by nearly 50% in the past few weeks, stoking already fierce inflation. Power cuts and fuel shortages are common, and many of the country's factories have closed. The tourist industry is all but dead. Syria's modest oil exports, the staple of government revenue, have virtually dried up.

Many Syrians are convinced that, eventually, Mr Assad will go. What worries them is how. Few expect the opposition to seize Russia's bait and engage in talks with the regime. Nor do they see Mr Assad retiring willingly. On the other hand, few expect much help from the outside world either. Those who can are leaving the country. Those who cannot are waiting, resigned to their fate. ■

The Herald (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

New Cold War rivalry over Syrian uprising

Chill wind from Russia carries smoke from Homs to the West

THE FACE OF WAR: While the civilian battle has very clearly begun within Syria, international leaders have launched their own fights. Picture: PA

DAVID PRATT
FOREIGN ANALYSIS

OH to have been a fly on the wall at that Damascus meeting the other day.

I'm talking about the one between Syria's President Bashar al Assad and his Russian visitors – some might say allies – Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Mikhail Fradkov, Moscow's director of foreign intelligence.

While the innocent civilians trapped by indiscriminate bombardment in the Syrian city of Homs will no doubt only have survival on their minds right now, it would surely add to their woes to know how much their fate seems increasingly beholden to regional and international power politicking.

Anyone in any doubt need only cast their mind back to last weekend when Russia and China used their veto at the UN Security Council, which backed an Arab League peace plan for Syria. So, now, while Homs burns, the air is full not only of smoke but the chill wind of an east-west Cold War re-run.

By deploying that veto, Russia and China laid down a marker, making it clear they, too, have interests in the Middle East and are prepared to go quite some way to protect them.

Responding with her own calls for the creation of a Friends of Syria group, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also spelled out Washington's determination to stand its ground.

While it's probably fair to say Syria's civil war has now begun, for some time now it has been far more than a purely Syrian affair.

To fully grasp Moscow's manoeuvrings on Syria and the current roots of its fallout with the West and some Arab states, one has to look at a combination of the regional struggle for power in the Middle East and Russia's own internal politics.

At the core of this revived Cold War struggle lies a desire by the US and its allies to see a shift in the ruling regimes in both Iran and Syria. Such changes would result in fundamental changes in the political configuration and alliances across the region.

For almost 30 years now, Syria, Iran and Hizbollah – the powerful political and military organisation of Shia Muslims allied to Syria – have been partners and thorns in the side of US-Israeli dominance in the Middle East.

Throughout that time, too, Moscow has maintained close links with the Assad family and Syrian regime. While Syria may not be an ally of Russia in the strictest sense of the word, Damascus has been a huge importer of Russian weapons, the trade between the two nations during the past decade amounting to around $1.5 billion.

Only last month, as the Syrian uprising gained momentum, a Russian cargo ship laden with ammunition arrived in the Russian naval resupply facility in the Syrian port of Tartus, and the two nations are said to have signed a £420m deal for military aircraft.

Hardly surprising, then, that Moscow is keen to keep business brisk while maintaining strong links with its long-time "friend" in the strategic heart of the Middle East.

So, be warned of Moscow's ire should any Arab nation have the temerity to apply political pressure to Russia's Syrian proxy. If Arab press reports of recent days are anything to go by, the tiny Gulf state of Qatar, which has proposed international military intervention in Syria to stop the killing, was the latest victim of a Russian diplomatic lashing.

Indeed, Russia's UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin has vigorously had to deny reports he threatened Qatar could be "wiped off the map" during the contentious negotiations over last week's UN Syrian peace resolution.

Moscow's alleged diplomatic pummelling of Qatar on Syria's behalf is in part a response to President Assad's fear the Gulf State might be willing to send its aircraft and special forces as part of any international intervention in Syria, as the Qataris did in Libya.

Russia's latest assertiveness on the international stage over Syria has, of course, also got lots to do with its own internal political climate.

Vladimir Putin is seeking election as president in a country where opposition to that very prospect has given rise to talk of a Russian Winter of political activism taking its lead from the Arab Spring.

Earlier this week, Mr Putin warned the world faced a growing "cult of violence" stoked by western interference and raised the spectre of the Arab Spring reaching Russia.

No doubt, in the weeks ahead, this diplomatic wrangling between Russia and the West will throw up yet more eerie memories of their previous Cold War rivalry.

The real question in the meantime though, is what all this means for those ordinary Syrians trapped in hell-holes like Homs, and their struggle to rid themselves of the Assad dictatorship?

Whatever was said at that Damascus meeting the other day, I can't for a moment imagine it will contribute much to alleviating their suffering.

UN condemns assault on civilians

AMMAN/BEIRUT: Syrian forces bombarded opposition-held neighbourhoods in Homs with rocket and mortar fire as world powers struggled to find a way to end the violence.

The United Nations condemned the ferocity of the assault on the heart of a revolt against President Bashar al-Assad that broke out nearly a year ago.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said: "I fear the appalling brutality we are witnessing in Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighbourhoods, is a grim harbinger of things to come."

Activists and residents report hundreds of people killed over the last week as Mr Assad's forces try stamp out opposition in Homs, with rocket and mortar fire raining down on Baba Amro, Khalidiya and other districts.

Concern is growing over the plight of civilians and the United States said it was considering ways to deliver food and medicine, a move that would deepen international involvement in a conflict which has divided foreign powers.

David Cameron has pledged to keep the pressure on Syria and said he was determined to deliver the "toughest possible response" despite the UN's failure to agree a resolution.

Mr Cameron said: "We need to work with the opposition to try and help shape their future and assist them in whatever way we can."

The Globe and Mail (Canada)

As atrocities mount in Syria, the international community struggles to choose a course of action. All options carry risks

PAUL KORING WASHINGTON

Scores more were killed Thursday as artillery salvo pounded Homs – the battered and bloodied Syrian city targeted by President Bashar al-Assad's loyal security forces for a brutal repression.

"The appalling brutality we are witnessing in Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighbourhoods, is a grim harbinger of things to come," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, warning of even worse if full-blown civil war erupts.

Appeals for help from Homs, where makeshift hospitals were reportedly overflowing with the dying and food was scarce in some besieged neighbourhoods, came after a week of sniper fire and machine-gun barrages. The day's death toll, impossible to confirm, was said to be more than 100 by nightfall, according to eyewitnesses and beleaguered medical staff.

Fragmentary messages and grim images emerged from the stricken city. The Assad regime has banned foreign journalists as it battles what it regards as a terrorist-backed uprising.

In one emotional appeal, posted to YouTube, a Syrian doctor, standing next to a bloodied body, begged: "We appeal to the international community to help us transport the wounded. We wait for them here to die in mosques. I appeal to the United Nations and to international humanitarian organizations to stop the rockets from being fired on us."

More than 5,000 people have been killed since Arab Spring pro-democracy uprisings reached Syria.

But after a double veto from Russia and China thwarted a UN Security Council resolution calling for Mr. al-Assad to quit, the international community was left scrambling for something credible and effective to do in the face of mounting atrocities.

The White House ruled out arming the Syrian opposition. Turkey called for a conference. And China met Syrian opposition figures even as plumes of smoke rose from embattled Homs. In other Syrian cities, scattered protests – and government crackdowns – continued.

As blood runs in Syrian streets, the outside world has few options. They all carry risks, not least turning a grim bloodbath into a full-blown civil war, or worse, a regional war putting millions in danger.

A rebel carries on the fight in Idlib, Syria, on Thursday, as scores more were killed in the al-Assad regime's brutal crackdown on Homs. ASSOCIATED PRESS

WRING HANDS AND WAIT

This is perhaps the toughest option, as the rising clamour to "do something" starts to pose political consequences in the United States and France (both with presidential elections under way) and across the Arab world where restive populations know that if one repressive regime in a major Arab state manages to defeat the pro-democracy forces, it will embolden the remaining dictators.

But, in the wake of the Russian and Chinese veto, waiting may be the West's best option. The veto puts Moscow, Syria's only great-power ally, on the spot. If Russia fails to persuade Mr. al-Assad to hand power over – and perhaps offer him asylum – then by waiting Washington may strengthen its hand. "Faced with a neutered Security Council, we have to redouble our efforts outside of the United Nations," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says.

The risks, of course, are huge. For the world to simply watch, and fail to act, as it did while a slow genocide unfolded in Rwanda, would disgrace the vows of "never again."

ENCLAVES, CONFERENCES AND DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE

In the absence of a Security Council resolution, the United Nations, the Arab League and Western nations are scrambling. But despite an array of options, none seem likely to force Mr. Assad to relinquish power.

Ms. Clinton wants more sanctions. A "humanitarian enclave" is touted, to provide a safe haven for Syrians to flee the regime – presumably to Turkey. In 1991, tens of thousands of Kurds fled the postwar wrath of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, finding temporary sanctuary in Turkey. But "safe havens" have a troubled history. Srebrenica became a death camp. For Turkey, the prospect of refugee camps morphing into radicalized bases for armed attacks makes the option problematic, not least because its own restive Kurdish minority dreams of a homeland shared with Syrian and Iranian Kurds.

An enclave might also be counterproductive, giving the al-Assad regime a place to drive its opponents.

RECOGNIZING AND ARMING THE OPPOSITION, INDICTING ASSAD

Riskier still would be arming the opposition – in effect turning the so-far largely peaceful pro-democracy protests into a full-blown insurrection pitted against the Syrian army. In the United States, some leading voices – notably Senator John McCain, who was in the forefront of calling for armed opposition to Libya's Moammar Gadhafi – want to back Syria's nascent liberation army. "We should start considering options, arming the opposition," Mr. McCain says. So far, at least, the Obama administration rejects that idea. "We don't think more arms into Syria is the answer," one official said.

Recognizing the Syrian National Council would represent a powerful, if symbolic, slap at Mr. al-Assad. But for other nations to regard the nascent opposition group as some sort of legitimate government in exile would mean little without active support.

So too would be seeking an indictment of Mr. al-Assad at the International Criminal Court. It might leave him isolated but even more defiant, as was the case with Colonel Gadhafi.

WAR WITHOUT MANDATE

Risky, but not unprecedented. In 1999, knowing that China and Russia would veto air strikes against Serbia, the West ignored the UN Security Council and went to war anyway. U.S. and Canadian warplanes, along with those of some other NATO countries, bombed Serb troops and positions. It took months before the Serbs capitulated but the air war saved hundreds of thousands of Albanians from ethnic cleansing. Any military intervention in Syria would be a far bigger war, with far greater risks, than Libya. Syria is far more powerful and has Iran as a close ally and neighbour. A U.S-led military intervention in Syria could quickly spiral out of control, with Syrian-backed Hezbollah forces attacking Israel and the entire Middle East engulfed.

New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

4 Syrian envoys expelled from Germany in spy case

BERLIN

BY NICHOLAS KULISH
AND ALAN COWELL

As tensions mount between Western nations and Syria, the German authorities said on Thursday that they had ordered the expulsion of four Syrian diplomats after arresting two men accused separately of spying on opponents of President Bashar al-Assad .

The police here arrested the two men on Tuesday, saying they were "strongly suspected of investigating Syrian opposition members in Germany for a Syrian intelligence service over a period of years." The men were identified, under standard German procedures, only as Mahmoud El A., 47, of Lebanese descent, and Akram O., 34, a Syrian.

State and federal police officers searched the homes of six other suspects "believed to be involved in espionage," prosecutors said.

In a statement on Thursday, the German foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, said four diplomats — three men and a woman who were not identified by name — had been given three days to leave Germany. He did not go into detail about the expulsions, but officials said the embassy personnel were suspected of carrying out activities incompatible with their diplomatic status, wording that usually refers to espionage.

The action came after several Western and Arab nations reduced their diplomatic presence in Damascus. The United States closed its embassy there this week.

Syrian officials made no immediate public comment on the expulsions.

After Tuesday's arrests, Mr. Westerwelle summoned the Syrian ambassador to tell him that intimidation of Syrian opposition figures in Germany would not be tolerated, officials said. According to German news reports, the two arrested men were not diplomats but worked closely with Syrian Embassy officials.

Their activities were said to have included infiltrating demonstrations to photograph Syrians opposed to Mr. Assad and then transmitting the images to Damascus along with other information about the regime's opponents. About 32,000 Syrian citizens are registered as living in Germany, according to official statistics, and around 2,600 of them applied for asylum in the 11 months since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011.

Many Syrian exiles have complained of harassment. Late last year, Ferhad Ahma, a politician of Syrian descent from Germany's opposition Greens, who is also a member of the Syrian National Council, an opposition movement, said he was attacked in his apartment.

A statement from the Greens at the time said two men posing as police officers arrived at his apartment at 2 a.m. and beat him with metal bars and clubs when he opened the door. Greens officials accused Syrian agents of responsibility, but the police said the identity of the assailants was not clear.

The practice of spying on overseas opponents is not restricted to Germany or Syria. In October, a Syrian-American man was arrested in the United States and accused of secretly working with Syrian intelligence to gather information on overseas opponents of the Syrian regime. The Syrian Embassy in Washington has called the charges baseless.

Alan Cowell reported from London. Victor Homola contributed reporting from Berlin.

Why Russia supports Assad

Russia has some good reasons to question Western policies on Syria. It should also question its own.

Dmitri Trenin

Two senior Russian officials, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Mikhail Fradkov, the director of Foreign Intelligence, have just been to Damascus.

Their mission was not to nudge Bashar al-Assad from power and offer him exile in Russia. Rather, the talk was about dialogue with the opposition, offering a referendum on a new constitution, and the Arab League resuming its "stabilizing" mission. Russia, for its part, would stand firm alongside China at the U.N. Security Council, preventing a formal condemnation of the Syrian regime, any outside military intervention, or any sanctions against it.

Coming so late in the game, the attempt at reconciliation is bound to fail. Syria's civil war has de facto begun, and it will not end soon. America, Europe, Turkey and the Gulf states have already given Assad a thumbs down.

But the Russian mediation might have had a chance if Lavrov and Fradkov had come to Damascus last summer, or even last fall, and kept coming in an exercise of shuttle diplomacy. Given Russia's role as Syria's traditional backer and arms supplier, Moscow might have been more successful as a peacemaker than Ankara. Today, Lavrov and Fradkov's mission looks more like a face-saving gesture.

Russia's stance on Syria is often explained in terms of Syria's importance to Moscow. It is true that Syria is positioned in the strategic heart of the Middle East, and that Moscow's links to the Assad family go back four decades.

None of this, however, should be exaggerated. Syria is not an ally; Tartus is a naval resupply facility rather than a naval base; and the total value of Russia's arms trade with Syria during the previous decade amounted to around $1.5 billion, which makes Damascus Moscow's seventh-largest client.

To understand Moscow's attitude to Syria, and the sources of its disagreement with the West and a number of Arab states, one has to take a broader view.

Last year, Russia abstained in the Security Council on the Libya no-flight zone vote, thus allowing the resolution to pass. Soon what was billed as protection of innocent civilians from a massacre in Benghazi turned into NATO's offshore war against the Libyan government, which finally resulted in the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime and the killing of the dictator along with many of his supporters and probably a number of civilians. That NATO's military actions went way beyond the terms of the U.N. resolution did not seem to bother Western governments.

The Russian government is openly conservative; it abhors revolutions. This, however, is more than a self-serving ideological stance. When the Kremlin — or Fradkov's office — looks at the Arab Awakening, they see democratization leading directly to Islamicization.

If the West's historical analogy is Europe's 1848 or 1989, theirs is Russia's 1917. They cite recent election results in Tunisia and especially Egypt. They point out that post-Qaddafi Libya is chaotic, with a lot of the former regime's weaponry finding its way into unsavory hands. In their view, Syria's uprising could have even worse consequences in terms of sectarian violence and the potential to affect the country's neighbors, particularly Lebanon and Israel.

Revolutions are bad enough, in the Kremlin's view, but attempts to interfere in other countries' civil wars can only make things worse.

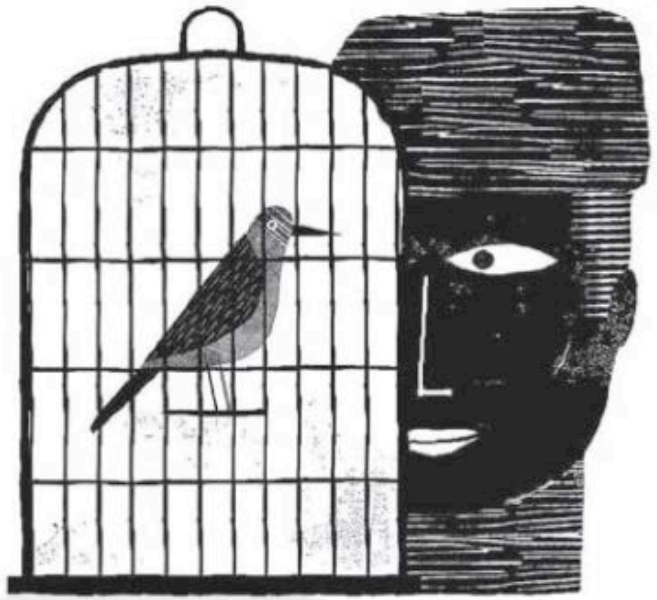
The Russians appreciate that the United States and other Western powers would only intervene militarily if they could sustain zero losses themselves, as in Libya. Syria, however, is a more difficult case. Arming the Free Syria Army and providing it with intelligence will not be enough to prevail over Assad's forces. A prospect of a wider war with Arab and Turkish participation looms on the horizon.

Such a war could only make sense if it were the first act of a more serious drama. Russians suspect that the real reason for the West's pressure on Damascus is to rob Tehran of its only ally in the region. Behind the activity of the Gulf States, particularly Qatar, in the Syrian issue Moscow sees the rising regional influence of Saudi Arabia, Iran's bitter rival in the region. Turkey's "neo-Ottoman" ambitions are also playing a role. What the Russians are most worried about, however, is that Israel may strike at Iran, dragging in the United States and thus precipitating a major war with Iran sometime this year.

Russian policy makers may have a point or two when they discuss other people's policies. They need, however, to step back and look at their own.

Delivering arms into a country going through civil war is damaging, both politically and morally. Confronting both America and Europe, even if Western policies are misguided, is clearly at odds with Russia's wider interests. Telling Qatar to shut up is not merely undiplomatic, but unwise. And openly quarreling with Turkey and Saudi Arabia has to be avoided.

To this, some would say that, having lost $4 billion in Libyan arms and other contracts and facing the prospect of losing an equal amount in potential Syrian trade, Moscow has no other choice but to take a hard line. It will be a pity if, at the end of the day, this argument prevails.



CRISTOBAL SCHMAL

DMITRI TRENIN, *director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, is the author, most recently, of "Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story."*

Réseau Voltaire / Voltairenet.org / Voltaire Network

The Washington Post (USA)

Post Partisan

washingtonpost.com/postpartisan

Arm the Syrian opposition

The Obama administration loudly denounces Bashar al-Assad, predicts the fall of the Syrian regime and hopes that it reacts like a house of straw. But what if Assad's defenses — including the tanks and artillery of his Republican Guard and elite Fourth Armored Division — hold? The regime pounds rebel-held areas in the city of Homs, killing hundreds a day. The rebel Free Syrian Army — a hodgepodge of neighborhood militias and defected soldiers armed with light weapons — seems to lack the capacity to stand up to such an assault, much less defeat it.

The onslaught in Homs, along with last weekend's veto by Russia and China of a U.N. Security Council resolution, prompted Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Joseph Lieberman (I-Conn.) to propose that the United States and its allies begin actively aiding the Syrian opposition, including with weapons. The administration demurs: "We don't think more arms into Syria is the answer," said the State Department.

To which McCain tweeted Thursday: "Tell that to the Iranians and Russians." Both have provided materiel aid to Assad's forces.

The administration's theory seems to be that Assad's army will soon be exhausted by defections and the impossibility of suppressing opposition across the country. Its generals, this thinking holds, will turn on Assad, depose him and accept the Arab League's plan for a democratic transition.

Yet Syria's top generals, like Assad, are members of the minority Alawite clan; the commander of the Fourth Division is his brother, Maher. These men may feel that they have nowhere to go in a country and a region where Sunni Islamists are in the ascendancy, and no choice but to fight to the bitter end. Not possible? Just ask their enemies in Lebanon, the Maronite Christians, who played out a losing hand for 14 years of civil war in the 1970s and '80s.

Either an Assad victory or a long war would be a disaster for the United States and its allies; a speedy collapse of the regime would be a devastating blow to Iran, for which Syria is a crucial ally. It follows, then, that the best U.S. policy — in what is a bad and risky situation — is to follow McCain's advice. This could be easily done through proxies: Persian Gulf states, and possibly Turkey, are already providing aid and probably arms to the Free Syrian Army.

A senior European diplomat I spoke with Thursday shuddered at this prospect: The European Union, like the State Department, favors forming a "Friends of Syria" group with the Arab League that would do . . . well, it's not yet clear. But the diplomat said that an arm-the-opposition policy would trigger unforeseeable blowback — another Afghanistan. But that, actually, is a misreading of history. Arming the Afghan opposition in the 1980s succeeded in its aim of driving out the Soviet Union. U.S. responsibility for the subsequent chaos lay in its abandoning the country after 1989.

In this case, the United States has reason to provide material support for the Syrian opposition: precisely so it can be a player in Syria if and when Assad does fall. Western influence could be vital in shaping the post-Assad regime. Or would it be better to stand back while Saudi and Qatari fundamentalists ship weapons to their counterparts in Syria — and call the political shots afterward?

— Jackson Diehl

Dallas Moring News (USA)

Bombarded Homs is 'a city of ghosts'

Weeklong offensive leaves epicenter of Syrian uprising cut off from food, doctors

BEIRUT — Between rocket blasts and mortar fire, Syrians used loudspeakers to call for blood donations and medical supplies Thursday in the stricken city of Homs, where a nearly weeklong government offensive has created a humanitarian crisis.

Government forces are trying to crush pockets of violent resistance in Homs, the epicenter of an 11-month-old uprising that has brought the country closer to civil war. The intense shelling in restive neighborhoods such as Baba Amr has made it difficult to get medicine and care to the wounded, and some areas have been without electricity for days, activists said.

"Snipers are on all the roofs in Baba Amr, shooting at people," Abu Muhammad Ibrahim, an activist in Homs, said by phone. "Anything that moves, even a bird, is targeted. Life is completely cut off. It's a city of ghosts."

As he spoke, explosions could be heard in the background.

Hundreds of people are believed to have been killed since early Saturday in the heaviest attack the city has endured since the uprising began in March, activists said.

Fighters from the rebel Free Syrian Army have been firing back with rocket-propelled grenades and rockets, according to activists' accounts.

The wounded have overwhelmed makeshift hospitals and clinics, and there were concerns that the city could soon run out of supplies.

"There is medicine in the pharmacies, but getting it to the field clinics is very difficult. They can't get the medicine to the wounded," Mohammed Saleh, a Syria-based activist, said by telephone.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported 63 deaths in Homs on Thursday. The opposition Local Coordination Committees said up to 100 people had died, but the tolls were impossible to verify.

Activists also reported violence in the towns of Zabadani and Daraa.

The Syrian government's crackdown on dissent has left it almost completely isolated internationally as nations have imposed sanctions and withdrawn diplomats. In the latest action, Libya on Thursday gave Syria's top envoy and embassy staff 72 hours to leave.

Also Thursday, Germany expelled four Syrian diplomats following the arrest this week of two men accused of spying on Syrian opposition groups in the country.

Elizabeth A. Kennedy, The Associated Press

Los Angeles Times (USA)

Keeping Syria at arm's length

Diplomacy, not military action that could enmesh the U.S. in a civil war, is the best approach.

GIVEN THE CONTINUED carnage in Syria, and given Russian and Chinese obstruction of a plan to have Syrian President Bashar Assad step aside, the Arab League, Western nations and the United Nations secretary-general are scrambling to identify other measures to stop the killing. Those efforts are urgent and admirable. But, dire as the humanitarian situation is, the United States and NATO should resist the temptation to become militarily involved.

Last month, the Arab League, frustrated by Assad's limited compliance with commitments he had made to end the violence and allow journalists and humanitarian agencies into the country, proposed a political solution: Assad would step down in favor of one of his vice presidents during a transition to democracy. Western nations pressed for a Security Council resolution endorsing the plan, but it was vetoed Saturday by Russia and China in what Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called a "travesty."

After casting its veto, Russia made a show of seeking a solution by dispatching its foreign minister to Damascus, but it shows little inclination to pressure Assad. That leaves several other paths forward. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who this week deplored the "appalling brutality" in the Syrian city of Homs, is expected to endorse a sizable joint U.N.-Arab League monitoring mission in Syria. Meanwhile, Clinton has called for a group of "friends" — countries that would join the United States — to ratchet up pressure on Assad. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) is suggesting that the U.S. aid countries willing to arm the Syrian opposition.

Singly or together, such efforts could move Assad in the direction of compromise and a cease-fire, but they won't produce immediate results and are no substitute for the failed Security Council resolution.

That raises the question of whether the United States and its allies should undertake military action in Syria, as they did in Libya. That would be a mistake. It isn't just that Russia and China probably would block a Security Council resolution of the kind that established the no-fly zone in Libya. (Russia, which abstained on that resolution, later criticized the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for using an authorization to protect civilians as a justification for regime change.) U.S. military action in Syria, a nation that is larger than Libya and that has close ties to Iran, could enmesh this country in a civil war that might continue along sectarian lines even if Assad were deposed. That is what occurred in Iraq during the U.S. occupation, prolonging American involvement.

Short of military intervention, the United States should do its utmost, alone or in collaboration with Clinton's "friends," to pressure the Syrian regime to end the war on its own people and move toward democracy. But the sobering reality is that there are limits to what this country can do to ameliorate suffering and end oppression, in Syria and elsewhere in the world.

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

China to Address U.S. 'Trust Deficit'

By Jeremy Page
And Andrew Browne

BEIJING—A senior Chinese official warned of a "trust deficit" hampering relations between Beijing and Washington, just five days before Xi Jinping, the man expected to become his country's top leader later this year, begins a visit to the U.S.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai also vigorously defended Beijing's decision to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria on Feb. 4, and suggested that U.S. criticism of the move was hypocritical.

In a briefing with reporters Thursday, Mr. Cui sought to damp expectations of any big commercial deals during Mr. Xi's visit, or of concessions to U.S. demands that China allow its currency to appreciate further.

Mr. Cui's remarks highlight the political and economic challenges facing Mr. Xi, China's vice president, as he prepares for his five-day tour of Washington, Iowa and California beginning on Monday.

Mr. Xi's main priority is to establish his credentials as a world statesman capable of handling the complex relationship with the U.S. before he takes over as Communist Party chief—the nation's top job—in a once-a-decade leadership change in the fall.

He has already shown signs that he will present a more open and confident image than the man he is expected to replace, President Hu Jintao, who often appears uncomfortable in public, especially when abroad.

On Wednesday, Mr. Xi plans to attend a teatime reunion in the city of Muscatine, Iowa, with a family he stayed with during a visit there as a young party official in 1985.

U.S. and Chinese officials are also discussing plans for him to attend a basketball game in Los Angeles on the last day of his trip on Friday, according to people familiar with the plans. The idea to attend the game—the Los Angeles Lakers vs. the Phoenix Suns—originated from the Chinese side, these people said, and appears to be another attempt to establish an image for Mr. Xi at home and overseas as a relatively open and confident leader who feels comfortable in a public setting

Both sides are hoping that Mr. Xi's self-assured manner will help to set a more positive tone for relations, which have been strained in the past two years by disputes over trade, and human rights and mutual suspicions over each other's military strategy in Asia.

"The trust deficit sums up a very clear fact: that is, the level of mutual trust between China and the United States is lagging behind what is required for the further expansion of our bilateral relationship," Mr. Cui said. "Vice President Xi's visit will present a very important opportunity to further enhance our mutual trust."

For U.S. officials, the main aim is to build on the personal rapport forged between Mr. Xi and Vice President Joe Biden during his visit to China last year, and to establish a working relationship with President Barack Obama, during meetings at the White House on Tuesday.

They will be scrutinizing Mr. Xi's words and actions for indications of how he will try to govern China over the next decade, and who he is most closely allied with among the other candidates for elevation to the Politburo Standing Committee—the top decision-making body.

A lunch hosted by Hillary Clinton on Tuesday and a visit to the Pentagon, probably the same day, will give U.S. officials a chance to gauge Mr. Xi's views on the new U.S. strategic focus on Asia, and on the main regional flash points, especially North Korea and the South China Sea.

The White House is looking in particular for signals that China is willing to comply with new U.S. sanctions on Iran, and to increase international pressure on the Syrian government.

Mr. Cui said cooperation with the U.S. on Syria was still a possibility.

But Mr. Cui also made it clear that China had been stung by U.S. criticism of its veto with Russia of the Syria resolution, which was described as "disgusting" by the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Susan Rice.

"If anyone should be criticized for using the veto power then I would say the United States should bear the most blame because the United States has used its veto power the most," Mr. Cui said.

"In international relations one should not wantonly resort to the use, or the threat of the use, of force," he said, adding that China had only used its veto eight times since 1971.

His uncompromising tone sets the stage for some tense exchanges in Washington, especially when Mr. Xi visits the Capitol on Wednesday morning for meetings with some of China's most vocal critics.

—Laura Meckler in Washington contributed to this article.

UN decries 'appalling brutality' as Homs onslaught continues

Dozens killed in protest hotbed • US weighs humanitarian aid, but expert says arms are needed

• By OREN KESSLER and Reuters

Syrian forces bombarded opposition-held neighborhoods of the city of Homs with rocket and mortar fire on Thursday, while divided world powers struggled to find a way to end nearly a year of bloodshed.

The United Nations chief condemned the ferocity of the government assault on the heart of a revolt against President Bashar Assad that appears to be getting bloodier by the day.

"I fear that the appalling brutality we are witnessing in Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighborhoods, is a grim harbinger of things to come," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said after briefing the Security Council in New York.

Activists and residents report hundreds of people killed over the past week as Assad's forces try to stamp out opposition in Homs. As Thursday dawned, rocket and mortar fire rained down again on Baba Amro, Khalidiya and other districts. Armored government reinforcements also poured into the city.

Any international move to bring in humanitarian aid could open a dangerous and complicated chapter in the crisis, with air drops seen as expensive and ineffective and any land routes open to attack from Syrian forces.

David Schenker, director of the Program on Arab Politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the opposition Free Syrian Army should be provided with the means to defend itself.

"The president and administration are still very much against it, but I think the people of Syria have the right to defend themselves," he said. "The Russians are certainly providing plenty of arms to Assad.

"We can change the nature of the battle by giving them certain types of equipment and encouraging more defections," Schenker, a former Pentagon analyst on Syria and Lebanon, told *The Jerusalem Post*. "Ultimately the goal would be to topple the regime. In the face of this slaughter, the Syrian people aren't backing down."

The Syrian Revolution Coordinating Commission said at least 30 civilians in Homs were killed in bombardments on Thursday morning on mainly Sunni neighborhoods that have been the focus of attacks by the government forces led largely by members of Assad's Alawite religious minority.

Such sectarian divisions have been coming to the surface as killings have increased on both sides.

Concern was growing over the plight of civilians and the United States said it was considering ways to get food and medicine to them – a move that would deepen international involvement in a conflict that has wide geopolitical dimensions and has caused division among foreign powers.

"We on the US side have already been looking at what we can do to prepare ourselves on both the financial and legal side(s) so that we're ready to provide humanitarian aid, such as food and medicine," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said. "But we're going to have to work with our international partners, we're going to have to work with neighboring states to identify coordinators on the ground who could assist in receiving this aid and in distributing it."

John McCain, a US senator and former presidential candidate, said Washington needs a more proactive Syria policy, and called to provide the rebels with arms. In an interview with CNN on Thursday, the Arizona Republican said "peaceful means" have been exhausted, and other options need to be considered.

"We could do things by providing them with intelligence information, with satellite information, with information on the movements of the Syrian armed forces," McCain said, adding that the US and allies could provide medical help and work with Turkey to provide refuge for fleeing Syrians.

Foreign ministers of the Arab League, which the UN's Ban said was planning to revive an observer mission it suspended last month, are due to meet in Cairo on Sunday. They may want to hear other governments' ideas by then.

Libya gave Syria's charge d'affaires and his staff in Tripoli 72 hours to leave the country, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

China, cool to Western lobbying for international involvement, nonetheless reported its first formal contact with a Syrian opposition figure who visited Beijing last week.

In Homs, the main street in Baba Amro was strewn with rubble and at least one house was destroyed, according to YouTube footage broadcast by activists from the district who said troops had used anti-aircraft cannon to demolish the building.

One video showed a youth putting two bodies wrapped in blankets in a truck. What appeared to be body parts were shown inside the house.

A doctor, his name given only as Muhammad, broadcast a cry for help on YouTube from his makeshift surgery in a mosque.

Standing next to a bloody body on a table, he said: "We appeal to the international community to help us transport the wounded. We wait for them here to die in mosques. I appeal to the United Nations and to international humanitarian organizations to stop the rockets from being fired on us."

The Syrian Human Rights Organization said this week's assault on Homs had killed at least 300 civilians and wounded 1,000, not counting Thursday's toll. International officials have estimated the overall death toll in Syria since last March at more than 5,000.

Activists said neighborhoods of Homs remained without electricity and water and basic supplies were running low.

Russia and China, which let the United Nations support the air campaign in Libya, provoked strong condemnation from the United States, European powers and Arab governments when they vetoed a resolution in the Security Council last week that called on Assad to step down.

Moscow, for whom Syria is a buyer of arms and host to a Soviet-era naval base, wants to counter US influence and maintain its traditional role in the Middle East.

Campaigning for next month's presidential election that he is certain to win, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said: "Help them, advise them, limit, for instance, their ability to use weapons but not interfere under any circumstances."

Ban said it was more urgent than ever to find common ground. In an implicit criticism of the Assad government, he said: "Such violence is unacceptable before humanity... We have heard too many broken promises, even within the past 24 hours."

In Washington, officials said the United States planned to meet soon with its allies to discuss ways to halt the violence and provide humanitarian aid to civilians under attack.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said the talks, which would include the opposition Syrian National Council, were aimed at helping the process "move toward a peaceful, political transition, democratic transition in Syria."

Also on Thursday, Syria's top Sunni cleric thanked Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for his unwavering support of the Assad regime, the Iranian presidency website reported.

Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Badreddin Hassoun conveyed the "thanks of the Syrian people and president for the stance of Ahmadinejad and our nation," the website said after a meeting between the two men late on Wednesday in Tehran, AFP reported.

Ahmadinejad told the cleric that "the main aim of the dominating and bullying powers is to preserve the Zionist regime."

"The US and its allies are seeking to launch a new war in the region and to break the line of Islamic resistance," Ahmadinejad said. "But we believe that with wisdom and unity we can stand against them."

Iran has stood by its longtime ally Damascus during the past year's unrest, but denies Western allegations it is providing military and financial support for Assad's crackdown.

SYRIAN SOLDIERS bury their comrades in Damascus yesterday. (SANA/Reuters)

Vigils in solidarity with Syrian rebels to be held in Tel Aviv

• By BEN HARTMAN

Demonstrations to show solidarity with the thousands of Syrians killed during the Assad regime's crackdown will be held on Friday and Saturday night in Tel Aviv.

The first demonstration, which will take place at the Jaffa Clock Tower on Friday night, is titled "Yaffa Syria one nation one pain." On the group's Facebook page, where 174 people had RSVPed by Thursday, the demonstration is referred to as "an act of solidarity with the Syrian people and revolution."

The Israeli Arab community has drawn criticism recently for their lack of mass protests against the bloodletting taking place in Syria.

A candlelight vigil will also be held outside the Russian Embassy on Saturday. Organizers said the event is "a support rally for the Syrian people who are being butchered by the cruel regime of Assad."

This week, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution to transfer powers from Assad.

Réseau Voltaire / Voltairenet.org / Voltaire Network

Thze Debka File (Palestine occupée / Occupied Palestine)

First foreign troops in Syria back Homs rebels. Damascus and Moscow at odds

DEBKA*file* *Exclusive Report* *February 8, 2012, 1:35 PM (GMT+02:00)*

Tags: Syrian uprising >> British forces >> Qatar >> Turkish PM >> Sergey Lavrov >> Bashar Assad >>

British and Qatari special operations units are operating with rebel forces under cover in the

Our military sources also report that Wednesday afternoon, Feb. 8, Assad sent the 40th Mechanized Brigade of heavy T-72 tanks to Homs for an all-out effort to beat the rebellion, counter the foreign contingents and reinforce the 90th Infantry Brigade commanded by his kinsman, Gen. Zuhair al-Assad, the backbone of the military force battering the city for the past five days at the cost of hundreds of dead.

The presence of the British and Qatari troops was seized on by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan for the new plan he unveiled to parliament in Ankara Tuesday, Feb. 7. Treating the British-Qatari contingents as the first foreign foot wedged through the Syrian door, his plan hinges on consigning a new Turkish-Arab force to Homs through that door and under the protection of those contingents. Later, they would go to additional flashpoint cities.

In the close to eleven months of the Syrian revolt, Erdogan has hatched more than one scheme for countering the Assad regime's savage crackdown on dissent. His most persistent was a plan for the creation of military buffer zones to shelter rebels and civilians persecuted by the Syrian authorities. But nothing came of those plans because, every time they came up, Assad reinforced his contingents on the Turkish border and deployed air defense and surface-to-surface missile batteries. He made it clear that the first Turk crossing the border would spark a full-scale war.

It is hard to say at this point whether the latest Turkish leader's current plan is any more practical than his earlier schemes. For now, he has put the ball in the American court. Wednesday, Feb. 8, he sent Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to Washington to ask for the Obama administration's cooperation. The Turkish prime minister is also in urgent consultation with Saudi and several other Gulf rulers in the hope of bringing them aboard.

The British-Qatari troop presence in Homs was at the center of Assad's talks in Damascus Tuesday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian SVR intelligence chief Mikhail Fradkov. Senior Syrian intelligence officers laid their updates from the field before the Russian visitors and received SVR data and evaluations in return.

Western intelligence officials familiar with the talks describe the atmosphere between Assad and the Russian officials as uneasy and tense. Later, Lavrov reported optimistically that he had received assurances from the Syrian ruler of an end to the violence, talks with all Syrian parties and an early referendum on a new constitution for political reforms. His account was no more than prevarication to conceal the opposite outcome of their talks. In fact, their conversation focused on more violence, namely, Assad's plans for his next assault on rebels and protesters and his military response to the rising covert presence of foreign Western, Arab and Muslim troops in Syria.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

League could recognise Syrian National Council

CAUTIOUS WELCOME TO PROPOSED ARAB-UN OBSERVER TEAM AS BLITZ CONTINUES

AP

Guardians of Idlib

Opposition fighters gather in Idlib yesterday. Human Rights Watch said eyewitness accounts, as well as video reviewed by the group's arms experts, suggest Syrian government forces are using long-range, indirect fire weapons such as mortars in the attacks on the besieged city of Homs. Such weapons 'are inherently indiscriminate when fired into densely populated areas,' the New York-based group said.

By Layelle Saad
GCC/Middle East Editor

Dubai The Syrian National Council intensified contacts to discuss developments in Syria by holding a meeting in Qatar, as tank, mortar and rocket bombardment by President Bashar Al Assad's forces on the besieged city of Homs killed at least 110 civilians yesterday.

Earlier in the week, some opposition officials also held talks with China, who along with Russia vetoed a UN draft resolution condemning Al Assad's bloody crackdown on protesters.

Sources say a decision could be taken on Sunday during the Arab League meeting in Cairo to recognise the Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

If the meeting agrees to recognise the SNC, offices could soon be opened in some Arab countries.

Major world powers gave a cautious welcome yesterday to a proposal to send a joint Arab League-United Nations mission to monitor the deadly crackdown.

France said there had to be "guarantees" for the mission. The US and German ambassadors to the United Nations said their countries were studying the idea raised by UN leader Ban Ki-moon on Wednesday.

Ban said the head of the Arab League had told him that he would be sending observers back to Syria and wanted it to be a joint UN-Arab League operation.

Russia yesterday slammed as "illegitimate" Turkey's proposed "Friends of Syria" meeting, likening it to a similar grouping of nations that supported military action in Libya, which Russia largely opposed. On the ground, the situation has been described by residents as "appalling".

"There is no food, no water, no medical supplies, soon we will starve to death, we are trapped inside," one resident from Baba Amro said.

Meanwhile, Libya yesterday ordered Syrian diplomats to leave the country within 72 hours, the official news agency Lana reported.

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WEEKEND REVIEW

TALE OF TWO BAATH PARTIES

Syria and Iraq were both controlled by the Baath Party and many of their decision-making mechanisms were similar. Terrifying the population is fundamental to these authoritarian regimes. But there are also differences between the two regimes: Saddam built his system and created an extensive network of rewards and punishments that enabled the regime to last 35 years despite wars, uprisings and sanctions. Bashar Al Assad's (inherited) power base is not nearly as deeply rooted, militarily or politically. The question is whether Al Assad can steer his regime out of this crisis.

— By Joseph Sassoon

See Weekend Review for details (For subscribers only)

OPINION

Cold war rumblings

Russia and China push Mideast interests with veto

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New regional alignment

The relationship between Iraq and Syria has strengthened

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Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Motives for a new regional alignment

The relationship between Iraq and Syria strengthened following the breakout of the uprising and withdrawal of US troops

By Marwan Kabalan
Special to Gulf News

At a time when most of the Syrian regime's former friends and allies are abandoning it for the brutal approach it has been using to quash the protest movement; Iraq, which can by no means considered a friend, is becoming — alongside Iran of course — the major backer of the embattled Syrian government. Today, Iraq constitutes the biggest market of Syria's manufactured commodities and is thus offering a shield against Arab and European sanctions.

Politically, Baghdad is providing a safety net for the increasingly isolated Syrian regime, particularly in the Arab world. From a logistical viewpoint, following the US withdrawal at the end of last year, Iraq compensated for the loss of Turkey as the major land route that connects the Syrian regime to its solid base of support in Iran. Given the historic animosity between Damascus and Baghdad, the behaviour of the Iraqi government must be perplexing.

Since they emerged as modern states following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century, Syria and Iraq could hardly develop any meaningful friendly relations. On the contrary, their relations have wings of the Baath party took over power in Damascus and Baghdad in 1960s.

In the following three decades, Syrian-Iraqi relations were shaped by mistrust and antagonism, and marked by numerous mutual attempts to unseat each other's governments. Syria also supported Iran in its eight-year war against Iraq, whereas Iraq backed anti-Syrian Lebanese factions during the civil war.

Nevertheless, the two regimes shared a common feature: utmost pragmatism. Thus, since 1997, Syria and Iraq had come to view one another as possible allies. In response to the ascendance of the Israeli right to power and the ensuing failure of the peace process, the late Syrian president Hafez Al Assad started cautiously, but steadily, to develop relations with Iraq. Rapprochement accelerated following the arrival of President Bashar Al Assad, as he lacked the personal animosity which marked the relationship between Saddam Hussain and his father.

Subsequently, Syria tried to develop its political and economic ties with Iraq while being careful not to provoke the turn. Washington turned a blind eye to the smuggling of Iraqi oil through Syria.

In a region still strongly dominated by a realpolitik approach and a delicate balance of power, Syria feared that a US-backed government in Baghdad would almost certainly place it between two hostile powers: Israel and a pro-US Iraq.

Strategic shift

For most of the eight years long US occupation, Iraqi officials persistently accused Syria of trying to undermine the stability of post-Saddam Iraq. In fact, since day one of the US invasion, Syria struggled to accommodate itself to the strategic shift which made the US a Middle Eastern power. Syria's position was not based on pan-Arabism, sympathy with a sisterly Arab country or affiliation to Baathist ideology, but rather on pragmatic provisions directly linked to its security dilemma and economic interests.

After a 24-year break, the resumption of diplomatic relations between Damascus and Baghdad in 2006 did not much improve bilateral relations. They only increased Syrian investment in Iraq. Thus when the protest movement broke out in Syria a year later, Al Maliki, also under Iranian pressure, supported the Syrian regime, illustrating how much Iraq's position in the Middle East has shifted toward an axis led by Iran.

Over the past few months, Baghdad hosted several delegations of Syrian government officials and businessmen to discuss closer economic ties, including the construction of a gas pipeline that would run from Iran through Iraq to Syria. The improved relations between the two Arab neighbours constitute today the cornerstone of a new regional alignment which began to take shape following the break out of the Syrian uprising and the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq.

The other camp of this new Middle East alignment is led by Turkey and includes the Arab Gulf states and Jordan. The future of the region will be defined by the outcome of this conflict.

DANA A. SHAMS/©Gulf News

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GULFNEWS.COM

Gulf News (ZAU / UAE)

Syrian crisis and the familiar rumblings of a cold war

With their vetoes, Russia and China are saying they too have interests in the Middle East, which they are bent on protecting

By Patrick Seale
Special to Gulf News

Illustration: NINO JOSE HEREDIA/©Gulf News

The Syrian crisis is no longer a purely Syrian affair. Its wider dimension was highlighted on February 4 when Russia and China cast their veto at the UN Security Council, thereby aborting a western-backed Arab Resolution, which had called on President Bashar Al Assad to step down.

At a stroke, the debate was no longer simply about Syria's internal power struggle. Instead, with their vetoes, Moscow and Beijing were saying that they too had interests in the Middle East, which they were determined to protect. The region was no longer an exclusive western preserve under the hegemony of the US and its allies.

Russia has decades-old interests in the Middle East, in Syria in particular. As a major customer of Iranian oil, China does not approve of western sanctions against Tehran. Nor does it take kindly to US attempts to contain its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. There is a hint in the air of a revived cold war.

The Syrian crisis has, in fact, been a two-stage affair from the very beginning — internal as well as international. On the internal level, the uprising has aimed to topple the regime on the model of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In this increasingly ugly struggle, both sides — government and opposition — have made serious mistakes. The government's mistake was to use live fire against street protesters who were — at first at least — demonstrating peacefully.

The opposition's mistake has been to resort to arms — to become militarised — largely in the form of the Free Syrian Army, a motley force of defectors from the armed services, as well as free-lance fighters and hard-line Islamists. It has been conducting hit-and-run attacks on regime targets and regime loyalists. The exiled opposition leadership is composed of a number of disparate, often squabbling groupings — of which the best known is the Syrian National Council. Inside the SNC, the Muslim Brotherhood is the best organised and funded element of the opposition. Outlawed since its terrorist campaign in 1977-1982 to overthrow the regime of former president Hafez Al Assad — an attempt crushed in blood at Hama — it is driven by a thirst for revenge.

The second level of the contest is being played out in the international arena, where Russia and China, with some support from other emerging powers such as India and Brazil, are challenging America's supremacy in the Middle East. Washington's outrage at the challenge was evident when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton angrily dismissed the Russian and Chinese veto as a 'travesty'. Escalating the crisis, she called for an international coalition to support the Syrian opposition against what she described as the 'brutal regime' in Damascus. She has encouraged the creation of a 'Friends of Syria' group, with the apparent aim of channelling funds and weapons to Bashar Al Assad's enemies.

At the heart of the international struggle is a concerted attempt by the US and its allies to bring down the ruling regimes in both Iran and Syria. Iran's 'crime' has been to refuse to submit to American hegemony in the Gulf region and to appear to pose a challenge, with its nuclear programme, to Israel's regional nuclear monopoly. At the same time, Iran, Syria and Hezbollah — partners for the past three decades — have managed to make a dent in Israel's military supremacy. They have in recent years been the main obstacle to US-Israeli regional dominance.

The real issue, however, is one of regional dominance. Iran's nuclear programme poses no particular danger to Israel. With its large nuclear arsenal, Israel has ample means to deter any would be aggressor. Nor would Iran willingly risk annihilation in a nuclear exchange. However, a nuclear-capable Iran — even if it never actually built a bomb — would limit Israel's freedom of action, notably its freedom to strike its neighbours at will.

The US has also suffered grave setbacks in the region: its catastrophic war in Iraq; its unfinished conflict in Afghanistan; the violent hostility it has aroused in the Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan, Yemen and the Horn of Africa. It, too, is striving to retain its pre-eminence over the Gulf states. Some Washington hawks may think that the overthrow of the regime in Tehran would put the US and its Israeli ally back on top.

Because of their own apprehension of Iran, the Arab states of the Gulf have allowed themselves to be drawn into the conflict. They seem to fear that Iran may endanger the existing political order by stirring up local Shiite communities. With Qatar in the lead, they joined the US and Israel in their assault against Damascus and Tehran. But — perhaps belatedly aware that a regional war could be catastrophic for them — there are signs that they are having second thoughts.

At the recent Munich Security Conference, Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Khalid Al Attiyah, declared that an attack on Iran "is not a solution, and tightening the embargo will make the scenario worse. I believe we should have dialogue." That is the voice of reason.

Patrick Seale is a commentator and author of several books on Middle East affairs.

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The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

'Citizen journalists' risk life and limb

BEIRUT — Mohammed Shami charges into a demonstration in Damascus, points his mobile phone and films the scene for a few minutes before rushing off in fear of the security forces.

A craftsman a year ago, Shami is today one of the hundreds, some say thousands, of citizen journalists covering the Syria government's crackdown on dissent.

Among the ranks of these makeshift reporters are former engineers, lawyers and students.

"It all started when we took part in the first demonstration in the capital," Shami, 32, said on the phone from Damascus. The regime said that these demonstrations never occurred (and) we wanted to prove their lies.

"We wanted the world to know that we were beginning to rise up against the regime. We started to shoot."

At one demonstration, Shami was arrested. The security forces discovered images of the rally on his phone.

"I paid a high price for these images. For 15 days, I was beaten and tortured."

But Shami said he was not discouraged. "We started to coordinate in a more efficient way.

"One of us would film for a few minutes, then hide in a safe place and send his images to satellite channels, while another person continued to film."

"Omar the Syrian," a citizen journalist, died in shelling overnight Friday-Saturday as government troops launched a huge assault on Homs, a friend said.

The 24-year-old student, whose real name was Mazhar Tayyara, had left his home in the Inshaat district at night for Khaldiyeh. "He was trying to help some people wounded in the bombardment when a second volley of shells fell and he was hit," the friend said.

"He was hit in the head, the stomach and in a leg and died of his injuries three hours later in hospital" on Saturday, the friend added, requesting anonymity.

Tayyara worked for several media outlets including British daily *The Guardian* and the German newspaper *Die Welt*. He also appeared on the satellite networks Al Jazeera and CNN.

Before Tayyara was killed, security forces shot dead 23-year-old Bassil Sayyed as he filmed in the flashpoint Homs neighbourhood of Baba Amr on December 29. — *AFP*

The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

SNC holding talks in Qatar

■ Homs under new deadly blitz ■ Germany expels four Syrian diplomats

DOHA — The opposition Syrian National Council was meeting in Qatar Thursday to discuss developments in their country, where the regime has intensified its crackdown on protesters, an SNC spokesman told AFP.

The SNC executive committee talks come "before two important meetings, one for the Gulf Cooperation Council and another for the Arab League," both of which will take place on Sunday in Cairo, said Mohammed Sarmini.

In three days of talks headed by SNC chief Burhan Ghalioun, they will discuss "the situation on the ground in Syria" as well as means of helping rebels, said Sarmini.

The opposition will also discuss the French proposal to create a "friends of Syria" grouping.

Meanwhile, regime forces launched a new blitz on the Syrian city of Homs Thursday, killing dozens of people, activists said, as the UN weighed a joint mission with the Arab League to end the violence.

Shelling erupted at daybreak, killing at least 24 people in the besieged central city and burning bodies beyond recognition, Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Rebels carried out an ambush later that killed at least seven security forces and wounded dozens in Daraa, southern cradle of the nearly 11-month revolt against President Bashar Al-Assad, said the head of the Britain-based group.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said Thursday Germany was expelling four diplomats from the Syrian embassy in Berlin after the arrest of two men suspected of spying on regime opponents.

"After the arrest of two people suspected of spying for Syria, I have decided to expel four members of the Syrian embassy in Berlin," Westerwelle said in a statement.

"The Syrian ambassador has been informed of this decision," added the minister.

Two men, identified only as 47-year-old German-Lebanese citizen Mahmoud El A. and 34-year-old Syrian national Akram O., were arrested in Berlin on Tuesday. — AFP

Smoke rises from al Malaab near Homs. Syrian forces bombarded opposition-held neighborhoods of the city of Homs with rocket and mortar fire Thursday, activists said, as divided world powers struggled to find a way to end the violence. — Reuters

A difficult choice in Syria

Assad's departure could threaten Russia's economic and military contracts

Andrei Murtazin
RIA Novosti

On February 7, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Foreign Intelligence Service Director Mikhail Fradkov traveled to Damascus to help stabilize the situation in Syria by encouraging democratic reforms. The substance of President Dmitry Medvedev's letter, which they delivered to Bashar al-Assad, was not disclosed, but experts point to the highly delicate nature of the Russian officials' mission.

Many Russian analysts assumed that Lavrov had been tasked with a very delicate mission: to convince al-Assad to resign and transfer power to Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa, which is what the Arab League's political settlement plan is proposing.

Most likely, the Russian envoys gave the Syrian president an ultimatum: either launch democratic reforms immediately in exchange for the continued support of Moscow, or step down. This was indirectly confirmed by Lavrov's statement at a news briefing regarding the drafting of a new Syrian constitution.

"President al-Assad has told us that in the next few days he will meet with the commission that was drafting a new constitution," Lavrov said. "It has completed its work and the date for a referendum on this crucial document for Syria will be announced soon." In fact, the visit has reaffirmed Russia's readiness to stand up to the West and the Arab League in defense of its last remaining ally in the Middle East. The question is, how far is Russia prepared to go in this confrontation?

Vladimir Putin said repeatedly during his two presidential terms that Russia would develop relations with Arab countries on an economic, not an ideological, basis. True to his word, Russia was actively trying to develop relations with Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Gulf monarchies in the mid-2000s. But simultaneously it was also signing major arms contracts with Algeria and Libya.

Syria was no exception, but trade with Syria was on a smaller scale than with other Arab countries. Now that Syria has become a bone of contention between Russia and the rest of the Arab world (apart from Iraq and Lebanon), Moscow is facing a difficult choice. They say that politics is the art of the possible, but the outbreak of civil war in Syria, which Russian diplomats prefer not to notice, has greatly undermined the room for political maneuver in Moscow and Damascus. If Bashar al-Assad stays in power, which seems highly unlikely, Russia's economic and military contracts with Syria will be safe. It will able to supply weapons to Syria, although most likely against deferred payment.

If the al-Assad regime falls, Russia will lose Syria, irrespective of who takes over, because the entire Syrian opposition is set against Russia. Islamic fundamentalists have already attacked Russian embassies in Sudan and Libya. But even if pro-Western liberals assume power, they will likely do business with Western companies.

So far, developments in Syria have not turned out favorably for Russia. Following the example of the West, six Gulf countries recalled their ambassadors from Syria on February 7. Russia's relations with these countries are rapidly deteriorating, which means that all Russian economic contracts with the Gulf states could be suspended or terminated.

But it is not weapons, or even economic contracts, that matter most. Confrontation with both Arab and Western countries would greatly damage Russia's hard-won international image as a democratic state.

The U.S. and its European partners, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, have sharply criticized Russia's stance on Syria. So the question is, is the Syrian game worth playing? ■

The views expressed here are the author's own.

Global Times (Chine / China)

Beijing confirms first opposition contact

UN condemns Syria as forces hit Homs

Syrian forces bombarded opposition-held neighborhoods of Homs with rocket and mortar fire yesterday, activists said, as divided world powers struggled to find a way to end the violence.

The United Nations chief condemned the government assault on the heart of a revolt against President Bashar al-Assad that broke out nearly a year ago.

"I fear that the appalling brutality we are witnessing in Homs, with heavy weapons firing into civilian neighborhoods, is a grim harbinger of things to come," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in New York.

Activists and residents report hundreds of people killed over the last week as Assad's forces try to stamp out opposition in Homs and as yesterday dawned, rocket and mortar fire rained down again on Baba Amro, Khalidiya and other districts. Armored government reinforcements also poured into the eastern city.

Foreign ministers of the Arab League, which the UN's Ban said was planning to revive an observer mission it suspended last month, are due to meet in Cairo on Sunday. They may want to hear other governments' ideas by then.

However, Russia wants to counter US influence and maintain its traditional role in the Middle East.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said, "help them, advise them, limit, for instance, their ability to use weapons but not interfere under any circumstances."

President Dmitry Medvedev told Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan in a phone conversation the search for a solution should continue, but that foreign interference was not an option.

China said yesterday that a Syrian opposition delegation had visited the country this week, the first contact reported by Beijing.

The delegation from the Syrian National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, lead by its deputy general coordinator Hassan Mana, made a four-day trip to China, leaving yesterday, foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said. They met Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun and other senior diplomats.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai yesterday said China, the US and other countries can still cooperate on the Syria issue, although they hold different stances on a recent UN Security Council draft resolution, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Cui reiterated that China's veto of the draft resolution was a responsible approach. "It was entirely an independent decision in accordance with our principles and positions," he said.

Reuters – Xinhua