

Es ist dringend notwendig zu warten

PRESSESCHAU SYRIEN #43

3. Februar 2012

Die westliche und die Golfpresse halten den Kurs, den das Weiße Haus ihnen im Sicherheitsrat seit der Begegnung zwischen den NATO Mitgliedern einerseits und China und Russland andererseits geboten hatte. Jeder wartet auf die nächste Versammlung und bereitet sich einen Ausgang vor. Wenn das globale Kommunikationsbüro versucht einen Konsens zu erstellen, machen die Leitartikler im Gegensatz zur Gewohnheit eine Schlussfolgerung, die sie selber erstellen müssen.

Der Ton wird von einem Leitartikel des konservativen Charles Krauthammer vom Washington Post angeschlagen, er wird weit verbreitet, sowohl durch die US-Presse als auch durch die europäischen und Golf Zeitungen. Nachdem man den möglichen Sturz von Bachar el-Assad mit dem Berliner Mauerfall verglichen hatte – der erste sollte den Weg zum Ende des Iran ebnen, wie der zweite das Ende der UdSSR besiegelt hatte – und nachdem er kriegerische Reden geschwungen hatte, schlägt der Autor vor ... die Sanktionen zu verstärken. Die großen Siege kämen von selbst, für jene die warten könnten.

- Im *Le Figaro* gibt Georges Malbrunot ein ruhmvolles Porträt von Burhan Ghalioun, Präsident des SNR (syrischen National Rates), sowie von Haytham Manna, Präsident des Nationalen Koordination Komitees wieder, aber unterstreicht ihren Zwiespalt und die Abwesenheit von populärer Repräsentation.
- Zahlreiche *Tageszeitungen* reproduzieren eine AFP Depesche anlässlich des 30. Jahrestags des Massakers von Hama. Was diesen Text charakterisiert, ist der Mangel an historischem Zusammenhang (es handelt sich nicht um die Repression einer politischen Partei, sondern um die Wiedereinstellung von Ordnung während eines missglückten Staatsstreiches der Muslimbrüder, jene die tatsächlich die Gewalttaten ausgelöst hatten), und das Amalgam mit der heutigen Lage (dieses Mal sind die Putschisten finanziell und militärisch durch die Absolut Monarchien aus dem Golf unterstützt).
- *La Tribune de Genève* übernimmt die Kommentare der *Foreign Policy* über den Bericht der Beobachter. Sie kennen den Inhalt der Beobachtungen nicht und fokalisieren sich auf Bemerkungen von abgesprungenen Beobachtern, die sie missbräuchlich auf ihre Kollegen extrapolieren. Es geht darum, den Glauben zu erwecken, dass die Beobachter inkompetent wären und dass folglich der Inhalt ihrer Aussagen keiner Aufmerksamkeit wert wäre.

- Der *Diario de Noticias* vergleicht Asma el-Assad mit Lady Macbeth. Wie die Figur von Shakespeare, die nach ihrem Mord in geistige Umnachtung fällt, wird die Ehefrau des Präsidenten von den Wellen der Verbrechen ihres Gemahls mitgerissen.
- Verschiedene Zeitungen denunzieren den russischen Waffenverkauf an Syrien. *Defence Technology International* bemerkt, dass Moskau zwei Yakhonts und 18 Abschussrampen Lastwagen an Syrien geliefert hat, die mit Überschallraketen ausgestattet, Schiffe bis in den Hafen von Haifa versenken können.
- Der stellvertretende Leiter der Leitartikelseite des *Washington Post*, der kriegssüchtige Jackson Diehl, warnt vor dem Bluff von Frau Clinton: die Erklärungen über den drohenden Sturz des syrischen Regimes überzeugen die Russen nicht und im Gegenteil, stärken sie in ihrer Analyse, dass der Okzident keine Strategie besitzt.
- Der *Jerusalem Post* und einige andere geben sich Mut, indem sie erklären, dass die freie syrische Armee sich in Zahl und Bewaffnung verstärkt. Die Artikel jedoch können nur mit Fotos, die bestenfalls einige Kämpfer zeigen, illustriert werden.
- Der syrische Universitätsangehörige Marwan Kabalan macht die Leser der *Gulf News* auf die russische Besorgnis aufmerksam, welche Rolle die USA der Türkei auferlegen. Moskau will nicht, dass Ankara der Gendarm des Mittleren Ostens wird, was die Ambitionen im Kaukasus und Zentralasien verschärfen würde.
- *The Saudi Gazette* gibt das Skript des Interviews in *CNN* vom Generalsekretär der arabischen Liga, Nabil Al-Arabi wieder. Al-Arabi glaubt nicht an eine internationale militärische Intervention, weil Syrien über eine starke Armee verfügt und das Land keine Ölschätze birgt. Niemand würde einen teuren Konflikt riskieren, ohne Aussicht auf Return on Investment.

Le Figaro (France)

Dans les coulisses de l'opposition syrienne en exil



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Tous les deux habitent la banlieue sud de Paris. Burhan Ghalion, un pavillon joliment décoré à l'orientale au Kremlin-Bicêtre. Haytham Manna, un deux-pièces spartiate encombré de livres à Malakoff. Depuis trente ans qu'ils sont exilés en France, ni l'un ni l'autre n'ont coupé les ponts avec leur pays et leur ville d'origine : Homs, l'épicentre de la révolte contre le régime de Bachar el-Assad pour Ghalion ; Deraa, le berceau de cette révolution, pour Manna. Mais depuis un an, Ghalion, 66 ans, n'enseigne plus la sociologie politique à la Sorbonne, et Manna, 60 ans, a définitivement arrêté son activité de médecin psychothérapeute, pour se consacrer, lui aussi, à un seul et même combat : renverser une dictature, qui réprime dans le sang ses opposants (6 000 morts selon Alain Juppé à l'ONU).

Jonglant entre les plateaux de télévision et les voyages au Caire, Doha ou Istanbul, le duo anime les principaux courants de cette opposition en exil. Ghalion préside le plus large d'entre eux, le Conseil national syrien (CNS), parti fourre-tout réunissant des islamistes modérés proches des États-Unis, des Frères musulmans interdits de séjour en Syrie, mais aussi des libéraux et des personnalités indépendantes. L'homme est apprécié pour son intégrité. Manna, lui, est le représentant hors de la Syrie du Comité national de coordination pour le changement, proche des nationalistes arabes. Volontiers provocateur, l'ancien médecin est hyperréaliste. Mais, au-delà des différences de style, de vraies divergences idéologiques opposent ces deux voisins, qui ne se parlent plus.

Mauvaises langues et persifleurs

Ghalion, le faïc, a consenti à s'allier avec les islamistes. Le CNS milite pour une internationalisation du conflit et refuse toute négociation avec el-Assad. Manna, l'ancien révolutionnaire, est, lui, farouchement anti-islamiste. La Coordination rejette la militarisation de la révolte et pense que la clé du conflit est à Moscou, l'allié de Damas, seul acteur à pouvoir convaincre le clan el-Assad de quitter le pouvoir pour éviter la guerre civile. Les mauvaises langues disent que Manna est lié au régime, qui a pourtant tué son frère l'an dernier à Deraa. Les persifleurs de l'autre camp racontent que Ghalion a reçu pour le CNS 22 millions de dollars du Qatar. Mais au-delà des rumeurs, leurs divisions illustrent « la fragmentation » d'une opposition, que vient de déplorer le patron du renseignement américain, James Clapper.

Pourtant le 30 décembre dernier, après des mois d'ostracisme à l'encontre de la Coordination, Ghalion, au nom du CNS, signait avec Manna une feuille de route, organisant la transition démocrati-

janvier, un congrès général devait rassembler toutes les factions de l'opposition. En cette veille du réveillon, dans sa villa de la banlieue du Caire, Nabil al-Arabi, le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe, s'appréta à recevoir les deux dirigeants pour les féliciter de cette avancée.

Las ! Quelques heures après la signature, sous la pression de ses alliés islamistes et de leurs sponsors qatariens, des membres du CNS contraignent Ghalion à se rétracter. Al-Arabi est furieux. « Pour qui me prennent-ils ? », fulmine le patron de la Ligue, après s'être beaucoup investi pour les brebis égarées se rassemblent enfin lors de ce congrès général.

« Conserver les preuves de tous les crimes commis »

Officiellement, les détracteurs de Ghalion au sein du CNS ne veulent pas exclure une intervention militaire extérieure, et ils refusent que l'accord entérine la suprématie du pouvoir civil sur le religieux. Ils ont en fait d'autres arrière-pensées. « Les islamistes ont réalisé qu'ils n'obtiendraient jamais autant de postes lors d'un congrès général », analyse a posteriori Haytham Manna. Ils n'ont donc aucun intérêt à saborder le CNS, qu'ils contrôlent en sous-main, après l'avoir créé au début de l'été dernier grâce à l'action opiniâtre de trois pilotes : Ahmed Ramadan, un ancien membre des Frères musulmans, Imad Eddine Rachid et Obeida al-Nahhas, deux islamistes modérés ayant l'oreille du département d'État américain. Trois hommes et une femme, Bassma Kodmani, chercheuse à Paris et ancienne directrice de la Fondation américaine Ford pour le Moyen-Orient, qui vont nommer Ghalion président du CNS à son insu, fin août...

Trois semaines avant le fiasco du Caire, Ghalion avait pourtant promis d'œuvrer à l'unité des opposants syriens lors de la première rencontre à Genève entre une délégation du CNS et Hillary Clinton, la secrétaire d'État américaine. « Nous souhaitons que vous reconnaissez le Conseil national comme le représentant légitime du peuple syrien », lui demande d'emblée Ghalion. L'entretien ne doit durer que 16 minutes. « Le travail que vous avez accompli est très important, lui répond Mme Clinton, mais il reste encore d'autres étapes qui vous attendent pour obtenir la légitimité requise », poursuit la secrétaire d'État, selon le procès-verbal de la rencontre que nous avons consulté. Hillary Clinton pointe ensuite deux déficiences du CNS : « Je vous rappelle l'importance et la nécessité d'un dialogue et d'une ouverture envers toutes les entités composant l'opposition afin de les unir, et l'exigence de ne pas oublier les minorités en Syrie, car il n'y aura pas d'avenir pour la majorité si on n'accorde pas aux minorités tous leurs droits. »

Ghalion opine du chef avant d'en venir à sa seconde requête : « Le régime doit voir et entendre que toutes les options sont ouvertes. » En clair, comme face à l'ennemi iranien, Washington ne doit pas écarter l'option de frappes militaires contre Damas. Mme Clinton se garde bien de répondre, puis demande à ses interlocuteurs de « conserver les preuves de tous les crimes commis pour qu'aucun criminel n'échappe à la justice ». Avant d'ajouter que, même

Divisés entre plusieurs factions, les adversaires de Bachar el-Assad ne parviennent pas à rédiger un programme commun de transition. Sous la pression des islamistes, les uns ne veulent pas exclure une intervention militaire extérieure, alors que d'autres dénoncent la militarisation du conflit.

Face à des militants sous la mitraille, toutes ces chicaneries ont fini par démonter les tenors de l'opposition en exil. Si MM. Manna et Ghalion ont épousé la première phase pacifiste de la révolte, ces figures honorables paraissent aujourd'hui dépassées par sa militarisation. « Les opposants en exil ont perdu de leur représentativité auprès de la base, assure un diplomate à Damas. Ils leur ont servi à un moment donné de porte-parole, mais maintenant, les jeunes manifestants sont déçus. De toute façon, une partie de la rue sait désormais les groupes armés qui défient le pouvoir. » Signe d'une désaffection : des représentants kurdes se sont retirés récemment du CNS et 14 adhérents ont quitté la Coordination.

« Une redistribution des cartes s'opère actuellement », reconnaît Manna. De toute façon, une partie de la rue sait désormais les groupes armés qui défient le pouvoir. « Les opposants en exil ont perdu de leur représentativité auprès de la base, assure un diplomate à Damas. Ils leur ont servi à un moment donné de porte-parole, mais maintenant, les jeunes manifestants sont déçus. De toute façon, une partie de la rue sait désormais les groupes armés qui défient le pouvoir. »

Ces gens-là représentent l'étranger

Dans un entretien récent à Libération, George Sabra - un opposant sorti de Syrie par le CNS et possible successeur de Ghalion - dressait un réquisitoire en creux de l'action de ses amis en exil. « Nous devons renouveler la façon dont nous prenons nos décisions, et régler les problèmes. Par exemple : l'aide aux opposants de l'intérieur. Le CNS n'a pas fait assez. Ils ont besoin de médicaments, de vêtements, de nourriture. » Même l'acheminement de l'aide humanitaire n'échappe pas aux divisions de l'opposition. Le CNS a son propre canal. La Coordination aussi. « J'ai réussi à envoyer pour 6 200 euros de matériel médical à Homs, raconte Manna, mais seul un des trois groupes armés qui combattent le régime en a profité. »

Sous l'influence des islamistes, et bien loin des recommandations de Mme Clinton, le discours anti-alouaite (la minorité qui soutient les el-Assad) a pris le dessus chez nombre d'opposants. Nibras al-Fadel a clairement été écarté du bureau politique du CNS parce qu'il était alouaite. Ancien énarque et camarade de classe de Bachar el-Assad, al-Fadel connaît pourtant de l'intérieur le système syrien, pour avoir été envoyé par le président Jacques Chirac aider à la restructuration de l'administration baasiste en 2002-2003, au plus fort de la lune de miel franco-syrienne. Mais la toute-puissante police secrète ne lui donna que 24 heures pour quitter le pays... Une fois son rapport remis, qui appelait à leur strict encadrement.

Présenté comme l'éminence grise de Burhan Ghalion, al-Fadel a gardé ses entrées au Quai d'Orsay et à l'Élysée. Mais « à Damas, des opposants ne sont pas loin de penser, comme le régime, que ces gens-là représentent l'étranger », relève le diplomate. Les différents groupes de l'opposition en exil ont bien du mal à échapper à une instrumentalisation par leurs hôtes turcs, français ou qatariens. « Tant que nous n'aurons pas un projet d'opposition crédible, beaucoup de Syriens penseront que ce sera le



HILLARY CLINTON

Il n'y aura pas d'avenir pour la majorité si on n'accorde pas aux minorités tous leurs droits

HILLARY CLINTON

Le Figaro (France) [Le texte original anglais de cette tribune a été publié par The Australian]

Protéger les civils devrait être une priorité

Gareth Evans*

L'ancien ministre australien des Affaires étrangères met en avant la nécessité de ne pas perdre de vue la protection des civils dans le cadre des conflits.

Le Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies a autorisé sans aucune contestation le recours à « toutes les mesures nécessaires » pour la protection des populations civiles des zones à risque imminent de massacre dans la Libye du colonel Kadhafi. Ces vies furent sauvées et – si le Conseil de sécurité avait agi avec la même fermeté et la même détermination dans les années 1990, 8 000 vies à Srebrenica et 800 000 au Rwanda auraient pu être sauvées.

Cet accord d'intervention en Libye peut être vu comme l'arrivée à maturité du principe de responsabilité de protéger (R2P, en anglais), voté à l'unanimité par les gouvernements de la planète en 2005. Son essence : contraindre des siècles de traitement de la souveraineté comme un quasi-droit de tuer. Les États doivent protéger leurs propres populations du génocide et autres crimes de masse. A défaut, la communauté internationale a la responsabilité d'agir – par la persuasion, si possible, et la force, si nécessaire.

Aujourd'hui, le cas de la Syrie paralyse le Conseil de sécurité, incapable de se mettre d'accord non seulement sur la décision ultime que constituerait l'intervention de la force militaire, mais même sur des mesures moins coercitives comme des sanctions ciblées, un embargo sur les armes ou un renvoi à la Cour pénale internationale. Et ce malgré plus de 5 000 morts et des perspectives bien pires que

celles de la Libye début 2011. Cette hésitation reflète un contexte géopolitique différent en Syrie : des divisions sectaires régionales potentiellement explosives, l'absence d'unanimité au sein de la Ligue arabe pour une action ferme, un engagement russe de longue date en faveur du régime d'Assad et une puissante armée syrienne, ce qui rendrait toute intervention militaire difficile et meurtrière.

Mais le consensus du Conseil de sécurité sur le lieu et le moment adéquats pour appliquer cette responsabilité de protéger s'est évaporé face au déferlement de plaintes sur la façon dont l'application de ce mandat du Conseil de « protéger les civils et les zones d'habitants civiles menacés d'une attaque » a été menée par l'Onu.

Les premiers à mener la charge ont été les Iraciens. Leurs plaintes ne concernent pas la réponse militaire initiale, mais le fait que les intervenants ont rejeté les offres de cessez-le-feu potentiellement sérieuses, leurs frappes ont ciblé des soldats en fuite ne présentant aucun risque pour les civils et qu'ils ont attaqué des positions dont la nature n'était visiblement pas militaire (comme les bâtiments dans lesquels les proches de Kadhafi ont été tués). Plus généralement, les puissances occidentales, et certains États arabes comme le Qatar, ont soutenu les rebelles dans ce qui est rapidement devenu une guerre civile, ignorant un embargo sur les armes.

Sur certaines questions, les États-Unis, la Grande-Bretagne et la France ont été prompts à répondre. La protection des civils dans des zones comme Tripoli, totalement contrôlée par Kadhafi, ont-ils

argué, ne pouvait se faire sans le renversement de son régime. Si l'un de deux camps a été soutenu dans la guerre civile, c'était parce que les actes de tueries d'un régime partial peuvent convaincre les civils (comme en Syrie) de prendre les armes pour se défendre (et recruter des militaires déserteurs). De plus, les opérations militaires ne peuvent être microgérées à grande distance.

Et un concept d'opérations plus limitées « de surveillance et de frappe » aurait entraîné un conflit plus long et plus dur, ce qui aurait été impossible à défendre vis-

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a-vis de l'opinion publique, sans compter que cela aurait probablement entraîné un nombre de victimes civiles plus important.

Ces arguments sont valables, mais ces trois pays ont refusé d'en débattre au Conseil de sécurité, et les autres membres du Conseil n'ont jamais reçu les informations suffisantes leur permettant de les évaluer. Il ne faut peut-être pas croire tous les Iraciens lorsqu'ils prétendent qu'un compromis aurait pu être trouvé si un meilleur processus avait été adopté. Mais le mépris des puissances occidentales lors de la campagne libyenne a laissé de douteuses traces.

Bonne nouvelle : une avancée a été réalisée. Le Brésil a fait circuler un document proposant que le concept

de responsabilité de protéger, tel qu'il a évolué, soit complété par un nouvel ensemble de principes et de procédures sur « la protection des civils » (Responsibility While Protecting, déjà baptisée RWP).

Les deux propositions clés sont un ensemble de critères (dont le dernier ressort, la proportionnalité et l'équilibre des conséquences) qui devront être pris en considération avant que le Conseil de sécurité n'accorde un mandat de recours à la force militaire, et un mécanisme de surveillance et de contrôle de l'application de tels mandats. La réaction initiale des États-Unis, de la Grande-Bretagne et de la France fut presque méprisante, mais il semble que le ton se soit radouci. Le Brésil a indiqué sa volonté d'alléger le processus pour rendre les propositions plus largement acceptables.

Retrouver un consensus sur la manière de mettre en place la RWP dans les cas difficiles prendra du temps. Il arrivera trop tard pour la Syrie. Mais tout le monde sait que l'alternative à la coopération du Conseil de sécurité constituerait un retour en arrière, un retour aux jours difficiles au Rwanda, à Srebrenica et au Kosovo :

soit une totale inaction devant l'atrocité des crimes de masse, soit une action considérée illégale selon les termes de la charte de l'ONU. Après toutes les avancées de la décennie écoulée, cela serait décevant.

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DESSIN : DOBRITZ

Die Tagesspiegel (Allemagne / Germany)

Türkei will Assads Familie Asyl bieten

ISTANBUL - Der türkische Staatspräsident Abdullah Gül hat der Familie des syrischen Staatschefs Baschar al Assad Asyl in der Türkei in Aussicht gestellt. Derzeit gebe es keine entsprechende Bitte aus Syrien, sagte Gül während einer Reise durch die Golfstaaten mitreisenden türkischen Journalisten. „Aber wenn es so etwas gibt, wird natürlich alles in Erwägung gezogen.“ Zuvor hatte der türkische Präsident betont, er sehe keine Chance mehr für einen Machterhalt Assads. „Das Ende ist absehbar“, sagte er über die Lage in dem unruhigen Nachbarland.

Die syrische Opposition hatte vor wenigen Tagen von einem angeblichen Fluchtversuch von Assads Ehefrau Asma und ihren drei Kindern aus Syrien berichtet. Wegen der Gewalt der Regierung Assad gegen die Protestbewegung im Land war die Türkei in den vergangenen Monaten immer mehr von ihrem früheren Partner Syrien abgerückt. Inzwischen fordert Ankara den Rücktritt Assads und die Erfüllung der Forderung nach politischen Veränderungen. Während Außenminister Guido Westerwelle Assad offen zum Rücktritt auffordert, will Russland seine Waffenexporte nach Syrien noch immer nicht stoppen. Der stellvertretende Verteidigungsminister Anatoli Antonow sagte laut Berichten russischer Nachrichtenagenturen, derzeit gebe es keine Einschränkungen für Rüstungsexporte nach Syrien. Russland müsse seine Verpflichtungen gegenüber Damaskus erfüllen.

Russland, ein langjähriger Verbündeter und Waffenlieferant Syriens, blockiert seit Monaten eine Resolution des UN-Sicherheitsrates, die die Gewalt gegen Demonstranten in Syrien verurteilen würde. Auch einen neuen Resolutionsentwurf, der unter anderem ein Waffenembargo und den Rücktritt von Assad fordert, lehnt Russland ab. Moskau erklärte, dass es keinen Text unterstützen werde, in dem eine militärische Intervention wie in Libyen gebilligt oder ein Machtwechsel gefordert werde.

In Syrien haben Sicherheitskräfte nach Angaben der Opposition mindestens neun Demonstranten getötet. Außerdem sei es beim Gedenken an ein Massaker zu Massenfestnahmen gekommen. *AFP/dpa*

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Russland sagt Syrien Waffen zu

In New York dennoch Hoffnung auf UN-Resolution

F.A.Z. FRANKFURT, 2. Februar. Das syrische Regime hat zum 30. Jahrestag eines Aufstands von Islamisten in Hama seine Armeepräsenz in der Protesthochburg erhöht. Sicherheitskräfte und Militärs seien an Brennpunkten postiert worden, berichten Oppositionelle am Donnerstag. Außerdem sei es zu Massenfestnahmen gekommen. 1982 hatte das Regime von Hafiz al Assad einen Aufstand von Muslimbrüdern blutig niederschlagen lassen. 20 000 Menschen waren getötet worden.

Trotz der anhaltenden Gewalt gegen Oppositionelle will Russland weiterhin Waffen an das syrische Regime verkaufen. Nach Angaben russischer Nachrichtenagenturen sagte der stellvertretende Verteidigungsminister Anatoli Antonow am Donnerstag, es gebe derzeit keine Einschränkungen für Rüstungsexporte nach Syrien.

In New York zeigten sich Diplomaten am Donnerstag dennoch zuversichtlicher als zuvor, dass sich der UN-Sicherheitsrat auf eine Syrien-Resolution verständigen könnte. Russland, das den jüngsten arabisch-europäischen Entwurf heftig kritisiert hat, habe sich an den Textverhandlungen vom Mittwochabend konstruktiv beteiligt. Im Westen gibt es offenbar Bereitschaft, die Forderung abzumildern, dass Präsident Assad die Macht an seinen Stellvertreter übertragen solle. Das hatte Moskau als Versuch kritisiert, Syrien von außen einen Regimewechsel aufzuerlegen. Gerungen wird auch darum, ob die Resolution die Wirtschaftssanktionen der Arabischen Liga gutheißen und Waffenlieferungen an Syrien kritisieren solle. Die Arabische Liga erhofft sich aus New York deutliche Unterstützung für ihre Politik.

Der Standard (Autriche / Austria)

Russland will weiter Waffen an Syrien liefern

Weitere Verhandlungen über UN-Resolution in New York – Suche nach Asyl-Platz für Präsident Assad

Damaskus/Beirut – Trotz der anhaltenden Gewalt in Syrien will Russland weiter Waffen an das arabische Land verkaufen. Der stellvertretende Verteidigungsminister Anatoli Antonow sagte am Donnerstag laut Berichten russischer Nachrichtenagenturen, derzeit gebe es keine Einschränkungen für Rüstungsexporte nach Syrien, und Russland müsse seine Verpflichtungen gegenüber Damaskus erfüllen.

Der russische Außenminister Sergej Lawrow hatte bereits am Dienstag bei einem Besuch in Australien erklärt, dass Moskau seine „vertraglichen Handelsverpflichtungen“ gegenüber Syrien erfüllen und dass die an Damaskus verkauften Waffen nicht gegen Demonstrationen eingesetzt würden.

Russland, ein langjähriger Verbündeter und wichtiger Waffenlieferant Syriens, blockiert seit Monaten eine Resolution des UN-Sicherheitsrates, die die Gewalt gegen regimiekritische Demonstranten in Syrien verurteilen würde. Auch einen neuen Resolutionsentwurf, der ein Waffenembargo



Syrische Sicherheitskräfte in Hama. Das Regime erhöhte dort seine Präsenz angesichts des 30. Jahrestags eines Massakers in der Protesthochburg Hama. Sicherheitskräfte und Militärs seien an Brennpunkten postiert worden, berichten Oppositionelle. Es sei zu Massenfestnahmen gekommen. 1982 hatte Hafiz al-Assad, der Vater des jetzigen Präsidenten, dort einen Aufstand sunnitischer Islamisten blutig niederschlagen, zigtausende Menschen waren getötet worden.

Foto: ddp

Angst vor Unruhen
In Syrien erhöhte das Regime aus Angst vor Unruhen zum 30. Jahrestag eines Massakers die Armeepräsenz in der Protesthochburg Hama. Sicherheitskräfte und Militärs seien an Brennpunkten postiert worden, berichten Oppositionelle. Es sei zu Massenfestnahmen gekommen. 1982 hatte Hafiz al-Assad, der Vater des jetzigen Präsidenten, dort einen Aufstand sunnitischer Islamisten blutig niederschlagen, zigtausende Menschen waren getötet worden.

Angesichts der anhaltenden Gewalt in Syrien hat auch Jordanien angekündigt, seine Beobachter aus dem Land abzuziehen. Am Wochenende hatte die Arabische Liga entschieden, die Mission auszusetzen. (Reuters, dpa, red)

go und den Rücktritt des syrischen Staatschefs Bashar al-Assad fordert und über den in New York derzeit verhandelt wird, lehnte Russland bisher ab. Diplomaten berichteten jedoch von Fortschritten bei den Verhandlungen, möglicherweise könnte schon heute, Freitag, über den Text abgestimmt werden.

Unterdessen suchen die USA und ihre Verbündeten in Europa und der arabischen Welt laut westlichen Regierungsvertretern nach einem Exil für Assad. Drei Staaten hätten Aufnahmebereitschaft signalisiert. Europäische Länder seien nicht darunter. Darin gegen hätten sich die Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate offen für die Idee gezeigt, Assad Asyl zu gewähren. Beobachter bezweifeln aber, dass sich der Machthaber in Damaskus zu einem solchen Schritt entschließen könnte. Geklärt werden müsste auch die höchst umstrittene Frage, ob man Assad Straffreiheit gewährt.

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ten, er habe der Familie Assads Asyl in der Türkei in Aussicht gestellt. Derzeit gebe es keine entsprechende Bitte. Die syrische Opposition hatte vor wenigen Tagen von einem angeblichen Fluchtversuch von Assads Ehefrau Asma und ihren Kindern berichtet.

Angst vor Unruhen

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Der Irak auf der Seite des syrischen Regimes

Schützen versuchen zu vermitteln – Sunniten hoffen auf den Sieg der Regimegegner

Der Konflikt in Syrien wirft auch im Irak seine Schatten. Während viele Schützen einen Regimewechsel befürchten, erhoffen diesen viele Sunniten. Damit steht der Irak wiederum im Zentrum eines regionalen Konflikts.

Inga Rogg, Bagdad

Vor zwei Jahren noch hatte kein Land das syrische Regime derart scharf kritisiert wie der Irak. Die Regierung in Bagdad warf dem Nachbarland vor, Terroristen und Gefolgsleuten des ehemaligen Diktators Saddam Hussein freie Hand zu lassen. Nach den schweren Anschlügen auf das Ausssen- und das Finanzministerium forderte Ministerpräsident Nuri al-Maliki die Auslieferung der angeblichen Drahtzieher und fror die diplomatischen Beziehungen ein. Insofern könnte man erwarten, dass Bagdad den Aufstand gegen das Regime von Bashar al-Assad begrüsst. Doch das Gegenteil ist der Fall.

Ein Schreckensszenario

In fast schon schillern Tönen warnt man im Lager des irakischen Regierungschefs vor einem Regimewechsel in Syrien. Hört man dem Abgesandten Izzet Shabander zu, dann stünde in die-

sem Fall nicht nur dem Irak, sondern dem ganzen Nahen Osten ein Inferno bevor. «Syrien ist nicht Libyen, Ägypten oder Jemen», sagt Shabander. «Wenn das syrische Regime stürzt, dann fällt die ganze Region auseinander.» Dabei entwirft er ein Szenario, das tatsächlich beängstigend ist. Der Hizbullah würde binnen weniger Stunden ganz Libanon unter seine Kontrolle bringen, behauptet der Gesandte. Das würde Israel nicht hinnehmen, ein Militärschlag der israeli hatte jedoch unweigerlich ein Eingreifen Irans zur Folge. Sollte es so weit kommen, würde Iran nicht nur Israel, sondern mit Angriffen in der Golf-Region auch amerikanische und europäische Interessen gefährden. «Weiss der Westen, auf was er sich da einlässt?», sagt Shabander.

Gespräche in Bagdad?

In den letzten Monaten hat Shabander im Auftrag von Maliki versucht, Assad zu Konzessionen zu bewegen. Mehrfach ist er nach Damaskus gereist. Dabei hat sich der Irak auch als Mediator in dem Konflikt eingebracht. Den Vermittlern sei es zu verdanken, dass Assad der Beobachtermission der Arabischen Liga zugestimmt habe, heisst es in Bagdad. Obwohl diese gescheitert ist und die Liga mittlerweile den Rücktritt von Assad fordert, sieht man im Irak das Ende der Bemühungen noch nicht er-

reicht. Es gebe mittlerweile Ansätze für den Dialog zwischen dem Regime und der Opposition, sagt der Abgeordnete Abbas Bayati von Malikis Partei in Gespräch. Die irakischen Mittler haben Gespräche zwischen den beiden Seiten in Bagdad vorgeschlagen. Die Antwort der Opposition steht laut Bayati noch aus. Das Ziel seien eine Überarbeitung der Verfassung und ein Mehrparteiensystem. Immer wieder betonen die Iraker, dass sie nicht hinter dem syrischen Baath-Regime stünden, sondern die Forderung der Opposition nach Demokratie stützten. Indirekt wirft Bayati dem Westen und den Golfstaaten vor, die irakischen Vermittlungsbemühungen zu hintertreiben, indem sie den Konflikt in Syrien vor den Uno-Sicherheitsrat bringen. Eine Internationalisierung des Konflikts müsse mit allen Mitteln verhindert werden, sagt Bayati. Es müsse eine syrische Lösung geben.

Eine neue Allianz

Diese wird freilich vom Iag zu Iag unwahrscheinlicher. Der Konflikt in Syrien hat sich in den letzten Wochen zugespitzt. Das Regime habe mittlerweile die Kontrolle über die Hälfte des Landes verloren, behauptete Riad Assad von der Freien Syrischen Armee am Donnerstag. Auch wenn die Angaben des Rebellenchefs übertrieben sind, so gewinnt die bewaffnete Untergrund-

bewegung doch immer mehr an Stärke. Insdies sind die Sorgen der irakischen Regierung verständlich. Der politische Beobachter Ibrahim Samiade sieht in den Warrungen von Shabander freilich weniger die Furcht vor den Folgen eines Bürgerkriegs im Nachbarland. «Es geht einzig und allein um den Konfessionalismus», sagt Samiade.

Die Aufständischen in Syrien sind mehrheitlich Sunniten. Assads Regime wird von Alawiten getragen, einer religiösen Minderheit, die den Schiiten nahesteht. Wie der ebenfalls schiitische libanesische Hizbullah und die von Schiiten dominierte Regierung in Irak wird das syrische Regime von Iran unterstützt. Fällt Assad, zerbricht der «schiitische Halbmond» – vor Jahren eine abschätzige Formulierung der Sunniten – das sagen heute Schiiten im Irak, um ihr Schweigen gegenüber den Verbrechen des Assad-Regimes zu erklären.

Auf der anderen Seite des Konflikts stehen die (sunnitische) Türkei und die Golfstaaten, allen voran Saudarabien und Katar. Aus schiitischer Sicht setzen sie sich nur deshalb für die Aufständischen in Syrien ein, weil sie Sunniten sind. Die sunnitische Minderheit im Irak, die bis heute ihren Machtverlust nicht verdaut hat, hofft dagegen auf deren Sieg, weil sie sich davon ihre Stärkung versprechen. Das Grenzgebiet zwischen dem Irak und Syrien wird von

Sunniten bewohnt. Dass Sunniten in den letzten Monaten nach Autonomie riefen, sieht man im Regierungslager als Vorbote für eine Allianz zwischen den Sunniten in Syrien und im Irak. Dahinter stecke Katar, das innerhalb der Arabischen Liga derzeit massgeblich die Isolierung von Assad vorantreibt, behaupten schiitische Politiker. Auch der innenpolitische Konflikt mit dem von Sunniten unterstützten Irakya-Blindnis wird durch diese Brille gesehen.

Kampf der Regionalmächte

Als der türkische Ministerpräsident Erdogan kürzlich vor einem erneuten Bürgerkrieg im Irak warnte, handelte er sich Proteste von schiitischer Seite ein. Damit sei es Maliki gelungen, die schiitischen Reihen hinter sich zu schliessen. sagt der kurdische Abgeordnete Serdar Abollu. Im Augenblick haben sich die Wogen im Irak wieder etwas geglättet. Für die meisten irakischen Politiker ist die Zukunft des Iraks jedoch eng mit dem Konflikt in Syrien verknüpft. Ein Umsturz in Syrien würde unweigerlich Iran schwächen. Deshalb werde er von der Türkei und den Golf-Atabern, aber auch den Amerikanern vorangetrieben, sagt Abollu. Wie zu Zeiten des Osmanen- und des Safawiden-Reichs stehe der Irak im Zentrum des Konflikts. «Der Irak ist die Bühne, auf der der Machtkampf ausgetragen wird.»

Le Temps (Suisse / Switzerland)

Nouveau projet de résolution sur la Syrie

> ONU Concessions à la Russie

AFP

Les pays membres du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU ont entre les mains une nouvelle version du projet de résolution sur la Syrie qui fait des concessions à la Russie dans l'espoir de lever son blocage, ont indiqué des diplomates jeudi.

La nouvelle mouture du texte, élaborée à la suite des négociations de mercredi entre les ambassadeurs des 15 pays membres, «soutient la décision de la Ligue arabe du 22 janvier». Mais les détails du processus de transition – notamment le transfert des pouvoirs du président Bachar el-Assad à son vice-président – n'apparaissent plus.

Cinq civils tués

La Russie, ainsi que l'Inde notamment, insistait depuis le début de la négociation pour que le Conseil ne préjuge pas de l'issue d'une transition démocratique en Syrie en demandant a priori que le président Assad cède le pouvoir.

Le texte abandonne aussi la référence aux sanctions économiques décidées par la Ligue arabe contre Damas en novembre 2011, ainsi qu'un paragraphe où le Conseil s'inquiétait des ventes d'armes à la Syrie, que Moscou souhaite poursuivre.

Alors que sur le terrain cinq civils ont été tués hier, selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme, le chef des observateurs arabes, le général soudanais Mohammed Ahmed Moustafa al-Dabi, s'est dit «satisfait» de la mission.

A Hama en 1982, «c'était la même sauvagerie»

> Un survivant du massacre raconte

Trente ans plus tard, Fawaz se souvient encore des horreurs du massacre de sa ville natale de Hama, devenue symbole de la brutalité du régime du clan Assad. «A l'époque, on était massacrés en silence, c'est ça la différence», affirme-t-il au téléphone depuis sa résidence dans un pays arabe. Ce Syrien avait 19 ans au moment de la répression d'un soulèvement armé mené par les Frères musulmans contre les forces du président Hafez el-Assad, père de Bachar, l'actuel chef d'Etat.

Pendant quatre semaines, Hama, située à 210 km au nord de Damas, a été bombardée par les forces du régime du président Hafez el-Assad, faisant, selon les estimations, de 10 000 à 40 000 morts, ce qui a été décrit comme le pire crime commis dans l'histoire moderne de la Syrie.

«Cadavres boursoufflés»

Fawaz garde en mémoire «les cadavres boursoufflés trainés par les chiens dans la rue», les «corps calcinés dans les commerces incendiés» et surtout la peur au ventre, la même qu'il a ressentie lorsque l'armée est entrée une nouvelle fois à Hama pour mater les manifestations en 2011.

Fawaz se souvient d'un matin froid et pluvieux, le 3 février 1982, quand l'armée a rassemblé sur une place tous les hommes de plus de 15 ans de son quartier. «Ils nous ont abreuvés d'insultes: «traîtres», «agents d'Israël». Puis ils nous ont dit: «Nous allons vous massacrer tous», raconte-t-il. L'horreur qui s'ensuivit restera à jamais marquée dans sa mémoire. «C'était la même sauvagerie, le même aveuglement [que maintenant]», dit Fawaz. A l'époque, les Syriens et l'étranger n'ont eu vent du massacre que trois mois après les faits. **AFP**

Rapport divulgué



«Je le jure devant Dieu, je suis pleinement satisfait de moi-même et de tous ceux qui ont participé à la mission en Syrie», a affirmé le général Mohammed Ahmed Moustafa al-Dabi, chef de la mission d'observation de la Ligue arabe en Syrie. ASHRAF SHAZLY/AFP

Les nombreux couacs de la mission arabe en Syrie

Le chef des observateurs de la Ligue arabe se dit «totalelement satisfait», alors que son rapport indique le contraire

Yannick Van der Schueren

«Je le jure devant Dieu, je suis pleinement satisfait de moi-même et de tous ceux qui ont participé à la mission en Syrie.» Tels sont les termes utilisés hier par le chef de la mission d'observation de la Ligue arabe en Syrie, le très controversé général Mohammed Ahmed Moustafa al-Dabi. Vraiment? Ce n'est pourtant pas ce qui ressort du rapport qu'il a remis à la Ligue arabe le 19 janvier dernier.

Manque de compétence

Dans ce document, divulgué dans son intégralité cette semaine par le magazine américain *Foreign Policy*, le général soudanais dénonce - en marge du récit de la mission - l'attitude des 166 observateurs sur le terrain. Les entraves du régime

heureusement, voyaient leur présence en Syrie comme un voyage d'agrément et de loisir», écrit ainsi l'ancien chef du renseignement militaire de Khartoum. Son rapport - qui attribue les violences au régime de Bachar el-Assad comme aux opposants - pointe aussi «le manque flagrant de compétence de certains observateurs à affronter la complexité et à faire face aux situations difficiles qui sont pourtant au cœur de leurs prérogatives».

Il enchaîne en soulignant l'incapacité physique de certains collaborateurs à accomplir leur tâche.

Manceuvres à l'ONU

● Le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU va-t-il enfin pouvoir condamner les violences de Damas? Un tout nouveau projet de résolution sur la Syrie est sur la table, apprenait-on hier de source diplomatique. Un projet «light», avec des concessions faites à la Russie afin que Moscou n'y oppose pas son veto. Certes, le texte «scoutient pleinement (...)

«Un certain nombre de participants sont trop âgés, alors que d'autres présentent un état de santé déficient les rendant incapables d'exercer les fonctions pour lesquelles ils ont été proposés.» D'autres, poursuit-il, «n'ont pas évalué le poids réel de leurs responsabilités ni l'importance de faire prévaloir les intérêts arabes sur les intérêts personnels». Pire, certains observateurs basés hors de la capitale «ont exigé un hébergement comparable à celui dont bénéficiaient leurs collègues à Damas ou, à défaut, un dédommagement correspondant à la diffé-

rence du prix des hôtels». Mais il n'y est plus question d'exiger le transfert des pouvoirs du président Bachar el-Assad à son vice-président. Abandonnée, également, la menace de sanctions économiques! Effacé, le paragraphe où le Conseil de sécurité s'inquiétait des ventes d'armes à la Syrie! La Russie veut en effet continuer de fournir Damas. Ce texte sera

rendre du prix des hôtels». On y apprend aussi que 22 observateurs ont quitté leur mission prétextant des raisons personnelles, parfois «jugées inacceptables». Pas un mot en revanche sur Anouar Malek, l'observateur algérien qui a jeté l'éponge le 6 janvier pour dénoncer les incohérences de cette mission.

Matériel confisqué

Ce rapport révèle aussi que le matériel de communication de la mission a été confisqué par la sécurité syrienne à leur arrivée à la frontière jordanienne, qu'ils ont été contraints de recourir aux lignes fixes locales (sur écoute?) et que «comme la mission ne disposait pas de quoi établir et maintenir la communication au sein d'un même groupe, l'ambassade chinoise a mis à la disposition de la mission dix talkies-walkies»...

Tous ces dysfonctionnements ont, sans nul doute, contribué à l'échec de la mission des observateurs, qui consistait à surveiller l'application du plan de sortie de crise de l'organisation panarabe prévoyant l'arrêt des massacres. En revanche, ce n'est pas leur incapacité à remplir leur mandat

PERFIL: ASMA AKHRAS ASSAD

Primeira dama da Síria

Síria Filha de um cardiologista e de uma diplomata, muçulmanos sunitas sírios que vivem em Londres, Asma teve uma educação ocidental e foi uma lufada de ar fresco quando se casou com Assad, mas hoje há quem a considere uma "Lady Macbeth"

ASMA ASSAD: DE "ROSA DO DESERTO" A "LADY MACBETH"

LUMENA RAPOSO

Mudar a mentalidade de seis milhões de jovens sírios, encorajá-los a empenhar-se numa "cidadania ativa" foi a missão principal que Asma Assad impôs a si própria ao tornar-se na primeira dama da Síria. E, em declarações à *Vogue*, explicou: "Toca a todos a responsabilidade de fazer avançar este país, de aumentar o poder da sociedade civil. Este país interessa a todos nós; ele será o que dele fizermos." E para conseguir esta sua "missão" – avança o artigo que a revista americana publicou em fevereiro de 2011 –, Asma fundou em 2005 a Massar, organização através da qual foram criados centros onde crianças e jovens (dos 5 aos 21 anos) aprendiam, de forma criativa e informal, em que consistia a "responsabilidade cívica".

Seis anos após a criação da Massar, grande parte dos jovens sírios terá interiorizado a mensagem da primeira dama e decidido tomar em mãos o seu destino e o do país. Uma decisão que pode ser nefasta para Asma que, em dezembro de 2000, trocou o anonimato confortável do Reino Unido para se tornar a mulher do jovem Presidente sírio, Bachar al-Assad. O afastamento do Chefe do Estado é agora exigido por milhares nas ruas do país, queda – como muitos avançam – que pode transformar Asma na "Maria Antonieta do século XXI".

Filha de diplomata Asma Akhras é a filha mais velha de Sahar Otri, uma diplomata reformada, e do cardiologista Fawaz Akhras, dois muçulmanos sunitas oriundos da cidade de Homs e que, nos anos 50, trocaram a Síria pelo Reino Unido para que Fawaz realizasse estudos mais aprofundados da sua especialidade. Em Londres,

Akhras tornou-se um importante elemento da comunidade de imigrantes sírios e foi membro fundador da Sociedade Sírio-Britânica. Testemunhos citados por media britânicos contam que Fawaz Akhras era um conhecido do ex-presidente sírio Hafez al-Assad e um defensor convicto – senão mesmo ativista – do Partido Baas, no poder em Damasco.

Na capital britânica nasceram os dois filhos do casal – Asma, a 11 de agosto de 1975, e Feras, hoje um cirurgião que durante algum tempo trocou Londres por Damasco. Asma fez toda a educação académica na sua cidade natal, onde, apesar de filha de muçulmanos, frequentou a escola da Igreja de Inglaterra e depois o Queen's College – seleta escola privada feminina por onde também passou Cristina Onassis. Asma foi boa aluna mas, como parece ser tradição das "meninas de Queen's College", também "fazia gazeta" para ir espreitar as famosas lojas da vizinha Oxford Street. Uma iniciação para a mulher elegante em que se transformaria.

King's College foi a etapa seguinte para a filha da diplomata e do cardiologista. "Emma", como passaram a chamar-lhe na universidade, fez a licenciatura em Literatura Francesa ao mesmo tempo que se aplicava no estudo da Informática. Terminada a universidade, Asma – que domina quatro línguas – passou seis meses a viajar. No regresso, facilmente

arranjou emprego no Deutsche Bank, que trocava depois pelo JP Morgan, o que lhe possibilitou trabalhar em Paris e Nova Iorque.

Primeira dama Olhos castanhos escuros que parecem estar sempre a sorrir, elegante, de ar sereno, Asma conheceu Bachar antes de ele ser catapultado para o poder. A família Akhras aproveitava as férias de verão para visitar os familiares que ainda vivem na Síria. Mas, confessou Asma à *Vogue*, "a diferença de dez anos" funcionou como uma espécie de barreira para qualquer relação sentimental. Mas fontes há que dão como certa a existência de uma namorada ao lado de Bachar al-Assad.

Em 1992, Bachar chegou a Londres para fazer uma pós-graduação em oftalmologia. Os Akhras receberam o filho do presidente sírio como se de um familiar se tratasse. O romance com Asma, que teria começado nas férias de verão desse ano, aprofundou-se. Mas

em 1994, Bachar é chamado de urgência a Damasco para assistir ao funeral do irmão Basil – o delfim de Hafez morto num acidente de viação – e preparar-se para, um dia, suceder a seu pai. A distância não enfraqueceu o sentimento: em dezembro de 2000, Bachar, que assumira a Presidência um mês antes, e Asma casam-se em segredo. Um mês depois, os sírios são informados de que têm uma primeira dama.

Asma Assad, que mantém a dupla nacionalidade, cativa todos, dentro e fora do país. Assume ter como referência a princesa Diana. Mulher moderna, preocupada com grandes causas e – diz-se – única confidente do marido,

é encarada como alguém que pode fazer a diferença na Síria. A revista francesa *Paris Match* classifica-a como "um elemento de luz num país cheio de zonas de sombra", e a *Vogue* considera-a "uma rosa no deserto".

E durante dez anos, a Síria e o Ocidente olham para os Assad – hoje com três filhos – como uma promessa. Em 2008, Asma recebeu a Medalha de Ouro da Presidência italiana, em 2010, o Presidente francês, Nicolas Sarkozy, convidou o casal para as cerimónias do Dia Nacional em 2010.

Em 2009, o casal Brad Pitt e Angelina Jolie é recebido como amigo pelos Assad, que, no seu todo o terreno e sem qualquer escolha, o leva a almoçar num restaurante. Asma, numa entrevista a media estrangeiros, convida o Presidente Obama a visitar o país. Os EUA respondem enviando, no início de 2011, o seu primeiro embaixador para Damasco desde 2005.

E tudo parecia perfeito. Até as joias e os fatos *Chanel* eram "perdoados" a Asma, que ousou criar uma página no Facebook quando este estava proibido no país. Perdoados os sapatos e carteiras de *Christian Loubotin*, o estilista que compra em Damasco a seda e o brocado que usa nos seus produtos, que se tornou amigo dos Assad e comprou um palácio em Aleppo. Mas a repressão da contestação de "cidadãos ativos" destruiu o enamoramento. Asma, silenciosa e ausente, é uma peça da repressão, uma "Lady Macbeth", gritam os que a adularam.

O silêncio de Asma Assad torna-a cúmplice da repressão



ILUSTRAÇÃO ANDRÉ CARREIRO

Publico (Portugal)

Na primeira pessoa Rami Jarrah fugiu da Síria e todos os dias pensa voltar

Tornou-se activista *online*, como tantos nas revoltas árabes do último ano. Nome de guerra Alexander Page, “o tipo da Internet”, “o tipo da Al-Jazira”. Filmava protestos, recolhia informações e imagens; fazia chegar tudo aos *media*. Falava na Al-Jazira. Manifestou-se a primeira vez quase há um ano e foi “como uma droga”. Até o regime perceber que Alexander Page e Rami Jarrah eram a mesma pessoa. “Não podia ter feito outra coisa. Mas não tenho desculpa”, diz sobre a fuga. Vive no Cairo, mas passa os dias na Síria



Sofia Lorena

● Sair da Síria foi a pior coisa que eu fiz. Não tinha outra solução. Mas isso não é desculpa, não torna o que eu fiz correcto. Porque há gente que está na mesma situação e não pode fugir, não tem dinheiro ou simplesmente não tem para onde ir. Foi a pior coisa que eu fiz.

O princípio

Nasci no Chipre e quando tinha dois anos a minha família mudou-se para Londres, onde fiquei até ter 17. Foi quando me mudei com o meu pai para o Dubai, onde estudei Jornalismo. A certa altura decidi visitar Damasco e não fui autorizado a sair do país. Os meus pais casaram-se fora da Síria e não me registaram lá, o que é ilegal. Durante três anos andei entre papéis e idas a tribunal para provar que sou sírio e que a minha mãe e o meu pai são casados. Isso envolveu muitos interrogatórios dos serviços secretos também, porque os meus pais são activistas.

Cheguei a Damasco em 2004 e fiquei três anos. Entretanto, arranjei um passaporte. Pagámos a uma pessoa do Exército para tratar disso e pensámos que tinha sido feito legalmente. Viajei para o Líbano e vivi lá quase um ano, trabalhei no jornal *Daily Star*. [O ex-primeiro-ministro Rafiq Hariri foi morto, os sírios deixaram de ser bem-vindos e voltei a Damasco. Quando entrei, fui acusado de ter forjado o passaporte e meu passaporte. Um ano depois tinha o meu passaporte.]

Instalei-me definitivamente em Damasco, comecei a trabalhar para uma empresa de importação próxima do regime e do presidente Bashar al-Assad. Se queríamos viver, tínhamos de trabalhar e quase todos os bons empregos tinham alguma ligação ao regime. Era um bom emprego, ganhava bastante bem, viajava muito.

Tive sempre um problema com o regime, que vinha já dos meus pais. O meu pai não podia ir à Síria, a minha mãe sim, podia, mas era sempre interrogada. O meu pai não podia, ponto final. Era procurado por ter pertencido à resistência palestina e desertou do Exército, fugiu para o Líbano.

Eu era contra o regime e muitas pessoas diziam-me para não falar dessas coisas. Mas eu tinha vivido numa sociedade democrática, em Londres, e as pessoas que vivem em democracia falam. As pessoas na Síria não gostavam de falar, achavam que era um desperdício de tempo.

A revolta

Tornei-me activo em Janeiro, com o que estava a acontecer no Egipto. Um pouco antes, na verdade, no fim de Dezembro. Tornei-me activo *online*. Apareceu uma página no Facebook, *Revolução Síria*, e comecei a seguir-la, a entrar em contacto com outros activistas. Algumas pessoas que eu conhecia começaram a fazer *graffiti* anti-Assad. Eu não fiz nada disso, achava que era estúpido, que não nos ia levar a lado nenhum. Mas estava enganado.

Online estava em contacto com pessoas que não conhecia, ninguém dizia o nome, só que estava em Deraa ou em Damasco... Algumas pessoas estavam fora do país, mas poucas. Quem estava fora só se envolveu muito mais tarde. Quem estava activo *online* eram pessoas que estavam dentro da Síria, que usavam nomes falsos e a quem eu também não dizia quem era. No início trocávamos mensagens sobre coisas tontas, com metáforas, alguém escrevia sobre uma manifestação de mortos dentro de uma casa, alguém tirava uma fotografia de uma pintura onde se lia “Abaixo Assad”.

Organizámos manifestações a 5 e a 6 de Fevereiro, mas não chegaram a acontecer. Quando cheguei ao local, só havia membros da polícia secreta. Limitei-me a continuar a andar.

A primeira manifestação de que me lembro foi um choque para todos nós. Penso que foi a 23 de Fevereiro, bem antes do protesto de 15 de Março, quando se começou a saber no estrangeiro. Foi na cidade velha de Damasco, depois de um polícia ter espancado o filho de um comerciante. Teve três a quatro mil pessoas. Eu não estive. Mas quando esse protesto aconteceu, de repente, tudo isto se tornou mais possível.

A 15 de Fevereiro houve um protesto na mesma zona, em Hamadiya, no mercado velho. Um homem que tem uma loja ali telefonou-me a dizer: “Tens de vir agora.” Perguntei o que era e ele insistiu. “É algo que te interessa, tens de vir agora.” E eu percebi o que

estava a passar-se. Quando cheguei, vi muitas forças de segurança a avançar para a zona, a prender manifestantes, e não cheguei a participar. Não havia mais de 200 manifestantes. Depois ouvimos que haveria uma nova manifestação no dia seguinte. E no próximo. A primeira em que eu realmente participei foi no dia 18.

Académicos, classe média

Os primeiros manifestantes eram activistas, académicos. Principalmente de classe média. Podemos ver isso pelas pessoas que estavam nos protestos. Penso que em qualquer revolução é assim, a classe mais baixa junta-se mais tarde. Sempre que podia, preferia ir a zonas mais pobres, a bairros populares. Ai é que se encontram as pessoas corajosas, dispostas a correr riscos.

Não eram pessoas religiosas. A parte religiosa do país estava com o Governo desde o início. Assad controlava as mesquitas. E muitas pessoas gostavam de Assad. A maioria não gostava, mas também não o odiava, não era como [o antigo Presidente e pai do actual] Hafez. A versão oficial era sempre que ele era uma boa pessoa, os erros eram cometidos por pessoas do Governo, que o rodeavam. A narrativa era a mesma que tinha sido usada com Hafez, mas ainda ninguém tinha visto sangue nas mãos de Bashar, por isso funcionava.

As pessoas só começaram a ficar contra Assad depois do seu primeiro discurso, quando ele começou a rir e

tratou o que estava a acontecer como uma piada.

Eu vivia num bairro novo de classe média, num subúrbio recente. São prédios novos, pouco mais. Ai quase não aconteceu nada. Houve protestos, mas muito pequenos, com dezenas de pessoas, e eu não participei. É demasiado perigoso, ninguém se manifesta na zona onde vive, a não ser que essa zona tenha sido fechada pelas forças de segurança e não se consiga sair.

Maioria negativa

Não queria dizer números, mas sou obrigado; claro que estes números não são exactos. A minha impressão é que 30% do país está activo contra o Governo. Entre os restantes 70%, há 20% a 30% activos a favor do Governo, mas a grande maioria destes, se pensassem que o regime ia cair, limitar-se-iam a mudar os retratos na parede. Quando eu digo que temos 30% de pessoas activas contra o Governo, quero dizer que essas pessoas estão dispostas a correr riscos, sabem que podem ser mortas, detidas, torturadas, que as suas mulheres podem ser violadas. São muito determinadas. Entre os que os apoiam, alguns estão determinados, mas a maioria não está disposta aos mesmos sacrifícios.

Os outros 40%, o resto do país, são o que eu chamo “a maioria silenciosa”. Chamamos-lhes assim porque são mais do que os manifestantes e do que as pessoas que estão com o Governo. Na Síria chamamos-lhes “negativos”, *selbi*.



Homs, 26 de Janeiro último. Desertores do Exército integraram as forças da oposição para defender a cidade



Quando tentamos protestar, temos de continuar, é uma sensação que não conseguimos ignorar. De de cada vez que havia uma manifestação maior, eu sabia que só podia crescer. Aquelas pessoas teriam de voltar a manifestar-se

Esta maioria silenciosa é composta pelas minorias, pessoas que têm medo de mudança, aliaças (como o Presidente), porque um aliaça não se pode virar contra o regime. Se a mim me cortarem um dedo, a um aliaça cortariam a mão toda. Temos os cristãos, que estão preocupados com um Estado islâmico, porque o regime usa muita a ameaça dos islamistas como arma de propaganda.

É há o factor medo, as pessoas que não querem participar simplesmente por terem medo. Há pessoas que dizem que estão com o Governo, mas não estão. Os sírios são o tipo de pessoas que, se fumam, não admitem que são viciados. Dizem: "Se eu quiser, deixo num dia." É a mesma coisa. Estas pessoas não querem dizer que têm medo e preferem dizer: "Eu estou com o Bashar; se quisesse manifestar-me, fazia-o."

Os apoiantes de Assad não são um grupo estável. Mas a oposição é estável, são pessoas que estão 100% contra o Governo. Por isso é que acredito que estamos em vantagem.

Chegar a um protesto

As pessoas saem das suas zonas na quinta-feira à noite para se dirigir a zonas onde sabem que vai haver protestos na sexta-feira. As pessoas vão sempre para zonas diferentes, onde ninguém as conhece, com medo dos informadores.

Eu estava num subúrbio e tinha de chegar ao centro de Damasco, por exemplo. Para o conseguir

levava papéis médicos, testes, e fingia que tinha de ir mostrá-los a um hospital. Era parado nos checkpoints e convencia-os que tinha de ir mostrar aqueles exames a um médico. Ajudava o facto de eu ter um carro bom. Seria ainda mais fácil, se tivesse uma mulher comigo, especialmente se fosse uma mulher sem lenço. Mas eu nunca usei a minha mulher para conseguir passar, não quis fazer isso. Na verdade, ela nem sempre sabia o que é que eu estava a fazer.

Começou em Damasco, mas foi em Deraa que as coisas pioraram e entraram em escalada muito depressa. Se não fosse por Deraa, não seria o que é hoje. Mas quando houve a escalada em Deraa, os miúdos concentraram-se na cidade e o Exército também. Tive medo que, se o Governo conseguisse reprimir os protestos em Deraa, fosse o fim. Mas depois começaram os protestos em Latakia e em Homs. Homs foi vital, pegou no que estava a acontecer em Deraa e deu-lhe continuidade. Penso que o Governo não estava preparado. Quando Homs começou, foi o momento em que tivemos a certeza de que não ia parar.

Tentei ir a Homs, fui com um amigo com telefones satélites escondidos debaixo dos rodízios do carro. Passámos por dois checkpoints, mas recuámos quando vimos um grande checkpoint do Exército onde os carros estavam a ser completamente revistados.

Mas estava sempre em contacto com pessoas de todas as cidades,

claram. Tínhamos uma agência de notícias, que ainda funciona. Estávamos em contacto com muitas pessoas em Homs, Deraa, Aleppo e também em Latakia, mas menos. Recebíamos os vídeos em primeira mão, fazíamos-os chegar aos miúdos e punhamos os jornalistas em contacto com pessoas nessas cidades.

O vício bloqueia o medo

Quando eu estava em Damasco, e ainda agora, desde que cheguei aqui, muitas pessoas me perguntam: "Como é que vocês fazem isto?" Dizem: "Vocês são heróis." E eu respondo: "Não é nada disso, vocês é que deviam estar invejosos de mim." Quando tentamos protestar, uma vez, depois temos de continuar, é uma sensação que não conseguimos ignorar, como uma droga, temos de continuar. De cada vez que havia uma manifestação maior, mais pessoas num protesto, eu sabia que só podia crescer. Aquelas pessoas teriam de voltar a manifestar-se.

Percebi que eles só conseguiram pôr termo à contestação, se fossem capazes de durante um mês inteiro impedir de facto as pessoas de se manifestarem. Ai haveria tempo para o medo se instalar. Mas desde que o façamos todas as semanas, sentimos que temos de continuar. Às vezes a minha mulher implorava-me para ficar em casa e eu ficava ali sentado até às onze da noite ou assim, e depois não podia mais. Levantava-me e ia-me embora.

Sempre esperamos que eles fossem brutais, penso que esperávamos

tudo o que aconteceu e até mais. Mas olhámos para o que tinha acontecido na Tunísia e no Egito e enganámos a nós mesmos. Na primeira manifestação em que eu participei, na Mesquita Omiada, estava a filmar e um polícia disse-me para desligar a câmara e eu não desliguei. E quando nos atacaram continuámos com os mesmos cânticos. Agora penso: "Mas no que é que eu estava a pensar, a enfrentar aqueles tipos e a deixá-los ver a minha cara?"

Fomos surpreendidos, mas só porque nos convencemos de que podia ter sido de outra forma. Mas depois lembrámo-nos de como o regime é sangrento e percebemos que Bashar é uma marioneta, muito pior do que nós pensávamos e tão perigoso como o pai.

Defender o resto da família

Vejo os sírios no exílio como pessoas nobres. Eu já vivi fora. Não é fácil abandonar a vida que se leva e concentrar-se no que se passa na Síria. A maioria não vai há anos à Síria. Mas com todo o respeito - e tenho muitos amigos fora da Síria -, a maioria dos que estão fora não fixa ideia nenhuma do que se está a passar na Síria.

No outro dia estava a falar com um sírio e expliquei-lhe que estou a trabalhar com alguém em Homs para tentar fazer chegar armas aos habitantes da cidade. "Mas do que é que estás a falar, como é que podes fazer isso?", perguntou-me. E eu disse-lhe que bastava pô-lo ao telefone com uma só pessoa, com



um homem com quem tinha acabado de falar, que perdeu a mulher e a filha... Perguntei-lhe: "Vais dizer-lhe que ele não pode defender o resto da família?" Porque ele tem mais quatro filhos. Quando este homem me diz que o Exército sírio está a vir matar toda a gente, não é ele que tem de me pedir armas a mim; sou eu que lhe imploro para que ele se defenda.

Logo em Março, o Governo disse que isto era um problema sectário e que havia milícias armadas.

Quem quer que se tenha sentado para escrever estas palavras tinha planeado que isto acontecesse. Escolheram Homs para mostrar que estão dispostos a tudo para nos provocar. Bombardearam a cidade, raptaram mulheres. Eles queriam uma retaliação, queriam uma rebelião armada. Queriam poder dizer: "Vêem, dissemos que estamos a enfrentar milícias."

E agora, tanto tempo depois, temos de facto pessoas a armar-se. Pessoas que dizem: "Não vamos ficar sentados à espera que vocês venham ter comigo se vocês vierem, podem matar a minha mulher e os meus filhos; se eu avançar, será só entre homens." Isto foi o que me disse outro homem de Homs.

Muitos dos que estão no exílio defendem uma transição política pacífica, mas não percebem que isso nunca acontecerá. O fim virá através de uma deserção em massa ou de uma guerra civil total. Uma intervenção internacional? Gostava que acontecesse já, mas não acredito. Claro que em princípio sou contra a ideia, mas tendo em conta as opções que o regime nos dá... Não fomos nós que escolhemos as opções. Se Assad quisesse sair do país, trataríamos disso. Mas o regime só nos dá opções negativas. Como são todas negativas, há sempre gente contra cada uma. Temos de escolher a menos catastrófica. Para mim, a menos catastrófica seria uma acção internacional.

"Ou te calas, ou matamos-te"

Tinha sido preso logo no dia 25 de Fevereiro e sabia que o Governo me conhecia como Rami. Voltei a ser detido, mas só por algumas horas. Durante algum tempo não aconteceu nada, mas uns dez dias antes de fugir, fui parado na rua por quatro milicianos do regime. Eles já me tinham visto nos checkpoints. Viram-me, aproximaram-se e atacaram-me. Foram só passes e empurrões, estalos e ameaças. Mas disseram-me: "Se não ficas calado, matamos-te." E as palavras assustaram-me. "Se não ficas calado, matamos-te."

Na altura não percebi qual era a ideia, o que queriam. Mas fiquei a pensar se aquilo queria dizer que sabiam que eu falara em nome de Alexander Page, que era um activista já conhecido. Contactei alguns activistas que me disseram que tinha de fazer quebra, ir à polícia ou aos serviços secretos e denunciar o que tinha acontecido. Para mostrar que não tinha razões para ter medo.

Depois contactei um empresário que eu conheço, um opositor próximo do regime, ninguém sabe que ele está contra o regime. Fomos aos serviços de segurança, falei com um oficial e descrevi o que tinha acontecido. Ele estava a ser muito simpático, mas depois de terem confirmado alguns dados sobre mim disseram que me queriam interrogar.

Sabiam que eu tinha uma tia no Conselho Nacional Sírio (principal grupo da oposição) e queriam saber como era a nossa relação. Eu abri a



Vítimas do massacre de Hama ordenado por Hafez al Assad, pai do actual Presidente. Hama voltou a ser cenário de repressão



Penso que os sírios em todo o mundo têm de começar a reflectir a situação no interior da Síria. E a única maneira de fazer isso é começar a destruir embaixadas, a atacar os embaixadores, as pessoas que trabalham em embaixadas

minha conta de Facebook e mostrei-lhes uma série de mensagens de ódio que tinha trocado com ela, que tínhamos preparado para o caso de eu ser apanhado. Tiveram dúvidas, mas mais ou menos pareceram ter acreditado. O oficial disse ao meu amigo que eu ia ser vigiado por uma semana. E fui, via um carro onde quer que fosse. Como deixei de poder ir a manifestações, resolvi gozar com a situação e ir a bares.

"O teu nome é...?"

Passado uma semana recebi um telefonema a dizerem-me que me devia apresentar no dia seguinte, para me fazerem algumas perguntas. Presenti que havia algum problema. Eu tenho um familiar, um marido de uma tia, que sei que é dos serviços secretos. Contaram-me que ele telefonou a outro familiar meu a perguntar: "Que história é esta do Rami Alexander Page?" Então eu percebi que alguém na minha família sabia que eu era o Alexander Page. "O Rami é o Alexander Page, isto é verdade?", perguntou esse meu tio.

Isso assustou-me muito. Juntando ao telefonema que tinha recebido para ir responder a mais perguntas, decidi telefonar a uma pessoa que pode aceder à base de dados dos serviços secretos da Força Aérea, que controlam as informações que vão para os aeroportos. Suborné-o e pedi-lhe que procurasse o meu nome e ele ligou-me quatro horas depois. Este homem, que só me conhecia como Alexander Page, perguntou-me: "O teu nome verdadeiro é Rami Jarrab?" Quando eu respondi que sim, ele disse-me para desaparecer imediatamente, que a minha casa ia ser atacada no dia seguinte. E a minha casa foi atacada na manhã seguinte, dia 5 de Outubro. Eu saí às oito da manhã e a casa foi atacada por volta do meio-dia.

Pensei esconder-me, mas tive medo que a minha família fosse perseguida. Pensei mandar a minha família embora sem mim, mas tive medo que fossem apanhados. Então

decidimos ir juntos até à fronteira. Penso que só passámos, porque a informação ainda não tinha chegado à fronteira. Era um aviso recente.

Um Rambo sentado

Se penso em voltar à Síria? Todos os dias. Mas não posso estar aqui sentado a fingir que sou o Rambo. Conheço gente que já conseguiu passar, gente que está a planejar fazê-lo. Um não é procurado como eu sou, outro passou com contrabandistas. Não posso ir agora, é demasiado arriscado e não vale a pena. Se for preciso então, mas preferia só arriscar fazê-lo quando o regime estiver a cair e eu for preciso para lutar. Quando for o início do fim, realmente. Nunca peguei num arma. Mas fazem falta jornalistas de guerra.

Daqui não consigo fazer 10% do que fazia na Síria, mesmo dando todo o meu tempo. Estaria a mentir se dissesse que sou tão eficaz como era no interior do país. O pior que fiz foi deixar Damasco, é inaceitável.

Aqui o que consigo fazer é estar em contacto com as pessoas no interior. Penso que a única coisa eficaz é apoiar as pessoas, ouvi-las, falar com elas todos os dias, fazê-las sentir que não estão sozinhas, tentar fazer-lhe chegar os cuidados médicos de que necessitam, tentar fazer-lhes chegar dinheiro, o que tem sido difícil. No Cairo, faz sentido organizarmos manifestações, porque temos aqui a Liga Árabe e isso chega à televisão na Síria. As pessoas vêem e percebem que não estão sozinhas.

Atirar um tomate a Hillary

Sei que isto vai parecer criminalidade ou vandalismo, mas penso que os sírios em todo o mundo têm de começar a reflectir a situação no interior da Síria. E a única maneira de fazer isso é começar a destruir embaixadas, a atacar os embaixadores, as pessoas que trabalham em embaixadas... Mesmo que isso signifique causar motins e entrar em confronto com as polícias, mas mostrar-lhes que estamos zangados.

Mesmo que isso signifique acertar na Hillary Clinton com um tomate, mas fazê-lo de modo a deixar muito claro que estamos a dizer que não aceitamos que não façam nada, que a situação é muito séria.

Estas pessoas já não nos representam, a embaixada síria já não é a nossa embaixada. Nós não podemos entrar nas embaixadas, eles recusam renovar os nossos passaportes. E nós podemos facilmente abrir um escritório noutra edificação e dizer: "Esta é a minha embaixada." É isso que devemos fazer. Agora temos o direito de começar a fazer isto noutros países. Essa é uma contribuição que vale a pena, em vez de estarmos aqui sentados.

Já estive em protestos na Turquia, onde os sírios são menos do que aqui mas mais organizados. Já estive num em Madrid também, coereu tudo bem, com muito civismo. Mas devia ser violento. Eu sei que parece que estou a incentivar as pessoas à violência, mas não é isso. É que nós estamos zangados. As nossas famílias estão na Síria, podem morrer. Como é que nos sentimos com isso? Devemos portar-nos com civismo?

Se governos como os dos Estados Unidos, ou da Espanha, se países como a França ou o Reino Unido apoiam a democracia por todo o mundo, assumem este papel, e depois a única coisa que querem é ensiná-los a ser democráticos... Não faz sentido. Eu fui a Espanha e eles querem ensinar-nos, querem ser um modelo para a transição. Mas se querem ser um modelo deviam fazer mais, se querem jogar o jogo de defesa da democracia, se entram nele, têm mesmo de o jogar. Nós temos de sublinhar isso. E se sublinhar isso significa incendiar a embaixada e depois ser atacado pela polícia espanhola, então vamos fazer isso. Se isso vai reflectir a situação dentro da Síria e fazer com que os governos levem mais a sério a necessidade de a resolver, então é isso que eu quero que aconteça.

The Irish Times (Irlande / Ireland)

Moscow can play central role in move to end Syrian violence



MARY RUSSELL

OPINION

If Moscow supports moves to get both sides in Syria talking, there is a chance that democracy may emerge

A RESOLUTION before the United Nations Security Council, drafted by the Arab League and a number of European countries in a bid to end violence in Syria, is still being discussed.

However, with Russia objecting to any call for regime change or to even a hint of foreign military intervention, it is unlikely it will be adopted in its original form. This may bring comfort to President Bashar al-Assad, who must surely now be nervous about the degree of dissatisfaction expressed daily by his own people.

Only a short while ago, it seemed the tide might be turning for his government. There were, after all, Arab League observers in the main cities. And the president himself, accompanied by his wife and children, performed smiling walkabouts.

His supporters have been shown on TV thronging the Damascus streets. Activists were being released from detention and BBC cameras were allowed into major trouble spots such as Homs and Douma.

On the surface, it looked like a move in the right direction. But did it reflect reality?

Decidedly not. Assad's appearances were well choreographed, the applause of his supporters carefully orchestrated. The BBC programme makers were accompanied by minders. The Arab League observers, no more than a token force, had their numbers scaled back from 165 to 100 and have finally been withdrawn. Last week pro-democracy activists succeeded in getting dangerously close to the centre of Damascus.

Formerly friendly Arab states have turned away from Syria, the country's financial state is bleak, and the original joint European-Arab resolution calls for a political transition including Assad's resignation. (The suggestion of tougher sanctions has not been included in the draft resolution since it is clear Russia would oppose such a move.)

Civil unrest, strikes and nervous investors have led to reduced oil production – a cause of growing concern to Russia which continues to support its beleaguered satellite.



Syrian refugees and residents living in Jordan shout slogans during a demonstration against President Bashar Al-Assad in front of the Syrian embassy in Amman last week. Photograph: Reuters

And why? Because Syria offers the only Mediterranean port where Russian ships can buy oil and refuel without hindrance – a facility significant for Moscow given Nato's 24 bases just across the Syrian border in Turkey.

Most threatening of all for those in power is the relentless nature of the political activists who, week after week, are on the streets of towns as far apart as Homs and Deir ez-Zour which, though separated by the Syrian desert, share the same aspirations to liberty, demonstrating their shared opposition to the leader of a one-party state whose rule, since 2000, has been characterised by control, oppression and torture.

The days of waiting for some movement towards democracy are over and the mood of pro-democracy activists has hardened, with some calling for the president to be summarily executed.

And while the initial wave of demonstrators were engaged in non-violent action, many are now armed by those who, ironically, once pointed their weapons at the activists but who have since defected from the Syrian security forces, bringing those same weapons with them.

Anyone who has watched videos of the beatings and torture inflicted by government forces on their own people will understand the degree of anger felt by many Syrians towards the president and his government. The fact that the

Syria offers the only Mediterranean port where Russian ships can buy oil and refuel without hindrance

beatings are inflicted openly, by men in the uniform of the Syrian security forces who appear not to care that their brutality is being witnessed worldwide, is itself a reflection of the nature of the situation.

Despite warnings from its Arab neighbours and threats from the UN, Assad's government has continued on its wayward path, assured that there would be no outside intervention, particularly in light of events in Hama in 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood was attacked.

Neither Europe nor America has the stomach to get involved militarily in yet another Middle East crisis. They fear that even if some measure of democratic change were to come about, the next government might not prove as friendly as hoped.

Would a new Syria, for

instance, be prepared to continue to do business with Russia, or would it look for more lucrative deals elsewhere? What line would a new Syrian government take over the Golan Heights?

There is no doubt that fear fuels the crisis.

"It's how dictators operate," says Nadim Shehadi, associate fellow of the Middle East programme at policy institute Chatham House.

"Assad has said that if things fall apart in Syria there will be chaos in the Middle East. Al-Qaeda and extreme Islamism will take over and it will spread. The conspiracy theory works well here. There are, Assad tells the people, outside forces at work. The CIA and Mossad are two. But Dr Assad himself is in denial and clearly does not fully appreciate the extent of the revolt. How can he? He is a dictator and he's got to believe he is in full control."

But could it be that Assad is not in control, and that he is a mere puppet of Russia?

"His government's means of control, by fear, is a classic tool of the old Soviet era," says Shehadi. "But he is not a puppet, nor is he a victim of any conspiracy theory."

There are some who, while not supporting the Assad regime, nevertheless fear that a victory for the Muslim Brotherhood – or a version of it – would mean a curtailment of freedom, especially in the area of women participating in society.

Shehadi disagrees: "Personal freedom is already curtailed. People can't vote for the party of their choice. They can't freely express their political ideas. They can only travel abroad by agreement with the relevant government department to which they must report on their return."

In the meantime, there are power cuts and fuel shortages. Travel between towns is dangerous, with bus travel the only relatively safe means of getting about. People are taken away and tortured.

The death toll mounts: 96 on Wednesday, 106 yesterday, with children among the dead. The UN, putting a figure of 5,000 deaths, says it can no longer keep count since the violence is now so widespread.

"If there is no intervention," says Shehadi, "many more will die."

The main challenge facing the joint European-Arab push now will be to get Russia on board without watering down the UN resolution too much.

Russia has expressed an interest in supporting a move towards promoting dialogue between the government and pro-democracy supporters, and that can only be good for Syria.

If this does happen, then the people of Syria can start to look towards achieving a freedom for which so many have already died.

Mary Russell's book, *My Home is Your Home, A Journey Round Syria*, was published in December 2011

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

UN waters down Syria proposals in bid to win Russia's backing

Bid to placate Moscow sees arms embargo shelved – and call for Assad's removal dropped

By **RUPERT CORNWELL**
in Washington

UN Security Council diplomats yesterday were moving towards a watered-down resolution on Syria that would secure a yes vote from Russia by removing a call for President Bashar al-Assad to step aside and dropping direct threats of an arms embargo or new sanctions.

Amid continuing intense negotiations, US, Arab and Russian officials all sounded more upbeat over prospects for an agreed text. In fact, any consensus would be acknowledgement that the tougher terms championed by the Arab League and backed by the West could not survive Moscow's veto.

In a gesture to the Arab League, which last weekend withdrew its monitors from Syria as the violence continued unchecked, the latest version "fully supports" the League's decision to "facilitate a political transition leading to a democratic, plural political system". Gone, however, is the explicit demand that Mr Assad delegate powers to his deputy within 15 days, and that a government of national unity be installed.

Although China – another permanent council member with veto powers – also disapproved of the original text circulated by Morocco, the loudest objections have come from Russia.

Moscow is determined to prevent any repeat of what happened over Libya, when it let through a UN resolution that helped bring down Colonel Muammar Gaddafi – and, as the Kremlin saw it, un-

derlined Russia's scant influence in world affairs. For that same reason, Moscow will do nothing that undermines virtually its last significant ally in the Arab world. Another factor however is the lucrative arms export trade with Syria, including equipment used to suppress the current protest. Despite overwhelming international criticism of the Assad regime's brutal tactics, the Putin/Medvedev government intends those sales to continue. "As of today there are no restrictions on the delivery of weapons and we must fulfil our obligations, and this what we are doing," the Deputy Defence Minister, Anatoly Antonov, said.

Nevertheless, the Arab League which



PRESIDENT ASSAD

His regime has been a major customer for Russian arms manufacturers

has lobbied hard but now apparently in vain for a genuinely strong UN response, insisted that even a weaker resolution would help. "It will still put pressure on the Syrian government, because they realise that Russia cannot stand up forever," said Nabil al-Araby, the League's chief. "Russia does not want to be against the people," he added.

It was still uncertain last night when a final vote would be taken, despite the insistence by the US and its allies that the Council act swiftly. The decision ought to be simple Hillary Clinton declared this week: "Are you on the side of the Syrian people, or are you on the side of a brutal dictatorial regime?"

Defence Technology International (USA)

YAKHONTS TO SYRIA

Russia has supplied two Bastion coastal missile systems to Syria, concluding a controversial \$300 million arms deal inked with the Syrian government four years ago. Russian sources say the new missile system will "enable Syria to protect its entire coast from a possible seaborne attack." Delivery of these medium-range, shore-based anti-ship missile systems is taking place as Syria appears to grow increasingly unstable. If the Bashar al-Assad regime collapses, the weapons could be transferred to allies such as the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, or even fall into the hands of extremist Islamic factions fighting the regime. The Bastion battery comprises 18 mobile launchers, each carrying two 3M55E Yakhont supersonic cruise missiles capable of striking surface targets on land and at sea at a range of 300 km (186 mi.), with its 200-kg (441-lb.) warhead. With these parameters, such missiles could put at risk elements of the U.S. Sixth Fleet patrolling the eastern Mediterranean Sea, as well as Israeli navy vessels and offshore gas rigs, which have become strategic assets for the economy.

For Israel, Yakhont's extensive range means its naval vessels could be at risk, even at the main base in Haifa. Israel's second naval base in Ashdod could be targeted from land-based sites in southern Syria. Also, when targeting Israeli naval patrols off Lebanon, Yakhont can be vertically launched from inland sites in Syria or Lebanon, fired behind the Lebanese mountain ridge, avoiding detection from the sea, thus minimizing early warnings for the targets. Therefore, accelerated fielding of Barak 8 and Magic Wand systems should be a top priority for Israel. Technology leaks are another risk for navies in the Persian Gulf. Such a missile falling into Iranian hands could accelerate the introduction of similar potent weapons in Tehran's growing anti-ship arsenal. ■



The Wall Street Journal (USA)

Syrians Mark Anniversary of Notorious Massacre

A WSJ Roundup

BEIRUT—Syrian security forces fanned out in Hama on Thursday as protesters splashed red paint symbolizing blood in the streets to mark the 30th anniversary of a notorious massacre carried out by President Bashar al-Assad's father and predecessor.

The Hama massacre of 1982, which leveled neighborhoods and killed thousands of people, has become a rallying cry for the uprising that began nearly 11 months ago in the hopes of ending four decades of the Assad family rule.

Separately Thursday, U.K.-based **Gulfands Petroleum PLC** reversed course and said it was suspending exploration activities in Syria, two days after reporting strong drilling results in the strife-ridden country.

Gulfands, a U.K. minnow that has forcefully defended its Syrian business even as international pressure on Syria has grown, said the move to suspend exploration—while

not required by European Union sanctions—is “consistent with the intent of the sanctions.” It noted that the sanctions have caused increasing difficulty to operate in the country and gain access to essential supplies and technical services.

Gulfands in December ceased production in Syria to meet EU sanctions, a move that curtailed a key revenue source. The move Thursday follows a decision in December by **Royal Dutch Shell PLC** to pull out of Syria following EU sanctions. The firm has budgeted around \$500,000 a month to pay its near 100 strong Syrian work force and maintain a local presence without exploration.

Meanwhile, hundreds of troops and security forces were in Hama Thursday, closing off public squares and setting up checkpoints. “There is a checkpoint every 100 meters,” said Ahmed Jimejmi, a Hama resident.

Activists painted two streets in Hama red to symbolize blood, and threw red dye in the waters of

Hama's famous and ancient water wheels. Graffiti on the walls read: “Hafez died, and Hama didn't. Bashar will die, and Hama won't.”

Mr. Assad's father ordered the scorched-earth assault on Hama 30 years ago to put down an uprising against his rule.

A top Russian defense official said the country won't stop selling arms to Syria, as Moscow stands by its ally despite international pressure.

Amnesty International has said that 10,000-25,000 were killed, though conflicting figures exist and the Syrian government has never made an official estimate.

For the next two decades, until his death, Hafez al-Assad ruled un-

contested and the massacre was seared into the minds of Syrians.

Now, as the country faces a far larger revolt against Bashar al-Assad, the United Nations Security Council ambassadors are discussing a revised resolution aimed at stopping the bloodshed.

In an apparent effort to overcome Russian objections, the new version of the resolution under discussion Thursday no longer includes the explicit reference to Mr. Assad delegating his powers.

It also removes the explicit call for a new national unity government and for transparent, free elections.

Moscow has been one of Syria's most powerful allies—along with Iran—motivated in part by its strategic and defense ties, including weapons sales. But Russia also rejects what it sees as a world order dominated by the U.S. Last month, Russia reportedly signed a \$550 million deal to sell combat jets to Syria.

Also Thursday, a top Russian defense official said the country won't

stop selling arms to Syria as Moscow stands by its longtime ally despite mounting international condemnation. The U.N. estimates that more than 5,400 people have been killed in the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown.

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said his country wasn't violating any international obligations by selling weapons to Damascus. “As of today there are no restrictions on our delivery of weapons,” he told journalists in Russia, according to the country's state news agencies.

Wiam Wahhab, a pro-Syrian Lebanese politician, met Tuesday with Mr. Assad in Damascus. “I found him relaxed and sure. He is confident in the Russian position,” Mr. Wahhab said, according to the Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhabar.

Mr. Wahhab also said Mr. Assad told him he would end the uprising, because “the cost of chaos is much worse than the cost of decisiveness,” according to the report.

The Washington Post (USA)

JACKSON DIEHL

A showdown that may reshape the Mideast

To judge from the debate at the United Nations, the international tussle over Syria pits a united Arab League and the Western democracies against a recalcitrant Russia, which is trying to prop up the doomed dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. If only it were so simple.

In reality, the U.N. debate obscures what has become one of the most complex, volatile and momentous power struggles in the history of the Middle East — one in which Assad and Syrian opposition forces have become virtual pawns, and Russia and the United States bit players.

The central drama in Syria is now a sectarian showdown, one that has been gathering force around the region since the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Syria has precipitated a crucial test of strength between Sunnis and Shiites, and between Turkey and Iran. It has triggered existential crises for Palestinians, Kurds and the Shiite government of Iraq. For Russia and the United States, Syria means not a display of Security Council clout but a potentially devastating exhibition of weakness — one that could greatly diminish the standing of both in the region.

To sort through the larger stakes of this conflict, let's start with the Persian Gulf states — led by Qatar — that have been pushing hardest for Arab League and Security Council action against the Assad

regime. The emirates say their goal is Syrian democracy — but their motives are purely sectarian. Their target is not Assad but Iran, the Persian Shiite enemy of the Arab Sunni monarchies. Iran's alliance with Syria, vital to its power in the Middle East, depends on a regime controlled by Assad's minority Alawite sect, which is an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

The Arab emirates' best ally against Iran is not the United States but the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which is openly backing the Free Syrian Army. Erdogan, too, claims to be outraged by Assad's brutality. But as a Sunni Islamist and the hugely ambitious leader of a rising power, he also perceives a strategic opportunity for Turkey to replace Iran as the preeminent outside influence in the former eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Inside Syria, Turkey is pushing the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood; in neighboring Iraq, Turkey's support for Sunni parties, and for the autonomous region of Kurdistan, is increasingly conspicuous.

That brings us to Nouri al-Maliki, the Shiite prime minister of Iraq and a man known for paranoid thinking even in the best of circumstances. Maliki has concluded that the Syrian conflict endangers the Shiite supremacy in Baghdad that has been his signature achievement. This fear, more than authoritarian impulses, has

motivated Maliki's crackdown on Sunni leaders — which has plunged Iraq into its own crisis. Turkey's assertiveness and Maliki's response, in turn, have prompted Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds to consider whether they should split off their own regions into separate mini-states — a move that looks much more feasible if Syria tilts toward Sunni rule.

Iran, of course, is fighting back. It has dispatched weapons and advisers to Syria, and it is pressing Maliki to open a corridor across Iraq to facilitate more material support. Maliki, I'm told, is resisting — for now, at least. But the lines of what could easily become a regional sectarian war are clearly drawn.

The Palestinian Hamas movement, ruler of the Gaza Strip, is having its own Syrian crisis. The shift of regional power has all but ruptured its supply link to Iran and forced its external leadership to flee Damascus. This has the effect of strengthening both Hamas's Gaza-based leaders and the rival Fatah movement in the West Bank. And it means foreign patronage of Hamas could shift toward Erdogan's Turkey. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or even Jordan. In the meantime, Israel can watch with quiet satisfaction as its biggest enemies — Iran, Hamas and Assad — are sapped of strength.

The problem for prospective regional

winners such as Israel and Turkey is that Assad may not go quickly. There is no sign that he or the Alawite leadership are willing to accept the exit strategies being discussed at the United Nations, with or without Russian support. For now the regime appears intent on fighting to the bitter end. With several Alawite-dominated elite divisions and plenty of tanks and artillery, Assad has the capacity to hold out for months; with continued Iranian and Russian help, that could stretch to years. Remember: The civil war in neighboring Lebanon lasted 14 years.

A quick Assad collapse will expose Russia to the loss of its Syrian naval base and residual Middle East influence. A prolonged fight will expose the critical weakness of the United States. With U.S. or NATO military intervention in Syria ruled out, President Obama's decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Iraq just as this crisis was mounting all but eliminated U.S. leverage.

American strategy now consists largely of public statements proclaiming Assad's inevitable downfall — a bluff that, it is hoped, will sway Vladimir Putin and Assad's generals. What if it doesn't? We could see a Syrian war that widens and deepens — with an outcome well beyond the U.N. Security Council's control.

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The Washington Post (USA)

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER

Syria: It's not just about freedom

Imperial regimes can crack when they are driven out of their major foreign outposts. The fall of the Berlin Wall did not only signal the liberation of Eastern Europe from Moscow. It prefigured the collapse of the Soviet Union itself just two years later.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's Syria could be similarly ominous for Iran. The alliance with Syria is the centerpiece of Iran's expanding sphere of influence, a mini-Cominintern that includes such clients as Iranian-armed and -directed Hezbollah, now the dominant power in Lebanon; and Hamas, which controls Gaza and threatens to take the rest of Palestine (the West Bank) from a feeble Fatah.

Additionally, Iran exerts growing pressure on Afghanistan to the east and growing influence in Iraq to the west. Tehran has even extended its horizon to Latin America, as symbolized by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's solidarity tour through Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Cuba.

Of all these clients, Syria is the most important. It's the only Arab state openly allied with non-Arab Iran. This is significant because the Arabs see the Persians as having had centuries-old designs to dominate the Middle East. Indeed, Iranian arms and trainers, transshipped to Hezbollah through Syria, have given the Persians their first outpost on the Mediterranean in 2,300 years.

But the Arab-Iranian divide is not just national/ethnic. It is sectarian. The Arabs are overwhelmingly Sunni. Iran is Shiite. The Arab states fear Shiite Iran infiltrating the Sunni homeland through (apart from Iraq) Hezbollah in Lebanon, and through Syria, run by Assad's Alawites, a heterodox offshoot of Shiite Islam.

Which is why the fate of the Assad regime is geopolitically crucial. It is, of course, highly significant for reasons of democracy and human rights as well. Syrian Baathism, while not as capricious and deranged as the Saddam Hussein variant, runs a ruthless police state that once killed 20,000 in Hama and has now killed more than 5,400 during the current uprising. Human rights — decency — is reason enough to do everything we can to bring down Assad.

hegemony; to traditional regimes menaced by Iranian jihadist subversion; to Israel, which the Islamic Republic has pledged to annihilate; to America and the West, whom the mullahs have vowed to drive from the region.

No surprise that the Arab League, many of whose members are no tenderhearted humanitarians, is pressing hard for Assad's departure. His fall would deprive Iran of an intra-Arab staging area and sever its corridor to the Mediterranean. Syria would return to the Sunni fold. Hezbollah, Tehran's agent in Lebanon, could be next, withering on the vine without Syrian support and Iranian materiel. And Hamas would revert to Egyptian patronage.

At the end of this causal chain, Iran, shorn of key allies and already reeling from economic sanctions over its nuclear program, would be thrown back on its heels. The mullahs are already shaky enough to be making near-suicidal threats of blocking the Strait of Hormuz. The population they put down in the 2009 Green Revolution is still seething. The regime is particularly reviled by the young. And its increasing attempts to shore up Assad financially and militarily have only compounded anti-Iranian feeling in the region.

It's not just the Sunni Arabs lining up against Assad. Turkey, after a recent flirtation with a Syrian-Iranian-Turkish entente, has turned firmly against Assad, seeing an opportunity to extend its influence, as in Ottoman days, as protector/master of the Sunni Arabs. The alignment of forces suggests a unique opportunity for the West to help finish the job.

How? First, a total boycott of Syria, beyond just oil and including a full arms embargo. Second, a flood of aid to the resistance (through Turkey, which harbors both rebel militias and the political opposition, or directly and clandestinely into Syria). Third, a Security Council resolution calling for the removal of the Assad regime. Russia, Assad's last major outside ally, should be forced to either accede or incur the wrath of the Arab states with a veto.

Force the issue. Draw bright lines. Make clear American solidarity with the Arab League against a hegemonic Iran and its tottering Syrian client. In diplomacy, one often has to choose between human rights

San Francisco Chronicle (USA)

Russia refuses to halt sales of weapons to Damascus

By Elizabeth A. Kennedy

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT — Russia said Thursday it will keep selling arms to longtime ally Syria, despite mounting international condemnation over the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown on a 10-month-old uprising.

Russia's Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said his country is not violating any international obligations by selling weapons to Damascus.

"As of today, there are no restrictions on our delivery of weapons," he told journalists in Russia, according to the country's state news agencies. "We must fulfill our obligations, and this is what we are doing."

Moscow has been one of Syria's most powerful allies — along with Iran — as regime forces try to crush the revolt against President Bashar Assad. The United Nations estimates that more than 5,400 people have been killed in the government crackdown.

Moscow's stance is motivated in part by its strategic and defense ties, including weapons sales, with Syria. But Russia also rejects what it sees as a world order dominated by the United States. Last month, Russia reportedly signed a \$550 million deal to sell combat jets to Syria.

U.N. ambassadors this week are trying to over-



Local Coordination Committees in Syria

Syrian girls in Idlib province hold banners marking the 30th anniversary of a government crackdown on the city of Hama that claimed thousands of lives.

come Russia's opposition to a draft resolution at the Security Council designed to stop the bloodshed. Moscow said it would veto the original version because it believes it would open the way for eventual international military action.

In an apparent effort to overcome Russian objections, the new version no longer includes the explicit reference to the president delegating his powers. It also removes the calls for a new national unity government, and for transparent, free elections.

Wiam Wahhab, a pro-Syrian Lebanese politician, met Tuesday with Assad in Damascus.

"I found him relaxed and sure. He is confident in the Russian position," Wahhab told the Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhabar in an interview published Thursday.

Also Thursday, Syrian security forces fanned out in Hama as protesters splashed red paint symbolizing blood in the streets to mark the 30th anniversary of a notorious massacre carried out by Hafez Assad, Bashar's father and predecessor.

The Hama massacre of 1982, which leveled entire neighborhoods and killed thousands of people, has become a rallying cry for the Syrian uprising that began nearly 11 months ago in the hopes of ending four decades of Assad family rule.

Hafez Assad ordered the scorched-earth assault on Hama 30 years ago to put down an uprising against his rule. Amnesty International has said 10,000 to 25,000 people were killed, though conflicting figures exist, and the Syrian government has never made an official estimate.

New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

U.N. envoys seek accord on Syria resolution

UNITED NATIONS

BY NEIL MacFARQUHAR

Security Council ambassadors began working Thursday on a revised Syria resolution, with references to sanctions removed, as bartering focused in good part on the conditions under which President Bashar al-Assad could be asked to cede power.

Russia has repeatedly threatened to veto any resolution that does not meet its demands, including that the document not specifically call for regime change in Syria, where Mr. Assad's forces have been seeking to crush an 11-month uprising that increasingly resembles a civil war.

But the commitment to do something, made in speeches Tuesday by numerous foreign ministers flying in from around the world, suggested that there was room for compromise, ambassadors said.

"We have more work to do, but I think it was a constructive session conducted in a good spirit," the U.S. ambassador, Susan E. Rice, said after emerging from a three-hour meeting late Wednesday. "Everyone is trying to approach this in a constructive and rational way. That in itself is progress."

Other points of contention, beyond what happens to Mr. Assad, included the issue of whether the resolution would support arms embargoes or other sanctions by U.N. member countries and how to word the resolution so it makes clear no outside military intervention is authorized.

In the latest version, crafted by Morocco, the paragraphs calling for a halt to weapons sales and endorsing sanctions imposed by the Arab League were both dropped, according to a version shown to The New York Times. The Russians wanted to insert language in the resolution that would have banned "illegal" sales, said a Security Council diplomat involved, effectively giving them license to sell unlimited arms to the regime. So the Western and Arab ambassadors tentatively agreed to drop the subject.

Nada Bakri contributed reporting from Beirut.

New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

RUSSIA'S BAD GAMBLE

Russia should stop defending Assad and blocking constructive action in the United Nations to end the crackdown.

Thirty years ago, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria had his army crush a Sunni revolt in Hama. When it was over, as many as 20,000 Syrians were killed and neighborhoods were bulldozed. On Wednesday, social media sites and services were abuzz with Syrians determined to keep the memory of that atrocity alive.

Another Assad — Bashar — is now in power and repeating history. Since the largely peaceful revolt against his regime began last March, security forces have killed nearly 6,000 protesters and the toll is rising. Yet the United Nations Security Council is paralyzed, unable to condemn Mr. Assad, much less impose the international economic sanctions that might force him to end the killing or leave power.

Foreign ministers from the United States, other Western nations and the Arab League are back at the Council this week pushing for a tough resolution and speaking out forcefully. But Russia, supported by China and India, is still defending Mr. Assad and blocking constructive action. Moscow, which values arms deals with Damascus over the Syrian people, vetoed the last resolution in October.

The new draft resolution repeats demands initially made by the Arab League for Syria to withdraw troops from the cities and release all political prisoners. It also endorses the league's proposal for a political transition that would have Mr. Assad yield power to his deputy, establish a unity government and prepare for free elections.

The Russians, Chinese and Indians — invoking Libya — insist that they will not abide foreign military intervention in Syria or let a resolution be exploited to permit the use of force. That complaint loses credibility when Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stipulates publicly, as she did Tuesday, that “there is no intention to seek any authority or to pursue any kind of military intervention.” It should be relatively easy to write a resolution to rule out military action, assuming Russia is not playing games.

Meanwhile, the European Union, the United States and the Arab League — which separately imposed sanctions on Syria — need to implement them strictly. In time, this pressure could persuade army and business elites to abandon the government.

We're not optimistic Mr. Assad will ever go along. But passing the resolution would unite the international community around a peaceful solution. It must be as strong as possible so there is no doubt where the world stands: with the Syrian people and against the Assad butchery.

FOREIGN INTERVENTION

Restive state is Russia's last foothold in the region

Damascus is last major Middle East customer for military hardware

BY FRED WEIR AND HOWARD LAFRANCHI

London Russia has warned that there is “no chance” it will allow passage of a resolution on the spiralling domestic conflict in Syria, due to come before the UN Security Council in the next few days, if it leaves even the slightest opening for outside intervention in the crisis.

Moscow's tough line on the issue has put it increasingly at odds not only with the West, but also many Arab states who support a resolution put forward by Morocco that would demand Syria's President Bashar Al Assad step aside and hand power to his deputy as a first step towards a democratic transition.

Syria has been a political partner and key regional client state of Moscow since 1971, and is the last remaining major customer for Russian arms in the Middle East. Over the past year, Russia sacrificed about \$4.5-billion (Dh16.52 billion) in broken arms deals with Libya, and lost as much as \$13-billion due to UN sanctions against Iran, experts say.

Political influence

“Moscow is afraid events in Syria will spin out of control,” says Alexander Konovalov, president of the independent Institute for Strategic Assessments in Moscow. “We have lots of economic interests that we stand to

lose, but this is not the main thing. The loss of political influence is more important, because Syria is the last point in the Middle East where Russia has a major role to play. Russia fears that the US is out to engineer regime change in this strategic region, and Russia is simply not going to play any part in granting authority for that.”

‘Libya scenario’ downplayed

On Tuesday, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton suggested that Russia may be making too much out of its fears that the “Libya scenario” might be repeated in Syria. “That is a false analogy,” Clinton was quoted by RIA-Novosti as saying at the UN Security Council meeting.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the independent Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in Moscow, retorted: “Nobody in Moscow takes Western arguments seriously anymore. After all that's happened, we frankly don't think they know what they're doing.”

Wayne White, an analyst with the Middle East Institute in Washington and a former State Department policy planner, observed: “If the Russians become utterly convinced that the regime is going down the drain, then the US and its allies can convince them that their best bet is going with the future.”

— *Christian Science Monitor*

Taking center stage

The Free Syrian Army is growing in prominence, cohesion and power, and while it is still heavily outnumbered and outgunned, can no longer be written off

The diplomatic route to change in Syria is firmly blocked, Russia, for its own reasons, is refusing and will continue to refuse to allow any resolution promising serious action against the regime of President Bashar Assad to pass in the United Nations Security Council.

The US, as was made clear by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks this week, will do all it can to avoid embroilment in a new Middle Eastern war. The status of 2012 as a presidential election year will serve to further entrench the default position of this administration against new entanglements in our chaotic neighborhood.

Yet despite the diplomatic deep freeze, significant changes are taking place on the ground. All of them are to the Assad regime's disadvantage. The most important are concerned with the growing prominence, cohesion and power of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

Civil wars are rarely announced or declared. It is thus not always easy to set a date marking their beginning. In many ways, Syria has been in a state of low-intensity civil war since the first emergence of armed resistance to Assad in the summer of 2011. But late January 2012 is likely to be remembered as the time when armed conflict between Syrians began in earnest.

In recent weeks, it has become clear that the disparate gathering of guerrillas known as the Free Syrian Army has greater capabilities than was hitherto supposed. The FSA is now holding the town of Zabadani, not far from the Lebanese border, which it

has turned into a mini "Free Syria." It is also maintaining positions across the Turkish border in the Idlib province in northern Syria.

The force evidently felt confident enough this week to take a number of journalists with it across the border into its positions in Idlib, from where they reported on the fighting. This largely Sunni province is the heartland of the FSA, with a reported 700 fighters present in Idlib city.

For a long period, reports suggested that the FSA was a semi-fictional body, consisting of poorly-equipped, sparsely supplied groups of army deserters with little or no central coordination and a nominal leadership. Few would make this claim in light of the events of the past two weeks.

Yet it would still be entirely wrong to begin to relate to the organization as a potential challenger for power in the short to medium term.

The FSA has at most around 20,000 fighters. The regime can still lay claim to just under 300,000.

Including its security services and Alawi irregulars, the rebels have no armor, no artillery, and a rudimentary logistical infrastructure.

FSA commanders live a hard-earned life in a compound near Antakya in Turkey, close to the border. Turkey is dithering the organization but keeps its operatives under close control. Ankara understands that for the FSA, the establishment of a buffer zone in northern Syria is a major demand and would be a major achievement.

But the Turks have no desire to be drawn into possible clashes with the Syrians because of an over-zealous hearing up



SYRIAN SOLDIERS who defected to join the Free Syrian Army are seen in Kafr Batna, near Damascus, this week. (Reuters)

of the border by the FSA. Hence the tight control, which extends to contacts with the media.

The BBC had to conduct a recent interview with FSA leader Col. Riyad Asaad via Skype, after being denied entrance to his compound by the Turkish authorities.

The movement maintains a small cadre of activists in Istanbul who meet directly with journalists.

Sources close to the organization noted that they expect the regime to re-take Zabadani at some stage and that the movement knows it cannot yet hope to hold any area against a frontal assault by regime forces.

This week, Assad's forces pushed back against the FSA, driving the rebels from neighborhoods they had occupied in the eastern suburbs of Damascus — with con-

siderable loss of life. The regime's artillery is also pounding the FSA's strongholds in Homs city, Rastan and Idlib province.

Despite all this, conversations with sources close to the FSA this week revealed high morale and determination. They are still calling for a no-fly zone and a buffer area, a la Benghazi. But with all eyes on the UN Security Council this week, there is little hope that such demands will reach fruition.

The Free Syrian Army is nevertheless elated by its growing ability to hold ground, at least for a while, and to continue to strike at Assad's men. The army claims that large parts of Syria have now become inaccessible to regime forces except where entered with minimum force. This is important. A regime that can only travel in convoy through some parts of its own country is a regime

whose rule is no longer complete. The FSA also derives hope from an accelerating rate of defections from Assad's forces and a sharp decline in the number of troops that the beleaguered Syrian dictator can call on and rely on.

This week, a Syrian general and former commander of the feared Palestine Branch of Military Intelligence, Mahmoud Halouf, was reported by regional media to have defected with 300 of his troops.

A guerrilla war of attrition appears to be commencing in Syria.

As the diplomacy grinds on and the slaughter by the regime of protesters continues, the armed campaign to destroy the dictator is moving to center stage. Victory looks distant. The Free Syrian Army, nevertheless, gives every impression of believing firmly that it will one day succeed.

L'Orient- Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Témoignage

Les survivants de Hama de nouveau hantés par « la sauvagerie du régime Assad »



Trente ans plus tard, Fawaz se souvient encore des horreurs du massacre de sa ville natale de Hama, devenue symbole de la brutalité du régime du clan Assad. Comme d'autres survivants, il a l'espoir que la répression d'aujourd'hui ne passera pas sans châtement.

« À l'époque, on était massacrés en silence, c'est ça la différence », affirme-t-il au téléphone depuis sa résidence dans un pays arabe. Ce Syrien avait 19 ans au moment de la répression d'un soulèvement armé mené par les Frères musulmans contre les forces du président Hafez el-Assad. Pendant quatre semaines, Hama a été bombardée par les forces du régime, faisant selon les estimations de 10 000 à 40 000 morts, ce qui a été décrit comme le pire crime commis dans l'histoire moderne de la Syrie. Il garde en mémoire « les cadavres boursouflés trainés par les chiens dans la rue », les « corps calcinés dans les commerces incendiés » et surtout la peur au ventre, la même qu'il a ressentie lorsque l'armée est entrée une nouvelle fois à Hama pour mater les manifestations en 2011.

Fawaz se souvient également d'un matin froid et pluvieux, le 3 février 1982, quand l'armée a rassemblé sur une place tous les hommes de plus de 15 ans de son quartier. « Ils nous ont abreuvés d'insultes : "traîtres", "agents d'Israël". Puis ils nous

crer tous" », raconte-t-il, la voix émue. L'horreur qui s'ensuivit restera à jamais marquée dans sa mémoire. « Ils ont obligé un homme à s'agenouiller et plaqué sa tête au sol, puis ils nous ont dit "vous allez avouer où se trouvent les Frères musulmans ou on tue celui-là en premier". Nous ne savions rien du tout. Ils ont alors fait passer un char sur son crâne. C'était comme un fruit écrasé. Le sang giclait de partout. » Par la suite, un officier a ordonné à un homme âgé de plus de 80 ans de s'agenouiller. « Je ne m'agenouille que pour Dieu, a-t-il répliqué. Ils l'ont mitraillé devant mes yeux. » « Nous étions tétanisés, nous pensions à chaque seconde "ça y est, nous allons mourir" », raconte-t-il. Il aura la « chance » d'être emmené avec d'autres en prison pour interrogatoire, avant d'en sortir quelques jours plus tard grâce à des « connaissances ».

À la tête de la brutale campagne, les redoutables Brigades de la défense, une force paramilitaire menée alors par le frère du président, Rifaat, qui faisait trembler les Syriens.

Abou Khaled, autre survivant qui avait 16 ans à l'époque, se souvient, lui, des forces de sécurité qui tiraient sur les habitants. « Avant de les tuer, ils leur ont pris leurs montres et leurs chaussures. » Il a réussi à s'échapper en se réfugiant « de toit en toit », puis a marché pendant trois jours vers la ville de Homs.

Même si le nombre de victimes est de loin supérieur à celui de la répression actuelle de la contestation, pour les survivants du massacre, la brutalité est la même. « C'est la même sauvagerie, le même aveuglement », assure Fawaz. Alors que les Syriens et l'étranger n'ont eu vent du massacre que trois mois après les faits, les choses ont changé pour la révolte de 2011, avec une large couverture par les médias arabes et occidentaux et des réseaux sociaux mobilisés 24 heures sur 24.

D'autres témoins parlent d'une partie de l'histoire, beaucoup moins évoquée. « Les tueries de Hama sont intervenues après que des membres du Baas eurent été tués avec leurs familles », raconte Robert Fisk, journaliste au quotidien britannique *The Independent*, qui était sur place au moment des faits. « Ce n'est pas une excuse pour tuer des milliers de civils, mais l'histoire doit noter (...) qu'il y a eu une série d'attaques sanglantes contre les propres officiers de Hafez el-Assad. Ils ont même assassiné son médecin. »

Pour les militants qui écrivent une nouvelle page de l'histoire, les choses vont changer, inéluctablement.

« Ils essaient de nous faire revivre la même peur, mais on ne se laissera pas faire », martèle ainsi Anouar el-Bounni, célèbre opposant également témoin des tueries de 1982.

© AFP

Nouveau projet à l'ONU : concessions ou compromissions ?

Syrie La Jordanie retire ses observateurs ; au moins 17 morts hier.

Un nouveau projet de résolution sur la Syrie circulait hier à l'ONU, faisant des concessions à la Russie dans l'espoir de lever son blocage. La nouvelle mouture du texte, qui a été élaborée après des négociations mercredi entre les ambassadeurs des 15 pays du Conseil de sécurité, abandonne toute référence explicite au départ du président Bachar el-Assad. La résolution « soutient pleinement (...) la décision de la Ligue arabe du 22 janvier 2012 de faciliter une transition politique menant à un système politique démocratique et pluraliste ». Mais les détails de cette transition n'apparaissent plus. Ce processus de transition démocratique avait été proposé par la Ligue arabe en janvier dans son plan de sortie de crise pour la Syrie. La Russie insiste pour que le Conseil ne préjuge pas de l'issue de la crise en demandant a priori que le président Assad cède le pouvoir. Comme les textes précédents, le nouveau « condamne la violence d'où qu'elle émane ».

Le texte abandonne en outre toute référence aux sanctions économiques décidées par la Ligue arabe contre Damas en novembre 2011, ainsi qu'un paragraphe où le Conseil « s'inquiétait » des ventes d'armes à la Syrie. D'ailleurs, Moscou a précisé hier qu'elle allait continuer d'exporter des armements à Damas, dans la mesure où il n'y a aucune restriction dans ce domaine, a indiqué le vice-ministre russe de la Défense, Anatoli Antonov. Notons que la Russie n'a pas encore réagi au nouveau texte.

Les 15 membres du Conseil de sécurité reprenaient à l'heure de mettre sous presse leurs consultations dans une ambiance de relatif optimisme, certains diplomates estimant qu'un compromis est proche. Il n'en reste pas moins que d'aucuns s'interrogent sur ces concessions faites à Moscou, les qualifiant

sans ambages de compromissions.

La guerre

Sur un autre plan, la Jordanie s'est officiellement retirée de la mission d'observation de la Ligue arabe en Syrie, a annoncé le ministre jordanien des Affaires étrangères. Nasser Jawdeh a précisé que la décision datait de plusieurs jours, lorsque la Ligue a suspendu les travaux de ses observateurs. Plus tôt, le chef de la mission d'observation, le général soudanais Mohammad Ahmad Moustafa al-Dabi, s'était dit « totalement satisfait » du travail de la mission, qualifiant néanmoins la situation sur le terrain de « guerre » et affirmant avoir constaté « des actes de torture ».

Alors que les militants pro-démocratie avaient appelé à des manifestations hier et aujourd'hui pour commémorer les 30 ans de la terrible répression à Hama, les violences ont fait au moins 17 morts, selon al-Jazira.

L'armée syrienne a bloqué l'accès à toutes les places de Hama où des habitants ont répandu sur le sol de la peinture rouge, symbole de sang. Des chars ont été déployés dans les rues et des camions de pompiers ont nettoyé à grande eau les traces de peinture. « Ils veulent effacer la mémoire, ils ne veulent pas qu'on se souvienne », accuse un opposant. « Mais nous ne plierons pas. » « Le silence arabe et international face aux crimes de Hafez el-Assad et sa clique il y a 30 ans est en grande partie responsable de la poursuite de ces crimes et des atrocités quotidiennes commises par Bachar au vu et au su » du monde entier, ont affirmé pour leur part dans un communiqué commun plusieurs instances de l'opposition, dont le Conseil national syrien (CNS).

Des coups de feu ont par ailleurs retenti dans la banlieue

damascène de Moaddamiyeh, où un militant a été tué par les forces de sécurité avant d'être jeté du toit de sa maison sous le regard de sa femme et de ses enfants. Dans la capitale, les manifestants, en majorité adolescents, ont défilé jusqu'à la place de la Liberté où ils ont été attaqués par les services de sécurité, d'après une vidéo postée sur YouTube par un groupe de militants. À Daraya, dans la province de Damas, des vidéos montraient également des manifestations d'étudiants, dont de nombreuses filles. Des manifestations ont également eu lieu à Homs et Qamichli.

L'armée syrienne a également poursuivi sa reprise en main des faubourgs est et nord de Damas, dont les insurgés avaient brièvement pris le contrôle la semaine dernière. Quelque 25 rebelles ont été tués au cours de cette opération, selon une organisation de défense des droits de l'homme. Toujours dans le rif de Damas, l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH) rapporte une « campagne d'arrestations et de perquisitions » dans plusieurs localités, dont Douma, tandis que les villages de Talfita et de Rankous continuaient d'être assiégés. Dans la province de Deraa, l'armée syrienne a pris d'assaut le village d'al-Jiza, selon l'OSDH, qui a fait état de trois civils décédés. À Idleb, deux frères ont également été tués par les forces de sécurité. La chaîne de télévision al-Arabiya a par ailleurs indiqué que « la brigade Farouk a fait prisonniers 17 soldats près du dispensaire Khaldiyé à Homs ».

Enfin, concernant les six Iraniens kidnappés hier près d'Idleb par l'Armée syrienne libre, al-Arabiya a précisé hier qu'ils étaient en réalité en route vers l'une des casernes situées près de la ville.

(Sources : agences et rédaction)

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

Syria troops lock down Hama on killing anniversary

Syrian troops closed public squares in Hama on Thursday after residents poured red paint symbolizing blood on the ground to mark the 30th anniversary of the massacre President Bashar al-Assad's father carried out during an uprising against his rule.

The act of defiance came as Russia warned it would veto any UN resolution on Syria it finds unacceptable, making clear it wanted to prevent Libyan-style intervention over Assad's violent crackdown on 11 months of mass protests and armed insurrection. Recent political violence in Syria has killed at least 5,000 people, and activists say Assad's forces have stepped up operations around the country after appearing to crush rebels who brought the fight to the outskirts of the capital, Damascus.

Activists in Hama said fire trucks washed away dye and paint poured on the ground overnight to commemorate the bloodshed of the elder Assad's 1982 assault on the city - centre of an Islamist revolt against him - at the cost of over 10,000 lives. "They want to kill the memory and they do not want us to remember," said an activist in the city, where residents said tanks blocked main squares to prevent demonstrations. "But we will not accept it."

The anniversary of the Hama massacre comes as Russia fends off attempts to mobilize the United Nations against Syria.

Moscow, presented with an Arab League-backed draft resolution that Washington and Paris endorse, says that plan - which calls on Assad to hand powers to a deputy -- demands any text rule out intervention, warning it will veto an "unacceptable" resolution.

Russia and China, both veto-wielding Security Council members, stand in the way of a Western push for a resolution condemning the Syrian government's crackdown on unrest.

UN Security Council ambassadors met in New York on Wednesday to discuss ways to overcome their disagreements on the wording of the European-Arab draft resolution that Morocco submitted to council members on Friday.

The closed-door negotiations ended without a final agreement and will resume on Thursday, Germany's UN mission said. The draft will be updated to reflect Wednesday's discussions, which the mission said were "rather constructive." A council diplomat at the meeting told Reuters, however, that Russia's envoy Vitaly Churkin reiterated to council members that the expression of full support for the Arab League plan in the current draft was "unacceptable"

He also made clear Moscow could not accept the expression of concern in the draft about arms sales to Syria unless there was a waiver for weapons transfers to the Syrian government, the diplomat said.

"It's way too soon in my judgment to know whether ultimately there will be agreement," US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice told reporters. "It's long past time for this council to take meaningful action," she said.

Despite the Russian comments, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said a "window of hope" had opened, and vowed redoubled efforts to agree a text "in the next few days."

Russia says the West exploited fuzzy wording in a March 2011 UN Security Council resolution on Libya to turn a mandate to protect civilians in the North African country's uprising into a push to remove the government, backed by NATO air strikes, that led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. Russia also worries the draft's threat of further measures against Syria may lead to sanctions, which it opposes.

Western envoys in New York said the main sticking point was likely to be not military intervention, on which they were confident agreement could be reached, but the resolution's support for the Arab League plan demanding Assad give up power. That is seen by Moscow as tantamount to change of government. **Beirut Reuters**

Russia defending interests in Mideast

Should the Al Assad regime fall, Turkey is set to benefit the most. For Moscow, this will change the balance of power from central Asia to Middle East

BY MARWAN KABALAN
Special to Gulf News

For the second time in four months, Russia seems to be inclined to veto a UN Security Council resolution that condemns the Syrian regime's approach in dealing with the protest movement. In early October, Moscow torpedoed an attempt to castigate the Syrian government for committing flagrant human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Russia's stiff resistance to take any sort of action against Damascus is perplexing for many observers. The ambiguous motives behind the Russian position are the key factors behind the confusion.

During the Cold War era, for example, Russia's support for Syria was easy to understand. It was almost exclusively driven by the great rivalry with the US and involved recognisable national interests. Under the bipolar mantle of the Cold War, both the USSR and the US sought regional clients to enhance their position vis-a-vis the other in a struggle for world-wide supremacy.

In such a climate, the fall of a client state was considered a setback for the patron. The motives behind the current Russian position, by contrast, are particularly unclear and as a consequence analysts seem to be wavering when asked to explain the Russian policy. Although the Cold War ended more than two decades ago and the situation has since fundamentally changed, most analysts tend to explain the Russian position on the Syrian crisis in historic perspective and as a consequence predict a return of the Cold War divide.

Internal opposition

In fact, except for its nuclear arsenal and a permanent membership in the Council, Russia lacks today some of the key characteristic of a superpower. Its GDP, for example, is only one tenth of that of the US — \$14.5 trillion (Dh53.22 trillion). It lags far behind China too — the second largest world economy with a GDP of around \$5.8 trillion. Russia's population is also shrinking. When the Cold War ended in 1991, Russia's population was 163 million. Today it is approximately 147 million and is set to further decline. Having said that, Russia's support of the Syrian regime must be seen as defensive rather than aggressive policy. Russia's position on the Syrian crisis has two aspects: domestic and external.

Domestically, the Russian government fears the fast-growing internal opposition movement since the early December parliamentary elections, which was marred by fraud and ballot stuffing. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is seeking a return to the presidency next month, seems to be convinced that any popular protest in any part of the world, and especially in the Middle East, is supported by the

US; it will have a domino effect and it will hence be inspiring for his internal opposition. The closer he, therefore, gets to the March election, the more resistance he will produce to prevent a victory by the opposition in Syria. Here, Putin is in fact defending himself not the Syrian regime.

Externally, ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow has been struggling to prevent the US from penetrating into its strategic belt in Caucasia and Central Asia. Although Moscow has retained its influence over most of the former Soviet republics which have formerly been lost to the US, Russia remains absolutely irritated by Nato's expansion into most of Eastern Europe and Russia's western frontiers. The deployment of the US defence shield in Eastern Europe and Turkey is also a matter of great concern. Opposing western policies on Syria is a means to complain against western meddling in Russia's strategic sphere and for ignoring its national interests in many other parts of the world, more recently in Libya.

Finally, Russia seems to be concerned about the rise of Turkey's influence in the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia and Caucasia. With one third of its population being Muslims, Russia views Turkey's policies, especially under the Islamically-oriented government of the AKP, with great suspicion. Turkey is marketing itself as model of liberal Islam in the Islamic world and with the ascendance of Islamist forces in all of the Arab countries which have so far witnessed change; Turkey is acting or presenting itself as a mentor for these forces.

Bearing in mind the centuries-old historic animosity between the Sunni Muslim Ottoman Empire and Christian Russia, Moscow is absolutely alarmed by the rise of Turkey and its interpretation of Islam. Should the Syrian regime fall too, Turkey, which has openly supported the opposition, is set to benefit the most. For Moscow, this will fundamentally change the balance of power in a region that stretches from central Asia to the Middle East and from the Balkans and Caucasia to the Gulf. With Iran's position weakening too, Russia, which attempts to present itself as a moderator between Tehran and the West, will also become irrelevant. Russia's new assertiveness must hence be understood within this context and its support for the Syrian regime is in fact more about defending its own interests rather than those of Damascus.

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Change in Syria without chaos

Security Council must work together with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, because they hold the key

BY MARK MALLOCH-BROWN

Diplomats should have permanent cricks in their necks because most international crises are managed through the lens of the last one. So the international community's failure to stop the genocide in Rwanda was influenced by the humiliation an American-led UN force had suffered in Somalia, which made former US president Bill Clinton wary of intervention in distant African conflicts. Today, Syria is seen through the lens of Libya.

On one side, Russia and China worry that UN Security Council permission for a humanitarian intervention will be used as a licence to support regime change, which is what they think happened in Libya. On the other, the UK, France and the US are equally concerned that what they see as a success in Libya should not become a precedent for serial intervention in the upheavals of the Arab Spring. So they too are resolute bystanders, even if they wish the Security Council would condemn the actions of the Al Assad regime much more forcefully.

That has left to the Arab League. Its observer mission is now stalled, however, and Qatar, the current

Arab League chair, has turned to the UN. There is an urgent need for a strategy in New York that promotes President Bashar Al Assad's early departure and a transition, perhaps via his vice-president, to a broader government and from there to elections. There also needs to be unified international pressure on the regime to stop

There is an urgent need for a strategy in New York that promotes Al Assad's early departure and a transition, perhaps via his vice-president, to a broader government

the killing and on both sides to respect a monitored ceasefire. Now that the fighting has reached Damascus, this is even more urgent. This is all broadly consistent with the Arab League's own plan.

There is also a need for a system of temporary humanitarian sanctuaries for civilians fleeing the fighting. Turkey and Iraq remain the most likely destinations of any such exodus and they should be sup-

ported in providing this haven just as the Syrian authorities should be pressed to allow safe exit.

Establishing humanitarian protection and a plan for political transition, without the threat of military action to back it, might seem a tall order for a divided Security Council. Yet it is better than a hollow threat to intervene, which would simply be a propaganda coup for the Al Assad regime. If intervention is to come it must be a Muslim-led UN effort to protect lives, with minimal notice because even this will rally Al Assad supporters. While there might be a supporting role for Nato logistics in such an operation, the Iraq experience has made western troops on the ground a non-starter. A broken Syria would be as hard for the West to put together as Iraq was, without any of the allegedly compelling rationale to try.

Stemming violence

Yet there could still be a happy conclusion, provided any solution respects two dynamics.

The first is Syria's religious complexity, where a small Alawite minority has been reluctantly trusted by other minorities and the Damascus middle class to hold in check a Sunni majority. For these minorities, as for Egypt's Copts,

an unpleasant regime at least offered stability and security. The opposition must promise to stem violence through dialogue and to protect minority rights. Then it can claim to be the true guarantor of stability, whereas a violent regime is now stability's enemy.

Second, the Security Council must heed the lessons not of Libya but of Iraq and Afghanistan. Holding together these complex and fragile nations became much harder because the US and its allies initially ignored their neighbours — which had their own interests and clients inside both. Excluded, countries such as Iran and Pakistan became forces for fragmentation and partition, rather than finding common cause in maintaining stability.

This time the Arab League has led — even if imperfectly. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been the architects. Impatient western Security Council members must go on working with them because these countries, together with Syrians themselves, hold the key to ensuring that chaos does not follow change.

— *Financial Times*

Mark Malloch-Brown is former UN deputy secretary-general and UK minister of state. He is author of The Unfinished Global Revolution.

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Syria locks down Hama on massacre anniversary

BEIRUT — Syrian security forces fanned out in Hama on Thursday as protesters splashed red paint symbolising blood in the streets to mark the 30th anniversary of a notorious massacre carried out by President Bashar Assad's father and predecessor.

The Hama massacre of 1982, which levelled entire neighbourhoods and killed thousands of people, has become a rallying cry for the Syrian uprising that began nearly 11 months ago in the hopes of ending four decades of the Assad family rule.

Hundreds of troops and security forces were in Hama on Thursday, closing off public squares and setting up checkpoints.

"There is a checkpoint every 100 meters," said Ahmed Jimejmi, a Hama resident.

Activists painted two streets in Hama red to symbolise blood, and threw red dye in the waters of Hama's famous and ancient water wheels.

Graffiti on the walls read: "Hafez died, and Hama didn't. Bashar will die, and Hama won't."

Assad's father, Hafez, ordered the scorched-earth assault on Hama 30 years ago to put down an uprising against his rule. Amnesty International has claimed that 10,000-25,000 were killed, though conflicting figures exist and the Syrian government has never made an official estimate.

For the next two decades, until his death, Hafez Assad ruled uncontested and the massacre was seared into the minds of Syrians.

Now, as the country faces a far larger revolt against Bashar Assad, the UN estimates more than 5,400 people have been killed in the gov-



A demonstrator covering his face flashes the victory sign during a protest against Bashar Al Assad in Qudsaya, Damascus.— Reuters

ernment crackdown. Also Thursday, a top defence official said Russia will not stop selling arms to Syria as Moscow stands by its longtime ally despite mounting international condemnation over the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown.

Russia's Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov said his country is not violating any international obligations by selling weapons to Damascus.

"As of today there are no restrictions on our delivery of weapons," he told journalists in Russia, according to the country's state

news agencies. "We must fulfil our obligations and this is what we are doing."

Moscow has been one of Syria's most powerful allies — along with Iran — as Syria tries to crush the revolt against President Bashar Assad.

Moscow's stance is motivated in part by its strategic and defense ties, including weapons sales, with Syria. But Russia also rejects what it sees as a world order dominated by the US. Last month, Russia reportedly signed a \$550-million deal to sell combat jets to Syria.— AP

The National (UAE / UAE)

Turkey could offer Assad sanctuary

US and European, Arab states discuss possibility of exile

Arshad Mohammed and Matt Spetalnick

Abdullah Gul, Turkey's president, said that his country would consider a request for asylum coming from Syria's ruling Al Assad family. In response to a question by Turkish reporters accompanying him on a trip to the UAE this week, Mr Gul said there had been no request for asylum by the family of Bashar Al Assad, the Syrian president.

The United States, European governments and Arab states have begun discussing the possibility of exile for Mr Al Assad despite scepticism the defiant Syrian leader would consider such an offer, western officials said on Wednesday.

While talks had not progressed

far and there was no real sense that Mr Al Assad's fall was imminent, one official said as many as three countries were willing to take him as a way to end to Syria's 10-month crisis.

Talk of exile surfaced amid mounting international pressure on Mr Al Assad and a diplomatic showdown over a proposed Arab League resolution at the United Nations aimed at getting him to transfer power. He responded by stepping up assaults on opposition strongholds.

With the White House insisting for weeks that Mr Al Assad's days in power were numbered, it was unclear whether this marked an attempt to persuade the Syrian leader and his family to grasp the chance of a safe exit instead of risking the fate of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, who was killed by rebels last year.

But with Mr Al Assad showing he remains in charge of a powerful security apparatus and the Syrian

opposition fragmented militarily, it could also be an effort to step up psychological pressure and open new cracks in his inner circle.

The officials said neither the US nor the European Union had taken the lead on the idea, which has been advocated by Arab nations as a way to try to end the violence.



Two sources said no European states were prepared to give Al Assad refuge

"We understand that some countries have offered to host him should he choose to leave Syria," an Obama administration official said, without naming any of the countries.

Before that could happen, however, the question of whether Mr Al Assad would be granted some kind of immunity would have to be tackled – something the Syrian opposition as well as international human-rights groups would likely oppose.

"There are significant questions of accountability for the horrible abuses that have been committed against the Syrian people," the US official said.

"Ultimately these issues will be deliberated by the Syrian people in concert with regional and international partners," the US official said.

★ Reuters with additional reporting by foreign correspondent Thomas Seibert in Istanbul

The National (EAU / UAE)

Moscow will be held to account on Syrian crisis

How many more innocent civilians must die before the bloodshed in Syria is stopped? Foreign ministers at the UN Security Council in New York are asking themselves a version of that question this week. And yet, there may be only one government in a position to answer, and it's not the one clinging to power in Damascus.

Over the past week, Moscow's objections to a Security Council resolution on Syria turned from an irritant to a deadly obstacle. Hundreds of opposition members have been killed as diplomats dither, adding to the more than 5,400 Syrian deaths since March.

Moscow may not be pulling the trigger, but neither is it doing what it can to halt the bloodshed. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov's claim this week that a resolution would be a "path to civil war" is just the type of circular logic that will ensure the violence continues.

A Security Council resolution alone would not immediately halt the violence, but the absence of one will almost certainly embolden President Bashar Al Assad to continue his brutality. Moscow's very threat of a veto has given Mr Al Assad a sense of misplaced righteousness.

Bungling by the Arab League's observer mission has also given the false impression that the current Syrian regime can weather the international condemnation. That is why a unified voice in New York is so important to ending the crisis.

In truth, Russia may be less opposed to an international solution than it is in favour of protecting its own interests. Russia's ties to the Assads is strong, dating back to the Soviet Union. Moscow's top Middle East arms customer is on the ropes, and the loss of roughly 7 per cent of Russia's defence market is in the crosshairs. As recently as January, Moscow was inking deals for fighter jets worth over \$500 million (Dh1.8 billion). A senior official said yesterday there were no plans to halt arms shipments to the rogue regime.

But Moscow's position may be softening. Yesterday, another senior Russian diplomat conceded his country would only veto an "unacceptable" resolution. The task now is to craft

a measure that has enough teeth to influence the behaviour of the Assads. If that includes an explicit renunciation of armed foreign intervention, it might be worth the concession.

Capitals from Doha to Washington may take a hard line on Damascus, but it is erstwhile friends that have the most influence. Moscow has real power to curb the bloodshed of innocents, or alternatively to shirk its responsibility.



Moscow has real power to curb the bloodshed

Oman Daily Observer

Opposition protests to mark Hama killings

DAMASCUS — Syria's opposition called protests yesterday to mark the 30th anniversary of the Hama massacre, as the United Nations moved closer to agreement on action to halt a crackdown on dissent.

Demonstrations were organised in various cities in memory of the people who perished in February 1982 when then president Hafez al Assad, father of the current president Bashar, launched an assault on the central town to crush a revolt.

The anniversary took place as the government in Damascus battles to crush an unprecedented revolt that has left more than 6,000 people dead since mid-March, according to estimates of human rights groups. The city of Hama defiantly painted roads in red and staged a general strike yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

In the town of Al Maadamiyeh, near Damascus, a Syrian dissident was killed by secu-

rity forces before his body was thrown off the rooftop of his home in front of his wife and children, the Observatory said. Explosions rocked the town of Talfita, a focal point of security operations also near the capital and home to the military prison of Saidnaya, while the army kept up its lockdown on Rankus, a hideout of army deserters it said.

Videos posted on YouTube showed student protests held in the capital and on the outskirts of the capital to mark the Hama carnage.

International efforts to stop the bloodshed have so far failed, with Russia firmly opposed to an Arab- and Western-backed UN Security Council resolution condemning the violence.

But diplomats hinted in New York on Wednesday that a compromise to overcome Russia's objections was possible. "We have made some progress today," Britain's UN Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant

told reporters after a three-hour meeting of council members.

Russia's envoy Vitaly Churkin also said there was a much better understanding of what needed to be done to reach a consensus. "I think it was a pretty good session," he said. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said Russia had a "less negative" attitude towards the resolution and a vote could take place "perhaps" next week.

The draft resolution, introduced by Morocco, calls for the formation of a unity government leading to "transparent and free elections," rather than for Assad to step down as proposed in an Arab League plan. It stresses that there will be no foreign military intervention in Syria as there was in Libya.

A new draft was expected to be prepared following Wednesday's talks and submitted to Council members later for new discussions, diplomats said. — AFP

Syria regime cannot resist pressure forever: Al-Arabi

In an exclusive and candid interview with CNN anchor and correspondent Hala Gorani, Arab League Secretary General Nabil Al-Arabi explains why he thinks the international community felt compelled to intervene in Libya but is not ready to do so in Syria, citing both the lack of oil and the global economic situation as potential reasons. He also discusses why Russia is opposing UN intervention in Syria and explains that "once the people will go on the street, you have to yield to their demands".

Hala Gorani, CNN International Correspondent: What is exactly the language that's bothering Russia right now? When you're in discussions with Russian representatives at the UN, what is bothering them and what can be removed, as far as you're concerned?

Nabil Al-Arabi, Arab League Secretary General: Well, I'll tell you what they say. I mean, and they have said it already. They do not want any reference to military intervention and no one is speaking about that. They don't want any reference to sanctions, and no one speaks about sanctions as such.

They don't want the Arab peace plan, which says that the president delegates power to the vice president. We didn't ask that the president should step down, but only to delegate powers to the vice president, which actually, according to their constitution...

Gorani: You know, there is a joke now that says Bashar Al-Asad is going to demote himself to vice president.

Laughter

Gorani: Because that's how seriously people are taking this, you know?

Al-Arabi: I didn't...
Gorani: Right. They're saying it's just toothless. It's going to lead to nothing. This regime is going to continue to employ violence, because it's the only way it knows to deal with opposition. Do you think that's true?

Al-Arabi: Well, up to now, it's true, but you have to refer that to the world we are living in.

Gorani: And if this resolution is passed and Russia removes every little reference to possible sanctions, possible intervention, possible pressure, then what good will that resolution do?
Al-Arabi: It will still put pressure



This is just a shocking — Al-Arabi: It's awful. It's awful. But you tell me, what can be done? And more than that, you are going to a universal organization, which is responsible for world peace. Security Council is the organ vested with the primary responsibility for the peace and security in the world. You cannot go further than that.

Gorani: People will say, why was Libya a case that the international community thought required intervention because a massacre was about to take place — I'm quoting people. Whereas Syria is a country where a massacre is taking place, and there is no intervention. Why?

Al-Arabi: Well, I'll try to answer but it's not — my view, personally, but I'll give you some examples. First of all, at one time, Gaddafi's was going to wipe out the whole city of Benghazi. And they had the means to do that. Secondly, you can say that the — as I said to you, political location is different here and there, between Syria and Libya.

Thirdly, in Syria, there is a regular strong army. In Libya, there was no army, just some militias headed by Gaddafi's sons, which, I mean, is

completely different. And maybe there is no oil in Syria.
Gorani: So what are you saying when you say maybe there's no oil in Syria? That the economic motivation was there?

Al-Arabi: Could be. Could be. But anyhow, we can add to that that this is an election year in the United States and there are elections in France. And Europe is not in the — I'm not going to say bankrupt, but is not in the best economic situations to enter into such a venture.

Gorani: When you look at Syria, what — I mean, you say you have hope, but what then gives you hope? What aspect of what's happening right now is giving you hope?

Al-Arabi: The fact that such, I mean, the regime itself is under pressure from the international — and they cannot go on forever. And once the people go to the street anywhere, and actually I told — I am saying this in public because I told the leadership in Syria, that once — the lesson from Egypt and from the others, but I speak as my own country — at that time I was foreign minister, as you know — that once the people will go the street, you have to yield to their demands.

mean, today, 70 — Al-Arabi: Yes, yes, people are dying. And even one — if one person dies, our conscience cannot take that.
Gorani: But in a country of 23 million, 6,000 people have died.

on the Syrian government, because they realize that Russia cannot stand up forever. And they are under great pressure now. And you know, Russia does not want to be against the people.
Gorani: Time is running out. I

foreign policy

A Suez moment for Russia?

Russian officials view Syria through a zero-sum lens



James Brooke
VOA News

Finally, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. Now the Kremlin seems to be making a last stand with Syria's Bashar Al-Assad.

Russia is threatening to veto a United Nations resolution calling for a political transition in Damascus. If Mr. Assad goes, the Kremlin seems to reason, Russia has nothing to gain, and a lot to lose.

Moscow's 40-year alliance with the Assad family has concrete benefits today: \$4 billion in arms contracts for future delivery, \$20 billion in gas investments, and Tartus naval station, Russia's last military base outside the former Soviet Union.

Is Russia living its Suez moment?

In October, 1956, France, Britain and Israel attacked Egypt in an attempt to reverse President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. The United States and the Soviet Union strong-armed the three attacking nations into pulling back.

Today, that conflict is widely seen as the bitter, historical turning point when Britons realized they were no longer a world power.

It is also seen as the dawn of Moscow's influence in the Middle East, a region distant from its pre-Cold War sphere of influence.

Now, half a century later in Syria, we may be witnessing the sun setting on Moscow's sway over the Arab world. For Russians, it is a painful reminder of Russia's reduced reach in the world.

Last year, Moscow stubbornly clung to its Soviet legacy allies in the Arab world. One by one, they wobbled, and eventually fell: Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and,

is to keep the beaches of Egypt, Tunisia, Israel and Turkey open for the millions of Russian vacationers who now flee there every winter).

On the world stage, Mr. Putin is determined not to be pushed around by the West. In Moscow, officials talk darkly about "the Libya scenario" and "the Libya precedent."

Russian officials still see geopolitics through the simplistic, Soviet, zero-sum lens. The fall of Gaddafi was a victory for Washington, and a setback for Moscow.

Russian journalists rarely think to talk to real Libyans, and ask them what they want. It rarely occurs to Russian diplomats that if they keep complaining about Libya's revolution, Russian businessmen are going to stand at the back of the line in Tripoli.

Part of this stems from a deep skepticism in Russia today about revolution. After two traumatic revolutions in the 20th century, this allegory is shared in Russia by both the rulers and the ruled.

But there is also a disdain for Arab public opinion. In Libya and Syria, Moscow has taken stands opposing the will of the Arab League. Of course, Russia, the world's largest oil producer, has no need to fidget around the



Tensions in Syria have resulted in recent bloodshed

big oil producers that dominate the Arab League.

But now Arab newspapers and internet sites are peppered with a novelty: anti-Russian cartoons and protest images coming from Syria and from Syrian exiles.

In Moscow, Russia's plummeting stock in the Arab world is a non-issue. Beneath this lack of concern may be the unspoken understand-

ing that Moscow is wrapping up its big power role in the region.

The half century that started with Suez, may end with Syria. ■

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