

- وِعْفَتَشَادِيْتَسْ عَرَّ سَهَيْطَنَرَشِيْشْ تَلَهْضْ عَدَّ خَعَّ عَسِيَا "عَارِحْ عِيَرَا اُرِي نَعْنَ ظَدُّ اِشْطَلِيْدِيْ نَعْنَضْ اَدَاةَ ذَنْبِيْدِيْ فِي ضَحْ اِرْمَادَنَرِيْشْ دَحْ عَدَّ عَرَّ. رَا يِرْطَشْ وَيْذَخْ ذَعْرُ" بِطَلْكَ لِيْ شِءَا نَمِيْكَ زِي اَدَاةَ زَيْبِيْ اُشْ؟
- فَصَنُّ اُصْرَسْفِ اُخْرِيْدِيْجِ اُعْبَثَا خِ اُرِي لَنْخَزَا دِي رِدِيْطْ اُرْعَا "اُخْرِيْدِيْتَسْ كَعَسِيَا رَعْدَعَا اُنْفِشَا اَشْرَلِيْدِيْ شِدْ اُنْفِشَا اُغْرِيْدِيْ."
- رُوْشْ خِ الشَايَا اِدَالِي "اُو" نَشَلْ تِيْدِيْ "اُخ" اَا اُنْفِجَلْجِ اُصْرِيْدِيْجِي شَرِيْكَ ظَا اُشْبِ بِيْعَشْ اَعَنْفِ عَفْرِيْ:

Le Monde (France)

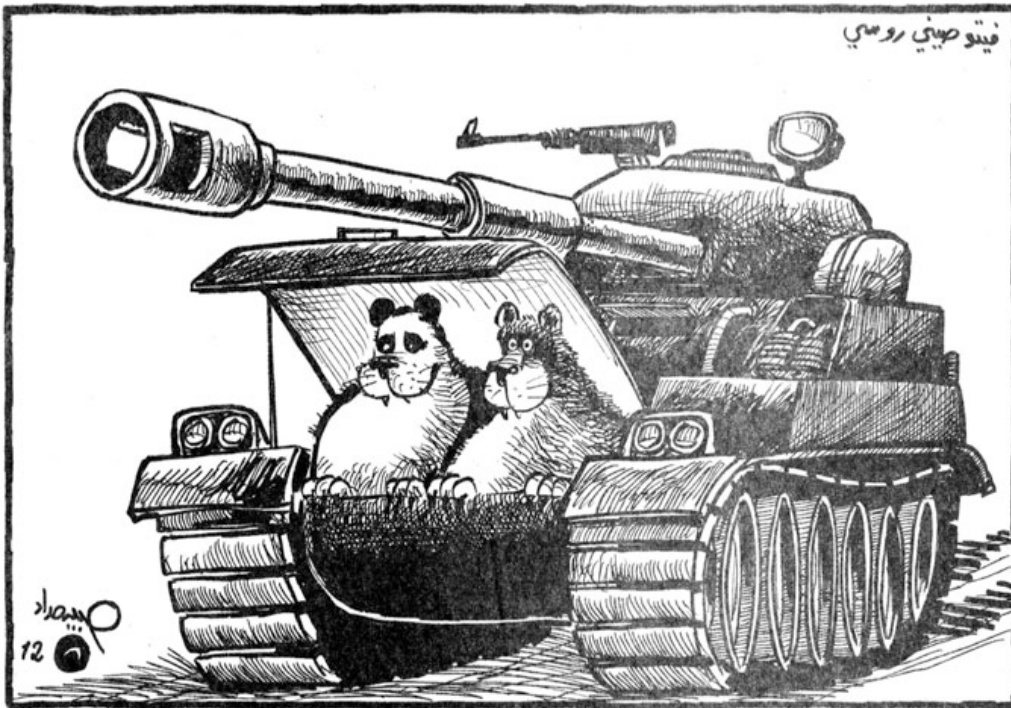
Appel pour la paix en Syrie par Sergueï



Der Standard (Autriche / Austria)



Al-Hayat



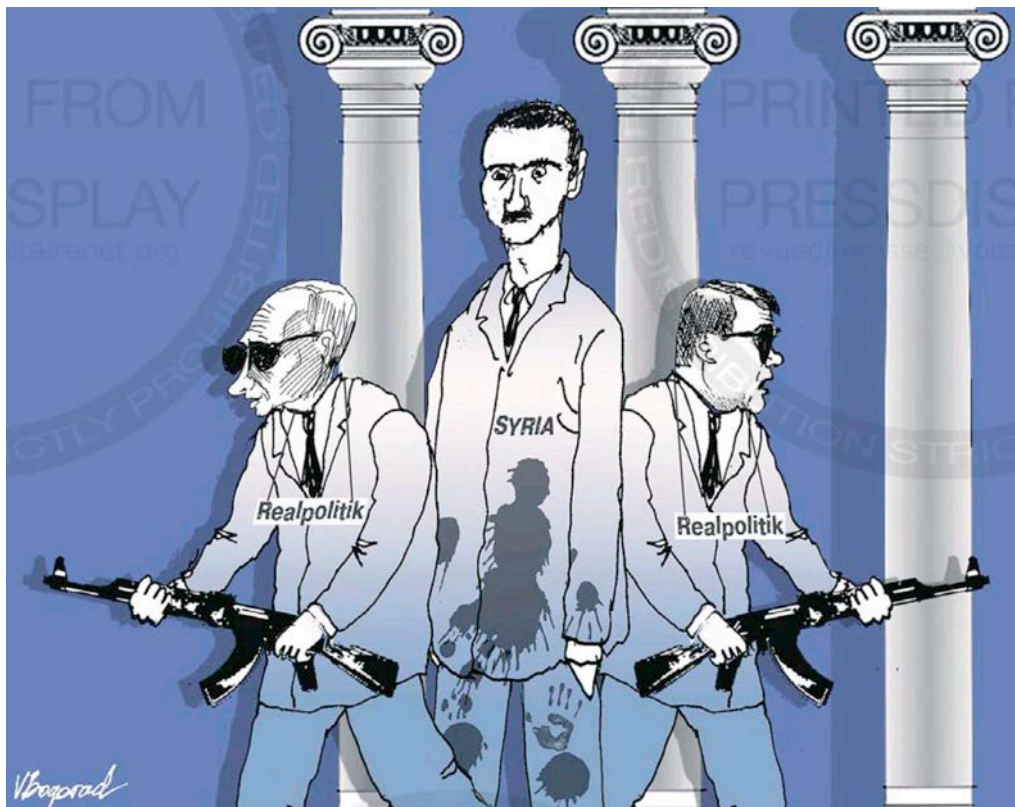
Gulf News (EAU / UAE)



The National (EAU / UAE)



Moscow Times (Russie / Russia)



Le Monde (France)

Le veto de Pékin sur la Syrie critiqué en Chine

La blogosphère dénonce l'attitude des autorités alors que les médias officiels accusent l'Occident d'ingérence

Pékin
Correspondant

Le veto opposé par Pékin, avec Moscou, samedi 4 février, devant le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, au projet de résolution sur la Syrie passe mal auprès d'une opinion publique chinoise dans son ensemble sous-informée des événements en Syrie. En l'absence de débats dans les médias, cette opposition est perceptible dans la blogosphère, forte de 510 millions d'internautes sur une population de 1,3 milliard d'habitants.

Elle relaie les critiques d'un nombre croissant d'intellectuels. L'écrivain Murong Xuecun notait ainsi, dimanche 5 février, que « le principe de non-ingérence ne doit pas l'emporter sur l'humanisme, et que soutenir des dictateurs vicieux revient à faire preuve d'une grande cruauté envers les peuples ». L'économiste Wu Jiaxiang déplorait lundi que l'ONU n'était plus qu'un « appendice », en raison de « ces deux membres permanents qui servent les dictatures ». « Leur montée en puissance, écrit l'intellectuel, est une catastrophe pour l'humanité. »

Des internautes en appelaient à « signer » la déclaration en ligne de l'activiste anti-CCTV (la télévision officielle) Dandao Jidan : « En tant que citoyen chinois, je veux présenter toutes mes excuses au peuple syrien. Je n'ai jamais participé à l'élection de mon pays, ce vote à l'ONU ne me représente en rien. Aussi serai-je toujours dans le même camp que le peuple syrien », écrit-il.

Une vidéo montrant des civils, probablement à Homs, tentant d'échapper à des tirs, au milieu de blessés et de tués, a été diffusée sur l'Internet chinois. Difficile de ne pas penser qu'elle remue dans l'inconscient collectif le souvenir refoulé du mouvement démocratique de Tiananmen réprimé en 1989. Ces réactions, qui dominent largement les voix alignées sur les positions officielles, confirment les tendances apparues lors du « printemps arabe » : la blogosphère chinoise s'est alors emparée des événements pour critiquer l'immobilisme politique chinois.



« Les barrages gouvernementaux sont tout proches »

PRÉSENT À HOMS pour Le Monde, dans les quartiers contrôlés par l'opposition, le photjournaliste Mani raconte une ville en état de guerre : « De retour à Homs, trois mois après mon dernier reportage, je suis frappé par l'importance prise par l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) qui rassemble les militaires qui ont fait défection. J'ai pris cette photo le 25 janvier dans le quartier de Safsafi, dans la vieille ville. Les positions de ce type sont une réponse aux

incursions des forces fidèles au régime. Elles se sont multipliées dans les quartiers qui ont basculé du côté de l'opposition comme dans ceux où les forces loyalistes continuent d'être présentes. C'est le cas pour ce quartier, les barrages des forces gouvernementales sont tout proches. » Lundi 6 février, les bombardements de l'armée syrienne ont fait 69 morts à Homs et 29 autres dans le reste du pays. ■ PHOTO : MANI POUR LE MONDE

Selon Hu Yong, un chercheur chinois spécialiste d'Internet, le discours nationaliste était dominant en 1999, au moment où le *Quotidien du peuple*, organe du Parti communiste, ouvrait un espace de discussion en ligne sur le bombardement de l'ambassade de Chine à Belgrade, puis a atteint son paroxysme en 2008, date de la mobilisation contre le boycottage de la torche olympique à Paris.

Pour ensuite basculer très rapidement vers une attitude très critique des problèmes de gouvernance en Chine à « l'ère des droits civiques ». Ce virage à 180 degrés s'illustre peut-être le mieux par la boutade récente d'un présentateur de CCTV sur Weibo, le Twitter chinois. Constatant que l'envoyée spéciale de la chaîne était arrivée au Pakistan avant la mort d'Oussama Ben Laden et en Libye juste avant celle

de Mouammar Kadhafi, il demandait où elle va désormais se rendre : « En Iran ? En Syrie ? » Une majorité des internautes a répondu : « En Chine. » Et même « à Zhongnanhai », bastion du pouvoir à Pékin. Le paradoxe est que le régime cherche avant tout à éviter cet effet boomerang sur l'opinion publique chinoise : « Pékin est persuadé qu'il y a une volonté occidentale, à travers l'Internet et l'opinion, de ren-

verser le régime chinois... La Libye, avec une intervention militaire aboutissant à un changement de régime, est un cas d'école qui confirme les pires craintes de Pékin », explique au Monde Valérie Niquet, de la Fondation pour la recherche stratégique. Dans un éditorial daté du mardi 7 février, le quotidien chinois en langue anglaise *Global Times* justifie le veto en fustigeant la « diplo-

matie des valeurs » que cherchent à promouvoir Europe et Etats-Unis, « en train de perdre leur avantage technologique face aux pays en développement ». Le « printemps arabe » permet ainsi « à l'Occident grevé de dettes » de « reprendre son souffle » et « d'exporter les révolutions », prévient l'éditorial.

« La diplomatie chinoise a toujours été le prolongement de sa politique intérieure. Voter pour [la résolution de l'ONU] validerait la logique que la démocratie est raisonnable. C'est un défi pour le pouvoir », explique au Monde l'intellectuelle Cui Weiping.

« Pékin est persuadé qu'il y a une volonté occidentale, à travers l'Internet et l'opinion, de renverser le régime chinois »

Valérie Niquet
Fondation pour la recherche stratégique

Dans cette perspective, un dossier d'intervention politique est autant déstabilisant à Pékin qu'il est porteur en Occident, surtout en période présidentielle. La longue phase d'approche qui précède à la transition au sommet du Parti communiste à l'automne 2012 oblige la Chine à camper sur ses positions traditionnelles – non-ingérence et dénonciation des « manipulations occidentales » à l'œuvre dans les soulèvements arabes.

Certes, Pékin a pris un risque certain, alors qu'il aurait pu s'abstenir, notent les observateurs, à moins d'une semaine de la visite officielle du vice-président chinois, Xi Jinping, aux Etats-Unis – pays qui a annoncé lundi la fermeture de son ambassade à Damas. Le futur numéro un chinois se retrouvera le 14 février à Washington avec deux dossiers gênants sur les bras. Celui du veto chinois et celui du Tibet, où l'intensification de la répression est sans précédent depuis 2008. ■

BRICE PEDROLETTI
(AVEC FRANÇOIS BOUGON À PARIS)

Le Monde (France)

Les hésitations du Brésil

Rio de Janeiro

Correspondant

Contourner l'obstacle des veto russes et chinois et accentuer la pression sur le régime syrien : tel était le double objectif de la visite de quatre jours au Brésil, commencée le 5 février, de Catherine Ashton, la haute représentante de l'Union européenne aux affaires étrangères.

La démarche de cette dernière s'inscrit dans l'offensive diplomatique européenne lancée aux côtés des Etats-Unis pour renforcer les sanctions contre Damas et isoler au maximum le régime de Bachar Al-Assad. Un moment opportun, selon plusieurs experts, puisqu'il intervient immédiatement après le vote des pays émergents du groupe IBAS (Inde, Brésil, Afrique du Sud), qui siègent au Conseil de sécurité, en faveur de la résolution bloquée par la Chine et la Russie.

Les trois pays de l'IBAS, connus pour traîner des pieds devant tout ce qui leur paraît être une forme d'ingérence occidentale, s'étaient abstenus en octobre 2011 lors d'un premier vote sur le cas syrien. Le vote de Pretoria et de New Delhi a été « coordonné avec le Brésil » qui ne siège pas actuellement au Conseil, d'après Brasilia.

Lundi soir, au terme d'un tête-à-tête avec Antonio Patriota, le ministre des affaires étrangères, la chef de la diplomatie des Vingt-Sept a réaffirmé lors d'une conférence de presse son désir

d'« aller de l'avant » sans toutefois sembler en mesure de pousser l'avantage. Avec son homologue brésilien, elle a rappelé l'importance du plan de la Ligue arabe pour une transition démocratique à Damas. Une manière pour M. Patriota de réaffirmer, à sa façon et comme il l'a répété plus directement par voix de presse ces derniers jours, que son pays restait farouchement opposé à toute intervention armée et que « seule une solution négociée et pacifique permettrait de mettre un terme aux violences ».

Cette légère évolution de Brasilia est à mettre au crédit de la présidente Dilma Rousseff, plus pragmatique que son prédécesseur et mentor, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. En août 2011, une délégation du Palais d'Itamaraty (le Quai d'Orsay brésilien) s'était déplacée à Damas avec des homologues indiens et sud-africains afin de tenter de convaincre le président syrien de négocier. Le régime ignore la demande. Dans la foulée, Brasilia soutint une enquête de l'ONU sur les massacres. Mais Damas s'opposa à l'entrée sur le territoire des membres de la mission.

A la veille de son arrivée, M^{me} Ashton a émis le souhait de rencontrer M^{me} Rousseff pour plaider sa cause. Une demande restée pour l'heure lettre morte alors que la chef de file de la diplomatie européenne devait s'envoler mercredi pour Mexico. ■

NICOLAS BOURCIER

La Russie condamnée à réussir sa médiation en Syrie



décryptage
RENAUD GIRARD
rgirard@lefigaro.fr

POUR expliquer que, le 4 février dernier, elle ait mis son veto à l'adoption par le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU d'une résolution d'initiative arabe condamnant la Syrie, la Russie avait, entre autres, invoqué une raison technique : elle ne souhaitait pas se prononcer avant que son ministre des Affaires étrangères ait pu s'entretenir avec le président syrien. Voilà qui est chose faite, maintenant que Bachar el-Assad et Sergueï Lavrov se sont longuement parlé à Damas.

Il faudra attendre sans doute longtemps pour savoir ce qu'ils se sont vraiment dit. Mais il est maintenant patent que la Russie est entrée, seule, dans un processus de médiation. Son objectif déclaré est d'user de la persuasion et non de la contrainte (incarquée par les sanc-



Le ministre des Affaires étrangères russe, Sergueï Lavrov, et Bachar el-Assad, se sont longuement parlé, hier à Damas. SANA/REUTERS

ctions) pour amener le clan Assad à lâcher progressivement le pouvoir en Syrie. Les Russes ont compris que les frères Assad, Bachar le politique et Maher le militaire, n'ont plus aucune chance de rétablir une situation aussi dégradée. Mais, averti du fait que l'armée - commandée par des officiers alaouites qui se battent le dos au mur - n'est pas déliquescente, Moscou souhaite « donner du temps au temps ».

ne rendront le régime que plus enragé et alimenteront la violence de la guerre civile, expliquent les diplomates russes.

Anarchie tribale

A court terme, les Russes n'auront pas de mal à défendre leur position. En matière de stabilisation en pays musulmans, les Occidentaux sont en effet assez malvenus pour donner des leçons. En Afghanistan et en Irak, leurs interventions risquent fort de se terminer en catastrophes. Quant à la Libye, les jeux ne sont pas encore faits, mais il semble qu'on se dirige vers l'anarchie tribale.

A long terme en revanche, la Russie est condamnée à réussir. Car son veto n'a pas frappé que les intentions - au départant assez floues - des Occidentaux. Moscou s'est opposé à une solution proposée par la Ligue arabe, qui a une légitimité évidente au Levant.

Que signifierait « réussir » en Syrie ? Ce serait mettre un terme à l'effusion de sang ; éviter la partition du pays ; garantir, à l'avenir, face à la majorité sunnite, les droits des minorités ethniques ou religieuses (alaouite, chrétiennes, druze, kurde).

Les Russes persuaderont-ils le clan Assad de lâcher les rênes du pouvoir pour un but plus noble, la survie en Syrie de leurs frères alaouites ? Cela fait plus de 40 ans que la famille y gouverne sans partage. Elle n'a pas réussi ; elle ne mérite donc pas de rester. Politiquement, elle n'a pas accompli l'ouverture promise au début du millénaire. Socialement, elle a laissé la démographie s'emballer sans instruire convenablement cette jeunesse pléthorique. Économiquement, elle a tardivement abandonné le socialisme pour le capitalisme... Diplomatiquement, elle s'est détachée de ses partenaires arabes par son alliance avec l'Iran et ses prétentions hégémoniques sur le Liban.

La seule chose à sauver du régime est sa tolérance religieuse et le caractère non confessionnel de l'Etat. Si elle se poursuivait, la guerre civile remettrait en cause ce bienfait. Le clan doit partir, pour que demeure son unique bienfait. Les Russes parviendront-ils à assurer cette transition ? Il ne nous faudra que quelques semaines pour avoir la réponse. ■

Die Welt (Allemagne / Germany)



Exil-Syrer demonstrieren vor dem Brandenburger Tor gegen Assads Regime. Offenbar wurden einige von ihnen ausspioniert

Spionageaffäre erschüttert Berlin

Zwei Männer sollen für den syrischen Geheimdienst Regimegegner beobachtet haben

■ Verdächtige wurden offenbar seit Monaten vom Verfassungsschutz beobachtet

HANS H. NIBBRIG

Beamte des Bundeskriminalamtes (BKA) und des Landeskriminalamtes (LKA) haben in Berlin mit Unterstützung von Spezialeinheiten zwei mutmaßliche syrische Spione festgenommen. Sie sollen zusammen mit sechs weiteren Verdächtigen jahrelang in der Hauptstadt lebende syrische Oppositionelle beobachtet haben. Gegen die zwei Hauptverdächtigen waren bereits am 31. Januar auf Antrag der Bundesanwaltschaft Haftbefehl wegen des dringenden Verdachts geheimdienstlicher Agententätigkeit erlassen worden. Die Männer sollen am heutigen Mittwoch einem Ermittlungsrichter des Bundesgerichtshofes vorgeführt werden, der ihnen die Haftbefehle verkünden wird, teilte ein Sprecher der Bundesanwaltschaft mit.

Der 34-jährige Syrer Akram O. und der 47-jährige Deutsch-Libanese Mahmoud El A. wurden in ihren Berliner Wohnungen festgenommen. Gleichzeitig wurden die Wohnungen der sechs weiteren Verdächtigen durchsucht. Bei ihnen soll es sich um zwei Syrer, zwei Deutsch-Syrer und zwei Libanesen handeln. Zumindest einige der Verdächtigen sollen Botschaftsangehörige sein, aus diesem Grund wurde auch das Auswärtige Amt eingeschaltet. An den Festnahmen und Durchsuchungen der Wohnungen in Berlin waren insgesamt 70 Beamte von BKA und LKA beteiligt. Sie stellten zahlreiches Beweismaterial sicher, dass jetzt ausgewertet wird.

Offenbar sind die Verdächtigen bereits seit Monaten vom Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz beobachtet worden. Nachdem sich der Verdacht erhärtet hatte, wurde die Bundesanwaltschaft eingeschaltet. Die führte zunächst mit Unterstützung des BKA weitere verdeckte Ermittlungen durch, bevor am Dienstag der Zugriff erfolgte. Aus Sicherheitskreisen hieß es, die Verdächtigen hätten ihre Zielpersonen nicht nur ausgespäht, sondern vermutlich auch drangsaliiert. Was genau unter diesem Begriff zu verstehen ist, sei momentan noch nicht gänzlich klar.

Weder die Bundesanwaltschaft noch der Verfassungsschutz wollten zu Details des Verfahrens Stellung nehmen.

Der offenbar bestehende Verdacht der Drangsalierung weckt allerdings Erinnerungen an den Fall des in Berlin lebenden syrisch-stämmigen Politikers Ferhad Ahma. Der 37-Jährige, der für die Grünen aktiv ist und sich

gleichzeitig im Nationalrat der syrischen Opposition engagiert, war Ende Dezember mitten in der Nacht in seiner Wohnung in Wedding von zwei mit Schlagstöcken bewaffneten Unbekannten zusammengeschlagen worden. Ahma beschrieb die Angreifer als „arabisch aussehende

Männer“ und vermutet hinter diesem Angriff einen Einschüchterungsversuch des syrischen Geheimdienstes. Unmittelbar nach Bekanntwerden der Festnahmen wurde der syrische Botschafter ins Auswärtige Amt einbestellt. Eine Einschüchterung syrischer Oppositioneller in Deutschland werde in keiner Weise hingenommen, sagte Außenminister Guido Westerwelle (FDP).

ARABISCHE GEHEIMDIENSTE IN BERLIN

Nach der Festnahme von zwei mutmaßlichen **syrischen Spionen** wird sich auch der Verfassungsschutz-Ausschuss des Berliner Abgeordnetenhauses mit dem Geheimdienst des Landes befassen. Bereits vor einem Mo-

nat habe die Leiterin des Berliner Verfassungsschutzes, Claudia Schmid, bestätigt, dass seit dem arabischen Frühling **gesteigerte Aktivitäten** der Geheimdienste aus den arabischen Ländern in Berlin zu verzeichnen seien.

ONLINE

Alle Informationen und Hintergründe zu den Unruhen in Syrien finden Sie hier:

welt.de/syrien

Heldenempfang für Lawrow

Syriens Präsident Assad lässt Ministeriumsmitarbeiter und Schulklassen für Russlands Außenminister aufmarschieren

Ast adl Fredé, Damaskus

„So wie der junge Mann in Tunesien, würde auch ich mich für Präsident Bashar al-Assad verbrennen!“, erhebt sich Ibtissam, die mit ihren Kindern an der Flughafenstraße in der syrischen Hauptstadt Damaskus steht. Sie ist wie Zehntausende andere Unterstützer des Regimes „spontan“ zu dieser Kundgebung erschienen, um den russischen Außenminister Sergej Lawrow willkommen zu heißen.

Der Applaus brandet auf, als die lange Wagenkolonne mit mehreren schwarzen Autos vorbeifährt, in der nicht zu sehen ist, wo genau der Staatsgast sitzt. „Gott, Syrien, Bashar, das ist alles!“, ständieren sie. Neben der syrischen Flagge und Bashar-Fotografen werden die russischen Farben getragen, unter anderem als ganzer Teppich aus weißen, roten und blauen Luftballons. Man hat sich gut vorbereitet. Ausländische Gäste sind selten geworden in Damaskus.

Der Besuch Lawrows ist ein willkommenes Anzeichen für das Regime, um zu zeigen, dass es weder national noch international isoliert ist.

„Spontane“ Demonstrationen bedeuten allerdings, dass Russe schon am frühen Morgen vor den syrischen Ministerien erwartet, um die Mitarbeiter und Mitarbeiterinnen zum Treffpunkt zu fahren. Auch ganze Schulklassen lässt das Regime in Reihen und Glied aufmarschieren.

Salwa aus dem Ministerium für Telekommunikation sagt, sie gehe zu jeder Pro-Assad-Kundgebung, um zu zeigen, dass der Präsident und das syrische Volk eins seien. Sie ist überzeugt, dass Syrien Reformen brauche. Aber die Proteste der Aufständischen



Jubel-Syrier: Der Konvoi des russischen Außenministers Sergej Lawrow wird in Damaskus von Assad-Anhängern freudig begrüßt

sind für sie „Sabotage“. Syrien sei immer ein Symbol für Sicherheit und Stabilität gewesen, betont sie. So müsse es wieder werden.

Ibtissam, die arbeitslos ist, gehört wie Naïm, ein Architekt, zu den wenigen, die nicht in einem Staatsbetrieb oder im öffentlichen Dienst angestellt sind. Er sagt, Lawrow zu begrüßen, sei das Beste, was man tun könne, um Russland für das Uno-Veto und die Unterstützung zu danken.

Die Stimmung ist aufgekratzt wie nach einem gewonnenen Fußballspiel. Tausende bewegen sich danach in einem langen Demonstrationszug über mehrere Kilometer zu Fuß zu-

rück in die Stadt. Es ist Mittag und der Rest des Tages bleibt frei. Es sind auch solche unter den Pro-Assad-Demonstranten, die einfach ihre Pflicht tun, kurz erscheinen und dann schnell wieder weg sind.

„Das ist reines Schauspiel, daraus kann man überhaupt nichts ableiten“, kommentiert ein ausländischer Diplomat, der schon seit über sechs Jahren in Damaskus stationiert ist, den orchestrierten Massenaufmarsch für den Gast aus Moskau. George Orwell misse in Syrien vorbeigekommen sei, bevor sein Buch „1984“ geschrieben habe, lautet ein anderer Kommentar, der in Damaskus kolportiert wird.

Der russische Außenminister wurde begleitet vom Generaldirektor Michail Fradkow und überbrachte Assad eine Botschaft vom russischen Präsidenten Dmitri Medwedew. Kritisch dürfte sie kaum gewesen sein, denn stat Assad aufzufordern, die Gewalt zu beenden – auch gestemmt wurde wieder die Protesthochburg Homs bombardiert –, versicherte man einander Freundschaft und Loyalität.

„Ein jeder Staatschef in einem jeden Land muss sich seiner Verantwortung bewusst sein“, sagte Lawrow zu Beginn der Gespräche mit dem syrischen Präsidenten. „Sie sind sich ihrer bewusst.“

Frankfurter Rundschau (Allemagne / Germany)

Deutschland setzt syrische Spione fest

Westen verschärft Druck,
Russland will vermitteln

Von Steffen Hebestreit

Mit der Festnahme von zwei mutmaßlichen Geheimagenten hat die Bundesregierung am Dienstag den Druck auf das syrische Regime von Baschar al-Assad erhöht. Die Berliner Polizei nahm einen 47 Jahre alten Deutsch-Libanesen sowie einen 34-jährigen Syrer unter dem Verdacht fest, dass sie im Auftrag des Staatschefs seit Längerem planmäßig syrische Oppositionelle in Deutschland ausspioniert haben.

Die mutmaßlichen Agenten sollen seit geraumer Zeit vom Verfassungsschutz, der für Spionageabwehr zuständig ist, beobachtet worden sein. Offenbar erschien es jetzt politisch opportun, die Männer zu verhaften.

Denn die Festnahmen erfolgten just an dem Tag, an dem die französische und die italienische Regierung ihre Botschafter aus Damaskus in die jeweiligen Heimatländer zurückbeorderten. Am Montag hatten bereits die USA ihre Vertretung in der syrischen Hauptstadt angeblich aus Sicherheitsgründen bis auf Weiteres geschlossen. Die Europäische Union kündigte an, ihren Botschafter vorerst im Land zu belassen.

Nach der gescheiterten Resolution im UN-Sicherheitsrat diskutieren die EU-Staaten über schärfere Sanktionen gegen Syrien, das mit großer Brutalität gegen die Opposition im eigenen Land vorgeht. Seit Beginn der Proteste im März 2012 sollen 6000 Menschen getötet worden sein.

Unter großem Jubel wurde am Dienstag Russlands Außenminister Sergej Lawrow in Damaskus empfangen. Russland hatte am Sonnabend mit seinem Veto eine Resolution Syriens im UN-Sicherheitsrat verhindert. Lawrow sagte nach einem Gespräch mit Assad, dieser habe sich zur Beendigung der Gewalt verpflichtet. Zeitgleich beschloss die syrische Armee weiter die Rebellenhochburg Homs. Russische Medien spekulierten, Lawrow wolle den Diktator zu einem kontrollierten Machtverzicht bewegen. Seite 8

Russland lässt sich von Assad feiern

Während in Homs erneut Dutzende Menschen im Granathagel der syrischen Armee starben, besuchte der russische Außenminister Staatschef Assad.

MARTIN GEHLEN

Der Staatsjubiläum funktioniert noch. „Danke Russland, danke China“, stand auf den Transparenten, mit denen Tausende Regimeanhänger den Gast aus Moskau bei seiner Fahrt zum Präsidentenpalast in Damaskus begrüßten. Begleitet von weltweiter Empörung über Russlands Veto im UN-Sicherheitsrat war Außenminister Sergej Lawrow gestern nach Syrien gereist, um mit Präsident Bashar al-Assad „eine politische Lösung“ zu suchen. Zur gleichen Zeit ließ dessen Regime die Stadt Homs bereits den vierten Tag in Folge bombardieren. Auch in der nördlichen Region um Idlib sowie in den Vororten von Damaskus ging die Armee mit aller Härte vor.

Keine Zugeständnisse

Assad sei „absolut entschlossen, das Blutvergießen zu beenden“, erklärte Lawrow nach dem knapp zweistündigen Gespräch und bezeichnete sein Treffen als „sehr nützlich“. Weitere Zugeständnisse des syrischen Machthabers konnte er allerdings nicht vermelden, obwohl der Kreml vor seiner Abreise lanciert hatte, Lawrow wolle Assad zum Rücktritt bewegen sowie eine stufen-



Nach dem Veto gegen eine UN-Resolution bereitete das syrische Regime den Russen in Damaskus einen Jubelempfang AP

festzulegen. Wer die neue Verfassung erarbeitet, ist unklar. Angeblich soll sie ein Mehrparteiensystem einführen und die Amtszeit des Präsidenten auf maximal acht Jahre begrenzen.

Scharfschützen

Derweil forderte das heftige Bombardement in Homs auch am Dienstag wieder Dutzende Menschenleben. Tags zuvor waren mehr als 70 Menschen im Granathagel gestorben, am Wochenende über 260. Augenzeugen berichteten, niemand traue sich mehr auf die Straße, überall lauerten Scharfschützen. „Der Beschuss geht rund um die Uhr, alle paar Minuten gibt es eine Explosion“, berichteten Bewohner gegenüber Al Jazeera. „Es ist unfassbar – es gibt keine Bunker, nirgends kann man Deckung suchen.“ Ein Video aus einem provisorischen Verbandsraum zeigt Tote und Verletzte mit schrecklichen Wunden. Auf anderen Bil-

es gibt kaum noch etwas zu essen. „Wir wissen nicht mehr ein noch aus, wir warten nur noch darauf zu sterben“, klagte einer der Bewohner.

Neuer Versuch

Nach den USA und Großbritannien gaben gestern auch Belgien, Italien und Frankreich bekannt, ihre Botschafter zu Konsultationen aus Damaskus abzuziehen. Die Golfstaaten beschlossen, alle syrischen Botschafter auszuweisen und ihre diplomatischen Vertretungen in Syrien zu schließen. Der türkische Ministerpräsident Recep Tayyip Erdogan schlug vor, nach dem „Fiasko für die zivilisierte Welt“ im UN-Sicherheitsrat mit gleich gesinnten Nationen eine neue diplomatische Initiative zu starten, die „be dem syrischen Volk steht und nicht bei dem Regime“. Moskau und Peking hätten mit ihrem Veto „dem Tyrannen eine Lizenz zum Töten“ ausgestellt.

Les Russes entre le marteau et l'enclume

Critiqué par les Occidentaux et la Ligue arabe, le chef de la diplomatie russe a été accueilli en héros, hier, dans la capitale syrienne

Cathy Macherel

«Merci la Russie, merci la Chine!» C'est par ce slogan, et des drapeaux aux couleurs de la Russie, que Sergueï Lavrov, le chef de la diplomatie russe, a été accueilli hier, avec sa délégation, par des milliers de Syriens dans les rues de Damas. Reçu en héros, après le refus de Moscou - et de Pékin - samedi de soutenir une résolution devant le Conseil de sécurité visant à demander le départ du pouvoir de Bachar el-Assad.

Sergueï Lavrov se serait sans doute volontiers passé de ce chaleureux accueil, alors que les bombes pleuvaient hier encore sur Homs. Car la diplomatie russe manœuvre dans une voie de plus en plus étroite: d'une part, elle doit persuader Bachar el-Assad de cesser sa féroce répression pour s'engager dans des «réformes démocratiques» et d'autre part calmer la colère des Occidentaux, qui accusent le veto russe à l'ONU de faire office de «permis de tuer» pour el-Assad.

La Russie sur la défensive

«La Russie est maintenant sur la défensive, elle se doit de trouver des solutions pour sauver la face», analysait lundi Sergueï Strokane, journaliste politique russe, éditorialiste de *Kommersant*, cité par le titre américain *The Christian Science Monitor*. «Le problème, c'est que el-Assad a probablement interprété le veto russe au Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU comme une marque de soutien. Il n'est pas certain que Lavrov sera capable de faire évoluer beaucoup les choses. Mais à chaque signe de progrès, Moscou ne manquera pas de faire valoir la justesse de sa méthode.»

Hier, au terme de la rencontre avec Bachar el-Assad, Lavrov a mis en évidence le fait que le président syrien lui a promis de «faire cesser les violences d'où qu'elles viennent». Et qu'il allait bientôt annon-



Bachar el-Assad (à gauche) accueillant Sergueï Lavrov, le chef de la diplomatie russe. SANA/REUTERS

«La Russie est maintenant sur la défensive, elle se doit de trouver des solutions pour sauver la face»

Sergueï Strokane

Journaliste politique russe, cité par le titre américain «The Christian Science Monitor»

cer la date du référendum sur une nouvelle Constitution. Lavrov a aussi répété que la Russie cherchait une solution au conflit syrien en se basant sur l'initiative de la Ligue arabe qui prévoit notamment le transfert des pouvoirs du président el-Assad à son vice-président.

Ambassadeurs rappelés

Mais le dialogue de la Ligue arabe avec Damas est mal en point pour l'heure: hier, une partie de ses membres, les monarchies du Golfe, ont annoncé le renvoi immédiat des ambassadeurs syriens et le rappel des leurs, en qualifiant d'«inutiles» les relations diplomatiques avec la

Syrie. Plusieurs pays européens ont aussi rappelé leur ambassadeur.

Selon l'analyse des médias russes, c'est moins les liens économiques avec Damas (contrats d'armes à la clé) que l'idée de perdre encore de l'influence au Moyen-Orient qui motive Moscou à s'opposer à la stratégie de la contrainte voulue par les Occidentaux. Et Moscou de laisser filtrer cette angoisse. Hier, l'ambassadeur russe à l'ONU, Vitali Tchourkine, dénonçant «les réactions exagérées» des Occidentaux au veto russe, a dit que «l'effet secondaire, ou peut-être le but, de certaines de ces réactions est de créer de l'hostilité envers la Russie dans le monde arabe».

Des hackers espionnent el-Assad

● Les hackers d'Anonymous ont fouillé les ordinateurs de proches conseillers du président syrien, Bachar el-Assad. Ces militants de la cyberliberté étaient déjà parvenus à pénétrer sur le site du Ministère de la défense, inscrivant leur logo sur la page d'accueil en août dernier. Cette fois, ils ont rendu publics des courriels et des mémos rédigés à l'attention du dirigeant syrien. L'un d'eux

conseille Bachar el-Assad sur la manière de préparer l'interview avec une journaliste de la chaîne ABC, l'an dernier. Ce conseiller jugeait très important de bien faire mention de «groupes armés» au cours de cet entretien et de documenter ce point avec des articles de la presse américaine et britannique. Le président a aussi été briefé sur la nécessité de montrer que ces groupes «sont

manipulés par l'étranger». Et de préciser que la Syrie «n'organise pas la torture», contrairement aux Etats-Unis, qui en ont fait la démonstration à la prison d'Abou Ghraib en Irak. Enfin, il fait allusion à la mentalité américaine, indulgente pour les fautes reconnues. Un autre mémo rappelle que l'Amérique aime les héros et les méchants. Avec qui dans le rôle du méchant? **O.B.**

Il Corriere della Sera (Italie / Italy)

» **Immagine** La moglie Asma scrive al «Times» di Londra

La «rosa del deserto» rompe il suo silenzio «Lavoro per il dialogo»

«La moglie di Assad rompe il silenzio», titolava ieri in prima pagina il *Times* di Londra. Uno scoop mondiale dalla Siria in piena guerra civile, teatro di stragi ogni giorno peggiori. E infatti la prima volta dall'inizio di tutto, quasi un anno fa, che «parla» Asma Fawaz Al Akhras sposata Al Assad, ricorda il quotidiano di Murdoch. La giovane signora spiega che il marito rais, nonché padre dei suoi tre bambini, è «presidente della Siria e non solo di una fazione di siriani. La first lady lo appoggia nel suo ruolo ed è come sempre intenta nelle opere di carità. In questi giorni è poi impegnata a costruire ponti e a incoraggiare il dialogo, ad ascoltare e a confortare le famiglie delle vittime della violenza».

Tutto qui. E per altro Asma non «parla»: al giornale di Londra è arrivata una email scritta in terza persona, calibrata in ogni parola, certo approvata dallo staff ufficiale della first lady. Un messaggio che il *Times* dice di non aver sollecitato ma che sarebbe arrivato in risposta a un suo recente articolo in cui chiedeva «cosa pensasse delle stragi, delle torture e degli arresti di migliaia di oppositori da parte delle forze di sicurezza del marito» quella 36enne «intelligente, colta, con tante buone azioni alle spalle». Soprattutto, perché tacesse da mesi quella «figlia di un eminente cardiologo di Harley Street, nel cuore di Londra, nata e cresciuta nel quartiere di Acton, con studi a Marylebone e all'Imperial College, poi un lavoro alla J.P. Morgan».

Ancora una settimana fa il *Times* trovava sorprendente che una «cittadina britannica» (nonché siriana) fosse complice della folle violenza di un tiranno mediorientale. Il dubbio è che Asma fos-

se costretta a tacere. Ma ormai da tempo, anche sul *Corriere*, articoli e commenti davano per scontato che la moglie chic e cosmopolita di Bashar Al Assad, nota per le sue scarpe Louboutin e i tailleur di Chanel, soprannominata da



Vogue un anno fa «rosa del deserto», dietro all'immagine aperta e riformista celasse un altro volto. Quello di una donna dell'élite siriana, miliardaria e poco importa se sunnita, che appoggia il marito fino in fondo. «Assurdo pensare che solo perché è nata a Londra una persona sia democratica», commentava ieri un dissidente siriano esule in Europa, chiedendo l'anonimato. «Anche Suzanne

Polemiche

Gli oppositori sono indignati:
«Ve la immaginate mentre
conforta la vedova di un uomo
ucciso dalle gang di Bashar?»



Coppia presidenziale Asma e Bashar Al Assad nel 2010 (Epa) e il servizio di *Vogue* del marzo 2011 sulla first lady chiamata «rosa del deserto» (a sin.)

Mubarak ha madre e passaporto del Regno Unito, eppure ha derubato mezzo Egitto. A Damasco tutti sanno che Asma gestisce enormi capitali suoi e ora anche degli Assad all'estero, grazie alla doppia nazionalità che la protegge dalle sanzioni. E sempre stata potentissima e in piena sintonia con il marito. In gennaio è anche scesa in piazza al suo fianco e con i due figli. Non ha parlato ma il messaggio era chiaro».

Lo scoop del *Times* ha comunque irritato, perfino infuriato, molti oppositori siriani, sorpreso esperti del Paese. Non perché rilevasse qualcosa di nuovo ma per l'impudenza della first lady nell'affermare il suo impegno a costruire «dialogo e ponti», ad «aiutare le famiglie delle vittime». Chris Doyle, capo del consiglio

d'intesa arabo-britannico e sposato con un'attivista siriana dell'opposizione, esclude che Asma «continui le sue attività benefiche». E chiede: «Ve la immaginate che confortava la vedova di un uomo ucciso o picchiato a morte dalle gang di Bashar?». Rami Jarrah, siriano esule in Egitto da ottobre aggiunge: «Con i suoi 11 mesi di silenzio la first lady mostra solo un'ipocrisia intollerabile. Abbiamo una lista di 5 mila famiglie di vittime, nessuna delle quali ha certo avuto il conforto da "Sua Altezza". Perché il mondo aiutasse i somali Asma aveva urlato tanto, per il suo popolo silenzio. Tutte le cause che appoggiava in passato erano pure e semplice pubblicità».

Cecilia Zecchinelli

» RIPRODUZIONE RISERVATA

L'Unita (Italie / Italy)

Damasco sempre più isolata a livello internazionale. Arabia Saudita, Oman, Kuwait, Emirati Arabi Uniti, Qatar e Bahrein ieri hanno espulso gli ambasciatori siriani. Intanto Assad subisce la ramanzina dei russi.

UMBERTO DE GIOVANNANGELI

udegiwannangel@unita.it

Arriva Lavrov, «fuggono» gli ambasciatori. Bashar al-Assad è sempre più isolato ma questo non ferma la «macchina di morte» del regime siriano. L'artiglieria da ieri mattina ha ripreso a martellare la città ribelle di Homs, dove lunedì si sono contate 95 vittime, e ieri sono morti almeno 21 civili.

Dopo il duplice veto di Mosca e Pechino di sabato scorso al Consiglio di Sicurezza dell'Onu, il ministro degli Esteri russo, Sergeï Lavrov, è stato ricevuto ieri a Damasco - accompagnato dal capo dell'in-

Allarme Unicef

Oltre 400 i bambini uccisi dall'inizio della repressione

telligence russa all'estero (Svr), Mikhail Fradkov - da Assad, da cui ha ottenuto solo vaghe dichiarazioni di intenti. Il ministro degli Esteri russo ha spiegato che il presidente siriano ha auspicato che si ponga fine alle violenze da tutte le parti; ha detto di essere pronto al dialogo con ogni forza politica; ha chiesto che riprenda e sia potenziata la missione degli osservatori della Lega Araba. Lavrov, contraddicendo poi il veto posto sabato all'Onu sulla risoluzione che chiedeva ad Assad di farsi da parte, ha dichiarato che Mosca «è disponibile ad agire per trovare una rapida soluzione alla crisi basata sul piano predisposto dalla Lega Araba». Piano che prevede esplicitamente le dimissioni di Assad.

FERMA CONDANNA

Sul fronte diplomatico i Paesi europei hanno richiamato i loro ambasciatori a Damasco. Ieri mattina ha iniziato il titolare della Farnesina, Giulio Terzi, che ha convocato a Roma «per consultazioni» l'ambasciatore d'Italia a Damasco, Achille Amerio, dopo aver convocato alla Farnesina l'ambasciatore siriano a Roma, Khaddour Hasan, per esprimergli la più ferma condanna e lo sdegno del governo italiano per le inaccettabili violenze perpetrate dal regime. Analoghe iniziative sono state assunte da Francia, Gran Bretagna, Belgio, Spagna, Olanda,



Manifestazione pro-Assad a Damasco per l'arrivo di Lavrov: sullo striscione c'è scritto «Grazie, Russia»

→ **A Damasco** il ministro degli Esteri russo Lavrov strappa solo vaghe promesse

→ **Strategie** Italia, Belgio, Gb, Spagna, Olanda ritirano i rappresentanti diplomatici

Siria, la grande fuga degli ambasciatori per fermare la strage

(la Germania ha convocato l'ambasciatore siriano a Berlino). L'altro ieri i gli Usa hanno chiuso del tutto la loro ambasciata. In prima linea nella «guerra diplomatica» scatenata contro il regime siriano sono i 6 Paesi del Consiglio di Cooperazione del Golfo: Arabia Saudita, Oman, Kuwait, Emirati Arabi Uniti, Qatar e Bahrein, che ieri hanno espulso gli ambasciatori siriani e richiamato i loro a Damasco. «L'Arabia Saudita, attuale presidente del Consiglio, annuncia

che gli Stati del Consiglio di cooperazione del Golfo hanno deciso di ritirare i propri ambasciatori dalla Siria e di aver chiesto a quelli siriani nei Paesi membri del Ccg di partire immediatamente», si legge in un comunicato diramato dal segretario generale, che prosegue accusando il regime siriano di «massacro collettivo contro un popolo disarmato». I sei Paesi del blocco petrolifero avevano già ritirato, a fine gennaio, i loro rappresentanti da una delegazione di osserva-

tori della Lega Araba inviata in Siria per monitorare le violenze, denunciando l'inefficienza della missione nelle condizioni in cui era svolta e la mancanza di sicurezza.

ORRORE

Arrestati, torturati, violentati e uccisi durante la detenzione. Sono queste le atrocità commesse sui minori in Siria e denunciate dall'Unicef. «Quasi undici mesi di violenze che hanno causato la morte e il ferimen-

Foto di Youssef Badawi/Ansa-Epa



Assad e i suoi fratelli: tra affari e terrore, ecco il clan del raïs

I cugini, il fratello, i sodali: hanno in mano tutto il potere dall'esercito alla compagnia telefonica. Gestiscono la politica, gli affari (anche quelli sporchi) e i rapporti con il terrorismo

Il dossier

U.D.G.

Un clan al potere. È il «clan Assad». Non solo un Presidente, ma un ramificato sistema di potere fondato su due pilastri: il partito-Stato e l'Esercito, il clan, innanzitutto. Un clan familiare, quello degli Assad, che ruota intorno a quattro uomini forti: Maher, fratello di Bashar, ha in mano le redini dell'esercito ed è a capo del partito, Assaf Chawkat, il cognato, è a capo dei servizi segreti. I fratelli Makhlof, cugini di Bashar, uno è capo dei servizi di sicurezza di Damasco, l'altro, Rami, ricco boss, è considerato il simbolo della corruzione. Cugino da parte materna di Bashar, Rami Makhlof è proprietario, tra l'altro, di una delle due compagnie di telefonia cellulare del Paese, la SyriaTel. Il suo nome era salito agli onori delle cronache nel 2008, quando il Dipartimento del tesoro americano lo aveva inserito in una lista nera con l'accusa di beneficiare e facilitare la corruzione pubblica in Siria.

Completa il clan una serie di militari e consiglieri. A cominciare da Abdel-Fatah Qudsiyeh, capo dell'intelligence militare e di quella, potentissima, dell'aviazione. È noto alle cronache per aver guidato la commissione d'inchiesta sull'uccisione, nel 2008, del comandante di Hezbollah Imad Mughniyeh. Uno dei sopravvissuti dell'era paterna - quella di Hafez Assad, oggi stretto consigliere di Bashar - è Muhammad Nasif Kheirbek, l'uomo malvisto dagli Stati Uniti che da decenni cura i rapporti, ottimi, con l'Iran. Altro nome forte è quello di Ali Mamlouk, ex capo del Mukhabarat, consigliere speciale del presidente per la sicurezza. Secondo Wikileaks, è considerato dagli americani uno degli anelli di congiunzione con le organizzazioni terroristiche mondiali.

Tutte queste figure rappresentano il cuore del clan. Attorno al gruppo di potere si aggirano anche il vicepresidente Farouk al-Sharaa, il ministro della Difesa Ali Habib Mahmoud e Bouthaina Shaaban, il consigliere personale di Assad che ha il compito di curarne l'immagine pubblica. La Siria è governata da quarant'anni dalla minoranza alawita (una setta musulmana che risale allo sciismo, una setta nella setta).

Gli alawiti, in Siria, sono però una piccolissima minoranza (non più dell'11%), mentre l'80% sono sunniti e circa il 9% cristiani. Per poter governare il Paese, quindi, la famiglia Assad ha messo in tutti i posti importanti (nel Governo, nell'esercito, nella polizia) gente della sua tradizione, del suo grup-

LA MISSIONE

D'Alema al Cairo «Fratelli musulmani interlocutori dell'Ue»

I Fratelli musulmani, il cui partito è la prima forza politica dell'Egitto, devono essere considerati interlocutori dell'Ue e dell'Italia, che a loro volta devono sostenere la transizione democratica e al tempo stesso misurarsi con la nuova dirigenza egiziana sui diritti. A sostenerlo è Massimo D'Alema che al Cairo, ultima tappa della sua missione in Medio Oriente, ha incontrato esponenti del governo e di varie forze politiche egiziane fra le quali il presidente del partito della Confraternita Mohamed Morsi e il presidente del Parlamento, Saad el Katatni. «Dobbiamo confrontarci con i nuovi leader perché dobbiamo rispettare quello che gli egiziani hanno deciso col voto», ha detto D'Alema, secondo il quale è necessario «stabilire un rapporto e discuterlo». Nell'incontro con Morsi, rimarca l'ex premier, è stato affrontato il tema della libertà religiosa e della convivenza con i copti «come uno dei test fondamentali per il nuovo Egitto» come quello dei diritti delle donne.

po religioso. La situazione, quindi, è questa: una grande maggioranza (80%) governata da una ristrettissima minoranza (11%).

Esercito, Guardia Repubblicana, Mukhabarat e Intelligence sono pilastri di questa struttura statale che rappresenta un potere concreto direttamente controllato dal clan Assad. Riflette in proposito Thomas Pierret, ricercatore francese, tra i più acuti analisti del «pianeta-Assad»: «Bisogna distinguere: da una parte ci sono i servizi di sicurezza, che hanno essenzialmente una funzione di controllo della società, il controllo di eventuali opposizioni; e dall'altra l'esercito. Poi c'è il partito Baath,

Parenti

Maher è a capo del partito, il cognato Assaf guida i servizi

Minoranza alawita

Un sistema di alleanze che però ora è entrato in crisi

che non è esattamente un partito ideologico, perché la sua ideologia ormai è morta: ne parlo come strumento di patronaggio e di controllo della società. E al di là di questo vi sono dei partenariati che sono stati stabiliti con alcuni attori sociali strategici come il mondo degli affari. E in una certa misura, con l'ambiente rurale, perché il regime all'inizio si è costruito su una strategia di alleanza e di promozione dei contadini, creando delle unioni di contadini per inquadrarli: oggi assistiamo proprio alla crisi di questa alleanza con il mondo rurale, perché i disordini sono proprio partiti dalle regioni rurali».

Per garantire il costante potere della sua famiglia, Hafez al-Assad, che aveva preso il controllo del governo nel 1971 e lo aveva rigidamente mantenuto per più di vent'anni, aveva istruito ciascuno dei quattro rami principali della sicurezza interna - la Sicurezza Generale, l'Intelligence dell'aeronautica, l'Intelligence militare e la Direzione della sicurezza politica - non solo affinché tenesse sotto controllo la popolazione siriana, ma anche affinché ciascuno di essi tenesse d'occhio l'altro, controllando gelosamente il proprio mal definito terreno d'azione. Undici mesi dopo l'inizio della rivolta, il «sistema-Assad» comincia a vacillare. Il conto alla rovescia è iniziato. ♦

to di centinaia di bambini». Oltre 400, per l'esattezza, sono i bambini che sono stati uccisi in Siria negli ultimi 11 mesi e altri 400 minori sono in carcere, denuncia la portavoce dell'Unicef, Marixie Mercado. «Abbiamo notizia di bambini arrestati arbitrariamente, torturati e abusati sessualmente durante la loro detenzione», rimarca Mercado. «Negli ultimi giorni i bombardamenti intensi delle forze governative nei quartieri civili di Homs hanno causato senza alcun dubbio nuove sofferenze ai bambini», ha aggiunto.

L'Unicef non ha accesso a queste zone, è stato spiegato. «Ma alcune notizie credibili, che arrivano in particolare da media internazionali presenti a Homs, ci dicono che ci sono bambini in preda alle violenze», insiste Mercado. «Tutto questo deve finire. Anche un solo bambino morto in una violenza è una morte in più che non possiamo permettere - incalza il direttore generale dell'Unicef Anthony Lake. È urgente che le autorità siriane aiutino tutti coloro che ne hanno un disperato bisogno». A fine novembre l'Onu aveva reso pubblico uno scioccante rapporto sulle violenze commesse dai militari siriani anche su bambini in tenera età, definite come veri e propri «crimini contro l'umanità». ♦

Il Giornale (Italie / Italy)

Obama: la Siria non è la Libia, niente attacchi

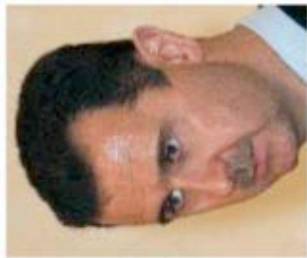
Il presidente Usa chiude l'ambasciata a Damasco, ma non la porta del compromesso con la Russia

■ Gli Stati Uniti hanno deciso di chiudere la propria ambasciata a Damasco e di invitare tutti i propri cittadini presenti in Siria a lasciare il Paese dopo che ieri una pesante offensiva militare contro i rivoltosi ha lasciato sul campo un'ottantina di morti. Nel mirino diplomatico di Washington, ma anche delle potenze europee, ci sono la Russia e la Cina che sabato scorso con il loro veto in Consiglio di Sicurezza all'Onu hanno impedito l'approvazione di una risoluzione di condanna del regime di Bashar el-Assad. La Casa Bianca sostiene, ed appare difficile darle torto, che quei «no» sono suonati alle orecchie del dittatore di Damasco come un'autorizzazione a continuare a comportarsi come un macellaio nel suo stesso Paese.

Ma anche dall'Europa giungono ferme parole di condanna dell'operato non solo di Assad, ma dei suoi oprotettori di Mosca e di Pechino. «La Germania e la Francia non

lasceranno morire il popolo siriano. Quello che sta succedendo è uno scandalo. Non siamo disposti ad accettare l'indecisione o il blocco della comunità internazionale», ha detto Nicolas Sarkozy, preannunciando una telefonata al collega russo Dmitri Medvedev anche a nome della cancelliera Angela Merkel.

Intanto, i Paesi dell'Unione Europea stanno valutando la possibilità di espellere i rappresentanti diplomatici siriani, ed eventualmente ritirare i propri ambascia-



DITTATORE Bashar el-Assad

tori da Damasco, cosa che la Gran Bretagna ha già fatto. Lo ha annunciato il ministro degli Esteri Giulio Terzi, che sulla linea sostenuta da Mosca e Pechino ha commentato: «È estremamente sgradevole, per usare un eufemismo». Un voto «basato su considerazioni di fatto e di diritto completamente sbagliate», ha aggiunto Terzi, che

«non può essere accettato». Ieri il nostro ministero degli Esteri ha espresso all'ambasciatore siriano a Roma «lo sdegno del governo italiano» per le violenze perpetra-

te dal regime contro la popolazione civile. Anche la Turchia, fino a poco tempo fa vicina alla Siria di Assad ma ormai passata a una diversa strategia, ha criticato duramente la scelta di Russia e Cina al Palazzo di Vetro: «La guerra fredda è finita», ha osservato il presidente Abdullah Gül.

Quanto ai possibili sviluppi della crisi siriana, la linea del presidente americano Barack Obama è simile a quella prescelta per quella iraniana: intensificare le pressioni sul regime senza ricorrere all'intervento militare. «Noi dobbiamo essere inflessibili nel mandare il messaggio che è arrivato il momento che Assad se ne vada - ha detto Obama - non è più una questione di date, ma una questione di quando». Tuttavia, ha aggiunto, «non tutte le situazioni permettono il tipo di soluzione militare che abbiamo avuto in Libia».

Anche ieri l'obiettivo principale dell'offensiva militare di Assad è stata la città di Homs, già bersaglio di pesanti attacchi, anche di artiglieria, nei giorni scorsi: solo ieri nella città ribelle sono morte circa 50 persone.

Libero (Italie / Italy)



LA MOGLIE DEL PRESIDENTE

Asma scrive al «Times»: non mollo mio marito

■ ■ ■ Nonostante il massacro di civili vada avanti, Asma al-Assad, moglie di Bashar al-Assad, conferma il suo appoggio al presidente siriano. Non sono bastati per farle cambiare idea 11 mesi di violenze. In una e-mail inviata dal suo ufficio al britannico Times, la first lady ha affermato che il marito è «presidente della Siria e non di una fazione di siriani». Ha inoltre ribadito di essere al fianco del leader di Damasco in questo momento di difficoltà. Nel messaggio c'è anche un timido invito al dialogo fra il regime e i suoi oppositori. Si dice anche che la moglie del presidente «in questi giorni ascolta e consola le famiglie delle vittime di violenze». E come sempre si sta dedicando al volontaria-

to. La posizione di Asma è stata molto defilata in passato. Lo scorso gennaio la moglie del presidente ha partecipato, insieme ai due figli, a una manifestazione governativa a Damasco, a cui era presente il marito. Erano circolate voci su una possibile fuga della first lady dalla Siria per presunte divergenze con il presidente sulla crisi in atto da metà marzo dello scorso anno. Asma, 36 anni, nata in Inghilterra, è musulmana sunnita (il marito e il suo clan sono sciiti), e la sua famiglia è originaria di Homs, proprio la città che in queste ore è bersagliata senza sosta dalle truppe di Damasco e che è già diventata la città martire degli insorti.

AL. CAR.

El Mundo (Espagne / Spain)

España estrena mano dura con Siria

- Madrid llama a consultas al embajador en Damasco y mantiene abierta la legación
- Italia, Francia, Holanda y Alemania emulan la política de EEUU y el Reino Unido

ANA ROMERO / Madrid

La comunidad internacional jugó ayer su última carta diplomática tras el fiasco del veto de Rusia y China en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU: la llamada a consultas en cascada de sus embajadores en Damasco, emulando la política iniciada en octubre por Estados Unidos y esta semana por el Reino Unido.

Por primera vez desde que se inició la revuelta en Siria hace 11 meses, España reaccionó con renovada dureza. El embajador español, Julio Albi, llega hoy a Madrid tras ser llamado también a consultas. Al mismo tiempo, su homólogo sirio en Madrid, Hussam Edin Aala, fue convalidado ayer por cuarta vez a Exteriores, donde Juan González-Barba, el director general de Oriente Medio, condenó ante el la represión del pasado fin de semana en Homs.

Allí se calcula que han muerto ya medio millar de personas. Los residentes atrapados en Homs hablan de «genocidio» para referirse a la peor matanza de civiles desde que

«no se anda por las ramas» cuando se trata de Derechos Humanos, «bien sea en Cuba, bien en Siria».

Fuentes diplomáticas no descartan que Albi ya no vuelva más a Siria. De momento, la legación española en Damasco permanece abierta con dos diplomáticos –el ministro consejero y el cónsul–. La seguridad del edificio se ha redoblado.

Pero la situación en el interior se deteriora por días. Francia y el Reino Unido, al igual que hicieron en Libia, están ayudando al Ejército Libre de Siria a través del Líbano, Turquía e Irak, según fuentes diplomáticas occidentales. Pero la situación de desigualdad militar puede hacer que el régimen de Asad aguante aún unos meses más.

Mientras la matanza continúa, Italia, Francia, Holanda, Alemania y Bélgica se mostraron ayer igual de contundentes que España en una acción semicoordinada por las principales capitales europeas. Todos llamaron a sus embajadores. A ellos se unieron los países del Golfo, agrupados en el organismo regional GCC (en sus siglas en inglés) que incluye a Arabia Saudí, Qatar, Omán, Kuwait, Bahrein y Emiratos Arabes Unidos. Estas petromonarquías han ido incluso más lejos que las democracias europeas: ayer decidieron no sólo llamar a consultas a sus embajadores,

sino también expulsar a los representantes sirios de sus capitales.

El GCC emitió una nota en la que dice seguir «con enfado y tristeza la escalada de la violencia en Siria, que no tiene compasión ni con niños, ni mujeres ni mayores, en actos terribles que solo se pueden calificar de masacres masivas contra el pueblo».

La Unión Europea

prepara nuevas sanciones para el 27 de febrero, informa Javier Gallejo. Se trata de acentuar la asfixia económica con el embargo a la importación de determinados metales preciosos y de prohibir el establecimiento de relaciones comerciales con el Banco Central.

Pero ayer, la jefa de la diplomacia europea, Catherine Ashton, no retiró al envío de la UE en Damasco, Vassilis Bontosoglou, porque «las decisiones a este respecto dependen de cada Estado miembro», según su portavoz, Michael Mann. Ashton es partidaria de seguir endureciendo sanciones a Siria hasta que Asad ceda el poder a su vicepresidente para que cree un gobierno de concertación y celebre elecciones. Para muchos, algo imposible después de 6.000 muertos.

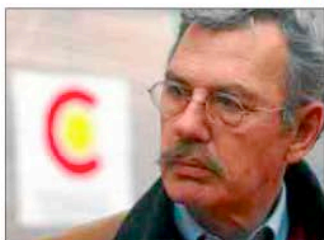
ORBYT.es

>Vea hoy en EL MUNDO en Orbyt el videoanálisis de Ana Romero sobre Siria.



Seguidores de Asad reciben con vitores al ministro de Exteriores ruso, Serguei Lavrov, ayer, en Damasco. /AFP

Los países del Golfo se suman a la iniciativa de los grandes de Europa



El embajador de España en Siria, Julio Albi. /EFE

García-Margallo «no dudó un instante» al tomar la decisión de llamar a Julio Albi

comenzó la revuelta el 16 de marzo, según fuentes de la oposición siria.

La decisión de ayer lleva el trazo personal del ministro José Manuel García-Margallo, quien según fuentes diplomáticas, «no dudó un instante» a la hora de decidir que había que llamar a consultas a Albi. El embajador español fue enviado a Damasco hace apenas dos años por el ministro Miguel Ángel Moratinos, que entonces mantenía una relación estrecha con el régimen de Bashar Asad. Especialmente destacada era la amistad de Moratinos con el aún titular de Exteriores Wálid Moalén.

La actitud de Madrid es ahora radicalmente distinta. Según fuentes diplomáticas, García-Margallo

Rusia: Asad hablará con todos

XAVIER COLÁS
El Gobierno sirio desea la paz tanto como Rusia. Ese fue el mensaje que se esforzó en dar el ministro ruso de Asuntos Exteriores, Serguei Lavrov, que afirmó ayer tras reunirse en Damasco con el presidente de Siria que Bashar Asad está dispuesto a dialogar con todas las fuerzas políticas. Lavrov, que desde el inicio de la crisis tra-

ta de evitar una intervención armada sobre su principal socio y aliado en la zona, reafirmó la disposición rusa para interceder en el conflicto «a partir de las posiciones expuestas en la iniciativa de la Liga Árabe».

Las gestiones para el cese de la violencia deberían incluir «la apertura de un diálogo entre todas las fuerzas políticas», dijo Lavrov.

«El presidente de Siria ha reafirmado su disposición a propiciar esta labor», añadió después de ser recibido como un salvador por una multitud que agita banderas rusas. El canciller desveló también que pronto habrá fecha para el referéndum sobre la futura constitución siria.

El líder opositor perteneciente al Consejo Nacional Sirio, George

Sabra, recogió el guante y se mostró favorable a participar en conversaciones con el actual Gobierno de Asad con mediación de Rusia, según informó Interfax.

Mientras, la sangría en ciudades como Homs sigue sin freno. Según los grupos de la oposición, al menos 14 personas murieron allí por los ataques de las fuerzas sirias, 25 en todo el país. Entre los fallecidos figuraba un matrimonio y tres de sus hijos pequeños.

ABC (Espagne / Spain)

Asma al-Assad rompe su silencio

D. IRIARTE
ESTAMBUL

La esposa del presidente sirio, Asma al-Assad, habría roto su misterioso silencio. Aunque lo hizo de forma un tanto indirecta, a través de un correo electrónico dirigido al diario británico «The Times», en el que se asegura que la primera dama apoya las acciones de su esposo como «presidente de todos los sirios». La desaparición casi total de Asma de la escena pública había desatado todo tipo de conjeturas. La semana pasada, el mismo «The Times» publicó un extenso artículo especulando sobre la postura de la primera dama siria ante la represión desatada por el régimen. El diario barajaba tres opciones: que hubiese cerrado filas con su cónyuge; que se encontrase atrapada por la situación, o que estuviese en «estado de negación» de la realidad ante lo trágico de los acontecimientos.

«El presidente es el presidente de Siria, no de una facción de los sirios, y la primera dama le apoya en este papel», asegura el correo citado por The Times. «La agenda extremadamente cargada de la primera dama está siempre consagrada principalmente a las asociaciones caritativas. Estos días, se ocupa también de promover el diálogo. Ella escucha y reconforta a las familias víctimas de la violencia», afirma.

¿Es la propia Asma la que habla? «The Times» así lo cree, aunque otros medios que se han hecho eco de la noticia indican la imposibilidad de comprobarlo de forma inde-



Asma al-Assad

AFP

Escueto mensaje
«El presidente es el presidente de Siria y no de una facción, y la primera dama le apoya»

pendiente. Para numerosos opositores consultados recientemente por ABC, no cabe duda de su complicidad, por activa o por pasiva, en la violencia. Les duele especialmente que no se haya rebelado ante la destrucción de Homs, ciudad de la que es originaria su familia, aunque ella haya nacido y crecido en Inglaterra. La que otrora fuese un icono de mujer árabe emancipada se ha convertido en la esposa cómplice del dictador.

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

Damasco recibe como a un héroe al ministro ruso de Exteriores

El Asad saca a sus leales a las calles mientras sube la repulsa internacional

TOMAS ALCOVERRO
Beirut. Corresponsal

Triunfalmente, como un héroe, fue recibido el ministro de Asuntos Exteriores ruso, Serguéi Lavrov, en Damasco. Según la televisión estatal, se congregaron alrededor de un millón de personas no sólo en la capital sino también en Alepo, la segunda ciudad del país, en esta gran manifestación de adhesión al régimen convocada para acoger al jefe de la diplomacia del Gobierno de Moscú. Su veto y el de China evitaron la

adopción de una resolución del Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU condenatoria de Bashar el Asad.

Con banderas, globos de los colores nacionales de ambos pueblos, esta parte de la población siria quiso dar fe ante el mundo de su apoyo al presidente cuando países occidentales y árabes, o las monarquías petrolíferas del Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo, han llamado a consultas sus embajadores. Este grupo de países, y en primer lugar Arabia Saudí y Qatar, ya habían retirado previamente sus observadores en la sus-



Llegada triunfal. El coche del ministro ruso de Asuntos Exteriores, Serguéi Lavrov, es recibido con banderas sirias y rusas a su llegada ayer al palacio presidencial de Damasco

pendida misión enviada por la Liga Árabe.

En el característico lenguaje edulcorado de los diplomáticos, el ministro Serguéi Lavrov se refirió a que sus conversaciones con el rais El Asad habían sido muy

constructivas. El ministro declaró que el presidente, cuyos carros de combate –ahora de fabricación rusa, antes soviética– continúan bombardeando la ciudad de Homs, se había comprometido a aceptar una solución del con-

flicto, basada en la propuesta anterior de la Liga Árabe, prometiéndole una ampliación de la misión de observadores, así como la inminente organización de un referéndum sobre una nueva Constitución.

Es difícil que la citada iniciativa de la Liga Árabe pueda servir de base a un acuerdo, ya que el texto proponía que El Asad delegase sus funciones en el vicepresidente Faruq el Shara, dirigente de la vieja guardia del régimen, ya anteriormente rechazada.

Según algunas informaciones, el Gobierno de Putin estaría preparado para convocar unos encuentros con miembros de la oposición siria, de la oposición moderada que no exige como condición previa a las negociaciones la dimisión de Bashar el Asad, para promover una solución pacífica de este conflicto extremadamente complicado por sus implicaciones internacionales y por la diversa composición de la población. Rusia no quiere un cambio de régimen en Siria, su última aliada árabe, su ventana al Mediterráneo. No acepta, tampoco, que se pueda repetir una situación tan catastrófica como la de Libia, con una intervención militar occidental como desean el Ejército Libre

España y otros cuatro países europeos se retiran

El ministerio español de Asuntos Exteriores ha llamado a consultas al embajador de España en Siria, Julio Albi, después de que Reino Unido, Francia, Bélgica e Italia hayan tomado la misma medida y EE.UU. haya cerrado su legación diplomática. Además, el embajador sirio en

Madrid, Husam Edin Ala, será convocado para comunicarle "la condena por las actuaciones de las fuerzas armadas y de seguridad". La retirada del embajador no implica cerrar la representación en Damasco. La Unión Europea no se plantea retirar a su personal en Siria, ya que conside-

ra necesario que haya observadores independientes, pero prepara nuevas sanciones, que podrían incluir un veto al comercio de oro y metales preciosos (como el que impuso a Irán) y no se descarta ampliar la lista negra en la que ya figuran casi un centenar de personas y decenas de

entidades sirias. Sin embargo, no hay todavía un acuerdo para prohibir la mayoría de las operaciones con el Banco Central sirio y bloquear sus fondos, idea planteada por algunos países. Los expertos comunitarios responsables del expediente sirio volverán a tratar el asunto mañana.

COMPRO ORO

Joyería Gracia desde 1980

ESPECIALISTAS EN:



Ajuntament de Barcelona

DIADA DE SANT JORDI 2012

Davant la diada de Sant Jordi 2012 – 23 d'abril –, es comunica a tots els interessats que l'admissió de sol·licituds per instal·lar parades de venda de roses o llibres serà oberta fins al dia 09 de març.

Jornal de Noticias (Portugal)

Europa e árabes aumentam pressão

Damasco recebe diplomata

russo como um herói

A pressão contra Assad aumenta. Depois dos EUA, Europa e países árabes decidiram retirar os seus diplomatas de Damasco. Agora, os olhos estão postos sobre a Rússia, o único aliado da Síria. Ontem, o chefe da diplomacia russa foi recebido como um herói.

O chefe da diplomacia russa, Serguei Lavrov, rejeitou, ontem, em Damasco, "qualquer intervenção estrangeira" para resolver a crise na Síria, depois de se reunir com o presidente Bashar al Assad. "A Síria precisa de paz, e esse acordo deveria ser alcançado fora de qualquer intervenção estrangeira", destacou Lavrov após a reunião.

O ministro russo garantiu que Moscovo "pretende continuar o seu trabalho com as autoridades sírias" com o objectivo de encontrar uma solução negociada. Da mesma forma, Lavrov lembrou que seu país está pronto para cooperar para uma saída do conflito "como foi mencionado na iniciativa da Liga Árabe, em 2 de Novembro".

O chefe da diplomacia russo, que viajou acompanhado pelo chefe do serviço de espionagem exte-

rior, Mikhail Fradkov, entregou a Assad uma carta do chefe de Estado russo, Dmitri Medvedev. E garantiu que o presidente sírio está disposto a dialogar com todas as forças políticas. "O presidente sírio está totalmente comprometido com o fim da violência, independentemente de onde provenha". Lavrov manifestou que Assad pediu ajuda "para influenciar os grupos opositores, até que se estabeleça o diálogo".

A visita do diplomata russo a Damasco, onde foi recebido como um herói pelo veto na ONU, ocorreu no mesmo dia em que Bélgica, Reino Unido, Espanha, França, Itália e Holanda anunciaram que chamaram os embaixadores para consultas. A decisão dos países europeus coincidiu com uma outra das monarquias do Golfo - Omã, Emirados Árabes Unidos, Arábia Saudita, Catar, Bahrein e Kuwait - de expulsarem os embaixadores sírios e retirarem os diplomatas de Damasco.

Portugal e Marrocos, membros não-permanentes do Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas, ape-



Apoiantes de Assad agradeceram o veto russo na ONU e receberam diplomata como herói

Espiões

ALEMANHA CHAMA EMBAIXADOR
O ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros da Alemanha chamou, ontem, o embaixador da Síria em Berlim e comunicou-lhe que não serão toleradas actividades contra opositoristas sírios em território germânico. A iniciativa surgiu poucas horas antes da detenção de dois alegados espiões sírios, acusados de terem vigiado sistematicamente dissidentes do regime de Assad na Alemanha.

laram, ontem, para o fim da violência na Síria, com Rabat a anunciar que pediu à China e à Rússia que pressionem Damasco.

Massacre continua

O massacre na Síria continua. Ontem, em Homs, cidade que continua a ser bombardeada pelas forças militares, mais de 20 pessoas terão morrido. Anteontem, o número de vítimas civis terá chegado a 100. Segundo estimativa feita há um mês pela ONU, mais de 5400 morreram desde o início do conflito. ■

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Orthodox Christians in fear of 'utter chaos' seek refuge in prayer



MICHAEL JANSEN
in Syria

Members of a Syrian convent believe many interests are seeking to sabotage their country

THE ORTHODOX convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya sits four square on a hilltop an hour's drive from Damascus. The convent de-militarises the town of Saydnaya, inhabited by Christians known for piety. Our missionaries, carrying a Lebanese television team, four

European journalists and two young men from the ministry of information, winds its way up the hillside and into the convent and parks at the back. There, we can see where a mortar punched a large hole in the pinkish-beige stone wall near the roof of the 19th-century building. The sound has already been cloaked with stones and mortar.

A thin woman in a blue wool dress goes to flowering to the address system.

Retired school mistress Mariella Mansour was at home when the projectile struck on Sunday, January 25th. "It was about 1.15. I rushed out to see what happened and saw the damage."

Why did they shoot at convents?
"To scare Christians . . . to scare children. *Harām* (haram). This never happened here before . . . God protect president Assad. We cannot trust anyone else," she says.
"They must persuade the

convents to end their attacks. I'm afraid . . . I watch TV day after day. All those dead people every day. It's so horrible. The TV does not switch al-Arabia and al-Jazeera. Arab satellite channels seem as being anti-regime.

We make our way to the front of the convent, where women in their Sunday best, girls in skimpy mini-skirts and sequin-quilted jackets, are in high-jump in wide

toes, are zig-zagging their way down flights of stone steps with black iron railings decorated with crosses. We pause until the flow subsides before climbing to a landing, where the priest awaits us. Fr George Najmeh is a portly, balding man wearing a black cassock with spiky threads over his cassock.

He echoes the words of Mansour: "The Virgin Mary protected us. Today's service had many more people than previous prayers. Prayer is among the weapons protecting us and driving



Sr Verona, head of the Saydnaya convent, in a room in the convent that was damaged in a recent mortar attack. Photograph: Bassem Tallawaj/AP

away the black cloud hanging over Syria. Fr adds: "We should not have forgotten the 100,000 boys and girls of innocents who seek to sabotage our country. They are promoting sectarianism in the villages. . . We are afraid of inner chaos. The Europeans are blindly following the Americans without looking at the reality . . . Russia is different. The Russian Church understands our situation."

We stand in the office of the mother superior, a large woman in black habit with a heavy jewelled cross hanging from her neck. She gestures towards the shelf of the unexplosive mortar lying on a tray on an elegant inlaid wooden table in the centre of the room. Security men who came to

the convent we slip off our shoes and duck into a tiny chapel where half a dozen women are seeking the blessing of an icon of the Virgin, reputedly painted by St Luke.

The icon is covered in gold, the image of the Virgin is tiny, dark and surrounded by tiny heads of saints. A Muslim man from the party kneels in respect and receives from a nun a small piece of cotton soaked in holy oil and inserted in a plastic packet.

near the dormitory where some of the 25 children sleep. "The ghost praying there left an hour before. The children were led the mortar are bracketed."

A cheerful sister leads us to the targeted room, where a third of the wall was destroyed. On the open landing, she points to the snow-topped mountains in the distance. "The emperor Justinian was building when his party came from the East. She is from here, Fr says: "You're not going to kill me but build a convent."

In a corridor at the bottom of the convent we slip off our shoes and duck into a tiny chapel where half a dozen women are seeking the blessing of an icon of the Virgin, reputedly painted by St Luke.

The icon is covered in gold, the image of the Virgin is tiny, dark and surrounded by tiny heads of saints. A Muslim man from the party kneels in respect and receives from a nun a small piece of cotton soaked in holy oil and inserted in a plastic packet.

The Irish Times (Irlande / Ireland)

MINISTER'S VISIT

Government supporters give Lavrov a warm welcome

MICHAEL JANSEN

SYRIANS, young and old, some carrying flags, others with rolled posters, gathered in the wide square near the central bank to climb on to buses that would carry them to the western Mezza neighbourhood.

There they welcomed Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov as he arrived at the grand foreign ministry complex.

Muhammad Barini, from the coastal city of Tartous, and three friends called Ali, chatted as they waited for their turn to board a bus. Ali Ibrahim is from the central city of Hama, Ali Assad from Latakia and Ali Ali from the Golan.

"We support President Assad," said Muhammad. "We want quiet, not violence." Asked their ages and what they are studying, he replied: "We're all 17. We're in the 11th form."

Ali, from the Israeli-occupied Golan said: "We want to go to college. Perhaps here, perhaps outside. We don't know yet what we want to study."

The boys grinned as three girls appeared, before giggling and moving away into a shop entrance.

Demonstrations are a great way for young people to meet in this conservative society.

Two women wearing identical white woolly hats made for the scrum for the bus. A man in a bulky jacket waved his friends goodbye when the packed, right-leaning bus left without him.

Cars with flags fluttering in

their windows rushed round the traffic circle, hooting.

A wedge of small school children, some boys wearing scout scarves, marched by with placards bearing the visage of President Bashar al-Assad, the rallies an excuse for playing truant.

Buses, cars, motorbikes carrying government supporters, some invited to attend, others determined to show the flag, converged on the six-lane Damascus-Beirut highway and formed lines along it to give Lavrov a hearty greeting.

In addition to Syrian flags, they brandished the Russian standard and the yellow-and-green banner of the Lebanese Hizbullah.

Two Russian flags were made out of hundreds of balloons.

The atmosphere was festive in spite of the tension and fear that preoccupy most Syrians watching helplessly as their country slides towards civil war.

Once the rally finished, participants melted away: teenagers to shops to buy snacks, lovers to walk in parks holding hands; workers freed from jobs marched with the flags and placards into the city centre to carry on private demonstrations elsewhere.

Some Syrians support the government, others the opposition, but most simply want the violence to end so they can resume normal lives.



Supporters of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gathered in Damascus yesterday, flying Syrian flags along with the Russian standard to welcome Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov. Photographs: Sana/Denis Sinyakov/Reuters



As Russia claims deal for peace, the killing in Homs goes on

Roland Olyphant in Moscow
and David Blair

ASSIA'S foreign minister claimed to see a promise of a "cessation" of violence yesterday after meeting President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

But Sergei Lavrov's words were immediately undermined by the Syrian interior ministry, which pledged to press on with an offensive against "armed terrorist gangs" in the city of Homs.

"Operations to hunt down terrorist gangs will continue until security and democracy is established in all neighbourhoods of Homs and all its environs and until a cessation of armed persons towards its citizens," said a statement.

Mr Lavrov met the president in Homs, where he was greeted by thousands of cheering Syrians and Russian soldiers, and then returned to Moscow on the night of his departure. He asks every five minutes, "There are about four opposition activists in the city. The humanitarian situation is dire. No one more around."

The bombardment targeted three areas were rebels from the Free Syrian Army were a strong presence, including the district of Bab al-Amr, which bore the brunt of Monday's barrage. At least nine militants and four soldiers were killed in an area yesterday, according to the Syrian secretary for Human Rights, a London-based group. Six of the civilian dead were Bab al-Amr. In total, 21 people were killed in Syria.

Mohammad al-Hassan, another activist

in Homs, said a doctor tried to get through the barrage to Bab al-Amr but was himself hit and wounded. "There is no electricity and all communication has been cut," Mr Hassan added.

One activist, who would give his name only as Omar, said that tanks were closing in on the neighbourhood. "The shelling has been going on for days and the siege is getting worse. We are short of everything including food and medical supplies," he said. "People here have not slept for days."

Mr Lavrov arrived in Damascus buoyed by Russia's decision to join China in vetoing a proposed United Nations resolution that would have urged Mr Assad to step down.

Mr Lavrov believes this move will aid the cause of peace. By maximising Russian influence in Syria, he is arguing, the president, Mr Assad, will be forced to drop our readiness to fully support an early exit from the crisis on the basis of the position set out in the Arab League initiative. In particular, the Syrian president assured us that he is fully committed to the cessation of violence."

At the start of their meeting Mr Lavrov turned towards Mr Assad and said: "I'vey leader of every country must be aware of his share of responsibility. You are aware of yours." RIA Novosti, the state news agency, reported Mr Assad replied that Syria "does not want to be a burden" on a friendly Russia.

However, Mr Lavrov gave no sign that Mr Assad had offered any new or specific commitments. He has promised to end

the bloodshed before, even as the death toll has climbed towards 6,000 since the conflict began 11 months ago.

Mr Assad has previously offered a new constitution that could pave the way for national elections, which he resisted yesterday. Last month he said that a referendum on this document could be held in March. But the president's opponents do not trust him to deliver, nor do they expect him to jeopardise his position by allowing free elections.

Russia is the biggest supplier of weapons to Mr Assad's armed forces, while its warships also use the Syrian port of Tartous. This facility gives the Kremlin its only naval presence in the Mediterranean and its sole military base outside the former-Soviet Union. Security Council dis-ambiguity in Syria, he argued, is Downing Street's responsibility. Mr William Hague, the foreign secretary, would lie in touch with Mr Lavrov. "Our position hasn't changed. We will judge the Syrian regime by its actions, not its words," she said. Mr Assad's pledges "stand in stark contrast" to the "savagery attempt to crush the peaceful protest in Homs," she added.

Meanwhile, evidence has emerged showing that Mr Assad was advised on how to handle an interview with ABC, the US television station, in December. Emails released by the online hacking group Anonymous show that a Syrian press attaché told Mr Assad the "American psyche can be easily manipulated".

Alex Spillius Page 19



Commentary
David Blair

ILDOM has a vote cast in the United Nations Security Council through, such prohibition on the government's respon-

sible. Russian faced what Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister, called a "hysterical" reaction when it vetoed a resolution that would have urged President Bashar al-Assad to step down.

But why is the Kremlin willing to bear such criticism for the sake of an alliance with a relatively small and poor country? Part of the explanation lies in economic interest; Russia values its standing

as the biggest supplier of weapons to Syria's armed forces, with export controls believed to be worth £2.5 billion. Russian warships also dock at the Syrian port of Tartous, the country's last military base outside the old Soviet countries.

Yet these are only the visible symbols of a deeper calculation. Vladimir Putin, who will return as Russia's president next month, is determined to restore his

country's global standing. That ambition begins with holding on to every last island of influence inherited from the Soviet Union. These reserves have been disappearing fast and three former Soviet republics — Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — are now members of Nato.

Russia interpreted the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the overthrow of Col Muammar Gaddafi in Libya as being part

of a dangerous plan to draw countries into the Western orbit, by force if necessary. The Kremlin is determined to ensure that Syria does not follow suit.

"This is not about Assad the man, this is about Syria the country," said Asher Susser from the Moshe Dajani Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University. "The Russians do not have a base of influence in the region that compares great as its Western rivals."

with Syria. It's an asset and they don't want to lose it. However, the Kremlin is also taking a gamble: if Mr Assad is overthrown, Russia will risk losing any influence in the new Syria. Russia probably wants to adopt a more subtle strategy, shaping events inside Syria and managing any transition if the regime must fall. But Moscow is running risks at least as great as its Western rivals.

Kremlin's risky calculation to hang on to an old island of Soviet influence



Turkey to take lead against Assad

By Alex Spillius

TURKEY'S prime minister yesterday said he was preparing a "new initiative" against the Assad regime, amid growing speculation that Ankara and Washington are considering the creation of an enclave and no-fly zone to protect rebels.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan said it was time for further action following the "fiasco" of Russia and China blocking a United Nations resolution against Syria.

"We are going to start a new initiative with those countries that stand by the people, not the Syrian government. We are preparing this," he told the Turkish

parliament. "We cannot remain silent on what is happening in Syria and we cannot turn our backs on the Syrian people."

Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, is due to fly to Washington today for talks with Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State. The White House said it was considering sending humanitarian aid in what would be a significant escalation of its involvement.

According to experts and former diplomats, discussions on a haven are in the earliest stages but would be accelerated if the Russian diplomatic mission to Syria proved fruitless and President Bashar al-Assad failed to stop the violence. Sinan

Ulgen, a former Turkish diplomat now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Mr Erdogan's government had "passed the point of no return" and was prepared to take a lead role in co-ordinating an effort against Syria.

It would consist of a "coalition of the willing-type operation" with an enclave and a no-fly zone, most probably in the north west around the city of Idlib.

Yesterday Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, which form the Gulf Co-operation Council, denounced Mr Assad, withdrawing their ambassadors from Damascus and expelling Syria's envoys.

The Herald (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Syria shows UN is mostly useless, most of the time



IAN BELL

GIVEN the waves of democracy activists in Moscow and other sub-zero Russian cities, Vladimir Putin is probably no fan of spontaneous uprisings. China's government, equally, is not known for encouraging popular dissent. Neither regime would relish free and fair elections.

It was not entirely a surprise, then, to see the Russians and the Chinese act as one to veto a UN Security Council resolution designed to hasten the departure of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. In non-diplomatic language, what was in it for them?

They stood to lose one of their last clients in the region. They risked allowing the West—duplicitous over Libya, they believe—to extend its influence in the region. Above all, they would be encouraging the use of the UN as a rubber stamp for regime change in democracy's name. That's not to their taste.

The United States, Britain, France, Germany and the rest,

must have seen it coming. If they truly believed that a compromise resolution would secure co-operation they were naive. The structure of the Security Council is such that the Russians and the Chinese didn't need to give an inch. Any further negotiations will begin with a resolution that amounts to almost nothing.

Britain and its allies were duly disgusted and appalled by the former Communists and semi-Communists, of course. They forgot to mention that the "action" sought by themselves and the Arab League amounted to no action at all.

Whatever the Russians and Chinese chose to believe, regime change and intervention were both ruled out, as were sanctions and an arms embargo. All that remained was a request, little more, for Assad to hand his job to his nominal deputy.

This was intended, in the UN's usual language, to put "pressure" on the Syrian regime. No-one explained what would have followed had Assad ignored the resolution or, more likely, made a few cosmetic changes while remaining in power behind the scenes. What the resolution made clear, in fact, is that there is no appetite for participation in another Egypt, Libya, or any other phase of the Arab spring.

The West was right about one thing, President Assad, as the carnage in Homs is demonstrating, now believes he has licence to crush the Syrian rebellion. Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov,

may have conveyed a different message in delivering a letter from Dmitry Medvedev, his nominal president, to Damascus. But don't hold your breath.

President Assad will probably be told to eradicate dissent with all speed and get on with a few "reforms". His supplies of Russian arms will not be impeded. Russia's Mediterranean base at Tartus will not be at risk. And democracy in Syria will be postponed for a while longer.

All of this is a textbook restatement of a familiar rule: the UN is mostly useless, most of the time. It may be all the world has in the way of a common purpose, but it falls more often than it succeeds. In terms of the Security Council, it is all but designed to fail. The American diplomats who are outraged over Russia's complicity with Syria have acted repeatedly, to take one example, to ensure that Israel is immune to UN "pressure". But then, if the UN is useless, where does that leave the Arab League? "Worse than useless"



There is far more at stake here than a near-empty resolution

would cover it. As with Libya, it has shown scant ability for united action in the affairs of the Arab world. Why would it? Several of its members are hardly shining beacons of democracy. If the dictator President Assad must go for denying his brutalised people their rights, where does that leave Saudi Arabia?

Where Syria is concerned, we are at the point where rhetoric and reality collide. Barack Obama has made it perfectly clear that the US will not actively intervene in Syria. David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy, those lions of Libya, have muted their previous rhetoric. Yesterday, France withdrew its ambassador for "consultations". In Homs, the mortar shells continued to fall.

There is far more at stake than a near-empty resolution or the machinations of Russia and China. The theological grounds are obscure, but Iran is closely allied to President Assad's Syria and liable to react to any hint of intervention. If Iran acts, Israel will act. Turkey, with borders and regional interests at stake, meanwhile expresses its disgust for the Damascus regime. The mix is as volatile as it could be.

The US is indignant, then, but realistic. A Libyan dissident would call it hypocritical. Who offered all those brave words when the Arab spring began to dawn? Who seemed to suggest that downtrodden peoples taking to the streets to overthrow hated rulers was an

excellent, uncomplicated idea? Someone forgot to add the exclusion clause: but not the Gulf states, not Syria.

Western rhetoric towards Syria tends also to minimise an inconvenient fact. The evidence emerging from the country seems to suggest that Assad is not universally unpopular. Desertions from his armed forces have self-evidently failed to hinder him. The population appears to be divided.

So are the Russians right? Is the West proposing to interfere in what is, in effect, a civil war, with no regard for the Syrians—a good number, it seems—who support Assad? They can't all be in the pay of the regime. And who are the people opposing the dictator? They need not be, by definition, the good guys. We know as much from the Libyan experience.

The Arab spring was never quite what it seemed. Egypt is now verging on chaos, but still under military rule; there is no democracy. In Libya, torture goes on, all but ignored in western capitals just because the people we backed are doing the torturing.

You can certainly apply to Assad the criterion that was applied to Gaddafi. Any ruler bent on murdering his own people should be stopped. There is a big difference, though, between what should be done and what can be done. Sometimes it seems as though the UN exists only to demonstrate how great the difference can be.

The New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

Why Beijing votes with Moscow

SYRIA

China has less interest in Syria than in maintaining a diplomatic alliance with Russia.

Minxin Pei

In many ways, China's decision to join Russia in vetoing the Syria resolution in the United Nations Security Council seems an aberration. The veto not only derailed the latest attempt to pressure the Assad regime to end its bloody crackdown, but also damaged China's relations with both the West and the Arab League, which sponsored the resolution.

In fact, the most important factor in China's decision had little to do with Beijing-Damascus ties, and everything to do with its diplomatic cooperation with Moscow.

Since it returned to the United Nations in 1971, China has been sparing in its use of the veto in the Security Council. It often chose to abstain in votes it did not support. Whenever it did use its veto — it has done so eight times — the issues were usually of importance to Chinese national interests.

In August 1972, for example, China blocked Bangladesh from gaining admission to the United Nations in support of Pakistan, from which Bangladesh had

just gained independence, and which was Beijing's ally. In January 2007, China, together with Russia, vetoed a measure imposing sanctions on Burma, a Chinese client state at the time. Then in July 2008, China joined Russia in killing a resolution punishing the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe, another of Beijing's allies.

Syria, however, seems a strange case for China to expend its valuable veto on. China has scant strategic or economic interests in the country. Yet of the eight vetoes China has cast in the Security Council, two have now involved Syria. The first one was in October 2011, when China joined Russia in blocking a Europe-backed sanctions resolution.

In the eyes of the pragmatic Chinese, the Assad regime is not worth a veto. But the Russians, motivated by their economic and security interests in Syria, opposed the resolution, and China apparently decided it was better not to jeopardize relations with the Russians and risk losing Russian support when Beijing might need it in the future.

The Russia-China axis of obstruction at the Security Council has now become a critical variable in the council's decision-making process. The two countries seem to have reached a strategic understanding: they will act defy the

West together, so that neither might look isolated. China will defer to Russia on matters more critical to Moscow (such as Syria) while Russia will do the same on issues China cares about (such as Zimbabwe or Burma).

So in order to get resolutions passed, the West usually has to persuade one of the duo (most of the time Russia) to drop its objections, typically by softening proposed sanctions. Russia is generally more confrontational than China, which prefers to let the former do most of the heavy lifting in frustrating the United States and Europe at the council. That is why on Iran-related matters, the West has consistently focused on winning over Russia.

Another factor that apparently tipped the scale in Beijing in favor of usping the veto is the Chinese Communist Party's ideological hostility to democratic transitions.

Ever since the Arab Spring brought down long-ruling dictatorships in the Middle East, the party's propaganda machine has spared no effort in portraying the events in the region in the most negative light. Fearing a similar upheaval in China, the party has tightened its censorship and intensified persecution of dissidents. The overthrow of the

Assad regime, especially should it happen as a result of Security Council action, would inspire the pro-democracy opposition — in Beijing and in Moscow. Chinese leaders understood that their veto damages ties with the West. But they appear to believe they would not have gained much had they abstained or voted yes. A prominent Chinese foreign-policy specialist, Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University, wrote on his blog that China, which has a bad image in the West because of its poor human rights record, would not have received any credit or better press had it cooperated with the West on Syria.

That may be true. But Chinese leaders will not find their veto cost-free. Their extensive efforts to burnish their image in the West, now consisting of lavish public relations campaigns and English-language news networks, is bound to be undercut by such actions.

And should a "Russian Spring" succeed in removing Vladimir Putin at some point, Beijing could find itself the lone autocratic great power in the Security Council.

MINXIN PEI is a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California.

The New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

Bargain with the devil

SYRIA II

Washington

should adopt a realistic, albeit distasteful, strategy to defuse the conflict rather than watch it explode in everyone's face.

Nicholas Noe

BEIRUT Almost one year after anti-government protests began in Syria, a disaster of enormous moral and strategic proportions is fast approaching. Full-scale civil war is now likely. And a multifront, conventional and possibly unconventional war ignited by events in the Levant is also increasingly plausible. However, many in the West, in some Arab governments and even in the Syrian opposition still think a "controlled collapse" of Bashar al-Assad's government is possible.

According to this view, increasing pressure from all around will, at some point, fracture the government and its supporters both at home and abroad. Any resulting death and destruction, as well as regional blowback, will be within acceptable limits. Unfortunately, there are at least three problems that make a controlled collapse unlikely.

First, the Assad government, which still enjoys substantial support from the army, the elite and other segments of the population, may be able to prolong its bloody denouement, with help from outsiders. Russia joined China on Saturday in vetoing a U.N. resolution against the Assad government. Iran has staked its own vital interests on Assad's regime, which is a crucial conduit for Tehran's support for Hezbollah in their common struggle against Israel.

Second, the violence from any drawdown collapse will most likely exceed the limits of moral or strategic acceptability for the West and its allies — not to mention the Syrian people. Sectarian conflicts that divide the Alawites and other minority communities from the majority Sunni population will accelerate, compounding tensions in neighboring Lebanon, where Sunni fighters are now staging attacks into Syria, and also in Iraq, where sectarian violence has sharply increased in recent weeks.

Third, the resulting movement of refugees will add yet another destabilizing element to a humanitarian crisis. Far from controlled collapse, a likely scenario is a bloody last-ditch effort by Assad, Iran and Hezbollah to save the Syrian government, which they have the means to do.

These "axis of resistance" forces

would most likely project their formidable military power against their enemies in a fight for their collective existence. Conveniently for all three of them, there are multiple ways Israel could be goaded into a major conflict without it seeming as if Assad or Hezbollah were responsible, in the eyes of their supporters. Indeed, a lone rocket attack from southern Lebanon that kills a large number of Israeli civilians is a distinct possibility.

To counter this dangerous situation responsibly, the United States and its allies would have to be willing to plan for and then swiftly implement a wide preemptive military strike. In even the best-case scenario, this would mean holding large chunks of Lebanese and Syrian territory with ground forces. Adequate preemptive planning and action, though, seems extremely unlikely given the political and financial constraints faced by Western countries at the moment, not to mention the repercussions a major war in the Middle East would have for Western interests.

It is not enough, then, to blame Russian and Chinese vetoes at the Security Council or even the murderous Assad regime for the danger that is gripping the region right now — even if they deserve much of the blame. Instead, Washington should adopt a realistic, albeit distasteful, strategy that seeks to steadily defuse the conflict rather than watch it explode in everyone's face. And that means dealing with Assad. America must dispense with the inconsistent maxim that bargaining is morally prohibited when a leader is deemed to have gone beyond the pale — especially when bargaining could actually mitigate future fallout, while eventually securing one's interests and values.

The main reason for making a deal with Assad right now is precisely that a Western-led process that steadily undermines his ability and desire to use violence would stabilize a quickly deteriorating regional situation, gradually opening up Syria's political system and reducing repression over time. The broad coalition currently facing Assad would first have to publicly lay out a grand bargain that retreats from the position of demanding that he step down immediately. In exchange, a robust and competent contingent of Arab and United Nations monitors should promptly fan out across the country in order to verify the



MURHAMAD HAMED/REUTERS

a more promising peace process makes sense. Unlike the now defunct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, talks with Syria could actually succeed (they broke down over a few hundred meters of land in 2009). Achieving an Israeli-Syrian deal could truly isolate the intransigent Iran-Hezbollah axis at a critical moment in the standoff over Tehran's nuclear program.

This benefit, together with the prospect of normalized ties between Israel and Syria, might prove attractive to members of Israel's security establishment who have long viewed a deal with Syria as both politically doable and strategically vital.

For its part, the badly shaken government in Damascus might find this a propitious moment to accept a deal as a way back from the abyss, even if this would most likely mean Assad's eventual exit in the future. And if Assad rejects it, such a patently unreasonable move might actually offer the best hope yet of splitting the government and controlling the resulting collapse.

Admittedly, the prospects of successfully orchestrating such a deal now are far less promising than they were early last year.

But the realization that die-hard elements in Damascus, Beirut and Tehran could unleash great regional destruction should prompt a long overdue discussion about putting forward a credible and comprehensive bargain.

Negotiations now, rather than war later, could lead to a far better outcome for all parties — even if that means Syrians' aspirations for freedom might be met much later than anyone would like.

NICHOLAS NOE is a contributing writer for Bloomberg View and the editor of "Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah."

army's pullback of heavy weaponry and the steady release of political prisoners. They would provide a permanent presence, and citizens could approach them to register complaints about violence committed by any side. A national reconciliation conference outside of Syria should then be convened under Arab League and United Nations auspices. This would lay the groundwork for writing a new constitution and holding multiparty, supervised parliamentary elections later this year — as Assad himself recently proposed — and presidential elections in 2013. The reconciliation conference should also begin an investigation into the violence of the past year.

Three incentives could make the deal extremely difficult for Assad to reject. First, America and its allies should call on the Free Syrian Army and other insurgents to suspend their operations. This would entail working with neighboring countries like Turkey and Jordan to create internationally supervised, weapons-free safe zones for the fighters, their families and others who feared retribution.

Second, the United States and the European Union would relax sanctions based on the government's adherence to the deal and would set up an international conference of donors to support the material needs of the Syrian people. Finally, so that it is not tarred as a Western plot, any deal would have to include a serious American-led effort to broker the return to Syria of the Golan Heights, which Israel has controlled since 1967.

Although there appears to be little political will for such an approach in Israel at the moment — the government sees no need to make concessions to Assad's weak, retreating government — expending American political capital on

The Washington Times (USA)

ORIGINAL VALUES

A U.N. for the good guys

Democracies need an organization where virtue is welcome

By Jonah Goldberg

The governments in Russia and China very much want to uphold the principle that every now and then, the state must crush people who want freedom. That is why they worked together to veto a fairly toothless U.N. resolution condemning the regime in Syria and calling for President Bashar Assad, the lipless murderer who runs the place, to step down.

The free world, still nominally led by the United States, erupted in outrage. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton denounced the U.N. Security Council veto as a “travesty.” U.S.

Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said the U.S. was “disgusted” by it. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said the Russian-Chinese veto was a “moral stain.” A spokesman for British Prime Minister David Cameron proclaimed that “Russia and China are protecting a regime which is killing thousands of people. We find their position both incomprehensible and inexcusable.”

Although I agree that the veto was disgusting and a travesty, I’m at a loss as to why so many people are shocked — or at least are pretending to be shocked.

Isn’t this what the United Nations is about?

I’ve never quite understood the idealistic enthusiasm people

have for the United Nations. First of all, it’s a club pretty much anyone can join so long as you have a government, internationally accepted borders and someone willing to vouch for your existence. As far as organizations go, that’s a pretty low bar — like a club exclusively for humans with a pulse.

has to be democratic or even care for the welfare of its people. When the ambassador from North Korea claims to speak for his people at the United Nations, it has no more moral legitimacy than a serial killer speaking for the victims he has locked in his basement.

But those who fantasize about

that is because good nations want to see good things done.

What would be so terrible about giving those good nations someplace else to meet? By good, I mean democratic. A league, or concert, of democracies wouldn’t replace the United Nations, but it would offer some much-needed competition.

We have had to go around the United Nations before, and usually we go to NATO. That was what President Clinton did in the Balkans and what President Obama did in Libya. Now Mrs. Clinton wants an ad hoc “friends of a democratic Syria” similar to the coalition that helped top-



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN CAMEJO

The whole thing stinks from the top down. The Security Council isn’t a democratic entity; it’s based on brute force. Russia and China became permanent members when they were totalitarian dictatorships. They have seats because they are powerful, not because they are decent, wise or democratic.

I think part of the confusion stems from a category error. We tend to anthropomorphize countries by talking about them as if they were people. U.N. members vote for stuff, so people think the United Nations is somehow democratic in more than a procedural way. But that’s not true. There is nothing in the U.N. Charter — at least nothing that has any binding power — that says a government

creating a “parliament of man” overlook all of that, in no small part because they see the United Nations as a useful counterweight to the United States.

Less-idealistic supporters of the United Nations insist the place is important — nay, vital — because America must engage the world, and the United Nations is the place where deals get done. That’s true, but it’s not a moral case for the United Nations; it’s an instrumental one.

None of this is an argument for getting rid of the United Nations, though I would certainly be happy to see it go. But it does point to the stupidity of expecting nobility and idealism from it. Sure, the United Nations does good things from time to time, but

ple Moammar Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein.

That’s all fine, but there are problems with making these things up as you go. NATO is a military alliance. Many friends of a democratic Syria are not, themselves, democratic.

A permanent global clubhouse for democracies based on shared principles would make aiding growing movements easier and offer a nice incentive for nations to earn membership in a club with loftier standards than mere existence.

.....
Jonah Goldberg is editor-at-large of National Review Online and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Chicago Tribune (USA)

Assad stands firm in face of uproar

Obama administration not in favor of arming rebels for time being

BY PATRICK J. McDONNELL AND PAUL RICHTER
Tribune Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Having warned Syrian President Bashar Assad that his days are numbered, Washington now faces the vexing problem of how to dislodge a defiant leader intent on snuffing out the 11-month uprising against him.

One option increasingly under consideration is arming the rebels, or looking the other way if its Persian Gulf allies do.

On Tuesday, the Obama administration said it would not support arming the Syrian opposition, for now at least, despite calls from some congressional leaders to do so. Washington said its current focus would be to organize a "contact group" to build stronger ties with opposition groups and pressure Assad with tightened economic sanctions.

But diplomats acknowledge privately that although this effort has value, it is likely to have limited effect as the Syrian body count continues to rise.

Meanwhile, Assad was standing his ground Tuesday, welcoming Russia's supportive foreign minister to Damascus. Assad re-

eled in the pro-government demonstrations that broke out in the country's two biggest cities, ostensibly to thank Russia and China for their weekend veto of a U.N. Security Council proposal demanding he step aside.

Faced with limited options, Western powers and their Arab League allies have begun "trying to decide what to do about support for the armed opposition," said Andrew Tabler, a longtime Syria analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "This discussion is going to suck everybody in."

Syria's singular geopolitical importance renders the outcome of its rebellion potentially more disruptive than that of other Arab Spring upheavals. Syria borders Israel, wields great influence in Lebanon and is a patron of Islamist militant group Hezbollah.

Perhaps most critically, Syria is not isolated. It is a key ally of Iran, a nation suspected of seeking nuclear arms capabilities while it is locked in a bruising battle for regional dominance with rival oil producer Saudi Arabia, a close U.S. ally. It also has support from neighbors Iraq and Lebanon.

As such, an armed struggle to oust Assad is likely to be protracted and bloody, with nasty sectarian overtones, analysts say. It also could involve alliances with Islamic militants and others whose view of a future Syrian



SYRIAN ARAB NEWS AGENCY PHOTO
Supporters of Syrian President Bashar Assad gather Tuesday in Damascus to welcome Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

society might be directly at odds with a Jeffersonian democracy. Experts foresee the possibility of a long-term proxy war, perhaps with Persian Gulf states' money rolled an uprising against a Soviet-

Ambassadors recalled

France recalled its ambassador from Syria on Tuesday in protest of the violent government crackdown. Also, Gulf Arab countries announced they are recalling their ambassadors from Damascus and expelling Syrian envoys. Syria's rulers have rejected Arab attempts to "solve this crisis and prevent the bloodshed of the Syrian people," a statement from the Gulf Cooperation Council said. Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are among the nations in the council.

installed secular regime.

The fight for Syria already has revived a Cold War trope: Russia backs and arms the government in Damascus, while its ouster is sought by Washington and its allies in Europe, the Arab world and Turkey, an emerging regional powerhouse that has turned on Assad.

U.S., European and Arab states have endorsed an expansion of the current approach of squeezing Assad via nonlethal means: by toughening economic sanctions, bolstering overtures to the fractious Syrian opposition and seeking to broaden Syria's diplomatic isolation.

Among the voices calling for a tougher approach against Assad on Tuesday was Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. "We should start arming the opposition," the 2008 presidential candidate said. "The bloodletting has got to stop."

pmcdonnell@tribune.com

San Francisco Chronicle (USA)



Bassem Tellawi / Associated Press

Supporters of President Bashar Assad cheer a car believed to be carrying Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. A Russian delegation is seeking to keep the Syrian leader in power.

Syria has been a key Russian ally since Soviet times, and Moscow remains a major arms supplier to Damascus even as Assad unleashes his forces to crush not only peaceful protesters, but army defectors who are fighting the regime.

that Moscow wanted to get a firsthand assessment of the situation in Syria — and the raucous welcome the diplomats received from thousands of regime supporters appeared designed to show that Assad's grip is firm, at least in Damascus.

Sergei Lavrov flew into Damascus on Tuesday, accompanied by his foreign security chief, to try to boost a plan that would keep Assad in power, even though many prominent members of the opposition reject that entirely. The visit was also a sign

WORLD

SYRIA

U.S. considers aid as Russians seek end to uprising

most severe international isolation in more than four decades of Assad family rule, with country after country calling home their envoys. France, Italy, Spain and Belgium pulled their ambassadors from Damascus, as did six Gulf nations, including Saudi Arabia, Germany, whose envoy left the country this month, said he would not be replaced. The moves came a day after the United States closed its embassy in Syria and Britain recalled its ambassador.

On Tuesday, the Obama administration suggested it might provide humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, but did not specify how or to whom.

Russian Foreign Minister

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT — Days after blocking a U.S.-backed peace plan at the United Nations, senior Russian officials pushed for reforms Tuesday during an emergency meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad, promoting a settlement to end the uprising without removing him from power.

Thousands of flag-waving government supporters cheered the Russians in the Syrian capital of Damascus, while to the north, Assad's forces pounded the opposition city of Homs — underpinning the sharp divisions propelling the country toward civil war.

The violence has led to the

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

In Syria, Russia Extracts No Vows

Moscow Says It 'Has Been Heard,' but Measures Are Unlikely to Satisfy Opposition; Homs Under Renewed Fire

By GREGORY L. WHITE
AND CHARLES LEVINSON

Russia, facing broadening international scorn over its handling of the Syrian crisis, held talks with President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on Tuesday that showed no immediate sign of slowing the country's bloody conflict.

Even as Russia's foreign minister met with the embattled president, Syrian forces pounded Homs, the heart of the uprising, for the fourth straight day. At least 15 civilians and four Syrian soldiers died there on Tuesday, activists said.

The international community appeared to place little hope in Russia's diplomatic outreach to Damascus. Instead, a new round of criticism was aimed at Russia for its decision on Saturday to veto a United Nations Security Council resolution that would have pressed Mr. Assad to leave power. The resolution, which was also rejected by China, had U.S., European and broad Arab backing.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an erstwhile Assad ally, called the veto a fiasco. "It is impossible to accept that the cruel have been given license to kill," the prime minister said, addressing the Syrian president in Arabic: "You reap what you sow."

Mr. Erdogan added that Turkey is preparing a new diplomatic initiative with Arab League countries.

Several Gulf countries pulled their diplomats from Syria, one day after the United States said it had closed its embassy in Damascus. Italy's foreign ministry said Tuesday it had recalled its ambassador to Syria for "consultation," a day after it voiced its "disdain for the unacceptable level of violence by the Damascus regime against the civil population." The French Foreign Ministry said it had recalled its ambassador because of the "intensification of the repression conducted by the Damascus regime."

After meeting with President Assad, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said his message of the need to step up efforts to end the violence in Syria "has been heard," Russian news agencies reported.

Mr. Lavrov said President Assad had said he would, in the next few days, announce a date for a referendum on a new constitution aimed at broadening political participation. He also said the Syria government backs extending an Arab League monitoring mission in the country and expanding its numbers.

"There's reason to suppose that the message we brought here to move more actively in all directions has been heard," Mr. Lavrov said.

The reforms pledged by the Syrian leader are almost certain to fall short of opposition demands that he leave power. There was no public indication Mr. Lavrov had conveyed an ultimatum in his closed-door talks with the Syrian leader.

In public comments at the start of the session, Mr. Assad hinted that he recognized the diplomatic pressure Moscow had been enduring for its support of its longtime ally. "Russia and Syria have long had friendly relations," Mr. Assad said, according to a Russian state radio report. "But Syria never wanted to be a burden for its friends."

Despite the public show of support from Russia, there were hints that Moscow's patience with Presi-



Nearly One Year of Unrest

- ◆ **March 16, 2011** Security forces break up gathering of 150 protesters in Damascus holding pictures of imprisoned relatives.
- ◆ **April 19** Government passes bill lifting 48 years of emergency rule.
- ◆ **April 22** Security forces, gunmen loyal to President Bashar al-Assad kill 100 protesters, rights group says.
- ◆ **May 23** EU imposes sanctions on Assad and nine other officials.
- ◆ **July 31** Syrian tanks storm Hama, residents say, killing at least 80.
- ◆ **Sept. 2** EU imposes ban on purchases of Syrian oil.
- ◆ **Nov. 27** Arab states vote to impose economic sanctions.
- ◆ **Jan. 22, 2012** Arab League urges Assad to hand power to a deputy, a call Syria rejects a day later.
- ◆ **Jan. 28** Amid violence, Arab League suspends monitoring mission.
- ◆ **Feb. 4** Russia, China veto U.N. bid to press Assad to yield power.

Source: Reuters

Syrian pro-government demonstrators greet the Moscow mission's motorcade with Russian and Syrian flags. Russia's Lavrov, at left during Tuesday's meeting with Syria's Assad in Damascus, said Russia's message 'has been heard.'



dent Assad could be wearing thin. In Moscow, Konstantin Kosachev, a senior legislator from the Kremlin's United Russia party, said the Assad regime "hardly has any kind of serious future."

European Union foreign ministers will examine steps to further increase pressure on Mr. Assad when they meet on Feb. 27, said EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton.

The Syrian regime's assault on Homs targeted two opposition-controlled neighborhoods, Khalediya and Bab al-Amer, with artillery, tank shells and mortars, according to activists and residents.

Local rebel fighters successfully repulsed an attempt by regime forces to enter the districts, killing four Syrian army soldiers in the process, activists and residents said. Eight civilians and four other Syrian soldiers were killed in fighting else-

where in the country on Tuesday, according to activists.

Moscow has faced a torrent of criticism from the U.S., Europe and Arab countries after its Saturday veto of the Security Council resolution, which would have pressed Mr. Assad to step aside to launch a process of democratic transition.

China, the only other country to join the veto, said Tuesday it is considering sending emissaries to Damascus. Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said during a daily press briefing on Tuesday that Beijing might dispatch representatives to help push for a peace deal in the near future, though he didn't say when the mission would go or with whom it would meet.

Russian and Syrian reports showed Mr. Lavrov and spy chief Mikhail Fradkov receiving a warm welcome from demonstrators on the

streets of Damascus waving Russian flags and chanting "Thank you" in Russian. Syria is Russia's last major remaining ally in the region, a major arms buyer and home to a Russian naval facility.

"The president of Syria gave assurance that he's completely committed to the task of stopping the violence, wherever it comes from," Mr. Lavrov said after Tuesday's talks. He noted that Mr. Assad had reiterated his willingness to hold dialogue with his opponents and asked Russia to help bring those who so far have refused to negotiate to the table.

Mr. Lavrov said Russia would continue working with opposition groups, but called on other countries "who have greater influence on them" to join the effort to stimulate dialogue.

Russian officials have accused the U.S. and other Western powers of

seeking to remove the Assad government and not doing enough to encourage dialogue. Western leaders say the Assad government, after 11 months of brutal fighting against domestic opponents, has lost its legitimacy to lead the country.

In the U.S., Sen. John McCain said Tuesday morning the U.S. should consider the option of arming opposition to Mr. Assad. Later Tuesday, officials said that while the U.S. has taken no options off the table, it isn't considering that step.

"As the president himself made absolutely clear and as the secretary has continued to say, we don't think more arms into Syria is the answer," said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland.

—Joe Parkinson, Brian Spegele, Liam Maloney and David Gauthier-Villars contributed to this article.

Bradley Burston

Wanted: A Goldstone inquiry into Syrian atrocities

It is one of the few points of agreement between people who are strongly pro-Palestinian and people who are strongly pro-Israeli: All too often, the United Nations fails its tests.

Both sides have their reasons. Palestinians will argue, and legitimately, that the veto power of the United States has shielded Israel time and again from Security Council censure. This has been true even in cases where the White House itself had grave reservations about Israeli military operations and settlement actions, which then continued unabated.

Israelis will maintain, and with justification, that UN bodies hypocritically single out Israel for condemnation and have shown overwhelming bias against its policies. This has been particularly true in the case of the UN Commission on Human Rights – in which a genocidal Sudan passed judgment on the Jewish state – and of its successor, the Human Rights Council, criticized both by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Human Rights Watch (HRW) for the extreme imbalance of its focus on Israel.

As the death toll in Syria climbs toward an unfathomable 10,000, if there were ever a test of the world body, it is now. And if ever the UN Security Council has proved to be a sham, it is now.

Syrian President Bashar Assad, a lifelong student of the United Nations' failings when it comes to Israel and Palestine, has used this knowledge to insulate himself from the consequences of the carnage he so closely controls. When Assad unleashed a murderous onslaught over the weekend, with witnesses reporting hundreds killed and a field hospital bombed to obliteration, he did so knowing that he held the only cards he needed – not one but two vetoes. Thirteen nations condemned his actions in the Security Council. Only Russia and China supported him.

When on Monday, Assad carpet-shelled



A convent in Sednaya, north of Damascus, damaged by artillery fire late last month. The UN needs to make clear to Bashar Assad that his actions will be subject to investigation, and that they may be viewed as war crimes in a future court of international law.

the city of Homs, he did so knowing how the UN so often views violence in this part of the world: In practice, Muslims can kill Muslims with impunity and prolonged freedom from sanction. Assad has also shown skill in playing off rifts within Islam to his advantage. He may also have benefited indirectly from the Israel-Palestinian divide, and the somewhat muffled nature of condemnation from this corner of the region. There are, for example, Israelis who warn that if Assad is toppled, the outcome may only be worse for Israel.

There are pro-Palestinian activists abroad who duck the issue, seeming to suggest that opposition to Syrian actions

nism which put both Israel and Hamas in the glare of international scrutiny. It put special focus on policies that subject non-combatants directly to the risk of lethal harm.

Flawed, much-hindered and little-loved, the Goldstone Report did not put an end to Israeli and Hamas military attacks that killed civilians. But it represented a turning point in accountability, one that has caused both Israel and Hamas to re-evaluate longstanding reliance on military doctrines which place civilians directly in harm's way. For all that Israel stonewalled and scorned the inquiry, it may actually have done more for Israelis than any other UN decision in recent memory. The report has effectively changed Israeli military and geopolitical strategic practice. No longer is there an automatic resort to the strategy that informed IDF tactics from Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon, 1996, and (the Beirut neighborhood of) Dahiya 10 years later, to Cast Lead in Gaza: disproportionate firepower marshaled in vain attempts to force Arab civilians to pressure their governments or armed groups in their midst. Hamas, as well, has shown signs of internal debate and re-evaluation over the efficacy and future of armed struggle.

If only for the sake of Syria's children, it is time for the United Nations to protect those it has so often failed to protect elsewhere. The UN needs to learn from its own history, and do better. There are children who cannot wait. The UN must recognize that immunity from censure, from effective protest, from sanction, directly endangers the lives of non-combatants.

The United Nations needs to create a Goldstone-type inquiry for the atrocities in Syria. The UN needs to send a direct message to Bashar Assad: A regime which resorts to war crimes will have to answer for them.



SUPPORTERS OF Syrian President Bashar Assad gather on a Damascus street to welcome Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday. (Sana/Reuters)

Russia claims Assad promised 'end to violence'

France, Gulf states pull envoys • 19 killed as Moscow's top diplomat visits Damascus • Leaked e-mails purport to show regime's tactics for manipulating Western media

• By OREN KESSLER and Reuters

Russia won a promise from Syrian President Bashar Assad on Tuesday to bring an end to bloodshed in his country, but Western and Arab states acted to isolate Assad further after activists and rebels said his forces killed over 100 in the city of Homs.

Visiting Damascus, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov hinted that the issue of Assad giving up power – a central element of the Arab proposal that Russia vetoed this week at the UN Security Council – had been raised. Assad said he would cooperate with any plan that stabilized Syria, but made clear that it would only include an earlier Arab League proposal that called for dialogue, release of prisoners and withdrawing the army from protest centers.

France withdrew its ambassador on Tuesday, vowing not to give up on peace efforts and saying Assad's days at the helm are numbered.

Opposition activists said government forces

renewed shelling of Homs just before Lavrov's arrival, killing 19 people in an onslaught they say has claimed more than 300 lives in the past five days. There were also reports from residents of shelling and fighting between government and rebel forces in Hama, another urban stronghold of anti-Assad sentiment.

Also on Tuesday, hundreds of e-mails from Assad's office were leaked by the hacker group Anonymous. The e-mails were reportedly sent from Sheherazad Jaafari, a press attaché at Syria's UN mission, to Assad's media adviser Bouthaina Shaaban in advance of his December interview with Barbara Walters of ABC News.

In the e-mails, obtained by *Haaretz*, Jaafari reportedly wrote, "It is hugely important and worth mentioning that 'mistakes' have been done in the beginning of the crises because we did not have a well-organized 'police force.' American psyche can be easily manipulated

See *RUSSIA*, Page 10

Assad promet à Lavrov la fin des violences

Syrie Rappel d'ambassadeurs arabes et occidentaux.

Le président Bachar el-Assad a déclaré hier qu'il allait « coopérer » à tout effort pour la stabilité de la Syrie et « promis » à son allié russe de faire cesser les violences, au moment où la pression internationale se faisait de plus en plus forte sur Damas. En outre, le président Assad a affirmé que la Syrie voulait que la mission de la Ligue arabe continue de travailler dans le pays et qu'elle soit élargie.

« Nous avons eu une rencontre très utile. Le président syrien nous a notamment assuré qu'il était entièrement engagé à faire cesser les violences d'où qu'elles viennent », a déclaré à Damas le ministre russe des Affaires étrangères Sergueï Lavrov, à l'issue d'entretiens avec M. Assad. « Il est clair que les efforts pour faire cesser les violences doivent être accompagnés d'un dialogue entre toutes les forces politiques », a poursuivi le chef de la diplomatie russe, ajoutant qu'aujourd'hui, le président syrien a confirmé sa

bonne volonté de contribuer à la solution contre la violence de la répression en Syrie.

Suite à ces déclarations, Washington a fait part de son « scepticisme » vis-à-vis des promesses de M. Assad et a appelé Damas à mettre immédiatement fin aux violences. « Nous allons continuer à coopérer avec nos alliés internationaux pour (...) exercer les pressions nécessaires » sur le président Assad, a déclaré Jay Carney, porte-parole de la diplomatie européenne.

« Nous explorons la possibilité de fournir une aide humanitaire aux Syriens », a-t-il poursuivi sans plus de précision, rajoutant par ailleurs que Washington n'avait pas l'intention de fournir des armes à l'opposition. Plus tôt, le sénateur républicain John McCain avait appelé à envisager d'aider l'opposition alors que l'élu démocrate John Kerry a appelé la Russie et la Chine à soutenir l'action de l'ONU.

Dans le même temps, sans aller aussi loin que les États-

Ce nouveau train de sanctions – le douzième depuis le printemps 2011 – est encore loin d'être prêt, souligne un diplomate européen. Parmi les idées sur la table figurent les sanctions avec « la banque centrale, le commerce d'or et de métaux précieux », a précisé un autre diplomate.

Les monarchies du Golfe ont de leur côté décidé d'expulser les ambassadeurs de Syrie dans leurs six pays et de retirer les leurs de Damas, alors que les Émirats arabes unis ont annoncé l'envoi « d'une aide humanitaire urgente » aux déplacés syriens dans les pays voisins. Le Parlement égyptien a pour sa part exhorté le gouvernement à dénoncer la répression de la révolte en Syrie et décidé de geler ses relations avec le Parlement syrien.

Parallèlement, la Turquie prépare une nouvelle initiative avec les pays opposés au gouvernement syrien, a déclaré le Premier ministre, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, en qualifiant de

« fiasco » le veto russo-chinois. « La conscience de la communauté internationale a une nouvelle fois été prise en otage par le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU. Disposer du droit de veto est une grande responsabilité. Faire usage de ce droit donne un feu vert à la poursuite des persécution », a déclaré le Premier ministre turc. M. Erdogan n'a donné aucune précision sur sa « nouvelle initiative ».

Côté russe, l'ambassadeur à l'ONU Vitali Tchoukline a déclaré que Moscou craint que les vives critiques qui ont accueilli son veto au Conseil de sécurité n'aient pour effet « d'empoisonner » ses relations avec le monde arabe. Enfin, l'Iran a démenti hier toute ingérence en Syrie, rejetant les accusations des Frères musulmans qui l'avaient jugé « complice des massacres » de la population par le régime syrien, et a annoncé l'envoi d'un haut responsable pour des consultations à Damas.

(Source : agences)

Le CNS et l'ASL appellent les hommes d'affaires arabes à financer les rebelles

Le Conseil national syrien (CNS) et l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) ont appelé les hommes d'affaires syriens et arabes à financer les opérations menées par les rebelles contre le régime, selon un communiqué commun diffusé hier. « Les moyens disponibles actuellement ne suffisent pas pour faire face aux attaques du régime qui reçoit un soutien en armes et en munitions et du financement de forces régionales et internationales », poursuit le communiqué.

Plus de 400 enfants tués, selon l'Unicef

Plus de 400 enfants ont été tués en Syrie depuis le début de la révolte, a indiqué hier le Fonds des Nations unies pour l'enfance (Unicef). « Selon les chiffres dont nous disposons, torturés et abusés sexuellement lors de leur détention », a déploré Mme Mercaado. L'Unicef est en outre particulièrement inquiet de la situation à Homs.

Onze pèlerins iraniens libérés

Onze des vingt-deux pèlerins iraniens enlevés ces derniers semaines en Syrie par des groupes armés ont été libérés, a annoncé hier le porte-parole du ministère iranien des Affaires étrangères, Ramin Mehmanparast. Les 11 Iraniens ont été libérés près de la frontière turque, qu'ils ont franchie à

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

GCC expels Syrian envoys

GULF STATES JOIN WEST IN RECALLING AMBASSADORS; AL ASSAD HEARD OUR MESSAGE — RUSSIA



Political manoeuvres

Supporters of the Syrian regime wave Syrian and Russian flags as they cheer a convoy carrying Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Damascus yesterday. Thousands welcomed Lavrov as he arrived for talks with President Bashar Al Assad on the country's escalating violence.

BY DURAID AL BAIK
UAE Editor

Dubai The six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) yesterday announced the recall of its ambassadors from Damascus and decided to expel Syrian envoys in response to escalating violence in the troubled country.

Damascus has rejected Arab attempts to "solve this crisis and prevent the bloodshed of the Syrian people," a GCC statement said. "The council considers that it is necessary for the Arab states ... to take every decisive measure faced with this dangerous escalation against the Syrian people. Nearly a year into the crisis, there is no glint of hope of a solution."

The GCC foreign ministers will meet in Riyadh on Saturday to discuss the situation in Syria.

The GCC action, Dr Samir Taqi, head of the Dubai-based Orient Research Centre, said is a great setback in relations between the Bashar Al Assad regime and what used to be strong allies of the country.

He said the burden of this move lies on the regime and will strip it of regional legitimacy.



Harsh reality

Two damaged armoured vehicles seen after clashes between Bashar Al Assad's forces and the Free Syrian Army in Cairo Square in the restive Syrian city of Homs.

imacy. "It comes after the regime slammed the doors on the Arab League initiative to resolve the bloody conflict," Dr Taqi said.

"I don't think that the move will entail the GCC recognition of the Syrian National Council, but it will help the revolution."

Europe, meanwhile, stepped up pressure on Syria with several nations recalling their ambassadors

and the EU considering new sanctions to cut the regime's access to funds.

France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands decided to bring back their envoys for consultations, joining Britain and Belgium to protest the regime's relentless crackdown. The US has also closed its embassy.

The developments came as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after

the Al Assad regime had heard Moscow's message, but did not elaborate.

Dr Taqi, however, said the unprecedented reception was an attempt by Al Assad's regime to pre-empt any Russian move proposing that Al Assad step down. "Al Assad wants his guest to feel that he is still popular among his people and that the maximum he could offer is a dialogue with the opposition."

Lavrov stressed that Al Assad wanted the Arab League observer mission, which was suspended last month amid a spike in violence, to continue its work and even expand, describing it as a "stabilising factor".

Turkey's new initiative

He said Syria will also announce the schedule for holding a referendum on constitutional reforms.

He also said Al Assad was ready for dialogue with all parties.

"It's clear that efforts to stop violence should be accompanied by the start of dialogue between all the political forces", he said.

Meanwhile, Turkey is preparing a new initiative with countries opposing the Syrian government and

ASSISTANCE UAE aid for the displaced

Abu Dhabi (WAM) The UAE has decided to rush emergency humanitarian aid to displaced Syrians who have taken refuge in neighbouring countries.

The humanitarian gesture comes in line with the UAE's keenness to provide all forms of humanitarian and charitable support for brotherly and friendly people affected by crises and disasters in different parts of the world.

As a result of the on-going violence, hundreds of Syrians have fled their homeland and sought shelter in neighbouring countries.

— With inputs from agencies
See also Pages 9, 12 & 13



Putin has misread Syria situation

Russia's use of its UN veto, in opposition to Arab League demand, has turned the tables in Middle East

BY DAVID HEARST

If anyone thinks the international opprobrium heaped on Russia and China for vetoing the UN resolution condemning Syria's violent repression of its people is unusual, they should cast their minds back to July 13, 2006.

Former US president George W. Bush and former UK prime minister Tony Blair spent the best part of the following 33 days dismissing calls for an end to Israel's bombardment of southern Lebanon in response to a cross-border raid by Hezbollah.

On August 3, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, a former British ambassador to Moscow, wrote that Blair's premiership had descended into "scandal and incoherence". Nor were serving Foreign Office officials quick to leap to Blair's defence. The government's policy of resisting calls for a ceasefire was "driven by the prime minister alone", they said.

Such a position is today occupied by Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister and next president who, on the day tens of thousands of his countrymen turned out in temperatures of -18 degrees Celsius to shout slogans like 'Russia without Putin', ordered Russia's

envoy to the UN to wield the veto. Russia's public relations machine went into overdrive. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave three reasons: the drive for a crackdown on Syria was preparation for a 'Libyan scenario'; despite efforts to tone it down, the draft was unilateral, and did not set enough demands on anti-government armed groups; and it demanded the withdrawal of President Bashar Al Assad's forces from towns and cities.

If defecting Syrian soldiers are to be called 'armed extremist groups', who are the militias running Libya, whom Russia belatedly recognised as a legitimate authority?

"This phrase, without being linked to a simultaneous termination of violence on the part of armed extremist groups, is absolutely provocative, as no president with self-respect, no matter how treated, will agree to surrender inhabited localities to armed extremists without resistance."

Lavrov said. Insurrections in the Middle East have now turned the international tables full circle.

Whereas western powers supported the status quo of Israel surrounded by Arab autocrats with whom it had made peace, and Russia had maintained diplomatic and defence links with Syria and Iran which backed the 'resistance' movements to Israel, today Russia finds itself defending the autocratic status quo in the form of Al Assad.

Staunching bloodshed

Putin, backed by the *sifoviki* who run the military and have invested billions in Syria, may think his policy on Al Assad is good tactics. It stops an intervention that the West was never going to make. But it makes for terrible strategy.

The veto sets Russia on the opposite side of the table from the Arab League; it lifts the international responsibility for failing to staunch the bloodshed off US President Barack Obama's shoulders, and assumes that burden itself.

And if defecting Syrian soldiers are to be called 'armed extremist groups', who exactly are the militias currently running Libya, whom Russia belatedly recognised as a legitimate authority? If Islam-

ists are by their nature extremist, and in Putin's eyes they are, what does that make the elected transitional authority in Tunisia?

Lavrov and the foreign intelligence service chief Mikhail Fradkov were in Damascus yesterday to 'stabilise' the situation in Syria and persuade Al Assad to implement 'democratic transformations'. In so doing, Russia will attempt to persuade the Arab League to extend the mission of Arab observers in Syria — a policy it has already abandoned. This lacks any sense of reality.

Russia is simply following in Turkey's footsteps, months after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan tried and failed to get Al Assad to institute political reforms before it was too late.

It is now too late. If Putin continues to believe that the extraordinary domestic protest he is facing has all been staged by the US State Department, there is little chance of him seeing the turmoil in Syria differently.

Putin's deadly enemy is the isolation in which he lives.

— *Guardian News & Media Ltd*

David Hearst is a foreign leader writer for the Guardian and a former Moscow correspondent.

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

GCC recalls, expels Syria ambassadors

Assad presents reform plan to Russia • Bombing of Homs continues

AMMAN/RIYADH — Russia said Syrian President Bashar Al Assad presented reform plans on Tuesday to help end the bloodshed in Syria, but Western and Gulf Arab states acted to isolate Assad further as his forces resumed bombarding the protest hotbed of Homs.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held talks with Assad in Damascus on a solution to the crisis palatable to Moscow, a long-time ally of Assad, after it vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that backed an Arab League call for his ouster.

But the Russian mediation failed to slow a rush by countries that denounced the Russian-Chinese veto three days ago to corner Syria diplomatically and cripple Assad with sanctions in hopes of removing him and encouraging reforms to avert chaos in a region straddling major fault lines of Middle East conflict.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states joined mounting international pressure on the Syria regime, deciding to expel its envoys and withdraw their own over the ‘mass slaughter’ of civilians.

“State members have decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Syria and ask at the same time for all the ambassadors of the Syrian regime to leave immediately,” the six GCC states said in a statement in Riyadh.

The GCC said there was “no point in them staying after the Syrian regime rejected all attempts and aborted all honest Arab efforts



A Syrian girl, who has a Syrian revolution flag painted on her hands, protests on Tuesday in front of the Russian embassy in Doha against the vetoing of the UN resolution by Russia and China. — Reuters

to solve this crisis and end the bloodshed.”

The bloc condemned “mass slaughter against the unarmed Syrian people” during the nearly 11-month crackdown by President Assad’s regime.

**› TURN TO PAGE 22
› SEE EDIT**

UAE TO SEND AID TO DISPLACED SYRIANS

ABU DHABI — The UAE has decided to rush emergency humanitarian assistance to the displaced people from Syria who took refuge in neighbouring countries. The humanitarian gesture underscores the UAE’s keenness to offer all forms of humanitarian and charitable support for brotherly and friendly peoples at times of crises and disasters. — *Wam*

China and US have ‘trust deficit’, says senior official

BEIJING — A top Chinese official has warned of a “trust deficit” between Beijing and Washington and expressed hopes that a key visit to the United States next week by China’s leader-in-waiting will strengthen ties.

Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai made the remarks in a speech published on the ministry’s website on Tuesday, as Beijing and Washington lock horns over China’s decision to veto a UN resolution on the bloody violence in Syria.

“There is indeed a trust deficit between China and the United States,” Cui said in a speech on Monday but only published on the foreign ministry website Tuesday.

“Each time the Sino-US relationship has problems, there are voices that fundamentally doubt the relationship. “Nurturing and deepening mutual trust remains a major issue that both sides must give full attention to and seriously address.”

China’s Vice President Xi Jinping will travel to the United States on Monday on a visit seen as part of efforts by the administration of US President Barack Obama to court the leader-in-waiting, about whom little is known in Washington.

His trip comes after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criti-

cized China’s veto of a UN Security Council resolution.

condemning Syria for its violent crackdown on protests, calling the move a “travesty”.

There are also concerns in Washington about Beijing’s rising military spending, while many Chinese policymakers are convinced that Washington is trying to contain the Asian power.

Cui said Xi, who is likely to succeed President Hu Jintao in a major leadership transition that begins this year, could help improve trust between the world’s two biggest economies.

“We hope both sides can seize the opportunity of this visit to strengthen communication, enhance mutual trust, expand cooperation, deepen friendship, and push forward the Sino-US partnership,” he said in a speech delivered Monday in Shanghai.

Foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin, however, played down Cui’s comments on Tuesday, telling reporters that differences between China and the United States were “quite normal”.

Xi will meet with President Barack Obama on February 14 and is expected to deliver a speech in Washington before heading to Iowa. — AFP

The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Gulf states to expel Syrian ambassadors

RIYADH — The six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have decided to expel Syria's envoys and withdraw their own from Damascus over the "mass slaughter" of civilians in Syria, a joint statement said Tuesday.

"State members have decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Syria and ask at the same time for all the ambassadors to the Syrian regime to leave immediately," a GCC statement said.

It said that there was "no point in them staying after the Syrian regime rejected all attempts and aborted all honest Arab efforts to solve this crisis and end the bloodshed."

The statement condemned "mass slaughter against the unarmed Syrian people" during the nearly 11-month crackdown by President Bashar Al-Assad's regime.

GCC states "follow with sor-

row and anger, the increase in killing and violence in Syria, which has not spared children, old people or women with heinous acts that at best can be described as mass slaughter," the statement said.

The GCC urged other Arab states to use an Arab League meeting next week to adopt "all decisive measures in response to this dangerous escalation against the Syrian people."

The Gulf states' announcement came after France, Italy, and Spain said Tuesday that they were following Britain and Belgium in bringing back their envoys for consultations. The United States has closed its Damascus embassy entirely.

King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, called on the international community Monday to take steps to "protect innocent lives and end the bloodshed" and warned that the violence threatened regional stability. — Agencies

Arab News (Koweit / Kuwait)

400 children killed in unrest

● Homs shelled again ● Lavrov holds talks with Assad ● Turkey plans new initiative

AGENCIES

GENEVA/ANKARA/AMMAN: At least 400 children have been killed in 11 months of violence in Syria and almost the same number detained, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said on Tuesday.

"As of the end of January, 400 children are dead and more than 400 have been detained," UNICEF spokeswoman Marixie Mercado said at a briefing.

"There are reports of children arbitrarily arrested, tortured and sexually abused while in detention," the agency added in a statement.

Mercado said the figures for children killed came from Syrian human rights groups, "that we find to be credible." The French Foreign Ministry says France is recalling its ambassador to Syria for consultations because of the continued crackdown by President Bashar Assad's regime on the population. Romain Nadal, a ministry spokesman, says the French Embassy in Damascus will remain open.

Spain also recalled its ambassador in Syria for consultations over the Damascus government's deadly crackdown on protests. Tuesday's announcement comes as other Western powers including Britain, the United States and Italy have called back their top envoys in the wake of new violence in Syria.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country will launch a "new initiative" with like-minded countries after the rejection of a UN resolution aimed at ending months-long bloodshed in Syria. "We will start a new initiative with those countries who stand by the



Syrians living in Jordan shout slogans during a demonstration against President Bashar Assad in front of the Syrian Embassy in Amman. (Reuters)

Syrian people, not the regime," Erdogan said in Parliament, without elaborating. "We are working on this initiative," Erdogan said, assuring that his government would utilize all diplomatic means to draw the world's attention to the Syrian crisis.

Russia and China, permanent members of the Security Council, on Saturday blocked the UN resolution denouncing Syria for its deadly crackdown on protests. The move drew condemnation from other global powers as well as Turkey.

For his part, the Turkish premier said the Security Council vote gave the "license to kill to the hands of the

revolt and carry out reforms. Lavrov confirmed Russia's readiness to help resolve Syria crisis on basis of positions set out in Arab League initiative. He added that Assad was ready to seek dialogue with all political forces to defuse the Syrian crisis.

Activists said the fresh assault on Homs came after 95 people were killed on Monday in the city of one million people, a hub of protest and armed opposition against Assad.

More than 200 were reported killed there on Friday night. "The bombardment is again concentrating on Baba Anro (district of Homs). A doctor tried to get in there this morning

but I heard he was wounded," Mohammad Al-Hassan, an activist in Homs, told Reuters. "There is no electricity and all communication with the neighborhood has been cut." Authorities say the military is fighting "terrorists" in Homs bent on dividing and sabotaging the country. State media said "tens" of terrorists and six members of the security forces were killed in clashes there on Monday.

Lavrov and Russian Foreign Intelligence Service chief Mikhail Fradkov arrived in Damascus to meet Assad, the Foreign Ministry in Moscow said. China is also considering sending an envoy to the Middle East to discuss the crisis in Syria, the Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday.

Syrian state television showed hundreds of people gathering on a main Damascus highway to welcome Lavrov. They were waving Syrian, Russian and Hezbollah flags and held up two Russian flags made out of hundreds of red, white and blue balloons.

Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Elaraby told Reuters he spoke to Lavrov on Monday and said the foreign minister would present an initiative to Damascus. Asked if he thought it could end the crisis, he replied: "They believe so."

In another development, Lebanese authorities have detained two Lebanese men suspected of smuggling weapons and ammunition to insurgents in neighboring Syria, a judicial source said on Tuesday.

The source said a Lebanese military prosecutor issued an order authorizing detention of the two men over suspected trafficking in weapons and ammunition via the town of Asad near the border.

The Hindu (Inde / India)

Significant headway in Syria, says Russia

Atul Aneja

DUBAI: Russia has said it has made significant headway in defusing the crisis in Syria following the air dash to Damascus by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for talks with Syrian President Bashar Al Assad that could end bloodshed following an externally supervised internal dialogue.

"We have had a very productive visit with the leadership of Syria," said Mr. Lavrov, according to Russia's RIA Novosti news service. "We have confirmed our preparedness to facilitate a rapid end to the crisis based on the positions set out in the Arab League initiative.

In particular, the President of Syria gave assurance that he is fully committed 'to an end to violence, no matter its source'."

Significantly, Mr. Lavrov also said Mr. Assad was ready to sit down with the opposition for a political dialogue.

"It is clear that efforts for ending the violence should be accompanied by dialogue between political forces," he said. "Today we received confirmation from the President of Syria that he is prepared to cooperate in this effort." Mr. Lavrov was in the Syrian capital after Russia and China on Saturday vetoed a U.N. Security Council that sought the exit of Mr. Assad from the Presidency and called for the formation of a national unity government to steer Syria's transition to democracy.

Sovereignty

Russia has maintained that if passed, the U.N. resolution would have breached Syrian sovereignty and led to the unacceptable situation of "regime change".

After Tuesday's talks with Mr. Assad, which followed furious criticism by western powers that the double veto at the U.N. would only encourage further bloodshed, the Russians seemed to suggest on Tuesday that the heavy condemnation of their action in New York might have been ill-conceived. Russian Television is reporting that Moscow is now set to end violence in Syria by facilitating talks between the government and the opposition.



DISPLEASURE: A Syrian girl protests against Russia's veto of the resolution on Syria in the U.N. Security Council, in front of the Russian Embassy in Qatar, Doha, on Tuesday. - PHOTO AP

Sketching the faint lines of a mechanism for a dialogue, Mr. Lavrov proposed that Russia would continue to work with various Syrian political groups to prevent further civilian deaths.

He stressed that Moscow was not keen to impose itself unilaterally, and that the role of the Arab League, which included sending its observers to all crisis zones, would be absolutely essential to pull back Syria from the brink. "Syria is notifying the Arab League that it is interested in the League continuing its work and increasing the number of observers," Mr. Lavrov said.

Initiative

In response to Mr. Lavrov's assertions, the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) signalled that it was, at this moment, not opposed to the Russian initiative. Russian media is quoting George

Sabra, a senior SNC member as saying, "Considering the good relations between the Russian and Syrian nations, Russia has a good chance of playing this part."

Ahead of the Russian Minister's visit, British Foreign Secretary condemned the Syrian regime as "murderous and doomed," while, the Americans citing security considerations, closed down their embassy in Damascus.

Seemingly aware that the Russians, by casting a veto had thrown them a lifeline, Syrian authorities earlier on Tuesday gave Mr. Lavrov a rousing welcome as he arrived in Damascus. Thousands of government supporters, waving Syrian and Russian flags lined the highway along which passed the motorcade of the visiting delegation, which, besides Mr. Lavrov included the Russian foreign intelligence chief, Mikhail Fradkov.

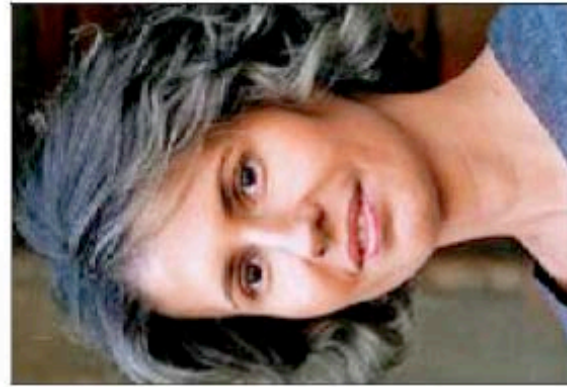
After bloodshed, Syria pledges restraint

Amman: Russia won a promise from Syrian president Bashar al-Assad on Tuesday to bring an end to bloodshed in Syria, but Western and Arab states acted to isolate Assad further after activists and rebels said his forces killed over 100 in the city of Homs.

Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, representing a rare ally on a trip to Damascus, other states are shunning, said Russia now wanted to resolve Syria's crisis in line with an Arab plan. Moscow and Beijing vetoed in the UN Security Council. The Russian mediation failed to slow a rush by

Assad wife defends army crackdown

The British-born wife of Syria's president has spoken in support of her husband for the first time since the 11-month uprising against his regime began, a British daily reported on Tuesday. "The president is the president of Syria, not a faction of Syrians, and the First Lady supports him in that role," The Times quoted Asma al-Assad as saying in an email sent via an intermediary from her office. **AFP**



HUSBAND FIRST: Asma

countries that denounced the Russian-Chinese veto three days ago to corner Syria diplomatically and cripple Assad with sanctions in hopes of toppling him and encouraging reforms.

Opposition activists said government forces renewed shelling in Homs on Tuesday just before Lavrov's arrival, killing some 19 people in an onslaught that they say has claimed over 300 lives in the last five days. There were also reports from residents of shelling and fighting on Tuesday between government and rebel forces in Hama. **REUTERS**

Moscow Times (Russie / Russia)

Lavrov in Syria to Strongly Back Assad

By Alexander Bratersky
THE MOSCOW TIMES

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Damascus on Tuesday, sending a clear message that Russia intends to stand by its strongest ally in the Middle East amid an international outcry over the country's response to a civil revolt.

Lavrov and foreign intelligence chief Mikhail Fradkov were given a royal welcome by thousands of pro-Assad supporters, who rallied in the streets waving Russian flags in thanks to Russia's veto over the weekend of a UN resolution calling for tough sanctions on the Syrian regime. Syrian state television declared that 1 mil-

lion people came out to greet Lavrov.

"Efforts to stop violence have to be met with dialogue by all the political forces," Lavrov said after the meeting, Interfax reported. "Today we received confirmation of the readiness of the president of Syria for this work."

The visit by Russia's most senior diplomat came as several countries — including the United States and Britain — pulled their ambassadors out of Damascus and pressure mounted on Assad over a bloody crackdown on an armed insurrection against his authoritarian rule.

"Today was a disappointing one for all those who aspire to build a new kind of relationship between the United States and Russia. Great powers have great re-

sponsibilities," U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul wrote on his Twitter feed. "[I am] Hoping for new progress in coming hours and days before it's too late in Syria."

Syria's opposition had earlier turned down Moscow's offer to organize negotiations in Russia between them and government leaders.

The United Nations has reported that the violence in Syria has left at least 5,400 civilians dead. Syrian officials say 2,000 soldiers have died while fighting what they claim are foreign-backed rebels.

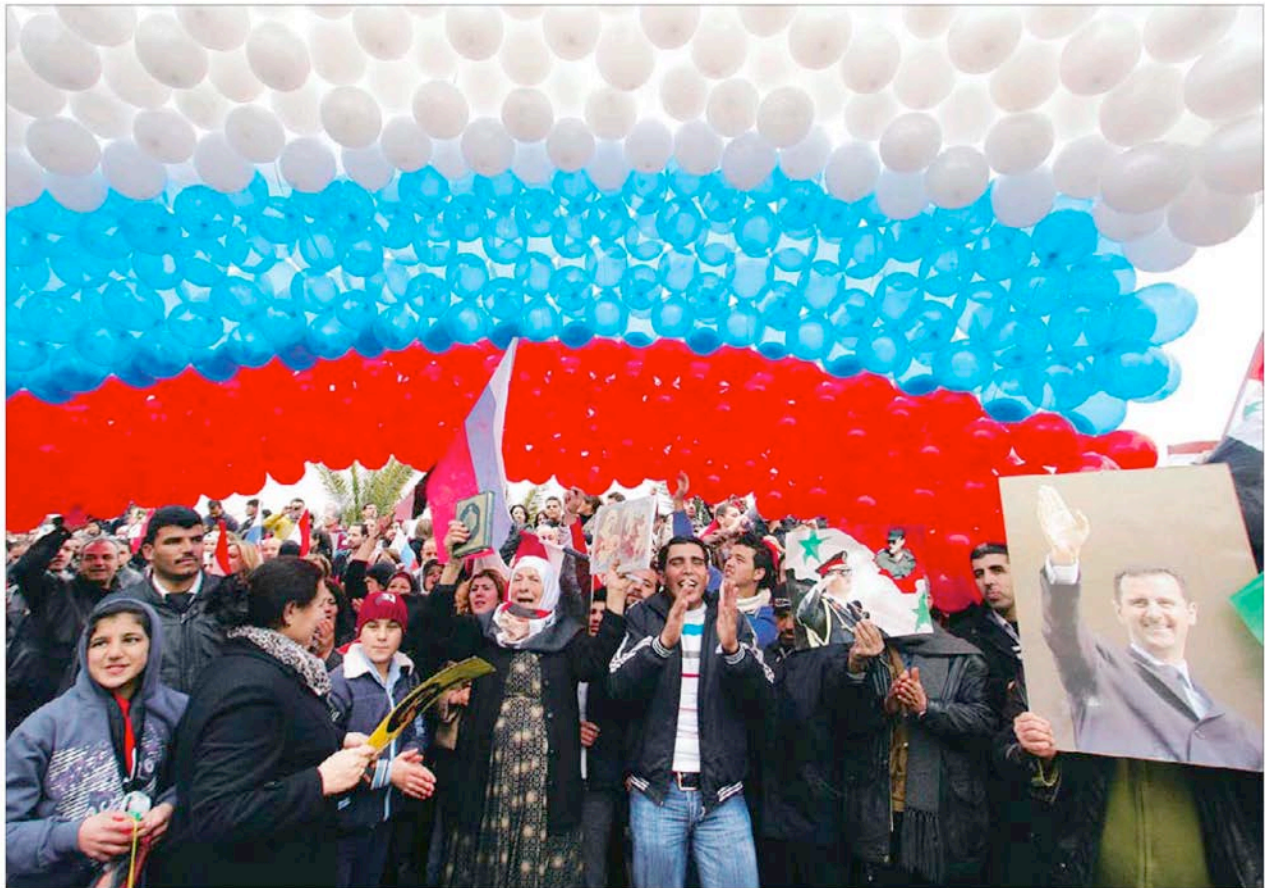
While Lavrov said Assad promised to open up dialogue with opposition leaders, violence continued to escalate in the country as government forces resumed

the bombardment of the city of Homs, an opposition stronghold, Reuters reported.

Analysts said the presence of Russia's intelligence chief on the trip indicated that Russia will continue its military support to Syria, a major ally dating back to Soviet times.

On Saturday, Russia and China blocked a UN Security Council resolution calling for increased pressure on Assad. Both Moscow and Beijing said they were worried foreign powers would use the resolution as a basis for a military intervention similar to that in Libya, where rebels — largely helped by a NATO bombing campaign — overthrew

See SYRIA, Page 2



Supporters of Bashar Assad wave a Russian flag made of balloons in Damascus on Tuesday as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's convoy speeds past.

MUZAFFAR SALMAN / AP

SYRIA

Continued from Page 1

and killed Colonel Moammar Gadhafi last year.

Lavrov earlier said "regime change is not our occupation" and stated that the resolution put all the blame on the Assad government's side and none on the opposition.

"There is not one single, but many sources of violence," Lavrov said.

Lavrov's sentiments were backed by some Russian Middle East experts who believe that the struggle against Assad's secular regime could unleash radical Islamist forces in the country.

While fears over the increased radicalization of the Middle East are real, experts say Russia's main concern is to keep Syria as its only dependable ally in the Middle East.

"The loss of Syria would be catastrophic, and we should hold on to it at any price," said Igor Korotchenko, a military expert and an editor of the *Natsionallya Obozona* magazine.

He said Fradkov's presence shows that Russia is serious in defending the interests of its old ally.

"Russia can provide Assad intelligence information that foreign countries might be behind the opposition," he said.

Military expert Alexander Perenzhiyev called Syria Russia's "last frontier" in the Middle East.

"If it is lost, we will be valued as a second-class state," he said, adding that Russia might even deploy military advisers to counter the threat of foreign intervention.

His position was echoed by presidential candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy,



REUTERS

Sergei Lavrov meeting with Syria's Bashar Assad on Tuesday, days after Russia vetoed a UN bid to push him out.

leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party.

"Let's hope that Russia will not leave Syria alone," he said, according to Interfax. "We have to support all countries which resist the United States."

Another presidential candidate, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, said Russia should continue efforts to force dialogue between the opposition and the government.

"But the opposition should be looked at carefully to make sure who are criminals sent by the West to topple a legitimate power," he said.

Billionaire presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov said Tuesday that while he understands the criticism of Assad, he does not support the radical opposition. He said Russian business and military interests in Syria — which amount to \$20 billion — should be taken into account.

Syria is among the largest buyers of Russian weapons, and contracts signed with the country amount to \$3.5 billion, Vyacheslav Dzirka, deputy head of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation said in November.

The country is also home to a small

Russian naval base built during Soviet times, which functions as a Russian-only port beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union.

Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of political magazine *Russia in Global Affairs*, told Reuters on Tuesday that Lavrov's visit was an indication to Assad that Russia did "everything possible" by vetoing the UN resolution.

"Now the main task for Lavrov is to tell Assad that if there is no visible change in Syria, then regardless of the Russian position he should be bracing for external military measures," Lukyanov said.

China Daily

Protesters attack Chinese embassy in Tripoli

By CUI HAIPEI
CHINA DAILY

BEIJING — China expressed serious concern on Tuesday after its embassy in Libya was attacked by demonstrators, and urged Tripoli to adopt practical measures to guarantee the safety of Chinese people and institutions in the country.

"The Chinese Government has made representations to the Libyan side," Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said at a regular news briefing. "And the Libyan side has expressed regret about the incident and promises to strengthen the embassy's security."

Syrian and Libyan demonstrators in Tripoli on Monday hurled rocks, eggs and tomatoes at the Chinese embassy, after Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution backing an Arab League plan urging Syria's President Bashar al-Assad to cede power, according to Reuters.

A similar incident took place on Sunday outside the Russian embassy.

China and Russia blocked a draft of a UN resolution on Saturday urging Assad to quit. China has already defended its veto, saying the vote was called before differences in the resolution were bridged.

Demonstrators said they wanted to take down the Chinese flag and replace it with the Syrian opposition's flag and the red, black and green flag of Libya's National Transitional Council, which came to power after a civil war last year that toppled Muammar Gadhafi's rule.

On the situation in Syria, Liu reiterated that China would continue to support the constructive and positive role played by the Arab League. "The Chinese people are friends of both the Syrian and the Arab peoples. We have always worked together and coordinated on all sorts of problems," Liu said.

► Only Moscow, Beijing act against 'conspiracy': Syrian diplomat

Russian envoy says Assad wants dialogue

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was given a hero's welcome when he arrived in the Syrian capital of Damascus for talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians lined up alongside the highway leading from the airport to the presidential palace waving banners and the Syrian and Russian flags to Lavrov's motorcade, a Damascus-based source told the Global Times.

Lavrov was accompanied by his Foreign Intelligence Service chief Mikhail Fradkov.

"Every leader in every country should understand their responsibility. You understand yours," Lavrov told Assad yesterday, adding "it's in our interests that the Arab people live in peace and harmony," according to the RIA Novosti News Agency.

After their talks, Lavrov told reporters that Assad assured him he was committed to halting bloodshed by both sides and that he was ready to seek dialogue with all political groups in Syria.

Assad said he was ready to announce a schedule for a constitutional referendum, and he agreed to see an enlarged Arab League mission in the country, Lavrov said, according to AFP.

"We have never aimed our weapons at our people, but armed groups who attempted to destabilize the country. It's not only our right, but our duty, to protect our innocent people's lives there," a senior diplomat at the Syrian embassy in Beijing told the Global Times.

"The whole thing will be eventually proved a conspiracy by Western countries and their allies against our country," the diplomat claimed. "They know the truth, but only Russia and China act

against the conspiracy."

Russia and China on Saturday both vetoed an Arab-European draft resolution backing an Arab League plan to promote a regime change in Syria.

China said yesterday it is considering sending diplomatic staffers to visit several countries in the near future and will continue to play a constructive role in promoting the political settlement of the Syrian issue, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

"China has always maintained that all parties in Syria should stop the violence and resolve their issues through dialogue and coordination in order to defuse tension in the region," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said.

The six Gulf Cooperation Council states have decided to expel Syria's envoys and withdraw their own from Damascus over the "mass slaughter" of

civilians in Syria, a joint statement said yesterday. The announcement came after France, Italy and Spain said yesterday that they were following Britain and Belgium in bringing back their envoys for consultations. The US has closed its Damascus embassy entirely.

However, the EU said it has no plans to withdraw the head of its delegation in Syria, stressing that the EU needs a presence on the ground to "report and observe what is going on" because "there is no free press in the country."

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday his country, once a staunch ally of Assad and now the haven for many Syrian opposition activists, will launch a new initiative "with those countries who stand by the Syrian people, not the regime."

Agencies — Global Times