

Al-Qaida frappe à Alep

REVUE DE PRESSE SYRIE #50
Samedi 10 et dimanche 11 février 2012

La presse internationale relate les attentats d'Alep, mais leur consacre quatre fois moins d'espace. Ce phénomène peut être interprété de deux manières : soit l'opinion publique se lasse de l'irakisation rampante de la Syrie, soit la presse est gênée des revendications. Les attentats d'Alep ont en effet été d'abord revendiqués par un porte-parole de l'Armée syrienne libre, puis condamnés par un autre. Simultanément, un rapport de renseignement US les attribue à Al-Qaida ; une revendication confirmée par une déclaration d'Ayman Al-Zawahiri, leader de cette mouvance.

Quoi qu'il en soit, aucun média ne rectifie ses articles précédents accusant l'administration el-Assad d'avoir organisé les attentats identiques de Damas ; Certains journaux relayent même les accusations du Conseil national syrien qui attribue les attentats d'Alep à l'administration Assad, sans apporter aucun élément de preuve.

- *Le Monde* continue la publication des magnifiques photos de Mani, toujours accompagnés de fantômes sectaires. Ainsi, le photjournaliste explique que seuls les boulangers alaouites de Homs sont approvisionnés en farine, pas les sunnites. C'est évidemment faux. Les difficultés d'approvisionnement sont circonscrites aux deux quartiers de la ville où se déroulent les combats, et ces quartiers sont aux mains de groupes armés exclusivement composés de sunnites. Mais le reste de la ville, à majorité sunnite, est parfaitement approvisionné.
- *Le Sunday Express* attribue des propos peu flatteurs au beau-père du président syrien qui confirmerait ainsi qu'Asma el-Assad est prisonnière de Bachar.
- Dans *The Independent*, Robert Fisk rappelle que les « bons » que l'OTAN a mis au pouvoir au Kosovo et en Libye se sont avérés bien pires que les « méchants » qu'elle a renversés. Il semble qu'en Syrie les « bons » ne soient pas meilleurs. Le renversement d'el-Assad conduirait probablement à de vastes massacres sectaires.
- Daniel Byman du Saban Center s'interroge dans le *Washington Post* : peut-on intervenir en Syrie sans empirer la situation ? Selon lui, ce n'est pas possible car le conflit ne serait plus limité à la Syrie, mais impliquerait immédiatement l'Iran et la Russie.
- Dans le *New York Post*, Amir Taheri constate qu'en l'absence d'intervention militaire directe, il reste la possibilité de sanctuariser sous les auspices de l'ONU une ville comme Zabadani. L'article a en effet été écrit alors que l'Armée syrienne libre tenait cette bourgade. Cependant Taheri préconise surtout l'action diplomatique, c'est-à-dire dans ce cas particulier l'abandon des opérations militaires de basse intensité.

- Le *Weekly Standard*, organe des néoconservateurs, s'intéresse cette semaine à la Syrie. Lee Smith a analysé des e-mails du palais présidentiel qui ont été hackés par des pirates anonymes. D'autres documents hackés sont présentés par Barack Ravid dans *Haaretz*. Ils montrent que l'Iran et la Syrie ont imaginé différents mécanismes pour contourner les embargos dont ils font l'objet. En outre l'Iran a aidé la Syrie à se fournir en hydrocarbures raffinés pour une valeur d'un milliard de dollars.



DANA A. SHAMS/©C



Adam

Le Monde (France)



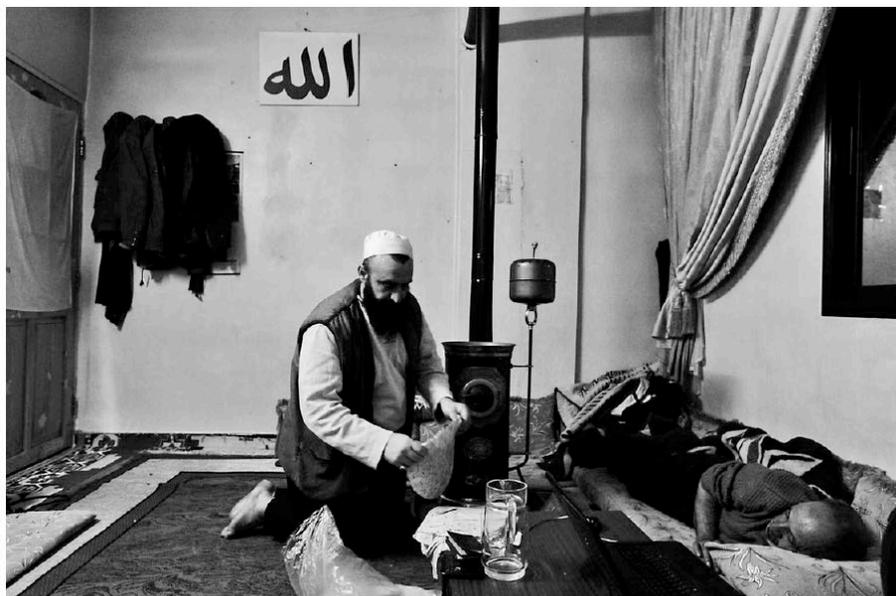
« Percer les murs pour circuler à l'abri »

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

« Le quartier de Sabil, au nord-est de la vieille ville, jouxte celui de Zahra, habité principalement par des Syriens de confession alaouite, une dissidence du chiisme dont est issue la famille du président Bachar Al-Assad. Contrairement à Zahra, Sabil est peuplé d'une population multiconfessionnelle (alaouites, sunnites et chrétiens). A Sabil, en réponse à la répression des autorités, les sunnites ont décidé de percer des trous

dans les murs de façon à pouvoir circuler sans avoir à passer près des barrages des soldats loyalistes, tout proches. Les murs sont également percés entre les maisons sunnites afin de pouvoir se déplacer discrètement dans le quartier et d'échapper ainsi à la surveillance des positions tenues par les loyalistes et des voisins membres des chabiha, les milices du régime. » Jeudi 9 février, plus de 80 personnes ont été tuées à Homs dans les bombardements de l'armée, selon les opposants. ■

PHOTO: MANI POUR « LE MONDE »



A Homs, « le pain est de plus en plus difficile à trouver »

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

« Depuis que la farine manque dans les quartiers de Homs tenus par l'insurrection, le pain devient de plus en plus difficile à trouver et souligne les clivages politiques et confessionnels. Les fours des boulangers de confession alaouite, une dissidence du chiisme dont est issue la famille du président Bachar Al-Assad, ne sont souvent plus accessibles aux sun-

nites. Les fours de ces derniers, dans les quartiers tenus par les insurgés, ne sont pas approvisionnés par l'Etat. Les boulangers de ces quartiers peuvent parfois se procurer de la farine auprès de grossistes privés, mais le prix du pain s'en ressent. Il double, alors que des queues de plus de cent personnes s'étirent devant les fours. » Plus de 70 personnes ont été tuées dans les violences en Syrie, vendredi 10 février, une journée marquée par deux attentats à Alep. ■ PHOTO: MANI POUR « LE MONDE »

Le Monde (France)

La mobilisation contre Damas vise aussi Téhéran

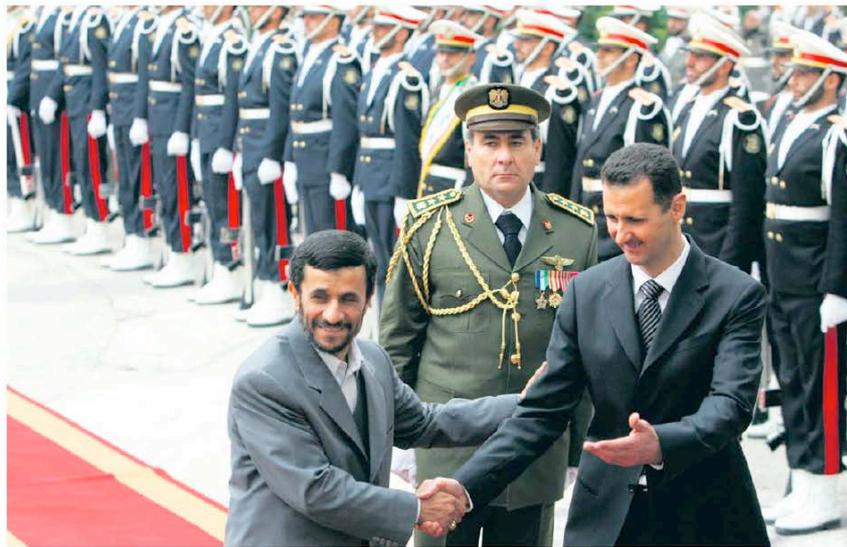
Les efforts diplomatiques face aux atrocités en Syrie vont de pair avec une volonté de priver l'Iran de son allié

Venir à bout de Bachar Al-Assad pour affaiblir l'Iran ? Sans être la motivation première des diplomates mobilisés sur la crise en Syrie – où les atrocités perpétrées par le régime ont atteint un degré tel que le Haut-Commissaire aux droits de l'homme de l'ONU, Navi Pillay, vient de lancer un appel à la saisine de la Cour pénale internationale (CPI) –, l'aspect régional est dans tous les esprits. Un changement de régime à Damas priverait Téhéran d'un allié de longue date au Proche-Orient.

L'alliance entre la République islamique et le pouvoir de la famille Assad, qui repose sur la minorité alaouite d'obédience chiite, dure depuis plus de trente ans. Si, voici quelques mois, Téhéran paraissait s'agacer de ce partenaire en l'appelant à conduire des réformes politiques, l'aide apportée à l'appareil répressif syrien par la garde prétorienne du régime iranien, les puissants Gardiens de la révolution, ne semble s'être jamais démentie.

Derrière l'effort conjugué, occidental, arabe et turc, pour mettre fin au bain de sang en Syrie, les calculs géopolitiques sont bien présents. L'affaiblissement de l'Iran par la perte de la « carte » syrienne est espéré par les Occidentaux car cela conforterait leur stratégie sur le dossier nucléaire : mettre le régime de Téhéran sous pression afin qu'il s'engage dans un règlement négocié.

La Syrie est, au-delà du drame vécu par ses opposants, ciblés par l'appareil militaire et broyés dans des chambres de tortures en raison



Le président iranien Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (à gauche) accueille le président syrien Bachar Al-Assad à Téhéran, en février 2007. (ATA KENARE/AFP)

de leurs revendications politiques, l'épicentre d'un affrontement régional complexe, qui met face à face la puissance chiite iranienne et l'Arabie saoudite, « gardienne » de l'islam sunnite. Un aspect mis en exergue de manière inédite, vendredi 10 février, par le roi Abdallah d'Arabie saoudite lui-même. Habituellement discret, le souverain a fait une déclaration à la télévision nationale décrivant le blocage à l'ONU sur la Syrie comme « absolument regrettable ». Sans nommer la Russie, cette « sortie » semblait destinée à souligner la coupure apparue entre les pays arabes sunnites et Moscou (qui a opposé son

veto à un projet de résolution sur la Syrie, le 4 février). La Russie a en outre beaucoup œuvré, ces dernières années à l'ONU, pour atténuer les mesures prises contre l'Iran. Une réunion de la Ligue arabe devait être consacrée, dimanche, à la Syrie, des consultations étant également prévues entre les pétro-

monarchies du Conseil de coopération du Golfe (CCG). Tous ces pays, apparemment appelés à faire partie d'un « groupe des amis de la Syrie » réunissant aussi les Occidentaux et la Turquie, sont depuis longtemps extrêmement nerveux face aux ambitions, régionales et technologiques, de l'Iran.

Nicolas Sarkozy, dont la diplomatie se veut en pointe à la fois sur le dossier iranien et sur la question syrienne, déclarait le 8 février à Paris : « Un jour, le régime de Bachar Al-Assad tombera, parce que l'on ne peut pas massacrer impunément son peuple. Ce jour-là, d'ailleurs, l'Iran sera encore plus seul et isolé et affaibli. »

L'ambition de rompre l'axe entre la Syrie et l'Iran figurait déjà au centre d'une politique absolument inverse, tentée par la France de 2007 à fin 2010 : celle d'un rapprochement avec Bachar Al-Assad. L'administration Obama s'était lancée dans une approche similaire, mais dans une moindre mesure.

La Syrie est l'épicentre d'un affrontement entre l'Iran et l'Arabie saoudite

En Israël, les événements en Syrie et le risque d'une percée des Frères musulmans dans ce pays donnent lieu à des analyses contrastées, que reflètent bien des propos tenus le 2 février par le ministre de la Défense, Ehoud Barak, lors d'une conférence sur les questions de sécurité organisée à Herzliya. Après avoir estimé que « le règne de la famille Assad est sur le point de s'achever », le ministre a dit son inquiétude à propos de transferts d'armes vers le Hezbollah au Liban. « En même temps, a ajouté M. Barak, la chute de la famille Assad sera un coup dur pour l'averdical car cela privera le Hezbollah de son relais, et l'Iran perdra sa seule emprise dans le monde arabe. »

La Turquie se livre à ses propres calculs. Active auprès de l'opposition syrienne, elle doit composer avec le rôle de la Ligue arabe pour ne pas heurter les sensibilités régionales en affichant trop de réflexe « néo-ottoman ». Elle a aussi à l'esprit la question kurde, que Damas instrumentalise. Alors que 50 % des importations de pétrole de la Turquie proviennent d'Iran, la relation avec le grand voisin chiite s'est nettement dégradée.

La Turquie reproche à l'Iran de se montrer trop hégémonique en Irak et de pousser le premier ministre chiite, Nouri Al-Maliki, à une politique sectaire et antisunnite, qui, à terme, risque de conduire à un éclatement de ce pays. Ankara se considère de plus en plus comme le protecteur des sunnites d'Irak et la rivalité qui l'y oppose à Téhéran ne cesse de s'amplifier. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD
ET NATALIE NOUGAYRDE

A Bahreïn, les chiites sont accusés de complot au bénéfice de l'Iran

Manama
Envoyée spéciale

Il a le ton hésitant et l'air tracassé. Masoud Jahromi, 42 ans, a été accusé d'être un espion à la solde de l'Iran dans le royaume de Bahreïn. L'accusation est ensuite tombée, mais cet Ajami (Bahreïn chiite d'origine iranienne) est inquiet. Dans un restaurant de Manama, il confie ses doutes, partagés par sa jeune épouse iranienne : quitter Bahreïn ? Rester ? Son passeport a été confisqué et ce professeur d'université, suspendu de ses fonctions après six mois en prison, vient d'apprendre qu'en avril il comparaitra de nouveau devant la justice pour participation à des rassemblements illégaux – autrement dit au soulèvement de février 2011, en majorité chiite, contre la famille royale sunnite. Il

risque quatre mois de détention. Une bagatelle, par rapport à l'accusation initiale, punie par la prison à vie, et qui avait également visé quatre opposants ajami. « Les autorités cherchaient des personnes d'origine iranienne à arrêter pour démontrer que Téhéran est derrière la révolte », affirme M. Jahromi. Animateur, jusqu'en 2011, d'un centre de promotion de l'islam, il n'a été naturalisé qu'en 2002. Sa famille, originaire du sud de l'Iran, est pourtant installée à Bahreïn depuis un siècle.

« Je ne vais en Iran que pour des visites privées. Mon arrestation a servi à faire peur aux Ajami », soutient M. Jahromi. Cette communauté (plus de 40 000 personnes, soit 8 % des Bahreïnais, selon un recensement) n'a pas été visée par une campagne systématique. Mais les accusations de complot iranien

ont semé la crainte, parmi ceux qui soutiennent la contestation, d'être perçus comme des relais de la République islamique. D'autant que lors des précédentes rébellions dans l'archipel, des familles avaient été expulsées vers l'Iran.

« Retourne en Iran »

Dans un quartier ajami de Manama, des jeunes discutent en farsi. Selon Bilal, « être d'origine iranienne est un facteur aggravant si on est chiite et avec l'opposition ; cela veut dire plus de contrôles, davantage d'humiliations en cas d'arrestation. En prison, on me disait, "retourne en Iran !" ».

Cet homme d'affaires et militant ne dort pas deux soirs au même endroit par crainte d'une interpellation. Il a appris que son compte bancaire « a été surveillé par la banque centrale ». « Sans dou-

te espéraient-ils découvrir des transactions depuis l'Iran ! Pour freiner toute solidarité avec la révolte, les autorités ne pouvaient pas trouver mieux que de désigner Téhéran. Car pour l'Occident, l'Iran, c'est le grand méchant loup ! », dit-il.

Que la République islamique soit favorable aux revendications politiques des chiites bahreïnais est une évidence. Mais la commission d'enquête diligentée par le pouvoir sur les troubles de 2011 a cependant écarté toute interférence de l'Iran dans la contestation autre qu'à travers ses médias et ses déclarations politiques.

Les Ajami entretiennent de multiples connexions avec Téhéran, religieuses ou familiales, disent-ils. Selon un opposant s'exprimant sous couvert d'anonymat, leur mobilisation est forte dans la révolte. « Pour les autorités, cela a été un

choc. Jusqu'au début des années 2000, les Ajami étaient pro-famille royale, ou muets. La vague de naturalisation a permis une émancipation », estime-t-il. Engagé politiquement, il a été emprisonné à deux reprises depuis 1980. Et à chaque fois, accusé de travailler pour Téhéran, raconte-t-il, tout en montrant les portraits des ayatollahs Khomeyni et Khamenei qu'il garde avec lui. Un peu par provocation et surtout par attachement : « La République islamique est un modèle positif. On peut l'admirer sans vouloir l'importer. Il n'est pas viable à Bahreïn. » L'instauration d'un Etat islamique est redoutée par les Bahreïnais restés fidèles au régime. « Les Ajami et les autres manifestants veulent juste que la famille royale quitte le pouvoir ! Tous sont patriotes ! », rétorque l'opposant. ■

LAURE STEPHAN

Le Figaro (France)

Les opposants d'el-Assad pourchassés jusqu'à Berlin

PATRICK SAINT-PAUL
CORRESPONDANT À BERLIN

LA RÉPRESSION du printemps arabe s'est invitée dans son appartement de Wedding au lendemain de Noël. Figure des Verts allemands dans ce quartier multiculturel de Berlin, Fehrad Ahma est aussi un opposant très actif au régime syrien de Bachar el-Assad. Son passage à tabac par deux sbires du régime baasiste a provoqué une vague d'émotion dans toute l'Allemagne. Et déclenché un sursaut des autorités allemandes face aux agissements des services secrets syriens outre-Rhin.

Surveillé depuis des années

Le 26 décembre, Fehrad Ahma passe la soirée à échanger des informations sur Skype avec des opposants en Syrie et à regarder des vidéos des violences commises par le régime. Lorsqu'il entend frapper à sa porte vers deux heures du matin, il pense que ses voisins viennent se plaindre de ses conversations trop bruyantes. « J'avais à peine entrouvert la porte lorsque deux brutes ont donné un coup d'épaule et ont fait irruption chez moi, raconte-t-il au Figaro. Les deux hommes, âgés d'une trentaine d'années, n'étaient pas masqués et ressemblaient clairement à des Syriens. Ils n'ont pas dit un mot. Ils m'ont frappé à coups de matraque en cherchant à atteindre le visage. »

Les agresseurs prennent la fuite lorsqu'un voisin réveillé par le bruit ouvre sa porte. Lui s'en sort avec des contusions au visage et aux bras. Membre du Conseil national syrien, qui regroupe les opposants au gouvernement de Bachar el-Assad, Fehrad Ahma est surpris mais pas étonné. Ce traducteur se sait surveillé depuis plusieurs années. « J'ai remarqué que j'étais suivi et que l'on me prenait en photo, explique Ahma, 37 ans, qui a fui son village kurde d'al-Qamischli, à la frontière avec la Turquie, en 1996. Les moukhabarat [membres des services de renseignement

syriens] rendent régulièrement visite à mon père resté à al-Qamischli. Ils lui disent que je n'ai rien à faire dans les manifestations contre le régime à Aix-la-Chapelle, à Hanovre ou à Berlin. Ils lui disent que je ferais bien de me tenir tranquille et à l'écart de la politique pour le bien de tous. »

Son père, son oncle et ses frères ont déjà effectué plusieurs séjours en prison. Leur village subit des coupures punitives d'électricité et d'eau. Cela n'empêche pas Ahma de continuer ses activités. Il organise des manifestations devant l'ambassade syrienne pour dénoncer les « crimes du régime », ou devant l'ambassade russe pour protester contre le veto de Moscou à une résolution du Conseil de sécurité - « un permis de tuer offert à el-Assad ». Il égraine le nombre des tués, par date, à Homs, Hama ou Deraa. Et réclame l'ouverture de corridors humanitaires, l'intervention de la Croix-Rouge et de la communauté internationale. « Je pensais que je pouvais être agressé en marge d'une manifestation, affirme-t-il. Mais pas chez moi en pleine nuit. J'ai porté plainte et les Verts ont médiatisé l'affaire. Résultat. L'ambassadeur syrien a été convoqué au ministère allemand des Affaires étrangères et les autorités allemandes se sont réveillées. »

Son passage à tabac par deux sbires du régime baasiste a provoqué un émoi dans tout le pays

La police et les services allemands découvrent alors l'étendue des agissements des espions syriens en Allemagne, où vivent quelque 50 000 Syriens, dont 30 000 ont la nationalité allemande. Jeudi, quatre employés de l'ambassade de Syrie à Berlin ont été expulsés en relation avec une affaire d'espionnage d'opposants syriens. Mardi, deux agents « soupçonnés d'avoir travaillé pendant plusieurs années pour un service de renseignements syrien en espionnant des opposants syriens dans la République fédérale » ont été placés en détention. « L'un d'entre eux travaillait à l'ambassade syrienne », précise Ahma, qui figure en 236^e position sur une liste d'opposants recherchés par le régime syrien, établie en mars 2007. « Si je suis considéré comme un traître par le régime, ça veut dire que j'ai peut-être réussi quelque chose ici, se félicite-t-il. Mais je sais que je ne pourrais pas rentrer en Syrie tant qu'el-Assad sera au pouvoir. »

Fehrad Ahma voudrait mettre son expertise au service de la reconstruction d'un pays démocratique et sensible aux questions écologiques. « Nous n'avons pas beaucoup d'argent ni d'armes, lâche Ahma. Mais c'est fini pour el-Assad. Il peut envoyer ses chars à Deraa ou à Homs... le mur de la peur est tombé. C'était son arme la plus féroce. Nous voulons la liberté. La question est maintenant de savoir combien de milliers de Syriens mourront avant qu'il ne quitte le pouvoir. Et combien de temps la communauté internationale restera les bras croisés face aux massacres



Quatre employés de l'ambassade de Syrie à Berlin ont été expulsés jeudi à la suite d'une affaire d'espionnage

Le Figaro (France)

La Russie dans l'imbroglia syrien



chronique
ALEXANDRE ADLER

Fait-ce le climat particulier qui règne en France, mais j'ai, tout d'un coup, pensé très fort à Guy Mollet lorsque j'ai vu l'ampleur de la mobilisation que les Russes mettent en œuvre pour venir au secours du régime Assad en Syrie.

Le rapprochement est en effet saisissant : dans les deux cas, des régimes en difficultés profondes (on pourrait d'ailleurs ajouter à la comparaison l'Angleterre d'Anthony Eden) et qui, dans un éblouissement fatal, imaginent qu'un grand geste d'affirmation militaire va sauver, d'un coup de baguette

magique, une situation pourtant clairement compromise.

En France, en 1956, Guy Mollet pensait interrompre net le cours de la révolution égyptienne afin, selon ses propres dires, de couper l'insurrection algérienne de ses bases les plus essentielles. Ici, Vladimir Poutine croit dur comme fer que le sort de toute la politique russe en Orient se joue dans la survie du régime Assad en Syrie, et que la première ligne de défense du Caucase russe et musulman se situe déjà plus au sud, dans la capacité de Moscou de porter enfin un coup décisif à un mouvement populaire

arabe que les Russes considèrent comme tout entier acquis à la confrérie des Frères musulmans. Et derrière cette analyse géopolitique qui se présente comme rigoureuse on sent bien, comme toujours, une suinpression en tremblé, l'imense nostalgie de l'empire perdu.

Vladimir Poutine a vu l'Union soviétique et le pacte de Varsovie se dissoudre irrémédiablement, et cet en-tousbasisme tardif pour un ultime bastion qui accueille quelques rafiotés russes en Méditerranée quand l'Ukraine et les pays Baltes ont depuis longtemps fermé leurs ports à, bien sûr, quelque chose de pathétique. Non que les Russes aient tort sur toute la ligne : ils voient, comme tout le monde, l'urgence d'un projet stratégique panarabe qui se met peu à peu en place par la conjonction de l'hégémonie politique des Frères musulmans en Égypte (laquelle s'étend à présent en tache d'huile vers le Maghreb, vers la Syrie et vers les sommités irakiennes), ils constatent aussi que dans leur nouvelle approche centrée sur le repli en bon ordre, les Américains sont prêts à tolérer cette nouvelle hégémonie à condition que soient respectées certaines lignes rouges à ne pas franchir vis-à-vis de l'État d'Israël, de l'indépendance de l'armée égyptienne et de la sécurité du royaume saoudien. Et les Russes se souviennent aussi du rôle que jouait l'empire des tsars dans la défense des communautés chrétiennes orthodoxes en Orient, et que ni Staline ni ses successeurs n'ont jamais abandonné, s'agissant de la Syrie et du Patriarcat d'Antioche depuis lors.

Il reste néanmoins que le centre du plan stratégique est faux de part en part : le régime actuel ne peut plus s'appuyer que sur une minorité multireligieuse de la population, sans relais véritable dans des élites sunnites que

Eachar s'était peu à peu aliénées par faiblesse plutôt que de propos délibérés, ces dernières années. Ou sont-elles à présent ? Mieux même ou pire : l'Iran, bien que catastrophé de la situation, fait en ce moment profil bas de peur de compliquer encore davantage la situation du Hezbollah au Liban et de perdre instantanément des relations idéologiques qu'il espère encore maintenir avec les islamistes arabes sunnites en général, dans le contexte classique d'un bras de fer avec l'Occident sur le problème nucléaire.

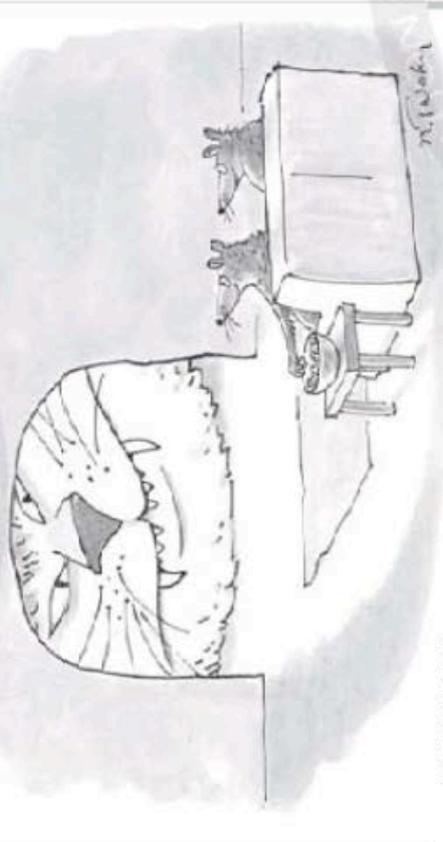
Bien vite donc, la Russie va se retrouver dans l'imbroglia syrien sans avoir les moyens ni de faire reculer les islamistes ni de contraindre les Alaouites à des concessions vraiment substantielles. Ainsi isolé, Moscou n'aura plus d'autre choix que de tenter, mais aura-t-il pour cela le soutien de l'Occident et de la Turquie, une ultime conférence internationale.

Enfin, l'élection présidentielle russe de la fin du mois de mars aura lieu dans un climat détestable et délétère. Certes, Poutine joue gros dans cette crise ou il veut apparaître à nouveau comme « maître de lui-même » comme de l'Univers » aux yeux d'électeurs russes qui sont pour le moins sceptiques sur ses capacités de gouverner.

Mais au lendemain d'un fiasco syrien, dont la suite logique devrait être le déclenchement d'une guerre civile généralisée, pouvant à tout moment diffuser vers les régions septentrionales sunnites de l'Irak, le prestige personnel du leader russe pourrait rejoindre ceux acquis par Guy Mollet et Anthony Eden au début de 1957. Ne serait-ce pas alors le glas définitif d'un empire historiquement dépassé et la fin de cette transition autoritaire un peu tragi-comique que Poutine s'est obstiné à vouloir incarner ?

L'œil du New Yorker

PRÉSENTÉ PAR
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Libération (France)



Devant le quartier général de la police à Alep, vendredi. PHOTO BASSEM TELLAWI. AP

La ville d'Alep frappée par deux attentats

SYRIE Damas accuse pays arabes et occidentaux d'être derrière les attaques qui ont fait 28 morts, vendredi.



Deux attentats à la voiture piégée ont secoué vendredi Alep, la deuxième ville de Syrie, faisant au moins 28 morts, au moment où les chars pénétraient dans la région rebelle de Homs, dévastée par une semaine de bombardements intenses. Le pouvoir syrien a annoncé ces deux attentats, les premiers du genre à frapper Alep, en les imputant à des «gangs terroristes soutenus par des pays arabes et occidentaux». Mais l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), formée de militaires dissidents, a accusé le régime de «vouloir

détourner l'attention» de sa répression à Homs.

La ville du Sud continue en effet d'être pilonnée par l'armée et des chars ont pris d'assaut le quartier Inchaat que les soldats ratissaient, a déclaré Rami Abdel Rahmane, chef de l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme. Plus de 450 personnes ont péri à Homs depuis le début du dernier assaut, le 4 février, selon les militants. Les ONG craignent une crise humanitaire «majeure» dans cette ville où les communications téléphoniques et l'électricité sont coupées, les infrastructures détruites, les médicaments et la nourriture rares. Dans le reste du pays, des manifestants se sont rassemblés dans plusieurs villes pour dénoncer le veto russe à une résolution des Nations unies, malgré les tirs des troupes déployées pour empêcher les

manifestations. Sur le plan diplomatique, tout reste bloqué au Conseil de sécurité depuis les veto chinois et russe il y a une semaine. De Washington à Paris, en passant par l'Otan, les dirigeants occidentaux durcissent le ton contre Damas et annoncent un durcissement des sanctions, mais excluent toute intervention armée. «Laissez-moi être très clair, l'Otan n'a aucune intention d'intervenir en Syrie», a rappelé Anders Fogh Rasmussen, le secrétaire général de l'Alliance. La Turquie, de son côté, s'active pour organiser une conférence internationale. Ce week-end, la Ligue arabe et le Conseil de coopération du Golfe sont réunis à Doha (Qatar) pour relancer la mission de leurs observateurs. Un certain nombre de ces pays pourraient reconnaître le Conseil national syrien.

S. Etr.

Le Parisien - Aujourd'hui en France

Asma al-Assad, du glamour à la tyrannie

Depuis un an, on ne la voyait plus, on ne l'entendait pas. Asma, 36 ans, la ravissante épouse de Bachar al-Assad, a rompu le silence il y a une dizaine de jours. Le communiqué envoyé par son bureau au quotidien britannique « Times » est lapidaire. « Le président est le président de la Syrie, non d'une faction de Syriens, et la première dame l'appuie dans son rôle. » Le soutien à son sanguinaire époux est total. Fracassée, l'image de celle que l'on présentait volontiers comme une Lady Di moyen-orientale. N'avait-elle pas, belle, moderne, élégante, tout sourires, humanisé un tyran aujourd'hui responsable de milliers de morts ? Tout avait pourtant si bien commencé pour cette Syrienne, possédant un passeport britannique, née à Londres d'une mère diplomate et d'un père cardiologue, avec cabinet dans la très huppée Harley Street. Etudiante brillante, diplômée du prestigieux Queen's College londonien, elle gère, avec compétence, un portefeuille « fusions acquisitions » à la banque JP Morgan. Elle parle l'arabe, le français et l'anglais. La jeune banquière connaît la famille Assad depuis toujours. Le coup de foudre, assez tardif, frappe sous les lambris dorés de l'ambassade de Syrie à Londres, lors d'une réception. Bachar et Asma ont dix ans d'écart, elle est sunnite, ses parents sont originaires de la ville, devenue martyre, d'Homs. Il est alaouite, branche minoritaire de l'islam. La différence de culte est loin d'être un détail. Peu importe, ils s'aiment !

Elle cuisine pour son mari, se promène en jeans et en cheveux, conduit elle-même sa voiture

Le fils d'Hafez al-Assad, qui avait choisi l'ophtalmologie, spécialiste « où il y a le moins de sang » doit rentrer en Syrie en 1994 après la mort accidentelle de son frère aîné, dauphin désigné par le père, le vieux lion Assad qui régna longtemps d'une main de fer sur le pays. Pas question pour l'héritier de la dynastie Baas — le parti nationaliste ultra-dominant — de fuir son destin. Asma rend alors souvent visite à son « boyfriend », renonce pour lui à une année à Harvard. Malgré l'opposition de sa famille à lui, qui voit d'un mau-



En soutenant indéfectiblement son époux, qui continue de réprimer dans le sang la révolte syrienne, Asma al-Assad a franchi la ligne rouge, passant du statut de Lady Di moyen-orientale à celui de support du tyran.

(AFP/MAGDEL MEDINA)

vais œil cette fiancée occidentalise et de confession contestable, ils se marient discrètement en janvier 2001, quelques mois après l'élection triomphale (97 % des voix) de Bachar à la présidence. Les premières années du couple présidentiel sont rudes. Bachar doit batailler pour s'imposer au sein du clan au pouvoir. Asma se bagare pour se

faire accepter par une belle-famille qui veut la réduire à un rôle de potiche. Le couple émerge encore plus soulé des épreuves. Vainqueurs mais modestes, les Assad vivent, sans ostentation, à Malki, un quartier résidentiel de Damas, dîner volontiers en tête à tête au restaurant, font découvrir, en toute simplicité, leur capitale à Brad Pitt et Angelina Jolie. M^{me} Assad cuisine

pour son mari, s'occupe des devoirs de ses 3 enfants, se promène en jeans et en cheveux, conduit elle-même sa voiture en respectant les feux rouges, se consacre à quelques bonnes œuvres depuis son bureau à la banalité édifiante. Prenant sa tâche très à cœur, elle a parcouru toute la Syrie, sans révéler qui elle était, pour mieux évaluer les besoins des habitants. Et a

BIO EXPRESS

- **11 août 1975** : naissance à Londres, d'Asma Fawaz al-Akhras.
- **1994** : coup de foudre pour Bachar al-Assad.
- **10 juin 2000** : mort d'Hafez al-Assad, président syrien.
- **10 juillet 2000** : élection, avec 97 % des voix, de Bachar al-Assad à la présidence syrienne.
- **Janvier 2001** : mariage de Bachar et Asma.
- **27 mai 2007** : réélection d'Assad, avec 97,62 % des voix.
- **14 juillet 2008** : les Assad sont invités aux festivités du 14 juillet à Paris.
- **Mars 2011** : premières manifestations contre le régime.

fonde, dans la foulée, une ONG pour améliorer la condition des femmes. Encore jeune, l'air d'un grand timide, Bachar al-Assad, qui a fait disparaître les milliers de ses portraits qui couvraient les murs de Damas et des grandes villes, devient le symbole d'une Syrie semblant alors en voie de démocratisation. Pour les Occidentaux, il est tout à fait présentable, et vite accueilli à bras ouverts.

A l'étranger, elle accomplit un parcours sans faute, de Buckingham Palace aux Champs-Élysées

La présence, à ses côtés, d'une charmante épouse, est un exceptionnel atout. A l'étranger, la « first lady » syrienne, si glamour et si ouverte, accomplit un parcours sans faute. En 2002, présentée à la reine Elisabeth II, à Buckingham Palace, elle réussit la révérence de rigueur. En 2008, à Paris, lors du défilé militaire du 14 juillet sur les Champs-Élysées et des réceptions qui suivent, ses tenues sobres mais chic, sa silhouette impeccable, sont admirées. Nicolas Sarkozy est reçu à l'antenne de la même année à Damas. Elle est, encore une fois, sublime. En décembre 2010, lors de la visite officielle du président syrien en France, la grâce et la culture de son épouse font merveille. Asma est parfaite. Claude Guéant, qui les a cotés sur ce terrain pas d'éloges sur ce couple si glamour et si moderne ! L'hebdomadaire « Paris-Match » consacre plusieurs pages aux tourtereaux, « deux amoureux à Paris », à leur « escapade dans la plus romantique des capitales ». Trois mois plus tard, en pleine révolution arabe, au tout début d'une contestation syrienne qui va vite vider au massacre, la « Rose du désert » a les hornetures de « Vogue », un long reportage illustre de clichés intimes, avec époux et bambins souriants. L'artifice, depuis, disparu du site du magazine... Asma al-Assad ne veut-elle rien voir ? Peut-elle vraiment ignorer les milliers de morts, les chars qui encerclent les villes, les tirés qui fauchent les vies ? Ses derniers airs assurent qu'elle est virtuellement prisonnière. Ironie cruelle : M^{me} al-Assad adore les chaussures de Christian Louboutin, surtout les plus périsées, celles dont les semelles sont... rouges sing.

KATHERINE TARDIEU

Mon mari était dictateur...

Pour les femmes de dictateurs, les histoires d'amour finissent mal. En général. Ainsi, la Tunisienne **Leïla Trabelsi Ben Ali**, 55 ans, sommée la reine de Carthage, a suivi le 14 janvier 2011 son mari Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali en exil. Le couple vit en Arabie saoudite. La Tunisie a réclamé en vain son extradition. Jugée par contumace le 20 juin 2011, elle a été condamnée à trente-cinq ans de prison et 45 M€ d'amende pour détournement de fonds publics et malversations.



(AFP/REUTERS)

Suzanne Moubarak, 70 ans, née d'un docteur égyptien et d'une mère britannique, mariée depuis cinquante-deux ans au rais égyptien Hosni Moubarak, a refusé de s'enfuir à Londres quand son mari a été renversé le 11 février 2011. Ils se sont réfugiés dans leur résidence secondaire à Charm El Sheik, station balnéaire sur la mer Rouge. Accusée de corruption, elle a passé quelques mois en prison, avant d'être libérée contre l'abandon de ses biens à l'Etat égyptien.



(AFP/REUTERS)

Simone Gbagbo, 62 ans, a été arrêtée en même temps que son mari, Laurent, dans leur villa fortifiée d'Abidjan. Placée en résidence surveillée à Odienné, dans le nord de la Côte d'Ivoire, elle est inculpée de « vol aggravé, détournement de deniers publics, concussion, pillage à l'économie nationale ». Laurent Gbagbo est incarcéré à La Haye (Pays-Bas), inculpé de crimes contre l'humanité par la Cour pénale internationale.



(AFP/REUTERS)

Safia Farkash a rencontré Mouammar Kadhafi en 1971. Elle était infirmière dans l'hôpital où il venait de se faire opérer de l'appendicite. Ils se sont mariés la même année. Mère de sept enfants, on dit qu'elle avait une influence considérable sur son mari. Elle est réfugiée en Algérie avec sa fille Aïcha et ses fils Mohamed et Hannibal, et détient 20 t d'or. Elle a réclamé la dépouille de Mouammar Kadhafi, abattu le 20 octobre dernier.



(AFP/REUTERS)

Sud-Ouest (France)

Abu Abdo, desperado de la révolution

SYRIE Avec des moyens dérisoires, Abu Abdo a mené la fronde contre le régime de Bachar al-Assad dans sa province. Réfugié avec sa famille en Turquie, il raconte sa lutte

HÉDI AOUIDJ
ANTAKYA (TURQUIE)

Les yeux cernés, il fume cigarette sur cigarette. Son visage s'anime quand il commence le récit de sa lutte contre le régime de Bachar al-Assad, qui dure depuis bientôt dix mois. Nous sommes à Yadalagi, en Turquie, juste à la frontière syrienne. Au loin, on aperçoit le village de Kassab, en Syrie, célèbre pour ses rivages très prisés des Arabes du Golfe avant la révolution... C'est là qu'Abu Abdo, chef d'un regroupement de 14 villages du Djebel Ansariyah, région frontalière de la Turquie, s'est réfugié. C'est lui qui a organisé le soulèvement armé, regroupé les femmes et les enfants pour les mettre en sûreté dans les camps de réfugiés en Turquie. Mais maintenant, il est fatigué, n'a plus rien à perdre. Surtout, il se sent très seul.

95% de civils

« Quand les incidents ont commencé à Deraa [ville du Sud, à la frontière jordannienne] que les enfants ont été arrêtés par Atef Najib [un cousin de Bachar], nous avons appris qu'il avait dit aux familles venues les récupérer : "Si vous n'êtes pas capables de les éduquer, amenez-nous vos femmes, nous allons fabriquer une nouvelle génération." » Pour

moi, c'était le début de la révolte. Nous nous sommes donc armés comme nous avons pu, avec quelques kalachnikov, des fusils d'assaut turcs et même de vieilles pétroires datant du mandat français. Nous avons attaqué le centre de police de Jisr al-Chourour, pendant deux jours et deux nuits, nous les avons frappés fort au début, c'est pour cela qu'ils ont organisé la visite des ambassadeurs étrangers pour leur montrer de soi-disant fosses communes pleines de soldats massacrés par les terroristes. » Il rigole et continue : « Nous sommes toujours en mouvement, 95% d'entre nous sont des civils, nous n'avons reçu aucun entraînement, aucune aide de qui que ce soit. L'armée a pris des coups, alors elle a commencé à envoyer des renforts, encore et encore. » La discussion s'interrompt. Le téléphone sonne, son cousin l'appelle de Jisr al-Chourour pour lui dire qu'il est toujours en vie.

Tout perdu

Ce n'est pas très prudent de continuer cette conversation dans ce petit village, où tourne un gros 4x4 noir avec des plaques syriennes, dans lequel sans doute se trouvent des agents des services de renseignements du régime. Mais Abu Abdo



Abu Abdo : « Nous avons capturé des snipers iraniens... » H. AOUIDJ

CRISE ET TENSIONS

HIER À ALEP, la tension est montée, au lendemain d'un double attentat sanglant. Poumon économique du pays, deuxième ville syrienne en termes de population, Alep était jusque-là relativement épargnée par la contestation contre le régime de Bachar al-Assad, mais a donc été frappée vendredi pour la première fois depuis le début de la révolte par un double attentat qui a fait 28 morts. Le pouvoir syrien a imputé ces attaques à des « gangs terroristes » qu'il accuse d'être derrière les violences ; l'opposition accusant quant à elle le régime d'avoir perpétré les attaques « pour détourner l'attention de ce qu'il fait à Homs ». **DANS LE CENTRE DU PAYS**, le régime poursuivait hier son pilonnage sur Homs, Zabadani et Deraa, où deux personnes ont également été tuées, hier.

À DAMAS, fait rarissime s'il est confirmé, un général de l'armée syrienne aurait par ailleurs été abattu, hier matin, par un « groupe terroriste ».

AULIBAN, des heurts entre pro et anti-Assad ont fait deux morts et 21 blessés hier à Tripoli.

SUR LE FRONT DIPLOMATIQUE, les pays de la Ligue arabe, qui se retrouvent aujourd'hui au Caire, pourraient créer un groupe des « Amis de la Syrie » et la désignation d'un envoyé spécial dans le pays.

Des membres du Conseil national syrien (CNS), principale coalition de l'opposition, ont en outre assuré que certains pays du Golfe étaient prêts à reconnaître le CNS comme autorité légitime en Syrie. La Libye est le seul pays à l'avoir fait pour l'instant.

s'en moque, il poursuit le récit de ses combats dans le bus qui nous conduit vers Antakya, la capitale de la province du Hatay. En sortant du bus, un homme barbu qui était à l'avant s'approche, c'est aussi un Syrien, il dit qu'il est préférable de ne pas parler de ces choses-là en public...

Mais Abu Abdo ne veut plus s'arrêter. Personne ne le fera taire, lui qui n'a plus peur. Lui qui a déjà tout perdu : sa maison, son métier dans le bâtiment, ses économies. Et puis, au moins, ses deux femmes et leurs huit enfants sont en sûreté dans les camps.

Les vidéos sur son portable

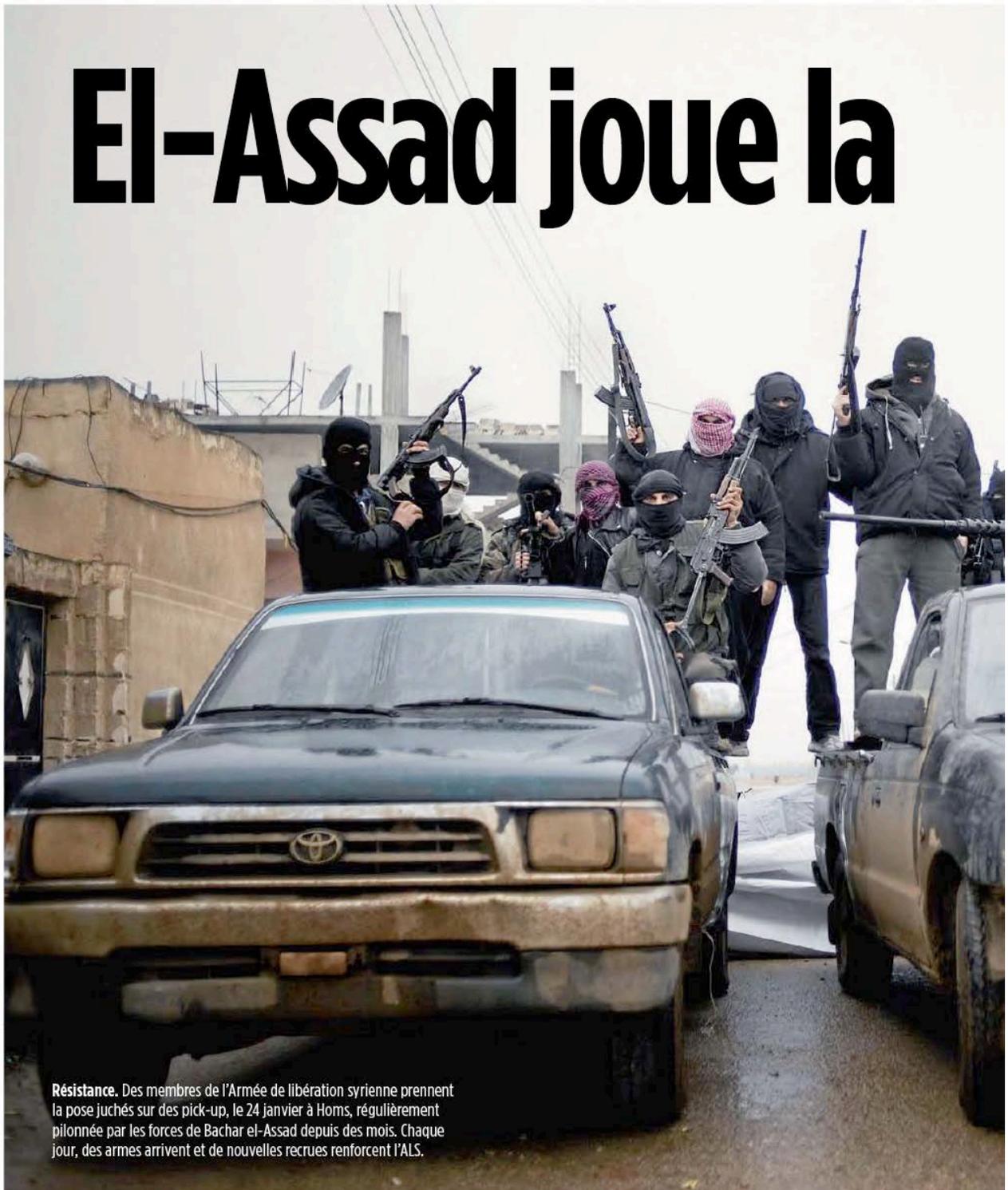
Il allume une énième cigarette : « Nous avons attaqué tous les centres de sécurité, les seuls qui ont résisté sont les renseignements militaires. Après cette dernière attaque, nous sommes partis en Turquie. Ce n'est pas tout, nous avons aussi capturé des snipers iraniens, six d'entre eux, nous venons de les remettre à la gendarmerie turque en échange des femmes et des enfants prisonniers, je ne sais pas s'ils ont tenu leur part du marché. »

Il sort son téléphone et montre une petite vidéo. Des cadavres, des chairs éclatées gisent dans une voiture, il énumère : « Abu Kasr, du village de Sili, Raed, son cousin, Abdallah de Ain al-Baida, Nidal de Sahen. Ils avaient entre 27 et 32 ans, ils ont été tués par l'armée après être venus nous voir, de très bons amis. C'est un des membres des moukhabarat qui travaille pour nous qui l'a filmée il y a quelques jours et me l'a envoyée. Ils sont de plus en plus nombreux dans son cas. Nous nous connaissons tous dans la région, nous sommes comme une famille, ils ne peuvent pas nous infiltrer. »

Ces cigarettes, ce téléphone portable, ces vidéos, sa volonté sans faille sont ses armes contre le régime. Et cela semble bien peu pour arrêter la machine à tuer de Bachar al-Assad. Mais Abu Abdo n'en peut plus de tourner en rond sans rien faire. Il espère une aide qui ne vient pas. Combien de temps pourra-t-il attendre ?

Le Point (France)

El-Assad joue la



Résistance. Des membres de l'Armée de libération syrienne prennent la pose juchés sur des pick-up, le 24 janvier à Homs, régulièrement pilonnée par les forces de Bachar el-Assad depuis des mois. Chaque jour, des armes arrivent et de nouvelles recrues renforcent l'ALS.

guerre civile



ALESSIO ROMBINZI

Syrie. La répression s'intensifie, la résistance tente de s'organiser et le pays s'enfonce dans le chaos.

PAR MIREILLE DUTEIL (AVEC ROULA ZEIN)

Bachar el-Assad se trompe d'époque. Et intensifie les bombardements sur ses opposants. Un massacre à répétition. En 1982, son père, le terrible Hafez el-Assad, avait lancé ses forces spéciales à l'assaut de Hama, cité rebelle tombée aux mains des islamistes. Il avait gagné vingt ans de paix. Depuis, Hama – entre 10 000 et 20 000 morts – est devenue une ville martyre dans l'imaginaire syrien.

Trente ans plus tard, Bachar el-Assad croit qu'il peut, lui aussi, mater la contestation. Il frappe fort. De plus en plus fort. Et fait bombarder sans relâche Homs, fief de l'insurrection depuis de longs mois. Les morts s'y comptent par dizaines, voire par centaines lors de certaines offensives. Comme le 3 février au soir. «*Il était autour de minuit quand nous avons entendu les premiers tirs de canon*», raconte un médecin interrogé par téléphone. Les bombardements n'ont cessé que peu avant l'aube. Un massacre à l'arme lourde. On a dénombré 265 morts cette nuit-là et plusieurs centaines de blessés, selon le Conseil national syrien (CNS), le principal mouvement d'opposition. Se déplacer d'un quartier à l'autre est toujours impossible sans prendre des risques énormes, en particulier à cause des snipers. Les blessés affluent dans les dispensaires de quartier, vite débordés et manquant de tout. Le dimanche 5, Homs pleurait encore 56 morts, plus de 60 lundi, et 100 pour l'ensemble du pays. Une litanie morbide dont on ne voit pas la fin.

Troisième ville du pays, Homs, au sud de Hama, est la pre- ■■■



Horreur quotidienne. Le 4 février, les habitants de Homs enterrent leurs morts. La veille, 265 Syriens, d'après l'opposition, ont été victimes de bombardements.

■■■ mière victime de l'entêtement présidentiel et de la communauté alaouite. Cité majoritairement sunnite (quelque 65 % de la population syrienne), ce sont les quartiers rebelles qui y sont bombardés. La minorité alaouite et la famille Assad craignent les représailles le jour où le pouvoir changera de mains. Elles sont prêtes à vendre chèrement leur tête. Homs en paie le prix.

Si Bachar el-Assad, le président à l'air timide, ose massacrer sa population, c'est qu'il se sent conforté par le veto de la Russie et de la Chine au Conseil de sécurité de l'Onu. La résolution présentée par le Maroc et soutenue par les Occidentaux avait pourtant été édulcorée: elle ne demandait plus le transfert du pouvoir au vice-président, mais juste la fin des violences. Ni Moscou ni Pékin ne veulent – du moins pour le moment – du départ de Bachar el-Assad. Pas question de réitérer le coup de la Libye. On se souvient que les Etats-Unis et la France avaient proposé une résolution condamnant la répression de Mouammar Kadhafi,

Solidarité arabe

La Tunisie a été le premier pays arabe à prendre une mesure de rétorsion contre la Syrie. Elle a décidé de ne plus reconnaître le régime de Bachar el-Assad et a expulsé l'ambassadeur de Syrie, demandant à tous les pays arabes de l'imiter. Il faut «*placer les principes de justice au-dessus de toute autre considération*», a affirmé le Premier ministre, Hamadi Jebali, du parti islamiste Ennahda. Une décision jugée «*précipitée*» par l'opposition et des syndicats. J. S.

et l'histoire s'est terminée par une intervention militaire et la chute du colonel libyen. Pour Vladimir Poutine comme pour le Premier ministre chinois, le principe même de l'ingérence occidentale est inacceptable. Un principe qui, pour Moscou au moins, n'est pas totalement désintéressé. La Syrie est son seul allié stratégique au Proche-Orient, elle lui assure une base navale pour sa flotte à Tartous et achète 7 % des exportations russes d'armement. «*La guerre froide est pourtant finie*», a souligné, lundi, le président turc Abdullah Gül, estimant que la situation évoluait «*vers le pire scénario possible*» pour la Syrie. En signe de protestation et face à l'insécurité croissante à Damas, les Etats-Unis ont fermé leur ambassade. La Grande-Bretagne et la France ont rappelé leurs ambassadeurs.

Bachar el-Assad n'en a cure. Le 6 février à l'aube, des centaines de blindés ont pris d'assaut Zabadani, jolie ville de 30 000 habitants en temps de paix qui abrite des résidences d'été de riches habitants du

Golfe. Ces dernières semaines, devant la multiplication des pillages, les grandes villas se sont vidées. Il ne reste plus que 7 000 personnes à Zabadani, les plus modestes. Ce sont elles qui, lundi matin, ont essuyé les bombardements des chars. Parallèlement, d'autres blindés entraînent dans Daraya. Plus tard dans la matinée, la télévision officielle annonçait que l'armée avait terminé son travail et «*nettoyé*» la région de Zabadani et l'est de la Ghouta, cette ceinture de vergers quienserre Damas. Aucun chiffre de victimes n'était donné par la télévision aux ordres, qui montre cependant les funérailles des officiers de l'armée. Un nettoyage aseptisé. Terrible.

Pillage. Il y a deux mois encore, le centre de Damas et les quartiers résidentiels habités par la bourgeoisie alaouite, sunnite ou chrétienne favorable au régime semblaient vivre dans une bulle. C'est terminé. L'insécurité est générale, des bandes pillent et volent, l'Etat est partout défaillant. Les Damas-

cènes se terrent dès le coucher du soleil, y compris sur le mont Qassioum, qui surplombe la capitale et abrite le palais-forteresse présidentiel.

Des manifestations, encore peu importantes, se multiplient dans Damas même. Les insurgés sont souvent protégés par des membres de l'Armée de libération syrienne (ALS) et se dispersent rapidement dès que les forces de sécurité interviennent. C'était la tactique utilisée à Homs ou à Hama il y a plusieurs mois, avant que des foules énormes ne descendent dans la rue pour enterrer leurs morts, hommes, femmes et enfants.

Combien sont-ils, ces déserteurs syriens qui tentent de faire tomber le régime ? Ils affirment être 40 000 et disposer de 37 bataillons. C'est probablement exagéré. Voilà plus de six mois que des petits groupes de 10 à 30 soldats, voire moins, font défection. Souvent parce qu'ils refusent de tirer sur la foule des civils, comme l'exigent leurs supérieurs. Nombre d'entre eux ont été abattus sur place par leurs officiers, des Alaouites. Des informations américaines estiment que l'ALS est présente dans la moitié des quatorze provinces du pays. Dans les villages, les déserteurs ont souvent été rejoints par des civils. Qu'un opposant soit fait prisonnier et sa famille sera arrêtée et souvent torturée. Des jeunes préfèrent rejoindre l'ALS. Ils constituent des groupes d'autodéfense et assurent la sécurité des civils lors des manifestations.

Lors de la création de l'Armée syrienne libre, le plus difficile a été de trouver des armes. Certains militaires ont pu désertre avec les leurs ; d'autres en ont récupéré lors des affrontements avec l'armée ; du matériel militaire arrive clandestinement du Liban, d'Irak (où les sunnites soutiennent les opposants syriens), de Jordanie et peut-être de Turquie, en dépit des démentis officiels. Le QG de l'ALS est d'ailleurs à Hatay (ex-Antioche), à la frontière turco-syrienne. Désormais, les déserteurs disposent de mitrailleuses, de lance-roquettes... Il est vrai que les voisins libanais et irakien ne sont pas à court de matériels. Pour l'instant encore, l'ALS joue au chat et à la souris avec les forces de sécurité syriennes, montant des embuscades, s'installant dans des villages (y compris près de Damas) pendant quelques heures ou quelques jours. De plus en plus, les accrochages avec l'armée régulière sont violents, comme ce fut le cas dans la vieille ville de Barzé, banlieue populaire de Damas, il y a trois semaines.

En ce début 2012, l'armée rebelle n'est constituée que de petits groupes autonomes, sans stratégie commune ni liens avec l'opposition politique. Celle-ci est réticente à la militarisation de l'insurrection. Pour deux raisons : elle semble sans issue compte tenu du rapport de forces et permet au pouvoir d'affirmer qu'il combat des « terroristes en armes ». Bachar el-Assad sait qu'en bombardant ses citoyens il mène son pays tout droit à la guerre civile ■

L'armée rebelle, constituée de petits groupes autonomes sans stratégie commune, n'a pas de liens avec l'opposition politique, réticente à la militarisation.

Marianne (France)

Syrie . Impunité p

Bachar al-Assad continue à massacrer son peuple, malgré les condamnations occidentales. Le maître de Damas bénéficie du soutien de Moscou, Téhéran et Pékin, qui veulent garder la main sur ce pays au cœur d'une sphère géopolitique explosive.

PAR MARTINE GOZLAN

Parce que les mots des révolutions arabes sont partout les mêmes, *hurriya, karama, chahid*, – « liberté », « dignité », « martyr » – on oublie que leur clameur jaillit sur des terres dont les destins ne se ressemblent pas. C'est ainsi qu'observant Tunis, Le Caire, Tripoli et aujourd'hui Damas, nous affichons le même appétit pour l'amalgame que les despotes, naguère, pour la fictive « unité arabe ». La clé des 6 000 meurtres commis à ce jour par Bachar al-Assad n'est pas cachée dans les précédents épisodes du grand soulèvement qui a déferlé sur le Maghreb et le Proche-Orient. Certes, les raisons de l'insurrection – la paupérisation, la détestation du clan au pouvoir et de sa corruption – et la jeunesse des révolutionnaires se ressemblent. En revanche, les raisons de la répression sanglante sont inédites. Typiquement syriennes. Mais pas seulement syriennes : car qui dit Syrie a toujours dit plus loin que la Syrie.

Etre au centre de la région

Telles furent la loi et la volonté de puissance de la dynastie au pouvoir depuis quarante ans : assurer le gouvernorat casqué



Selon l'Armée syrienne libre, Téhéran fournit des pasdarans pour mater l'insurrection avec les mêmes méthodes

de la région. Il fallait donc maîtriser son ordre fragile, fût-ce au prix d'un désordre agile tissé d'attentats et de déstabilisations. Il fallait restituer à Damas, jadis cœur historique de l'Empire arabe omeyyade, son statut impérial. En s'appuyant sur ce national-socialisme arabe, le baasisme, dont ni la détestation de l'islamisme, ni la protection savamment instrumentalisée de la minorité chrétienne (10 % du pays) ne peuvent cacher la nature fasciste. Il vrai que le baasisme syrien jouait sur du velours de sang face aux dictatures religieuses sunnites du Golfe, Arabie saoudite en tête. Laquelle s'est transformée, pour faire tomber Bachar, en sœur samaritaine de la démocratie !

Ici, la guerre régionale n'est jamais loin. C'est au prisme de cette lumière noire que vacille le malheureux destin du Liban toujours otage, *via* le Hezbollah, du

régime de Bachar, malgré le retrait syrien du pays du Cèdre en 2005. C'est dans la réverbération de l'ambition baasiste (être au centre et non à la périphérie de la région) que s'éclaire le lien fusionnel du régime syrien laïc avec les mollahs de la République islamique d'Iran. Bien sûr, le clan Assad, minoritaire dans son pays sunnite, est alaouite – une lointaine excroissance du chiisme –, mais c'est essentiellement pour consolider son pouvoir grâce au parrainage de Téhéran qu'il a joué sur la vague parenté confessionnelle.

Quand les Syriens sont dans la rue pour réclamer la chute du régime, leur tyran les fait donc abattre avec d'autant plus de sang-froid qu'il sait son fauteuil de despote au centre d'une galaxie géopolitique explosive : le conflit entre sunnites et chiites sans cesse réactivé par

our le boucher



que celles utilisées en Iran en 2009.

toasts les forces du régime bombardent Homs ! L'Unicef sonne le tocsin pour les 400 enfants syriens « arrêtés, torturés et abusés sexuellement ».

Tout espoir agonise. Les lendemains révolutionnaires ne chanteront pas. Car l'horreur décrétée par le régime Assad a totalement marginalisé les opposants favorables à une solution négociée. Elle a fait émerger l'Armée syrienne libre, dont les porte-parole à l'étranger, via le Conseil national syrien, ne sont pas hostiles à une intervention occidentale. Balayée, la position de Michel Kilo, opposant historique à Bachar, pour qui « une intervention extérieure serait la destruction du pays » ! Noir effet de miroir régional encore : Bachar est voisin de Bagdad, naguère aux mains de l'autre branche du baasisme, celle de Saddam Hussein, puis ravagée par la guerre américaine qui a rouvert l'atroce boîte de Pandore des haines confessionnelles.

Le maître de Damas gouverne depuis 2003 en lisière du chaos irakien. Or, Bagdad est aujourd'hui gouvernée par un régime chiite pro-iranien : encore une carte alliée et une raison supplémentaire d'éliminer les révolutionnaires.

Moscou se rend aux raisons de l'ami bourreau : pas question de sacrifier sa base navale de Tartous, ni les contrats d'armement qui lient la Russie à la Syrie. Des contrats qui assurent la vie huppée des hauts dignitaires du complexe militaro-

industriel. Moscou est ainsi l'autre grand parrain d'Assad, avec désormais Pékin et, comme toujours, Téhéran qui, selon l'Armée syrienne libre, lui fournit des hommes de main. Des pasdarans, des gardiens de la révolution iranienne, envoyés pour mater l'insurrection avec les mêmes méthodes

que celles utilisées en Iran, de juin à décembre 2009, contre les millions de manifestants pacifiques du mouvement contre l'élection truquée de Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Toutefois, ce sont des bataillons syriens fidèles au régime qui tirent massivement sur la foule. C'est l'énorme réseau de services de renseignements qui dénonce, arrête, incarcère, torture, viole. La dictature, c'est leur gagne-pain. L'achat des soutiens et le clientélisme ont assuré jusqu'ici la pérennité du clan Assad, comme le montre la journaliste et politologue Caroline Donati dans une volumi-

neuse enquête, *L'Exception syrienne* (éditions La Découverte), réalisée avant la révolution. Elle y explorait des pistes annonciatrices du séisme : la frustration de la jeunesse qui constitue démographiquement la moitié de la Syrie, la marginalisation économique du plus grand nombre, la revendication islamiste. La révolution a jailli de ces fractures.

Mais, à l'inverse des dictateurs balayés par la tempête de la liberté, Bachar al-Assad n'est pas seul. Il tue accompagné. ■

Moscou se rend aux raisons de l'ami bourreau : pas question de sacrifier sa base navale de Tartous, ni les contrats d'armement qui lient les deux pays.

Riyad et Téhéran, la partie de bras de fer entre l'Iran nucléaire et l'Amérique, la poudrière israélo-arabe avec le Hezbollah au Sud-Liban.

L'achat des soutiens

Certain que si son pouvoir explose, tout explose ailleurs, Bachar continue à tuer. Même au moment où il assure qu'il « [fera] cesser toutes les violences, d'où qu'elles viennent » au chef de la diplomatie russe, Sergueï Lavrov, accueilli en héros à Damas le 7 février, après le veto russe et chinois à la résolution de l'ONU condamnant la répression. L'entretien se déroule sous les dorures et le nacre du palais de la présidence, au sommet du mont Qassioun, qui signifie – ça ne s'invente pas – « mont de la cruauté » -, mais pendant qu'on porte des

SOS Homs

Homs, la ville où est née la révolution syrienne, subit aujourd'hui sous le regard du monde – sans journalistes, mais avec le témoignage de vidéos – le même martyre qu'Hama en 1982, détruite par Hafez al-Assad dans un huis clos intégral. On relevait à Homs 250 morts entre le 5 et le 6 février,

50 morts sous les bombardements dans la seule matinée du 8 février, au lendemain des fausses promesses de Bachar. Omar Shaker, un habitant joint par l'AFP, racontait l'asphyxie : « Toutes les infrastructures sont détruites, les réservoirs d'eau comme les poteaux électriques. La nourriture se fait rare... » ■

Viele Tote nach Explosionen in Aleppo

Syrische Regierung: Terroranschläge / Opposition: Schwarzes Theater des Regimes / Viele Tote in Homs

ch. FRANKFURT, 10. Februar. In der syrischen Stadt Aleppo sind am Freitag bei Bombenexplosionen nach Regimeangaben Dutzende Personen getötet worden. Die staatliche Nachrichtenagentur Sana berichtete, bei zwei „Terroranschlägen“ auf ein Gebäude des Militärgeheimdienstes und eines der Sicherheitskräfte seien 25 Menschen getötet und 175 weitere verletzt worden. Die Staatsmedien zeigten Bilder verkohlter Leichname und von Aufräumarbeiten. Ein Sprecher der „Freien Syrischen Armee“, die sich überwiegend aus Deserteuren zusammensetzt, beschuldigte das Regime in Damaskus, die Anschläge inszeniert zu haben. Das sei „ein altes Spiel“, um von den Massakern abzulenken, welche die Sicherheitskräfte an der Zivilbevölkerung verübten. Oppositionsaktivisten sprachen von einem „weiteren schwarzen Theaterstück des Regimes“, das die Niederschlagung der Proteste als Kampf gegen „Terroristen“ bezeichnet. Solche gegenseitigen Vorwürfe hatte es auch nach Bombenexplosionen in Damaskus im Januar und im Dezember gegeben.

In Aleppo war es in der Vergangenheit vergleichsweise ruhig geblieben, es war die letzte Großstadt, in der Proteste ausbrachen. Das mehrheitlich konservative Bürgertum von Aleppo verhält sich in dem Konflikt bisher zumindest neutral, viele der sunnitischen Kaufleute der Stadt sind unter der Assad-Herrschaft zu Wohlstand gelangt. Die Opposition hatte zu neuen Demonstrationen nach den Freitagsgebeten aufgerufen.

In der Stadt Homs, die derzeit das Zentrum des Aufstands gegen das Assad-Regime ist, setzte die Armee die Belagerung mit unverminderter Härte fort. Unterstützt von Panzern, rückten Soldaten in den Stadtteil Inshaat ein. Vor allem die Viertel, in denen das Regime die Zentren des Widerstands vermutet, werden seit einer Woche mit schwerem Artilleriebeschuss belegt. So berichten Augenzeugen, dass auf den Stadtteil Bab Amr täglich fast ohne Unterbrechung Granaten niedergingen. Seit vergangener Samstag sollen in Homs nach Angaben von Aktivisten 400 Menschen getötet worden sein. Allein am Freitagmorgen war von mehr

als 100 Toten in den vergangenen 24 Stunden die Rede. Solche Berichte lassen sich nicht überprüfen. Die Menschenrechtsorganisation „Human Rights Watch“ hatte unter Berufung auf Angaben aus der Stadt von Opferzahlen in ähnlicher Größenordnung berichtet.

Nach Fernsehberichten aus Homs fürchtet die Bevölkerung schon seit Tagen eine großangelegte Bodenoffensive und neue Verhaftungswellen. Demnach sind die Kämpfer der „Freien Syrischen Armee“ schlecht ausgerüstet. Die Deserteure brachten ihre Waffen mit oder mussten sich auf dem Schwarzmarkt welche kaufen. Ein Offizier der Aufständischen sagte unlängst der Zeitung „Al Sharq al Awsat“, die Kämpfer würden Kleinwaffen wie Sturmgewehre oder Panzerfäuste bei Shahiba-Milizen kaufen. Andere Kämpfer machen diese kriminellen Banden für den Beschuss von Homs verant-

wortlich. Sie seien vom Regime angeheuert worden, sagte ein Kämpfer in Homs einer Reporterin des Senders Al Dschazira.

Vor diesem Hintergrund erscheinen auch die Berichte plausibel, nach denen bei Beratungen des Führungsstabes des oppositionellen Syrischen Nationalrats in Qatar auch über Waffenlieferungen an

dem Regime unterbunden. Demnach werden Hunderte Verletzte in notdürftig in Privathäusern eingerichteten „Untergrundkliniken“ behandelt.

Obama: Gewalt Assads abstoßend

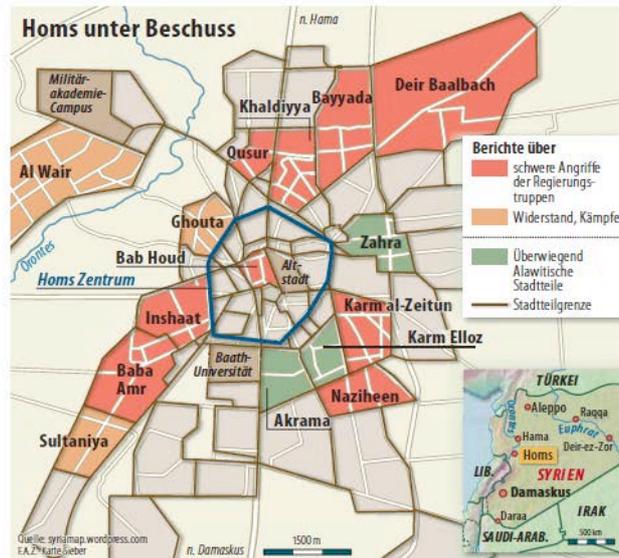
rüb/johe. WASHINGTON/BERLIN, 10. Februar. Präsident Obama hat seine Forderung nach einem sofortigen Rücktritt des syrischen Präsidenten Baschar al Assad bekräftigt. Eine Regierung, die ihr eigenes Volk angreife, müsse umgehend ersetzt werden, sagte er am Donnerstag in Washington. Er bezeichnete die Gewalt in Syrien als „schockierend“ und „abstoßend“. In Washington mehrten sich die Forderungen nach Waffenlieferungen an die syrische Opposition. Der frühere republikanische Präsidentschaftskandidat John McCain fordert ein Eingreifen, will aber keine Truppen entsenden.

In Berlin forderten am Freitag Vertreter der syrischen Exilopposition die Bundesregierung auf, die diplomatischen Beziehungen zu Syrien abzubrechen. Der syrische Botschafter müsse ausgewiesen werden, sagte Ferhad Ahma vom Syrischen Nationalrat. Hozan Ibrahim, Mitglied des Generalsekretariats des SNC, forderte Deutschland und die EU auf, den Nationalrat als legitime Vertretung des syrischen Volkes anzuerkennen. Er verlangte ferner schärfere politische und wirtschaftliche Sanktionen gegen das Assad-Regime. Die Nationalratsvertreter appellierten an die Bundesregierung, humanitäre Hilfe in Syrien zu leisten. Eine militärische Intervention lehnten sie ab.

Die Schweiz gab unterdessen trotz Sanktionen gegen das syrische Regime drei Millionen Euro für Hafez Machluf frei, den mächtigsten Geheimdienst in Syrien leitet. Seine Familie ist mit dem Assad-Clan verschwägert, sein Bruder Rami Machluf ist der reichste Syrer; Fachleute schätzen, dass er 60 Prozent der syrischen Wirtschaft beeinflusst oder gar kontrolliert. Rami Machluf beschaffte dem Assad-Regime stets das Geld, das es für das Überleben benötigt. Es handele sich um einen Ausnahmefall, zu dem man nicht im einzelnen Stellung nehme, sagte eine Sprecherin des zuständigen Schweizer Staatssekretariats für Wirtschaft in Bern am Freitag der Deutschen Presse-Agentur.

Hochburgen des Widerstands, Zeitgeschehen, Seite 10

Deserteure diskutiert werde. Im Libyen-Konflikt hatte die Führung des Golfemirats die Rebellen mit Waffen versorgt. Aktivisten fordern auch Hilfslieferungen aus der Luft, vor allem medizinische Güter und Babyahrung. Die medizinische Versorgung der Zivilbevölkerung wird nach Angaben von „Human Rights Watch“



Am 15. März 2011 entfachten Jugendliche in der staubigen Stadt Daraa arglos die tiefgreifendste Revolution in der Geschichte Syriens seit 500 Jahren. Sie spraysen gegen die Korruption, gegen die Geheimdienste und gegen die Armut an. Sie wurden verhaftet und gefoltert. Als die Eltern nach ihren Kindern fragten, wies sie der Chef des Geheimdienstes, ein Cousin des Präsidenten Baschar al-Assad, brüsk zurück. So demonstrierten sie am nächsten Tag, eher schüchtern. Sie sagten kein Wort gegen den Präsidenten. Er aber, ein Gefangener seines Systems, ließ auf sie schießen. Er hatte von seinem Vater gelernt: Sobald Menschen ihre Stimme erheben, bedarf es einer harten Lektion. Das hatte dieser Vater 1982 in Hama praktiziert. Nach einem Massaker, bei dem mehr als 20 000 unschuldige Menschen den Tod fanden, herrschte Friedhofsruhe. Der Sohn aber hat Pech. Die Zeiten haben sich geändert.

Baschar al-Assad lügt, wenn er Reformen verspricht, er muss lügen. Die erste ernst zu nehmende Reform wäre die Auflösung der fünfzehn Geheimdienste, die gegen das eigene Volk arbeiten. Das aber würde ihm das Genick brechen. Würde er die Panzer und Scharfschützen aus den Städten abziehen, sie wären bald von den Revolutionären befreit.

Ich schreibe einen Artikel in der syrischen Oppositionszeitung *Safahat Suriye*

Außenansicht

Assad wird stürzen – was dann?

Unglaubliches passiert in Syrien. Doch die Gefahr ist groß, dass die gewonnene Freiheit in neuem Blut ertrinkt

Von Rafik Schami

(Syrische Blätter). Gegen den Geist der Rache, für den Mut, auch den Gegnern die Hand zu reichen. Ich schreibe aus Sorge um die alawitische Minderheit, die seit Jahrtausenden verfolgt wurde und Syrien nun seit vierzig Jahren beherrscht. Fundamentalisten rufen zur Rache auf. Die aufgeklärten Oppositionellen müssen dagegen ankämpfen. Das Regime ist die Pest, der konfessionelle Bürgerkrieg die Cholera.

Unglaubliches ist passiert – dabei sah es so düster aus. Die Herrscher hatten die absolute Macht, der Westen war damit einverstanden. Die arabischen Menschen suchten ihr Heil im Konsum. Die Intellektuellen waren tot, im Gefängnis oder im Exil, die Opposition gebrochen. Und nun? Assad wird stürzen! Das Volk kann nicht mehr zurück.

Was dann? Zwölf Jahre Nazidiktatur zeigen in Deutschland heute noch Folgen. Syrien wird seit vierzig Jahren diktatorisch deformiert. Wie werden die Menschen darauf reagieren, plötzlich frei zu sein? Immerhin werden sich die Syrer selbst befreit haben. Doch was kommt nach dem Sturz des Regimes? Bürgerkrieg? Provisorische Einheitsregierung? Ein blutiger Putsch? Übernehmen die Fundamentalisten die Macht?

Vor den Fundamentalisten muss man keine Angst haben. Mögen sie auch im Moment stark erscheinen, ein Programm zur Lösung der syrischen Probleme haben sie nicht. Mit der Scharia lässt sich das Land nicht regieren: 40 Prozent der Bevölkerung sind Nicht-Sunniten. Möglicherweise werden Putsch und Bürgerkrieg die Freiheit in einer Blutlache er-

tränken. Der Westen muss die zivile demokratische Opposition unterstützen, wie er es in Osteuropa meisterlich getan hat. Nur dies kann die Fundamentalisten und den Bürgerkrieg verhindern.

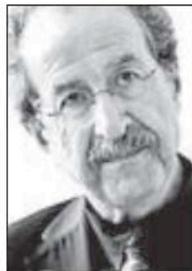
Ist es nicht erstaunlich, dass Regime, die mit dem Slogan „Religion ist das Opium des Volkes“ auftraten, selbst ein religions-ähnliches System aufbauten? Auch die Assads glaubten den von den Geheimdiensten bestellten Ausrufern, die ihnen zujubelten. Sie glaubten an ihre göttliche Genialität. Dagegen der Esel: Selbst wenn man ihm tausendmal sagt, du bist ein Löwe, er glaubt es nicht. Esel sind nicht so dumm, wie wir denken.

Mehr als 80 000 Menschen sind seit jenem März verschwunden. Sie sollen in Fußballstadien, Kasernen und neuerdings auch auf Schiffen vor der Küste gefangen gehalten werden. Ich fürchte, viele von ihnen sind tot. Es ist nur eine Frage der Zeit, wann diese Gräueltaten aufgedeckt werden. Die Syrer zahlen auf einen Schlag, was Ägypten, Jemeniten und Tunesier in Raten zahlen.

Der Westen kritisiert Assad – und liefert ihm durch die Hintertür Software der Firma „Blue Coat“, mit der die einzige wirksame Waffe der syrischen Opposition, das Internet, zunichte gemacht wird. Der syrische Geheimdienst kann nun in kompletten Regionen den Zugang zum Internet unterbinden und die Kom-

munikation der Oppositionellen unterwandern und stören, dank amerikanischer Hilfe.

Ein Streit mit einem palästinensischen Freund führt nach 25 Jahren zum Bruch der Freundschaft. Für ihn ist das syrische Regime die letzte Hochburg des arabischen Nationalismus. Ich zähle ihm die Untaten des Regimes gegen die von ihm geliebte Nation auf. Der Mann erhob sich am Ende beleidigt und ging. Ein nächtliches Telefonat mit einem syrischen Intellektuellen. Er zeigt Angst vor der Leere, davor, dass seine Maßstäbe nicht mehr gelten. Es redet ein enttäuschter Mensch, der glaubte, die Intellektuellen führten das Volk. Nun erlebt er, wie Jugendliche, Frauen und Männer, die nicht ein Tausendstel seines Wissens besitzen, ihn zum verwirrten Kommentator degradieren.



Die Werke des syrischstämmigen Schriftstellers Rafik Schami, 65, verbinden orientalische und westliche Erzähltraditionen. Er kritisierte seit Jahren die arabischen Diktaturen. Foto: dpa

Die Syrer haben die schwierigste Nuss zu knacken. Viele Machtzentren sind mit dem Regime in Damaskus vernetzt und verstrickt: Israel, Iran, die Hisbollah, der Irak, die Türkei, die Russen, die Saudis. Die Kurden streben, zu Recht, nach Autonomie. All das gerät in Bewegung, sobald Assad stürzt. Ich beneide meinen Freund Burhan Ghalioun nicht um seine Rolle als Vorsitzender des Nationalrats, als möglicher Präsident einer Übergangsregierung. Übergangsregierungen werden undankbar verjagt, sobald sich die Bürger sicher fühlen.

Die Arabische Liga ist ein Verein der Diktatoren; von dort ausgesuchte Beobachter können nicht viel besser sein als dieser Verein. Trotzdem war ihr Eintreffen in Syrien ein Sieg für die Opposition: Zum ersten Mal musste das Regime zugeben, dass der Widerstand nicht zu brechen ist, nicht mit Soldaten, Geheimdiensten, Todesschwadronen. Dies ist mehr, als die UN samt ihrem Generalsekretär, Sicherheitsrat und ihrer Menschenrechtskommission bewirkt haben, mehr, als die EU bewirkt hat.

Ich bin jetzt Mitglied des „Verbands Syrischer Autoren“. Dort sind neben Oppositionellen auch Autoren vertreten, die bis vor kurzem noch brave Regimeanhänger waren. Erst stieß mich der Gedanke ab, mit ihnen auf einer Liste zu stehen. Aber wir müssen lernen zu verzeihen. Sonst sind wir verloren.

Der Standard (Aurtriche / Austria)

Im Ring um Damaskus tobt der Aufstand

Die Geschichten der verwundeten Soldaten im Tishrin-Militärspital in Damaskus zeigen, wie nah an der Hauptstadt die Truppen von Präsident Assad und die bewaffneten Oppositionellen kämpfen.

Astrid Frefel aus Damaskus

Ein Team des staatlichen TV-Senders Al-Akhabariya filmt vor der Omayyaden-Moschee im Herzen der Altstadt von Damaskus – ein Zeichen dafür, dass das Regime dieses Freitagsgebet für sich beansprucht. Und tatsächlich beginnen bald jugendliche, Pro-Assad-Parolen zu skandieren und russische Flaggen zu schwingen.

Die Opposition hat hingegen für Freitag zu Kundgebungen unter dem Motto „Russland tötet unsere Kinder“ aufgerufen. Auch vor diesem Wahrzeichen der Stadt hatte es anfangs Proteste gegen den Präsidenten gegeben, aber das Regime hat reagiert und schickt seit her die eigenen Leute her.

Spontane Kundgebungen

Das nahe gelegene Midan-Viertel südwestlich der Altstadt bleibe dagegen ein „Hotspot“ der Opposition, erklärt Salem, der auf der zentralen Marktstraße ein Geschäft führt. Meist kommt es freitags zu kleinen Demonstrationen gegen Bashar al-Assad, und die Läden machen schnell dicht. Diese „fliegenden Demonstrationen“, wie sie die Einheimischen nennen, lösen sich stets nach nur wenigen Minuten wieder auf. Oft dokumentieren die Teilnehmer die Aktion mit Handycameras und stellen Videos ins Internet.

„Niemand weiß, wann die Versammlungen stattfinden, sonst wären auch die allwissenden Sicherheitskräfte informiert“, sagt Salem. In der Umgebung sei deshalb bis jetzt auch noch nie geschossen worden.

Solche Spontankundgebungen sind in-

Die dreieinhalbjährige Naghmeh ist die jüngste Patientin im Tishrin-Militärkrankenhaus. Sie wurde angeschossen, als sie mit ihrer Großmutter auf der Straße war.

Foto: Astrid Frefel



zwischen in vielen Stadtvierteln der Hauptstadt zu beobachten.

Am nördlichen Stadtrand, in Barzeh, gingen zuletzt sogar Schüler gegen die Bombardierung der Stadt Homs auf die Straße – diese soll es laut staatlichen Medien gar nicht gegeben haben.

Nur wenige Kilometer weiter, in mehreren Orten des Hauptstadtbereichs, gibt es hingegen regelmäßig bewaffnete Auseinandersetzungen. Davon zeugen die verwundeten Soldaten und Offiziere, die im Tishrin-Militärkrankenhaus behandelt werden. Vor wenigen Tagen wurden hier 13 Tote – ein Major, ein Leutnant sowie elf Soldaten der regulären Armee – als „Märtyrer“ geehrt und beerdigt.

Die jüngste Patientin ist die dreieinhalbjährige Naghmeh. Sie wurde vor einer Wo-

che im Vorort Arbeen angeschossen, als sie mit ihrer Großmutter auf der Straße unterwegs war. Die Frau ist noch immer geschockt und wünscht sich nur, dass Syrien wieder das sichere Land werde, das es einmal war.

REPORTAGE

Ein Stockwerk höher liegt der 20-jährige Hamid, der in Rastan angeschossen wurde; er wird nie mehr gehen können. „Welche Sünde hat er denn begangen?“, fragt der Vater verzweifelt. Hamid ist einfacher Soldat, der seinen 18-monatigen Pflichtdienst ableistet.

Er erzählt seine Geschichte mit ähnlichen Worten wie der 25-jährige Geheimdienstagent Majed, der mit zwei Messerstichen in die Brust verletzt wurde. „Wir waren auf dem Weg zu einem Job, als es passierte.“ Soll heißen: Die Armee schickt ihre Truppen los, sobald sie Informationen über Stellungen der oppositionellen Freien Syri-

schen Armee hat. Ihre Mitglieder werden von den Soldaten nur als „Terroristen“ oder „Al-Kaida“ bezeichnet. Schuld an der Gewalt sei eine Verschwörung gegen Syrien.

Oberst Khazzan nennt auch soziale Gründe und die „Manipulationen von Al-Jazeera“, wie das „fabrizierte Massaker von Homs“. Der 48-jährige hat eine Schusswunde, ein Teil der Lunge musste entfernt werden. Er sei seit März schon zum dritten Mal angeschossen worden, zuletzt in Rastan. Dort herrsche Chaos, sagt er. Der Befehl laute, nur zur Verteidigung zu schießen, betont er – um gleich anzufügen, dass er bereits mehrere „Terroristen“ getötet habe.

Der Oberst ist überzeugt, dass die syrische Armee die Oberhand behalten wird. Die Erzählungen der Soldaten im Militärspital zeigen aber, dass Damaskus umgeben ist von einem Ring, in dem der Aufstand brodelte.

Ashton wirbt für härtere Sanktionen gegen Syrien

Berlin/Damaskus – Mindestens 750 Zivilisten seien in der letzten Woche vom syrischen Regime getötet worden, sagte Ferhad Ahma vom Syrischen Nationalrat (SNC) am Freitag in Berlin. Er appellierte an die internationale Gemeinschaft, einzuschreiten und härtere Sanktionen zu verhängen. Humanitäre Maßnahmen seien dringend nötig. Eine militärische Intervention forderte der SNC hingegen nicht – diese sei nur das letzte Mittel.

Allein in Homs wurden am Donnerstag nach Angaben der Aktivisten mindestens 107 Menschen getötet. Die Stadt ist von Armeeposten umzingelt. Die letzte Lebensmittellieferung ist zehn Tage her, die Heizölverträge gehen ebenfalls zu Ende.

Aleppo, Syriens zweitgrößte Stadt, wurde am Freitag von mindestens zwei Explosionen erschüttert. Nach Angaben des Staats-TV wurden 25 Menschen getötet und 175 verletzt, es handelte sich um „terroristische“ Angriffe gegen ein Gebäude des Militärgeheimdienstes und den Sitz der Ordnungspolizei. Assad-Gegner machten dagegen das Militär für die Anschläge verantwortlich.

Appell an Russland

Unterdessen hält die internationale Kritik am syrischen Regime an: US-Präsident Barack Obama bezeichnete die Situation in Syrien am Donnerstag als „abscheuliches Blutvergießen“. EU-Außenbeauftragte Catherine Ashton appellierte an Russland, doch noch eine UN-Resolution gegen die Gewalt in Syrien zu unterstützen. Zudem warb sie für härtere Sanktionen gegen das syrische Regime. Die UN-Hochkommissarin für Menschenrechte, Navi Pillay, sieht in Syrien einen Fall für den Internationalen Strafgerichtshof.

Libyen wies am Donnerstag alle syrischen Diplomaten aus. Bereits im Oktober hatte es den Syrischen Nationalrat als legitime Vertretung anerkannt. (Reuters, AFP)

SCHWERPUNKT:
Kein Ende der Gewalt in Syrien

Kleine Zeitung (Autriche / Austria)



Spuren der Verwüstung in der zweitgrößten syrischen Stadt Aleppo

REUTERS

Tote bei Doppelanschlag in Syrien

DAMASKUS. Vor zwei Einrichtungen der Sicherheitskräfte in der syrischen Stadt Aleppo sind große Sprengsätze detoniert. Dabei wurden mindestens 25 Menschen getötet. Weitere Opfer wurden unter den teils eingestürzten Gebäuden vermutet, wie das Staats-

fernsehen berichtete. Die staatliche Nachrichtenagentur Sana meldete, die Terroranschläge hätten einem Gebäude des Militärgeheimdienstes und dem Sitz der Ordnungspolizei gegolten. Bislang war es in der zweitgrößten Stadt Syriens relativ ruhig.

La Tribune de Genève (Suisse / Switzerland)

«La Syrie est en passe de devenir un nouvel Irak»

Un attentat a fait au moins 25 morts et 175 blessés hier à Alep, tandis qu'à Homs la répression se poursuit

La ville d'Alep (nord de la Syrie) a vécu l'horreur, hier. Deux attentats à la voiture piégée, qui auraient visé le siège des renseignements militaires et le QG des forces de l'ordre, selon les autorités, ont tué au moins 25 personnes et fait 175 blessés. Ces attaques ont d'abord été revendiquées par un colonel de l'Armée libre syrienne; puis celle-ci, par la voix de son dirigeant Ryad el-Assad, démentait pour accuser le régime de les avoir organisées afin de détourner l'attention portée à la répression qui s'exerce à Homs. Le régime, lui, parle de «gangs terroristes».

«S'agit-il d'attaques de groupes islamistes? C'est possible. Ce qui est certain, c'est que ces attentats vont desservir l'opposition qui était parvenue à organiser des manifestations ces derniers temps à Alep, ville jusqu'ici peu versée dans la contestation. Une ville prospère,



A Alep, deux attentats à la voiture piégée auraient visé le siège des renseignements militaires et le QG des forces de l'ordre. REUTERS/SANA

surtout soucieuse de préserver le commerce qui la fait vivre», souligne Jean-René Belliard, expert du conflit syrien. «L'une des bombes a explosé dans le quartier de Marja, précisément là où les étudiants ont manifesté à la mi-janvier. Il est clair que ces sanglants attentats vont refroidir les velléités de mobilisation à Alep.» Hier, les secouristes filmés par la télévision syrienne criaient

Ce mode opératoire s'est déjà vu: une série de sanglants attentats ont été commis ces deux derniers mois en Syrie, toujours un vendredi, jour de prière et de mobilisation. «Les attentats-suicides, les embuscades au bord des routes, tout

montre qu'on est dans une évolution à l'irakienne en Syrie», analyse encore Jean-René Belliard. Il s'alarme en outre de l'effroyable crise humanitaire qui se prépare dans le pays. «Des centaines de milliers de civils risquent d'avoir besoin d'une aide absolument urgente d'ici très peu de temps. Eau, médicaments, nourriture, électricité, chauffage, tout manque. Même les réfugiés au Liban sont dans une situation extrêmement difficile.»

La féroce répression qu'exerce l'armée syrienne à Homs (450 morts en une semaine) est à la mesure de cette urgence humanitaire. Hier, des chars ont pris d'assaut le quartier Inchaat et les soldats ratissaient maison par maison, selon Rami Abdel Rahmane, de l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme. On faisait par ailleurs état de quatre civils tués par les forces de sécurité dans deux autres quartiers.

A Damas, plusieurs manifestations se sont déroulées en soutien aux habitants de Homs aux cris de «La Russie tue nos enfants».

Cathy Macherel

Le Temps (Suisse / Switzerland)

Les Alaouites syriens, un espoir érigé en système

«Les Alaouites se battent le dos au mur, il ne suffit pas d'exiler une famille, c'est tout un système qui est en jeu et qui ne fera pas de concessions», dit l'islamologue Olivier Roy à propos de la Syrie. Quel système, pour quelles fins? Le coup d'Etat militaire de 1963 à l'origine de la présidence d'Hafez el-Assad a brisé la domination de la bourgeoisie commerçante sunnite qui régnait traditionnellement à Damas sans égard pour les minorités religieuses ou ethniques, tenues à l'écart ou réprimées (LT, 14 mai 2011). Commencent alors cinq décennies d'établissement des Alaouites aux sommets de l'Etat, en alliance tacite avec les chrétiens et les Druzes, pour la défense de leurs intérêts mutuels.

Les Alaouites adhèrent à la prédication d'Ibn Nosayr qui divinise l'imam chiite Ali - d'où le nom que leur ont donné les sunnites, «Alawiyîyîn», partisans d'Ali, tandis qu'eux-mêmes se nomment «Nosafîris» quand ils veulent se démarquer des musulmans. Cette doctrine, explique Alain Chouet*, s'est développée aux marges de l'Empire byzantin parmi des populations encore mal islamisées du IX et du Xe siècle.

C'est un syncrétisme mystique incorporant des éléments du chiisme le plus extrême, de christianisme byzantin et de panthéisme hellénistique. Après la reconquête musulmane sur les royaumes francs, une répression féroce les oblige à se réfugier dans les montagnes surplombant Lattaquié, où ils restent pendant des siècles isolés du reste du pays et en butte aux persécutions. Dans ce refuge d'où ils ne descendent que pour louer leurs services d'ouvriers agricoles ou vendre leurs filles comme servantes, ils cultivent toutes les formes de survie caractéristiques des sectes persécutées, solidarité, hermétisme, dissimulation et même, en cas de nécessité, reniement. Ils sont organisés en clans, au sein de tribus



Joëlle Kuntz

regroupées en quatre fédérations qui rassemblent 80% d'entre eux dans le nord-ouest du pays.

Hafez el-Assad appartient au clan des Karahil, de la tribu des Kalbiyyeh, fédérée dans la tribu des Jurûd. Cette dernière, la plus pauvre, a été parmi les plus réceptives des doctrines socialisantes qui allaient substituer la référence nationale à la référence religieuse au début du XXe siècle. Disparu l'espoir d'exister sur un territoire autonome dans le cadre d'une Grande Syrie à la française, les Alaouites se feraient Arabes et trouveraient dans le parti Baas, nationaliste, laïque et social, le moyen de légitimer leur existence politique et sociale.

Hafez el-Assad s'est montré particulièrement habile à manipuler ce parti. Son but, affirme Alain Chouet, est d'obtenir que les Kalbiyyeh, sa tribu, deviennent «dominants chez les Alaouites, les Alaouites dominants dans la société syrienne et la Syrie dominante dans le monde arabe, chaque renversement pérennisant le précédent». Il place les siens dès 1966 dans l'appareil militaire, créant pour eux quantité de forces spéciales. Il infiltre le parti Baas, et par là tout l'appareil législatif. L'administration territoriale est confiée à des Alaouites là où c'est important, tout comme les grands ministères, les sunnites devant se contenter des plus modestes, ou des plus dangereux politiquement, comme la Justice et le Barreau.

La logique communautaire s'empare aussi de l'économie et des finances. Chouet: «En une vingtaine d'années, de 1973 à 1995, les dirigeants alaouites ont ainsi réussi à opérer le transfert à leur profit de la richesse nationale qu'ils gèrent soit directement, soit le plus souvent par l'entremise de leurs enfants, envoyés entre-temps dans les meilleures écoles d'Occident, ou d'associés sunnites, alaouites ou chrétiens choisis en

marge de l'establishment traditionnel... et facilement sacrificiables sur l'autel de la vertu quand les excès du régime mènent le pays vers la rupture.»

Ce transfert se réalise sans spoliation brutale, lentement et systématiquement, «dans la gestion quotidienne et discrète» des équilibres internes de la communauté alaouite et de ses rapports avec les autres communautés, par un Hafez el-Assad qui démontre non seulement «son savoir-faire mais aussi la détermination et la cohésion de la minorité qui l'a accompagné au pouvoir».

Dotant et sur-dotant les siens, Hafez el-Assad cherchait-il à les installer durablement en caste privilégiée ou, comme le pense Alain Chouet, à leur permettre «de se fondre dans un ensemble modernisé et intégré où les critères de distinction tribaux, confessionnels et culturels seraient à terme effacés». La question est débattue parmi les spécialistes. Elle comporte un enjeu important pour l'interprétation des événements dramatiques actuels.

Si l'on considère au départ que, parce que minoritaire, le pouvoir alaouite est illégitime, on rejoint le point de vue de la majorité sunnite qui cherche à s'en débarrasser, par Frères musulmans interposés. Si l'on croit au contraire, comme Chouet, que, parce que minoritaire, le pouvoir alaouite visait à intégrer les minorités et à tenir en respect les objectifs politiques de la majorité sunnite, purifiés par le sang versé à Hama en 1982, on y regarde à deux fois avant de conclure. Il est trop tard, après tant de morts, de vouloir comprendre ce régime. Mais il n'est pas trop tard pour réfléchir à ce qui se passera pour les minorités si la tête de Bachar el-Assad, fils d'Hafez, roule sur la poussière de Damas.

*<http://alain.chouet.free.fr/documents/Alaouite.htm>



A Damas, l'alaouite n°

Il Corriere della Sera (Italie / Italy)

Stragi parallele Prosegue la mattanza ad Homs. Il nunzio apostolico: «L'esercito spara anche sui bambini»

Bombe ad Aleppo, dubbi sulla «regia»

Per il governo siriano sono «terroristi». L'opposizione accusa i servizi

Arriva anche ad Aleppo la spirale di violenza che sta investendo la Siria e nelle ultime tre settimane ha subito una sanguinosa accelerazione. Ieri in tarda mattina due autobombe (sembra guidate da kamikaze) sono esplose nelle vicinanze delle caserme in centro città dove sono accampati i servizi d'informazione dell'esercito e le forze di polizia. La televisione di Stato ha trasmesso subito le immagini dei palazzi distrutti, i crateri delle deflagrazioni, le strade ingombre di detriti misti a sangue e brandelli di corpi. Il bilancio delle vittime in serata è di 28 morti e 235 feriti civili e militari. Sono scene di devastazione simili a quelle causate dalle bombe che a metà dicembre colpirono i quartieri generali delle forze di sicurezza a Damasco (44 morti) e poi il 6 gennaio una zona residenziale della capitale (26 morti).

La novità è che Aleppo sino a ieri era stata quasi del tutto risparmiata dal fuoco della rivoluzione esplosa 11 mesi fa. Circa due milioni di abitanti, è la seconda città del Paese, ricca di una lunga tradizione commerciale. Veniva presentata come una delle roccaforti fedeli alla dittatura. Ma a fine gennaio la situazione ha cominciato a mutare. I militari sono intervenuti per sedare le prime manifestazioni organizzate dagli studenti nel campus universitario locale. In poche ore vennero segnalati almeno 9 morti tra i manifestanti. E da allora anche qui la tensione è cresciuta. Ieri il regime è tornato ad accusare le «bande di terroristi» responsabili per gli attentati. È la replica della narrazione tradizionale che tende a criminalizzare le sommosse e a delegittimarle, insistendo sulla tesi del «complotto straniero» ai danni della Siria.

Anche da parte delle organizzazioni che guidano le sommosse il commento è quasi scontato. «La dittatura architetta gli attentati e cerca di incriminarci», sostengono all'unisono. Un portavoce del



La città

Distruzione
Le forze di sicurezza siriane ispezionano il luogo di una delle due esplosioni avvenute ieri nella città di Aleppo. La foto è stata diffusa dall'agenzia di stampa Sana. Gli attentati la cui matrice è dubbia, hanno causato 28 morti e almeno 235 feriti. (Reuters/ Sana)



Capitale culturale

È la più popolosa città della Siria e anche una delle più antiche del mondo, che vanta una storia lunga 5 mila anni. È anche detta la «città grigia» (esh-Sheba) a causa del caratteristico colore delle case costruite con roccia calcarea. Nel 2006 è stata nominata «Capitale culturale del mondo islamico».

Viaggiatori

Tra i più noti frequentatori della città: Lawrence d'Arabia, la scrittrice Agatha Christie, l'aviatore Charles Lindbergh, il presidente americano Theodore Roosevelt, il presidente egiziano Gamal Nasser, il fondatore della Turchia Kemal Atatürk, il magnate Nelson Rockefeller e anche Pierpaolo Pasolini.

Nuovo esercito siriano libero, il movimento paramilitare che cerca di riorganizzare i soldati disertori pronti a combattere nelle file della resistenza, aggiunge: «Lo stesso regime criminale che uccide i nostri figli, ora attacca con le bombe Aleppo per distogliere l'attenzione dalle stragi che perpetua a Homs». Centro delle violenze resta in ogni caso proprio Homs, la città martire per eccellenza.

Le opposizioni vi segnalano 400 morti, per lo più civili, solo nell'ultima settimana. Anche in questo caso, risulta praticamente impossibile verificare i bilanci delle vittime diffusi dai due campi. A Homs l'esercito lealista da una settimana sta usando con sempre maggior determinazione artiglieria e carri armati. I video che riescono ad arrivare all'estero mostrano bombardamenti indiscriminati sui civili.

Nelle ultime ore vi è riportata una trentina di morti, specie attorno alle moschee (luoghi tradizionali di aggregazione politica) nei quartieri «liberati» di Bab Amro e Bab Seeba. «È drammatico. Sparano anche sui bambini, comincia a scarseggiare tutto», denuncia alla radio vaticana il nunzio a Damasco, Mario Zenari. Scontri anche a Deraa sul confine con la Giordania, a Zabadane presso la frontiera

libanese. Ma l'agonia della Siria è parte di un braccio di ferro internazionale a più livelli, esacerbato domenica scorsa dal veto all'Onu di Russia e Cina contro la risoluzione proposta da alcuni Paesi della Lega araba che chiedeva le dimissioni di Assad e l'avvio del dialogo con il movimento di protesta e con il sostegno americano. Nel contesto regionale i Paesi a maggioranza sunnita (Arabia Saudita in testa) sostengono le rivolte contro l'Iran sciita, tradizionale alleato degli Assad alauti (considerati una setta scita). Il viceministro degli Esteri russo, Sergey Ryabkov, ha accusato ieri pubblicamente «l'Occidente» di mandare armi e aiuti militari alle rivolte. Mosca a sua volta invia di continuo navi cariche di armi al porto siriano di Tartus. Domani la Lega araba si riunirà al Cairo per discutere la proposta di mandare osservatori in Siria assieme alle Nazioni Unite.

Lorenzo Cremonesi

La cronologia

Da marzo del 2011 quasi seimila morti

1 La rivolta siriana è iniziata a marzo del 2011 a Deraa con l'arresto di 15 ragazzi accusati di essere gli autori di graffiti antiregime. Da allora sono morte quasi seimila persone tra cui almeno 400 bambini

No di Russia e Cina alla risoluzione Onu

2 Il 4 febbraio Russia e Cina hanno bloccato per la seconda volta in quattro mesi una risoluzione del Consiglio di sicurezza di condanna del regime siriano. Nel testo si chiedeva a Bashar Assad di lasciare il potere

Assad scatena la repressione

3 Dopo il doppio veto di Cina e Russia il presidente siriano scatena una repressione senza precedenti martellando le città ribelli. Nel mirino in particolare c'è Homs dove in sei giorni sono morte almeno 400 persone

Damasco, assassinato un generale siriano

L'intelligence americana: Al Qaeda dietro l'omicidio e le stragi dei giorni scorsi

La cronologia

Da marzo 2011 quasi 6.000 morti

1 La rivolta è iniziata a marzo 2011 a Daraa con l'arresto di 15 ragazzi, autori di graffiti anti regime da allora 6.000 morti (400 bambini)

No di Russia e Cina alla risoluzione Onu

2 Il 4 febbraio Russia e Cina hanno bloccato, per la seconda volta in quattro mesi, una risoluzione del Consiglio di Sicurezza di condanna del regime siriano

Assad scatena la repressione

3 Dopo il doppio veto di Mosca e Pechino, il presidente siriano Assad scatena una repressione senza precedenti, bombardando Homs e le altre città «ribelli»

WASHINGTON — Prima le stragi con gli attentati suicidi a Damasco e Aleppo. Poi un generale ucciso nella capitale siriana. Issa Al Khouli è stato assassinato da tre uomini armati che lo hanno sorpreso mentre si recava al lavoro, all'ospedale militare. Un agguato che segnala un salto di qualità, con sezzari che inquietano la diplomazia. Perché adesso è emerso il fattore Al Qaeda. Era lì, nascosto dalla «nebbia di guerra», e volutamente ignorato per non frenare il supporto ai ribelli siriani. E, invece, è sbucato fuori nelle indiscrezioni dell'intelligence e Usa affidate ai giorni alla catena McClatchy. I due attacchi terroristici a Damasco e Aleppo (oltre 50 le vittime) — secondo gli ogy — sono opera della branca irachena di Al Qaeda. I dirigenti locali hanno chiesto il permesso di esportare la lotta ad Aymaan Al Zawabirhi che nella sua funzione di guida, ha dato l'autorizzazione. Un variegato neopopolo. Il gruppo storico partecipa concretamente alla primavera araba, un fenomeno dal quale è stato escluso. Gli affiliati iracheni cercano un'investitura regionale e seguono il sentiero di guerra contro chi non è sunnita.

Anche se le rivelazioni hanno



Battaglione Faruk

Alcuni militanti del «Battaglione Faruk», un gruppo legato ad Al Qaeda che opera in Siria con l'aiuto di volontari dal Libano e dall'Iraq.

Fuori dall'area

A sinistra, militari siriani trasportano le bare e i commilitoni uccisi negli scontri con i ribelli nel corso di un funerale collettivo a Damasco (Reuters)

pa e Nord Africa. Un'indagine dei carabinieri del Ros di Milano ha provato il ruolo di una figura intrigante, il «dotto» Personaggio legato ad Al Qaeda fra i siriani, l'estremista assidua cura di stanze e ospitalità. Al punto che la maggior parte dei volontari era ospitata in un albergo offerto dai network. Spostamenti che avvenivano con la consapevolezza dei servizi siriani. Lasciavano fare a patto che i terroristi coprissero altre. Ora ne pagano le conseguenze.

Una situazione che potrebbe allarmare l'Paes occidentali, decisi a sostenere la rivolta in Siria. Serve cautela e la fuga di notizie, ispirata dagli ogy, è un avviso. Siamo attenti a chi aiutiamo. Potrebbe accadere che americani, con gli europei, si trovino a fianco degli islamisti. È avvenuto in Afghanistan, poi in Bosnia, infine in Libia. Adesso lo schema torna in Siria. C'è poi un altro livello e riguarda l'opposizione siriana: ne è suo complesso. A Washington in questi giorni divisi tra i ribelli e la mancanza di controllo da parte dei dirigenti in esilio.

Guido Olimpio
Twitter @guidofoolimpio
goolimpio@rcs.it

no bisogno di vertice, sono più sensibili. Da settimane si sono multipli le segretazioni sui gruppi questi, alcuni dei quali hanno lasciato traccia sul web. È il caso del Battaglione Faruk, composto da elementi locali e volontari dal Libano, al quale si attribuiscono diversi attacchi. Formazioni che hanno incrociato il loro corso con i fratelli giunti dal Libano e dall'Iraq. Un fus-

so di uomini e armi confermano anche gli affari dei combattenti: per un fucile Ak-47 chiedono fino a 1.000 dollari mentre fino a pochi giorni fa ne bastavano 200. I questidi, probabilmente, hanno riattivato i canali usati in Siria dopo l'invasione americana del 2003. In numerose città cercano punti d'appoggio e transitano per rifugiati arruolati in Euro-

Il Fatto (Italie / Italy)

SIRIA, GUERRA IN TV COME IN LIBIA

Attentato ad Aleppo: la televisione di Stato incolpa i ribelli



Miliziani siriani anti-regime Foto: L'Espresso

di **Francesca Cicardi**

Damasco

Due forti esplosioni hanno avuto luogo nella finora tranquilla Aleppo, annunciata la tv statale e siriana. Almeno 28 le vittime e più di 200 i feriti, tra cui civili e bambini, anche se gli attacchi hanno avuto luogo di mattina presto, un giorno fendale e contro due edifici delle forze di sicurezza. Le televisioni pro regime ritrasmettono in diretta da Aleppo immagini di distruzione e di morti, cadaveri sotto le macerie, insanguinati, persino con le viscere in primo piano.

A Damasco, dove si sono registrati due attentati simili a dicembre e gennaio, nessuno osa uscire in strada, tranne per andare a pregare. Le moschee sono fortemente controllate perché è venerdì, giorno di protezione, e di repressione. Pulmini e jeep con uomini armati dei diversi corpi di sicurezza del regime circolano per la città, controllano i principali ponti e strade, limitano i movimenti. L'ambiente è di terrore, ma la violenza

non si può vedere, solo sentire, ascoltare i colpi di kalashnikov senza sapere da che quartiere arrivano. In Siria la guerra si può solo indovinare, tra la versione ufficiale del regime e quella dell'opposizione, che ieri denunciava più di 50 morti, la maggior parte di loro a Homs, assediata dalle forze governative da una settimana. Impossibile verificare cosa succede in città, che sta diventando la Misurata siriana: gli attivisti assicurano che il governo sta bombardando i quartieri sotto controllo dei ribelli, che a loro volta cercano di resistere e respingere il nemico, e chiedono aiuto alla comunità internazionale, sperando ancora in una soluzione alla libica. Da Homs e attraverso il web arrivano immagini di bambini feriti, morti e dottori che supplicano aiuto, ma anche di "barbuti" e le grida, ormai familiari, di "Allah Akbar", dio è grande, come gridavano i ribelli libici per prendere coraggio e festeggiare una vittoria. Ma a differenza della Libia, in Siria non tutti credono nello stesso dio e allo stesso modo, e questo pone un grave problema ma in questo Paese relativamente laico di 23 milioni di persone, non gli scarsi 6 milioni di libici. Si comincia a parlare di guerra civile, soprattutto a Homs, divisa tra quartieri alauniti (le deli al regime) e sunniti (ribelli). In mezzo i cristiani, che per adesso restano fedeli al presidente.

IL REGIME gioca la carta della paura delle minoranze e degli estremisti, che sarebbero responsabili delle esplosioni di Aleppo, città di maggioranza

le immagini dell'attentato. L'uso della violenza anche da parte dei manifestanti pacifici e l'apparizione degli islamisti è negativa per l'opposizione, che cerca di mantenere il suo spirito originale e nega che questa sia una guerra di religione. Gli attivisti dicono che il regime non gli ha lasciato altra possibilità che prendere le armi per difendersi, in una lotta che non è religiosa, ma per la dignità e la libertà. Così come dicevano i combattenti libici, la barba non è una questione religiosa, ma in guerra non c'è tempo né possibilità di farcela.

**Voci a Damasco:
"Non finiremo
come il regime
di Gheddafi,
i ribelli
devono cessare
le violenze"**

A Damasco in molti assicurano che non vogliono finire come l'Egitto, la Libia e la Tunisia, governati dagli islamisti, e il fantasma della guerra irachena, dall'altra parte della frontiera è potente. Un tuono che pochi giorni fa osava criticare il Governo a bassa voce in un negozio del centro, ieri denunciava e trambe le parti, spaventato escioccato dal-

Il Giornale (Italie / Italy)

STRAGE
Corpi delle vittime di un attentato giacciono coperti in qualche modo nella città settentrionale di Aleppo, considerata strategica per la sopravvivenza del regime di Bashar el-Assad. In Siria i massacri continuano e ogni giorno si aggiungono al tragico bilancio diverse decine di morti: il totale stimato sfiora ormai i settemila [Ap]



ciali fuoriusciti, ha cercato di assumerne il controllo innescando una guerra intestina con quel colonnello Riad al Assad che firma i proclami dell'Esercito Libero da un santuario in territorio turco. In ogni caso nessuno dei due controlla le forze sul campo guidate, come a Homs, da gruppi di coordinamento civili.

La Turchia e altri alleati della Nato hanno inoltre scommesso sulla defezione di un'importante unità corazzata pronta a sollevarsi dopo l'approvazione della mozione dell'Onu. La scommessa non teneva conto dei servizi segreti iraniani e russi prontissimi nel segnalare a Damasco il rischio di tradimento. Proprio le soffiate russe e iraniane hanno dato il via al

FUORI GIOCO

Israele non dà aiuto perché non si fida di un cambio al vertice

L'offensiva della Quarta brigata corazzata considerata, assieme alla Guardia Repubblicana, una delle unità più fedeli al regime.

A indebolire l'Occidente contribuisce anche la cauta circospezione israeliana. Preoccupati che la caduta di Bashar Assad porti al potere un regime islamista assai più imprevedibile di quello attuale gli israeliani, gli unici a poter contare su numerose talpe a Damasco, preferiscono operare non interferire e non fornire informazioni agli alleati occidentali. L'errore più grave dei nemici di Damasco è però analizzare lo scontro in termini puramente demografici. Benché famiglia Assad appartenga ad una minoranza alawita che non supera il 12 per cento della popolazione, il regime può ancora contare sul sostegno dei cristiani, di buona parte dei curdi e d'importanti clansunniti legati da rapporti trentennali ai vertici militari ed economici del regime.

Questo spiega perché Damasco, Aleppo e i più importanti centri politico-economici del Paese si guardino bene dallo scendere in campo. Con buona pace degli oppositori assediati a Homs e Zabadani, che rischiano ora di pagare le conseguenze degli errori commessi dagli occidentali e dagli arabi.

SIRIA Troppi errori diplomatici e dell'intelligence

Così l'Occidente sta regalando la vittoria al regime di Assad

Washington non ha saputo prevedere l'irrigidimento di Russia e Cina, il ruolo dell'Iran è stato sottovalutato e la rivolta dei generali non c'è stata

Oleg Mihaljevic

■ Forse era meglio stare a guardare. A un anno dallo scoppio della rivolta - e seimila morti dopo - l'Occidente, l'Onu e i nemici arabi di Bashar Assad farebbero meglio a fare il «mea culpa». Le medicine propinate al paziente siriano si stanno rivelando più perniciose del cancro della dittatura e rischiano di essere la vera causa di morte dell'insurrezione. Il più grave degli errori è stata l'incapacità di prevedere il veto di Russia e Cina che ha bloccato la mozione del Consiglio di Sicurezza destinata ad aprire le porte ad un intervento in stile libico. Il passo falso rischia di rivelarsi fatale per un'insurrezione co-

stretta a far i conti con l'offensiva di un regime deciso ad approfittare della confusione dei propri nemici. E così mentre ad Aleppo, risparmiata fino ad ora dagli scontri, si registra il primo sanguinoso attentato con 28 morti e un centinaio di feriti, a Homs e Zabadani continua l'offensiva governativa.

Lo spietato assalto alle roccaforti ribelli è la diretta conseguenza della "debaacle" del Palazzo di Vetro. Dando per scontata una legittimazione Onu e una maggiore libertà d'azione anche sul fronte delle operazioni clandestine, Stati Uniti, Francia, Inghilterra, Turchia e Qatar hanno incoraggiato i gruppi armati ad intensificare le loro operazioni. Ma hanno sotto-

valutato le divisioni che affliggono gli insorti a livello politico e militare. Sulla falsariga di quanto avvenuto in Libia, Stati Uniti, Francia e Inghilterra hanno delegato a Qatar e Turchia il ruolo di armieri e finanziatori degli insorti. Dabuo ni musulmani, ad Ankara e Doha preferiscono privilegiare i gruppi islamisti vicini ai Fratelli Musulmani coordinati dal cosiddetto Consiglio Nazionale Siriano. Ma la Siria non è né l'Egitto, né la Li-

ESERCITO

Le forze armate siriane si sono dimostrate più compatte del previsto

bia. La Fratellanza Musulmana è tutt'altro che egemone. L'opposizione laica legata al Comitato di Coordinamento Nazionale ha un ruolo non marginale ed è contraria a qualsiasi intervento esterno. Il neonato Esercito Libero Siriano, braccio armato del Consiglio Nazionale Siriano, non è in grado, inoltre, di contrapporsi militarmente all'esercito di Damasco.

Formato in gran parte da ufficiali disertori legati ai Fratelli Musulmani, l'Esercito Libero non dispone di armi pesanti, non ha una struttura di coordinamento nazionale e soffre di profonde lacerazioni al vertice. Il 6 febbraio scorso il generale Mustafa Ahmad El Sheik, il più alto in grado fra gli uffi-

L'Unita (Italie / Italy)

Cara Unità

Dialoghi

Luigi Cancrini



GIOVANNA MARTINI

I bambini massacrati in Siria

Ogni volta che si parla di Afghanistan e di Libia noto che i membri del Tavolo per la Pace, dott. Lotti in prima linea, sono tutti prodighi di critiche sull'uso della forza di Stato e di consigli su come fare altrimenti e quindi mi aspettavo che per il caso Siria il Tavolo per la Pace promuovesse iniziative in accordo alle idee che ha sempre espresso.

RISPOSTA ■■■ Le immagini televisive dei bambini feriti dalla repressione di Assad all'interno di quella che è ormai a tutti gli effetti una guerra di liberazione fanno ancora più male nel momento in cui, fermata dal veto di Russia e Cina, l'Onu si trova nell'impossibilità di intervenire. E' Medici senza Frontiere, oggi, l'Ong che invia notizie ogni giorno più drammatiche sulle vittime civili dei bombardamenti e dell'inseguimento casa per casa dei ribelli mentre quello cui sembra di ritornare è il tempo della guerra fredda e della paralisi degli organismi internazionali. La lettrice ha ragione, povera e incerta è stata finora anche la mobilitazione di quelli che in Italia di più e con più coerenza si sono battuti in questi anni per la pace nel mondo. Memori di quello che è accaduto in Libia dopo l'intervento della Nato? Preoccupati delle conseguenze che un intervento in Siria potrebbe avere in Israele ed in Iran? Quale che sia la ragione della sua prudenza, dopo undici mesi di violenze e di massacri, il Tavolo della Pace deve farsi sentire di più. Con l'appoggio di tutti quelli che credono nell'assurdità di una politica che avalla l'uccisione dei bambini.

LA LEGA ARABA PRESENTA DOMANI UNA RISOLUZIONE DI CONDANNA ALL'ASSEMBLEA GENERALE DELL'ONU

400

uccisi a Homs
in otto giorni

L'assalto finale alla roccaforte degli Insorti è cominciato venerdì 3 febbraio, con ampio uso di razzi e carri armati

48

settimane
di rivolta

Le prime manifestazioni di massa sono cominciate a Homs a metà dello scorso marzo, gli scontri armati invece a maggio



La città in fiamme

Una delle immagini prese da un satellite Usa che mostrano un quartiere di Homs colpito dall'artiglieria, con colonne di fumo



Carri in movimento

Le immagini documentano anche gli spostamenti di mezzi militari, compresi tank che si avvicinano al centro della città

Siria, satellite Usa mostra i bombardamenti di Homs

Ieri altri 15 morti. Ma la Cia: Al Qaeda dietro gli attentati ad Aleppo

GIORDANO STABILE
Colonne di fumo, blindati, carri armati ed edifici in fiamme. Le immagini di una battaglia urbana, senza esclusioni di colpi, che sta devastando interi quartieri. È la battaglia di Homs ripresa attimo per attimo, anche se da molto distante. Sono le immagini riprese da un satellite americano che

Due vittime anche in Libano in scontri fra minoranza alawita e sunniti anti-Assad

ha zoomato nelle ultime quarantott'ore sulla terza città della Siria, roccaforte degli insorti che combattono con armi leggere contro le forze di sicurezza di Bashar al Assad. Immagini pubblicate sul sito Facebook dell'ambasciata americana a Damasco guidata da Robert Ford. Un modo per alzare la pressione sul regime siriano e aggirare l'em-

bargo su immagini e servizi giornalistici imposto fin dall'inizio della rivolta.

Damasco ha risposto che si tratta di «un'operazione antiterroristica» e denunciato «gruppi stranieri» che agiscono all'interno del Paese, «con la scusa dell'intervento umanitario». Difficile parlare di terrorismo per quanto riguarda il rastrellamento di Homs, dove è in corso un'insurrezione popolare. E ieri, nel quartiere Baba Arm sono state uccise altre quindici persone. Ma nel caos siriano è chiaro che ormai agiscono gruppi armati con metodi terroristici. Ne sono convinti persino i servizi di Intelligence degli Stati Uniti che, secondo le indiscrezioni del gruppo editoriale McClatchy Company, hanno avvertito che dietro l'esplosione di venerdì ad Aleppo, seconda città del Paese, ci sono «uomini di Al Qaeda provenienti dall'Iraq». Gli stessi che avrebbero colpito Damasco nelle scorse settimane, su ordine personale del successore di Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Un'infiltrazione che rende la situazione ancora più esplosiva, foriera di futuri scenari di instabilità: ieri gli scontri fra sostenitori di Assad, alawiti, e oppositori si sono estesi in Libano, a Tripoli, con due morti. Mentre sul confine, le truppe regolari hanno ripreso la città di Zabadani,

dopo un accordo per il cessate il fuoco con gli insorti. A Damasco è invece stato assassinato un generale, Isa al-Kholi, a Nord di Damasco. Kholi era direttore dell'ospedale militare di Hamish e, secondo la tv di Stato siriana, «è stato ucciso con un colpo alla nuca». Non ci sono ri-

WORLD PRESS PHOTO
I protagonisti della «Pietà» sono madre e figlio



Samuel Aranda, autore della foto che ha vinto il World Press Photo, evidentemente si è posto le stesse domande che il suo scatto ha sollevato in tutti noi. Chi sono e che fine hanno fatto i protagonisti della Pietà yemenita, come la sua foto è stata subito ribattezzata? «Lui sta bene e la donna è sua madre», ha scritto ieri sul suo profilo Twitter Aranda appena ricevute notizie fresche dallo Yemen. A «La Stampa» il reporter spagnolo ha raccontato di aver realizzato quello scatto in un attimo, d'istinto, senza riuscire «neppure a rivolgere la parola» alla donna della foto, fatta a Sana'a lo scorso 15 ottobre.

vendicazioni. Ma, come nel caso di Aleppo, la dinamica è terroristica. Con il rischio, avverte l'analista John R. Bradley sul settimanale britannico «The Spectator», che alla fine la Siria «sia consegnata agli islamisti, che per prima cosa imporranno la sharia, come in Libia».

Eventualità respinta dal Consiglio nazionale siriano (Cns), il cartello con sede a Istanbul che raggruppa i principali partiti dell'opposizione, laici e religiosi, e che si è detto ieri convinto che arriverà a giorni un formale riconoscimento da parte della Lega Araba. Il gesto darebbe maggior forza alla richiesta di aiuto internazionale. Nonostante l'opposizione della Russia, la comunità internazionale lavora per una soluzione. Dopo l'accorata denuncia del segretario generale delle Nazioni Unite Ban Ki-moon, la Lega araba ha deciso di far discutere domani all'Assemblea generale, dove non ci sono diritti di veto, una nuova risoluzione.

Diplomatici di Paesi arabi, Usa, Ue e Turchia stanno lavorando al testo. Come quella bloccata una settimana fa da Mosca e Pechino al Consiglio di sicurezza, la risoluzione assicura il «pieno supporto al piano elaborato dalla Lega Araba». Un assunto praticamente identico a quello bocciato, che in sostanza intima ad Assad di farsi da parte. Un voto favorevole, a larga maggioranza, anche se non avrebbe implicazioni legali per il raiss, potrebbe segnare un suo ulteriore isolamento. E forse aprire un breccia.

Libero (Italie / Italy)

La Siria diventa il nuovo Iraq Gli alleati inconfessabili di Obama: contro Assad ora arriva Al Qaeda

*** GIANANDREA GAIANI

■ ■ ■ Se la crisi siriana assomiglia a quella libica, inclusa la possibilità di un intervento militare internazionale, l'Italia e l'Europa non sembrano aver apprensione nulla dalla guerra a Gheddafi e dagli sviluppi della "primavera araba". La Libia è sullo sfondo della guerra civile egiziana voce dello stesso Mario Monti sia rimasto sconvolto dal caos che regna a Tripoli. Milizie incontrarie, le quattro più forti di matrice islamista inclusa una che fa capo ad Al Qaeda. In Tunisia gli "islamici moderati", termine coi quale Washington ha sdoganato la vasta galassia della fratellanza musulmana, impongono la

morale coranica a una società fino a ieri moderna e tollerante. In Egitto fratelli musulmani e salafiti hanno vinto il zionismo farfallato di 40 milioni di elettori, oltre 52 milioni di voti) e dividono, per ora, il potere con i militari.

Di democrazia, libertà e diritti civili neppure l'ombra. In Siria il copione assomiglia a quello libico inclusa la deformentazione e propaganda degli irsorti che non occidentali ci beviamo senza il minimo senso critico direttamente dal boccale del lazzeri. Assad stermina i bambini nelle culle fa persino esplodere i comandi dei suoi servizi segreti per dare la colpa ai ribelli. Eppure anche a Bagdad confermano che le milizie esurite e di Al Qaeda

si stanno spostando in Siria. Si è già visto nell'attentato suicida di venerdì ad Aleppo e probabilmente anche nell'uccisione del generale Issa al Khouli, ieri a Damasco.

Terroristi che in Iraq hanno ucciso soldati anglo-americani e italiani oggi combattono in Siria la stessa jihad ma al fianco delle forze speciali inglesi e con la benedizione dell'Occidente. Il presidente siriano era un dittatore sanguinario anche quando l'Italia vendeva al suo esercito sistemi di punimento per i carcerati e la Francia gli elicotteri da attacco Gazelle. Suo padre Hafez nel 1982 sterminò quasi 40 mila fratelli musulmani ad Hama nel disinteresse genera-

le. Oggi invece il regime va battuto per far posto a salafiti, wahabiti e altri "moderati". Ordine di Washington, gli europei ubbidiscono anche se i membri di Assad non sono migliori di lui. Gridano «alauti sotto terra e cristiani a Beirut per far capire che razza di democrazia hanno in mente. Caduto il regime scateranno un bagno di sangue, una pulizia etnica e religiosa che non risparmierà cristiani, sciiti e curdi che non a caso sostengono il regime laico di Assad.

Quale interesse abbiamo a mettere Nord Africa e Medio Oriente nelle mani di islamiti così "moderati"? In base a quale disegno strategico conviene rovesciare regimi affidabili per far posto a



ATTACCO SUICIDA

I resti del comando dei servizi segreti siriani ad Aleppo distrutto da un doppio attacco kamikaze venerdì. I morti sono stati 28, i feriti 235 Ap

estremisti e fanatici parenti stretti di quelli che combattiamo da dieci anni in Afghanistan? Una strategia tutta americana, veduta da Obama per rafforzare il blocco sunnita in funzione anti-iraniana ma che si inserisce in un piano globale a creare problemi "competitivi" degli Stati Uniti, europei, irachesi. Un mondo arabo in mano a estremisti islamici sostenuti dalle aspirazioni neo-imperiali turche e dai petrodollari del Qatar non potrà che portare guai a Europa e Russia che oggi avrebbero l'interesse comune di impedire il trionfo degli islamisti. A Mosca l'hanno capito bene, noi invece aiutiamo Obama a portare sharia e jihad nel giardino di casa nostra.

El Mundo (Espagne / Spain)

La sangre siria llega al Líbano

Dos muertos en la lucha entre seguidores y contrarios al régimen en el país vecino

TESTIGO DIRECTO

JAVIER ESPINOSA / Trípoli (Líbano)
Enviado especial



El cohete impactó en el último piso de la vivienda levantando una columna de humo. «¡Y dicen que no están atacando!», clamó uno de

los milicianos. A la explosión le siguieron interminables tiroteos. La callejuela del barrio de Bab al Tabaneh asistía a un continuo trasiego de milicianos pertrechados con todo tipo de modernos fusiles. Otros se habían apostado en las esquinas protegidas por sacos de tierra o dirigían el combate a través de sus radios portátiles. Los atribulados viandantes se veían obligados a cruzar las calles a la carrera.

Pero en un suburbio acostumbrado a mil refriegas parecidas, había también quienes ignoraban las deflagraciones y balazos jugando a las cartas en plena calle o permaneciendo enfrascados en la venta cotidiana de patatas y tomates.

Un grupo se permitía incluso jugar a la pelota a tan sólo unos metros de la línea del frente que delimita el barrio controlado por los paramilitares alauíes, aliados del presidente sirio, Bashar Asad, y

las posiciones que mantienen los suníes que les acosan. Para Abu Abdallah, un jefe miliciano del área suní de Bab al Tabaneh curtido por cientos de confrontaciones, los enfrentamientos que se registraron ayer en esos arrabales de la ciudad libanesa de Trípoli forman parte ya de una «herida» incurable que ahora se ha reabierto «ante lo que está ocurriendo en Siria».

La opinión era común en Bab al Tabaneh. Los más jóvenes, los que ahora sirven a las órdenes de personajes como Abu Abdallah –veterano de las luchas fratricidas de la guerra del Líbano en la década de los años 80– apoyan esta idea aduciendo, por ejemplo, que han rebautizado ese paupérrimo distrito como Bab Amro, en alusión al sector más castigado y emblemático de la ciudad siria de Homs, símbolo de la resistencia del Ejército Libre Sirio frente a la ofensiva que mantienen los uniformados leales a Bashar Asad.

Como habían vaticinado sus propios habitantes, las repercusiones de la revuelta en el país vecino alcanzaron ayer la ciudad norteña del Líbano dejando un saldo de al menos dos muertos y más de una docena de heridos, entre ellos numerosos soldados del ejército libanés. Uno de los fallecidos fue un joven alcanzado en el cuello por un proyectil cuando atravesaba una de las avenidas controladas por los francotiradores. Para evitar la acción de

estos tiradores emboscados, los residentes de Bab al Tabaneh han horadado desde hace años agujeros en los muros de algunas viviendas y se mueven de casa en casa evitando exponerse al exterior.

Del otro lado del bulevar Siria, como se llama la calle que marca la división entre los dos reductos enemigos, los habitantes de Jabal Al Mohsen, quizás el único enclave de todo Trípoli donde se pueden divisar retratos y loas al jefe de Estado sirio, se habían replegado en sus viviendas. Aquí no daban crédito a la teoría de la relación entre la algarada siria y las nuevas hostilidades, pero Abdelatif Salej, uno de los principales asesores de Rifaat Eid –el actual líder de esta comunidad– recurría a la misma dialéctica que se escucha en Damasco cuando se alude a la oposición. «Son terroristas, extremistas islámicos, que quieren mezclar al Líbano con lo que sucede en Siria. Su problema es que nuestra postura es favorable a la resistencia [alusión a Hizbulá]», señaló.

A escasas decenas de metros –pero divididos por un abismo de odio–, Ahmed Tajeldin Abdullah, otro antiguo miembro del Movimiento Popular que luchó contra los alauíes de Jabal al Mohsen y los soldados de Damasco en los 80, deambulaba por Bab al Tabaneh empuñando una vez más su kalashnikov. Ahmed no escondía su animadversión sectaria hacia los alauitas. Tampoco, su deseo de que «paguen» por la represión que lidera en Siria uno de los suyos, Bashar Asad. «Sí, es un conflicto sectario. Ellos son mentirosos y no son musulmanes», aducía en las intermediaciones de donde sus acólitos continuaban enzarzados en un virulento tiroteo con sus oponentes.

«Esta gente se alegra de las masacres que se registran en Siria. No lo podemos permitir», le secundaba Abu Abdallah vaticinando un

largo conflicto, pese a que los líderes de ambas comunidades pactaron un alto el fuego a media tarde.

En un suburbio como Bab al Tabaneh las imágenes procedentes de Siria han hecho revivir las que continúan ancladas en la memoria. Los residentes se explayan recordando lo que llaman «masacre» de 1986, cuando las milicias de Jabal al Mohsen y el ejército sirio asaltaron su reducto. El relato habla de cientos de muertos, algunos asesinados a hachazos, de desaparecidos, violaciones, saqueos,

Han bautizado el distrito como Bab Amro, el golpeado barrio de Homs

«Esta gente se alegra de las masacres en Siria», dice un jefe miliciano suní

«Lo que viven ahora los sirios ya lo padecemos nosotros», afirma el jefe Walid

de miles de presos que sufrieron terribles torturas. «Todo lo que están viviendo los sirios lo padecemos nosotros», indica el jeque Walid Ain Jaili, quien también peleó contra los sirios en los 80.

«Antes [cuando fueron aplastados por los sirios en 1986] sólo teníamos a Dios. Ahora disponemos del apoyo del rey Abdalá [saudi]. Si no les gusta, que se vayan a Siria», añadió el jeque.

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

Asesinado un general de un tiro en la nuca en el mismo Damasco

Primera víctima de la cúpula militar desde el comienzo de la revuelta

TOMÁS ALCOVERRO
Beirut. Corresponsal

El general Isa el Kholi fue asesinado por tres terroristas que le dispararon en la nuca, en un barrio del norte de Damasco. Es el primer alto dirigente militar del régimen sirio asesinado desde que empezase, el pasado mes de marzo, el levantamiento contra el rais Bashar el Asad, aunque otros jefes y oficiales del ejército hayan perecido en enfrentamientos armados con insurrectos en la capital y en otras localidades de la república. El Gobierno afirma que dos mil militares, entre soldados y policías han muerto a causa de la rebelión.

Isa el Kholi era director del hospital militar damasceno y especialista en ortopedia. Fue muerto a las puertas de su casa en una zona residencial de la capital siria.

El régimen, que durante tantas décadas había presumido de que Siria era un oasis de seguridad en el turbulento Oriente Medio, es objeto, cada vez más, de la acción de los grupos de la oposición en el primer lugar del Ejército Libre Sirio, que desafían su autoridad en varias localidades del estado, especialmente en Homs, la ciudad de mayoría suni.

En esta población han continuado los enfrentamientos con disparos entre soldados e insurrectos, que comenzaron con el asalto militar de hace una semana. Siria no sólo se libaniza, sino que también sufre un proceso de iraquización, impulsado ahora con el asesinato de un destacado miembro del ejército, uno de los pilares del régimen baasista.

En un informe elaborado por los Servicios de Inteligencia estadounidenses, se ha revelado que agentes de Al Qaeda, la organiza-

ción terrorista de musulmanes suníes, procedentes de Iraq, eran responsables de los mortíferos atentados cometidos hace unas semanas en Damasco. El último atentado del viernes en la ciudad de Alepo, fue atribuido también por el Gobierno sirio a esta misma organización criminal. Esta afirmación pone en entredicho las repetidas declaraciones del movimiento de oposición sirio que insiste en que ningún grupo de Al Qaeda actúa en sus filas.

Para el Gobierno sirio, la revuelta es una maquinación terrorista dirigida por Al Qaeda

El gobierno de Beirut hace equilibrios para no ser arrastrado por el contagioso conflicto sirio, que divide profundamente a la población, apoyando los suníes y una parte de los cristianos a los enemigos del régimen baasista, mientras los chiíes y otros sectores de la comunidad cristiana, defienden a Bashar el Asad. La influyente organización chií Hizbullah, que ha enviado a su segundones a reforzar las tropas del Gobierno de Damasco, se encuentra en una embarazosa situación.

Es público y notorio en Beirut que Tripoli puede convertirse en el primer gran foco de luchas intestinas provocadas por el conflicto de Siria.



En el bastión del régimen. El general Isa el Kholi, director del hospital militar de Damasco, fue tiroteado ante su casa

El régimen, que durante tantas décadas había presumido de que Siria era un oasis de seguridad en el turbulento Oriente Medio, es objeto, cada vez más, de la acción de los grupos de la oposición en el primer lugar del Ejército Libre Sirio, que desafían su autoridad en varias localidades del estado, especialmente en Homs, la ciudad de mayoría suni.

El gobierno de Beirut hace equilibrios para no ser arrastrado por el contagioso conflicto sirio, que divide profundamente a la población, apoyando los suníes y una parte de los cristianos a los enemigos del régimen baasista, mientras los chiíes y otros sectores de la comunidad cristiana, defienden a Bashar el Asad. La influyente organización chií Hizbullah, que ha enviado a su segundones a reforzar las tropas del Gobierno de Damasco, se encuentra en una embarazosa situación.

Es público y notorio en Beirut que Tripoli puede convertirse en el primer gran foco de luchas intestinas provocadas por el conflicto de Siria.

La rebelión prende en Aleppo con varios ataques que causan 28 muertos

► La segunda ciudad más importante de Siria permanecía hasta ahora en calma. Gobierno y oposición se culpan mutuamente del estallido de violencia

DANIEL IRIARTE
CORRESPONSAL EN ESTAMBUL

Hasta hace muy poco, Aleppo, la segunda ciudad de Siria y una de las capitales comerciales, se mantenía ajena a la inestabilidad que afecta al resto del país. Pero ayer por la mañana, esta calma fue rota por dos explosiones que mataron a al menos veinticinco personas, tanto militares como civiles, e hirieron a casi dos centenares.

La televisión estatal mostró imágenes de cadáveres y cuantiosos daños materiales, así como los restos retorcidos de un vehículo carbonizado, lo que hace pensar en el uso de un coche bomba. La confusa reivindicación del atentado (un comandante del Ejército Sirio Libre la ha asumido, mien-

tras que otro ha negado toda responsabilidad de la guerrilla insurgente) sembró las dudas sobre la autoría de la acción.

Un oficial identificado como teniente Omar, al mando de la brigada Al Faruk del distrito de Al Qasair en Homs, negó toda relación del Ejército Sirio Libre con los hechos. «Aseguran que somos responsables para intentar que la gente deje de manifestarse. Nosotros nunca usamos coches bomba. Sí, podemos usar IEDes (artefactos explosivos caseros), podemos usar armas, pero no usamos coches bomba. No va en nuestro interés, porque nos daría una mala reputación», aseguró al diario británico «The Guardian».

«Mira en qué momento ha ocurrido el atentado. Aleppo acababa de unirse a las protestas, lo que es bueno para nosotros. Si ponemos un coche

bomba en Aleppo, la gente dejará de manifestarse allí», afirmó. «Hay muchos controles en Aleppo, jamás podrías acceder a un complejo de seguridad para hacerlo estallar. Es imposible», dijo.

Miembros de Al Qaida

Es el mismo argumento que los críticos han utilizado para justificar su escepticismo respecto a los atentados que tuvieron lugar en Damasco el pasado diciembre, en los que murieron casi medio centenar de personas, y que el gobierno sirio achacó a «los terroristas extranjeros de Al Qaida» que, según el régimen, están detrás de las protestas. Un dato que pasó desapercibido en su momento es que en una de aquellas explosiones —que tuvo lugar en el interior de un edificio de Inteligencia— murió Rostom Gazali, antiguo jefe de la todopoderosa In-

teligencia siria en Libano durante el gobierno de Hafez al-Assad, y que cayó en desgracia con su hijo Bashar. Dos semanas después, el 6 de enero, tuvo lugar otro atentado en el área de Midan, en Damasco, en un lugar en el que poco después estaba prevista una manifestación de la oposición.

Sin embargo, el hecho de que uno de los objetivos fuese un edificio de la seguridad estatal, así como el que otro de los oficiales insurgentes sí haya reivindicado la acción, hacen pensar que tal vez se haya tratado de una acción de la guerrilla que ahora ésta se muestra reticente a asumir, dado que en el ataque también fallecieron civiles.

Mientras tanto, se produjeron de nuevo manifestaciones contra el régimen por todo el país, especialmente a la salida de la oración del viernes en las mezquitas. En Aleppo, al menos seis personas murieron abatidas por las fuerzas de seguridad, según informó el Observatorio Sirio de Derechos Humanos. En Homs, continuaron los bombardeos, que, según algunos activistas y residentes de la ciudad, parecen estar preparando el terreno para una operación militar terrestre a gran escala.

Desmentido rebelde

Miembros del Ejército Sirio Libre aseguran que nunca han utilizado ni utilizarán coches bomba

Publico (Portugal)

Ao que a oposição chamou 'acção militar' o regime denunciou um atentado 'terrorista'

Duas explosões fizeram 28 mortos e 175 feridos junto a instalações militares na segunda maior cidade da Síria. Em Homs prepara-se uma ofensiva final contra bairros rebeldes

Rita Siza

● Aleppo, a segunda maior cidade da Síria, acordou ontem ao som das bombas, alegadamente lançadas pelas forças armadas dissidentes que apoiam a oposição ao Presidente Bashar al-Assad contra edifícios do exército e polícia nacional, segundo a versão dos meios oficiais. Os "grupos terroristas armados" mataram 28 pessoas, incluindo mulheres, crianças e soldados do regime e fizeram 175 feridos, adiantou a televisão estatal.

Em lágrimas, um repórter televisivo relatou os acontecimentos da manhã. "Civis e membros do exército foram martirizados em duas explosões terroristas", lamentou o jornalista, que, segurando um patim infantil na mão, informou que as bombas foram detonadas à beira de um parque onde famílias se tinham juntado para o pequeno-almoço.

As imagens exibiam a fachada do complexo militar atingido: na rua, viam-se socorristas atarefados a recolher partes dos corpos das vítimas para dentro de sacos e cinco cadáveres já cobertos. Uma cratera gigante era apontada pelo repórter como o local onde explodiu um veículo armado usado pelos terroristas.

Um dirigente do Exército Livre da Síria confirmou à BBC que as forças rebeldes estiveram envolvidas no incidente, mas desmentiu que se tivesse tratado de um atentado terrorista. Pelo contrário, precisou o coronel Arif al-Hamoud ao telefone a partir da Turquia, o que aconteceu foi uma "operação militar".

Mas pouco depois da difusão das imagens do ataque na televisão, o Conselho Nacional Sírio desmentiu "categoricamente" que as forças armadas da oposição fossem responsáveis pelo bombardeamento. Em declarações posteriores à AFP, um outro porta-voz do Exército Livre da Síria, coronel Mahir Nouaimi, indicou que as forças governamentais é que estavam por detrás do ataque. "Este regime criminoso está a matar as nossas crianças em Homs, e agora vem lançar bombas em Aleppo para desviar as atenções", acusou.

Muitas outras vozes apontaram o dedo ao regime, apresentando indícios para compor uma versão alternativa dos acontecimentos. A conclusão da oposição é que o ataque suicida foi uma encenação do regime, para desacreditar a oposição e impedir a realização de uma marcha pró-democracia marcada para a tarde de ontem - uma estratégia que, lembram, já foi seguida por Assad em Damasco. Aleppo, que é o centro economi-

Um dos edifícios que foi atingido pelas explosões em Aleppo



co da Síria, tem sido relativamente poupado a protestos e confrontos: os líderes empresariais, fiéis apoiantes do Presidente, têm usado o seu privilégio económico para calar o descontentamento político, explicava a Associated Press.

No entanto, o ataque em Aleppo evidencia uma generalização da violência por toda a Síria. A cidade de Homs continua a ser o alvo preferencial do regime, e ontem uma nova vaga de tanques de guerra assumiu posições à entrada dos bairros que es-

tão sob o controlo da oposição, o que levou os activistas a alertar sobre a iminência de uma nova "grande ofensiva" sobre a cidade, massacrada por violência continua há uma semana. Segundo o Observatório Sírio para os Direitos Humanos, sediado em

Londres, os soldados estavam a bater o bairro de Inshaat porta-a-porta, efectuando dezenas de detenções. Num apelo desesperado antes da "ofensiva final" do exército, os altifalantes das mesquitas ecoaram apelos à dádiva de sangue e à partilha de alimentos.

Obama apressa reunião dos Amigos da Síria

ONU quer acusar Assad de crimes contra a humanidade

● O Presidente dos Estados Unidos, Barack Obama, pediu ao seu enviado especial para os assuntos do Médio Oriente para intensificar os esforços diplomáticos para a constituição do grupo dos Amigos da Síria e apressar a realização de uma primeira reunião onde fossem exploradas novas acções de isolamento do regime do Presidente Bashar al-Assad. "Estamos interessados em acabar com o derramamento de sangue e em assistir à transição do poder na Síria", disse Obama. O Departamento de Estado confirmou

que havia encontros agendados em França, Marrocos e no Bahrain, no sentido de organizar o grupo de aliados interessados em apoiar a oposição síria e fixar o seu mandato.

Entretanto, a Assembleia geral das Nações Unidas agendou para segunda-feira um debate plenário sobre a situação na Síria. A alta-comissária para os Direitos Humanos, Navi Pillay, vai exigir que o Governo de Assad seja acusado de crimes contra a humanidade no Tribunal Penal Internacional.

O Governo da Arábia Saudita ape-

lou ontem à ONU para "prosseguir os esforços para encontrar uma solução para a crise síria", notando que "o falhanço do Conselho de Segurança em adoptar uma resolução em apoio da iniciativa de paz da Liga Árabe não



"Estamos interessados em acabar com o derramamento de sangue e em assistir à transição do poder na Síria"

pode impedir que sejam feitas novas tentativas para proteger os inocentes e pôr fim à violência que ameaça o povo sírio e a estabilidade da região", disse o porta-voz do executivo, Yousef bin Ahmad Al-Othaimeen.

No entanto, Moscovo disse ontem que bloqueará qualquer resolução que exigisse a deposição de Assad. "Se os nossos parceiros não entenderem à primeira, voltaremos a usar o veto para os chamar de volta à realidade", disse o vice-ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Sergei Riabkov.

The Mail on Sunday (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

West is making things worse for Syria's victims



PAYING A TERRIBLE PRICE: Young children wounded by shell fire in the rebel stronghold of Homs

THE BBC is working hard to get us to go to war in Syria. Its incessant coverage is – as it was in Libya and Egypt – mostly dim, partial and unquestioning. This should cease.

If there is a rebellion against a dictatorship, then it must, as far as the BBC is concerned, be noble. If a government defends itself against rebellion, it must, according to the BBC, be wrong.

Great slabs of history tell us that this is not necessarily so. In this case, I tremble for the fate of Syria's Arab Christians if the Assad regime falls.

Bad is often replaced by worse. This is already happening in Egypt and Libya, though the BBC seldom troubles to record the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' it welcomed so simple-mindedly.

Perhaps the Corporation is trying to please our Foreign Secretary, William

Hague, an increasingly pathetic figure who seems to have mistaken military intervention in foreign countries for conservatism. Someone should also ask him why he gets so outraged about Syria, and was not outraged by equally bloody repression in Bahrain.

It seems that, having been refused UN permission to destabilise Damascus under the blue flag, we are now looking at running guns to the rebels. What British interest is served by this dangerous policy?

The revolt in Syria would long ago have faded away had it not been for the noisy support of Washington and London. Much of the bloodshed and destruction is, I believe, the responsibility of the 'West', which has falsely encouraged naive people to believe that Nato helicopters and bombers are just over the horizon.

Sunday Express (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Syrian heartache of Assad's in-laws

WHILE THE carnage continues in Syria, where President Assad clings to power by waging a campaign of slaughter and torture against his country's rebelling citizens, life is becoming increasingly uncomfortable for his father-in-law, who continues to work as a consultant cardiologist in Harley Street.

Last week the president's wife Asma, who was raised in West London and went to a primary school in Ealing, broke her silence to pledge support for Assad, whom she married 12 years ago, but her father Fawaz Akhras has told a friend he is "horrified" by his son-in-law's savage suppression of the uprising in Syria which has cost at least 6,000 lives.

Syrian-born Dr Akhras, 66, who also practises at the private Cromwell Hospital in Earl's Court, is said now to fear for his safety and that of his wife Sahar. Yesterday their pebble-dashed house close to the A40 in Acton was empty and unkempt. A neighbour said they had not been seen there for two or three weeks and that the couple had felt worried ever since a group of angry pro-democratic protestors in the area, which is popular with expat Syrians, had pushed down the wall of their front garden.

Another neighbour, originally from Damascus, observed: "Many Syrians who live around

here have relatives who have been treated badly by Assad, some put in prison for no reason. They think Dr Akhras should use his position in the family to make his deranged son-in-law see sense and leave the country."

A friend and medical colleague of Dr Akhras, who does not want to be named, says: "Fawaz is a decent man; he founded the British Syrian Society to foster good relations between the two countries and he's horrified by the killing going on. He and his wife are terribly concerned about their daughter and three grandchildren; they know she won't be allowed to leave Syria because that would be damaging to the regime - she's a virtual prisoner."

His worst fear is that if - or when - the regime falls, the president will either be killed outright, or tried and executed, or forced into exile and that Asma may be harmed. He wants his daughter to return to London, where she still has friends from the days she worked for the investment bank JP Morgan. She still retains a British passport.

Those who know Dr Akhras say he was quietly pushing for reform when the uprising began but they accept he is now in an impossible position, caught between family loyalty and worldwide condemnation at the brutality of Assad's regime. He refuses all requests to speak about his situation beyond commenting: "Whatever I say people will take it the wrong way."



FEARS: Asma Assad faces danger in Syria

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Violence spreads as fighters claim credit for bombing police station in second city

CONFLICT

By David Blair

SYRIA'S conflict escalated to the country's second city of Aleppo yesterday when explosions tore through headquarters, killing 28.

The regime blamed the first serious violence in the commercial centre of two million people on "armed terrorist gangs", although some opponents of President Bashar al-Assad disputed this claim.

Col Malik al-Kurdi, the deputy commander of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), claimed that the rebels were responsible.

The bombings coincided with a

seventh day of attacks by government forces on the city of Homs, where tanks entered areas under the control of the FSA.

In Aleppo, state television reported that "car bombs" had exploded at two locations, showing graphic pictures of victims and wrecked buildings. Col al-Kurdi said security personnel had been kept under surveillance.

"When they were gathering in a square to go to the mosques and repress demonstrations, two groups from the FSA targeted the two buildings with small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire," he told BBC Arabic.

"After violent clashes, there was an explosion inside the military intelli-

gence building. At first we didn't know what it was, but we think it was the regime trying to stop the operation of the FSA."

The department of military intelligence, led by Gen Abdel Fatah Kudryeh, has been a central instrument of repression since the conflict began 11 months ago as one of the country's five intelligence agencies.

Another rebel spokesman, Col Maher Nouaimi, claimed that Mr Assad's "criminal regime" had itself carried out the Aleppo bombings to "steer attention away from what it is doing in Homs".

The government pressed on with its onslaught against Homs yesterday, sending tanks into the district of Inshaat. The neighbouring suburb of

Bab al-Amr, a stronghold of the FSA, has been largely cut off.

At least 300 people have been killed since Feb 3, and many of the wounded have been forced to seek treatment in an underground network of clinics, often in mosques or homes. All hospitals are compelled to report their patients to the security forces, who arrest those suspected of opposing the regime.

A Western diplomat said securing the regime's permission for aid agencies to enter Homs was the "most immediate issue". "Turning up international pressure to allow access – and to defenders of the regime, Russia and China, to use whatever influence they have to allow access – must be a priority," he said. The

diplomat also had a warning for the Assad regime. "With the amount of blood that's been spilt, the regime is now committed to this process, they can't back up," he said. "With every military operation they carry out, they further alienate more people, so the prospect of them being able to succeed with this strategy seems to me to be low."

However, Sergei Ryabizov, the Russian deputy foreign minister, offered a radically different analysis. He told a state news agency in Moscow that Mr Assad had proposed a new constitution paying the way for free elections. "This means that the opposition bears full responsibility for improving the situation and finding a way to stop the bloodshed," he said.

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Could there be some bad guys among the rebels too?

COMMENT
ROBERT FISK



John McCain backed the good guys in Libya, who are now keenly torturing their opponents to death. The same John McCain now backs the good guys in Syria – no “boots on the ground”, mind you, for this is war without death for America – and it all seems OK, until I sit opposite a guy over coffee in Beirut who kind of makes the whole story a bit more complicated. We back surrounded minorities, fighting bravely for their rights against overwhelming odds – Homs, for example. We did the same when the Kosovo Liberation Army – not exactly the squeaky-clean outfit that Nato would have us believe until Slobodan Milosevic surrendered – fought against overwhelming Serbian odds in 1998.

Maybe it goes back to the Paris Commune of 1871 – French versus French, but let’s forget that bit – or the Warsaw Uprising, or the 1944 Liberation of Paris. The French used to talk about *les tireurs des toits* – the roof marksmen – who assaulted even Charles de Gaulle when he entered Notre Dame on the day of liberation. Homs, of course, has its own *tireurs des toits*: Syrian government snipers on the roofs – Iranians according to the Syrian opposition. As if the Syrian military needs to be taught how to shoot by the slightly decrepit Revolutionary Guards of Tehran. Stories of the brutality and cruelty of Syrian officials are true. Let’s repeat that: stories, reports, images, YouTube, real recordings of these cruelties, are all true. But then there’s the shocked face of my friend, neither

Syrian nor a journalist, drinking coffee with me, who agrees with much of the story. Snipers, yes. “Most of the shooting victims are hit in the head or chest. If you are hit by a sniper, you are in a serious way.” There has been shelling – of homes and of at least one clinic – and there are graves in gardens. But then there are the other little comments, almost forgettable but still disturbing. The habit of “Free Syrian Army” soldiers of playing Islamic music before crossing roads under sniper fire and of praying before pressing their foot on the gas. Well, nothing wrong in that, for heaven’s sake.

Then the large number of FSA men who appear to be Islamist rather than Islamic – this subtle difference is initially hard to spot, says my friend. And then the boasts of “armed activists” in Homs – there now seems to be a gentle difference between activists (armed) and protesters (unarmed) – who are executing their Alawite and Christian neighbours.

Could it be that the brave defenders of Homs include some very bad guys? Well, you may say, who can blame them? What resistance force, defending its people, has not admitted that “there may have been some excesses”?

My friend (no acolyte of the Baath party) expresses his absolute belief that if the FSA breaks out of Homs, there will be “massacres”. The ethnic cleansing of the Christians, then, the nightmare that Assad evokes? And the rumours that Syrian tanks use heavy machine guns in cities but growl around without shells for their barrels – just in case they, too, defect? Could it be that shelling Homs is one thing, but levelling it to the ground a much more painful gamble of “will the tank-crews defect or not”?

National Post (Canada)

REGIME USES CAR BOMBS AS DIVERSION, REBELS SAY

SYRIAN DEATH TOLL 28

DAMASCUS • Twin car bombs targeting security posts in Syria's second city of Aleppo killed at least 28 people on Friday, as rebels accused the regime of launching the attacks as a diversion.

The explosions came as troops backed by tanks advanced on pockets of resistance in the battered and besieged protest hub of Homs, and heavy security deployments nationwide thwarted planned protests against the regime's ally, Russia.

The powerful mid-morning blasts ripped through the northern commercial hub, also wounding 235 people, said state television, which broadcast gruesome footage.

Mangled bodies were shown in pools of blood outside rows of shattered buildings and piles of rubble strewn across a broad avenue. Soldiers and children were among those killed.

State television called the bombings, the first in Aleppo since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime erupted almost a year ago, the work of "armed terrorist gangs."

It said a "suicide bomber in a car packed with explosives" had attacked a police station, flattening a nearby food distribution centre. The second targeted an intelligence base.

The rebel Free Syrian Army blamed the government for the attacks.

"This criminal regime is ... carrying out bomb attacks in Aleppo to steer attention away from what it is doing in Homs, Zabadani and elsewhere," said its spokesman, Colonel Maher Nouaimi.

Several people interviewed on television denounced Turkey and Qatar for not standing by the regime as it seeks to put down the revolt.

"Is this the freedom they want?" asked one angry man, holding up a severed arm and referring to those leading the protest movement.

Aleppo has been largely spared the unrest that has rocked Syria since last March and killed more than 6,000 people, say rights groups.

In central Syria, tanks stormed the Inshaat district in Homs overnight as troops launched a house-to-house sweep to crush regime opponents, said Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Inshaat is next to Baba Amr district, which has been subjected to a withering assault by regime forces since Saturday that has killed more than 450 people, activists say.

In addition to those killed in Aleppo, the Observatory said another 44 people died across Syria Friday — 28 civilians, nine soldiers and seven deserters.

Security forces deployed heavily outside mosques nationwide, firing on worshippers in some areas to prevent protests denouncing Russia's steadfast support for the Assad regime, activists said.

"Demonstrations broke out in various parts of the country, but they were small in numbers because of the heavy deployment of army and security forces as well as the cold weather," Mr. Abdel Rahman said.

Internet-based activists had urged protests under the banner of "Russia is killing our children."

But Moscow said Syria's opposition "bears full responsibility" for the ongoing violence, while accusing the West of pushing regime opponents into armed conflict.

Arab and Western governments have so far resisted mounting calls for military aid to the outgunned and outnumbered rebels in Syria.

Robert Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, posted declassified photographs on his Facebook site that Washington said shows an army attacking a civilian area of Homs.

Victoria Nuland, a U.S. State Department spokeswoman, said the "declassified U.S. national imagery" shows the destruction of the city.

Syrian deaths mount with Aleppo blasts and Homs siege

BEIRUT

BY NEIL MACPARKER/IBHAR

Explosions struck two targets associated with the military and the police in Aleppo on Friday, Syrian state television reported, and Homs was reported to still be under siege with sporadic tank fire pinging down residents in their homes.

State television quoted the Health Ministry as saying 26 people were killed and 235 wounded in Aleppo in what seemed to be two car bombings.

One explosion erupted near a military intelligence directorate in Aleppo and the second at a police headquarters, state media reported, saying the blasts were the work of "terrorists."

Activists said seven people were also killed in Aleppo when troops fired on anti-government demonstrators drawn to the streets to protest Russia's support of President Bashar al-Assad. Protesters said the theme of Friday's demonstrations, which they hoped to stage nationwide, was "Russia is killing our children."

Aleppo, a northern city not far from Turkey that is Syria's industrial center,

has been relatively quiet throughout the 11-month-old uprising despite occasional demonstrations in recent weeks. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was the scene of running battles between the government of President Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father, and the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

Images broadcast from one security compound showed bloodied bodies strewn on the ground outside the shattered buildings. The force of the blast shattered windows, upended vehicles and twisted a black east-iron fence. The blasts left both scores a jumble of concrete blocks and other wreckage.

The explosions in Aleppo came almost exactly a week after the authorities began what activists have depicted as a major effort to crush dissent, shelled by East-West international divisions that have blocked efforts to muster global support behind a Western and Arab plan to force Mr. Assad to step aside.

In Turkey, Capt. Ammar al-Wa'ani, a spokesman for the Free Syria Army, an opposition group of military defectors, denounced events in the explosions.

Another Free Syria Army commander

er, Gen. Aref Hamoud, said that the rebels had carried out an operation against security headquarters before the bombings, but that they had nothing to do with the blasts. General Hamoud said the operation had been an attempt to derail assaults by the security forces on demonstrators.

Captain Wawi blamed the government itself for carrying out the attacks against what he said were two heavily guarded security compounds that would have been difficult for civilians to approach. Two bombings in Damascus in January and December killed 70 people, and the government blamed Al Qaeda or its sympathizers at the time.

"This regime is playing a well-known game, seeking to distract the world's attention from the massacres in Homs," Captain Wawi said.

Much of the government effort to quash revolt has centered on Homs, where activists said another 17 people had died Friday in shelling, including five who had been wounded in previous violence.

The deaths followed what appeared to be a particularly bloody crackdown Thursday that activists said killed at

least 30 people and possibly scores more.

"Nobody dares venture into the streets," a 65-year-old man named Mohamed said Thursday, describing in a phone interview the blast of tank shells and the rattle of machine guns as all he heard, even though his home is not close to the worst fighting.

With Homs largely sealed off by the Syrian military, activists relied on cellphone videos uploaded to YouTube to distribute images of the government offensive. The short video clips updated throughout the day Thursday showed streets cluttered with rubble from damaged buildings, houses, collapsed on their owners and a bloody flow of victims either being treated in makeshift clinics or prepared for burial.

The images, although impossible to verify independently, left the hellish image of a city devoid of people but plagued by random eruptions of fiery, black smoke. They were punctuated with cries like "Bashar is a dog!" or "Bashar is a tyrant!" — all referring to Mr. Assad.

Resisting Homs by telephone proved difficult Thursday, although internate

tent cellphone service returned in the early evening.

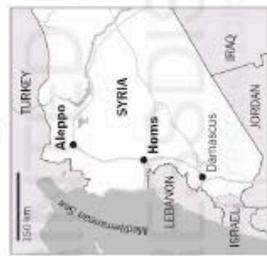
In the official version of Thursday's events, the government-run Syrian Arab News Agency reported that two members of the security forces were killed in Homs while eight others killed earlier, either there or elsewhere, were buried in Damascus and Latakia.

In terms of the violence in Homs, the government news service said, "Armed terrorist groups booby-trapped several buildings, alleys and streets in the city and detonated a number of explosive devices." It also said the groups tried to barricade streets, barred tires, looted stores and burglarized cars.

Separately, a U.S. military official acknowledged Friday that the Pentagon had begun to review potential military options for dealing with the upheaval in Syria but said discussions were in the hypothetical phase.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal discussions, said, "We're looking at a whole range of options, but as far as going to the course of action, I've not seen anything."

The official declined to elaborate on



the possible options, but typically the Pentagon — which as a matter of course reviews options when conflicts around the world arise — would consider everything from doing nothing to arming rebels to covert action, airstrikes or deploying ground troops.

Hussein Saad, an employee of The New York Times in Beirut, Alan Coates in London and Elizabeth Hammar in Washington contributed reporting.

The Washington Post Sunday (USA)

Can we help Syria without making things worse?

Middle East expert **Daniel Byman** on the dangers of ousting a dictator

You smell death everywhere you go, said a wounded activist last week, describing the Syrian city of Homs, where the regime of Bashar al-Assad has vented its fury on its own people. Horrors in Homs and other cities mount, but the opposition is not cowed. Yet their bravery is not enough: Despite almost a year of protests and regular reports of Assad's imminent demise, the Syrian dictator remains in power.

The Arab League tried to broker a settlement to ease Assad out but failed, though it may take up the task again. Much of the world signed on to sanctions against Syria, but the economic pain so far is not enough to convince Assad loyalists to abandon the regime. As the body count grows, with hundreds reportedly dying this past week, the Syrian opposition is clamoring for help.

What can the United States do? The Syrian opposition was initially leery of calling for American aid, but as the violence has grown, it has become more open to outside help, asking for "international protection" and calling plaintively this month for "everyone around the world to speak up and do something to stop the bloodshed of innocent Syrians." Some among the opposition have now called for a Libya-style international intervention.

To be of any value, an intervention must end the bloodshed, or at least diminish it dramatically. Syria also must remain an intact state capable of policing its borders, stopping terrorism and providing services to its people. It should not fragment into a failed state, trade Assad for another dictator or become a pawn of foreign powers such as Iran.

As recent U.S. interventions have shown, the United States can be moved to help and advance freedom and its interests in the Middle East — but it can also make things worse or trip over unanticipated consequences. This knowledge should not be an excuse for standing by while Assad slaughters his people, but it should shape how the world responds.

Syria is not Libya. At least, NATO will not carry out a bombing operation there. Russia and China made their opposition

undermined their countries' political and judicial institutions and tried to divide their opponents to stay in power. And with their departures, Iraq, Libya and Yemen all are at risk of becoming failed states.

So it is not enough for Assad to go — the key question is who replaces him. The Syrian opposition is divided by region, sect and political orientation, and the movement fears penetration by regime spies. It is not clear how much, or if, opposition groups outside the country, such as the Syrian National Council, speak for those bearing the brunt of Assad's repression. One official representing part of the internal opposition told the Guardian newspaper that "the revolution has two arms" and lamented the division between "the people outside, who have no weight on the ground, and the people inside, who are actively leading."

The Free Syrian Army, an opposition group that embraces armed struggle, claims to "work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity," but rebels battle the regime locally, without central coordination. Activists mock the FSA as the "Facebook Syrian Army" because its leadership is much stronger on the Internet than it is on the ground. This lack of unity may doom the postwar Syria. In Libya, the local militias that fought Moammar Gaddafi still operate independently months after his fall, and there is no government that most Libyans accept as legitimate.

The United States also shouldn't expect gratitude for turning against Assad. In Egypt, where U.S. pressure helped ease Mubarak out, a poll taken after the revolution shows that only a fifth of Egyptians have a favorable view of the United States. The caretaker government run by Egypt's generals, facing a poor economy and domestic strife, announced that it will try 19 Americans working for nonprofit organizations that promote democracy. Egypt did this in defiance of U.S. warnings that such a prosecution could jeopardize the U.S.-Egypt relationship, including \$1.3 billion in military aid.

Whatever the United States decides to do, it won't be about just Syria. It will be about Russia and Iran, too, countries that are already providing military support to Assad. In Libya, Gaddafi had no friends — his reckless foreign policy had alienated everyone. But in Syria, Western military intervention would only increase Moscow and Tehran's attachment to Assad.



Two explosions hit the Syrian city of Aleppo on Friday. Violence in the country continues to grow as the opposition clashes with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. (AP Photo/Alamy)

clear at the United Nations, voting against a Security Council resolution that called for Assad to step down and asked Syria to withdraw the forces that are moving down civilians in the country's cities. Now Syria uses Russia's anodyne calls for dialogue as a screen to step up repression.

The United States and Europe have little appetite for another war in the Middle East, particularly without U.N. cover. Meanwhile, sanctions are reshaping Syrian politics. Those sanctions, including travel bans and frozen assets, are devastating Syria's tourism and energy sectors. The value of the Syrian pound is collapsing. All of this places tremendous pressure on Assad.

But sanctions are not a sure thing. In Iraq in the 1990s, similar measures rocked Saddam Hussein's regime. He reaged, but not brought stability to that country. Like Assad, all these dictators

When the United States invaded Iraq the country's neighbors rushed in. Iran in particular sent intelligence and paramilitary personnel to organize locals and train them to fight U.S. forces. In Syria, Iraq is working with Lebanon's Hezbollah might seek to further help Assad, or should he fall, any remaining allies among regime survivors.

To reduce these risks, the United States and its allies need to build the Syrian opposition into a coherent, representative and legitimate body. A stronger opposition makes it more likely that Assad will fall and puts the United States and its allies — and Syria — in a better position to do so. Building the opposition should be more important for Syria's future and U.S. interests than a single-minded focus on removing Assad, who in the end is only a dishonest and brutal leader of an illegitimate and brutal regime.

Militarily, the opposition needs to prove competent enough to stand up to Assad's tanks and artillery, a tough task for lightly armed and untrained fighters. Even more important, the movement needs to be united. As its ranks come together, the United States should work with its allies to arm and train them. With Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others, the United States should present a cohesive front using tough love to cajole and reward the opposition for unity and cooperation while recognizing that some fissures will be inevitable.

Syria is only the latest regime shake by the Arab uprisings, which have brought freedom and exultation, but also repression and tyranny. However, success in Syria may be more important for the United States than in other countries. The other governments, even Gaddafi's bizarre regime, were U.S. allies to varying degrees, and no conflict dragged on in Syria's bas, with no end to the bloodshed in sight. Failure in Syria would set back U.S. security interests as well as deal a blow to fledgling democracies elsewhere in the region. Dictators old and new could take heart that force, again, triumphs in the Middle East.

dby32@georgetown.edu

Daniel Byman is a professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University and a research director at the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy. His latest book is "A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism."

New York Post (USA)

WHAT NOW IN SYRIA



There are alternatives
to military action

by **AMIR TAHERI**

In the opinion of the Obama administration, the United States has run out of options on Syria. In other words, the Russian and Chinese vetoes of a resolution backing the Arab League peace plan last week at the United Nations must be regarded as a licence for the Ba'athist regime to continue massacring the Syrian people.

To be sure, the double veto represents a failure of international diplomacy. However, as is often the case, that failure also contains an opportunity.

By going to the UN, the US and its European and Middle Eastern allies underlined their desire to play multilateral diplomacy at the highest level. Thus, responsibility for the failure rests with Russia and China. They said no to the only

peace formula on the table — without offering an alternative. Then, Russia pushed cynicism to the limits by sending Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Damascus to demand that President Bashar al-Assad do what the vetoed resolution had demanded: Hand over power to one of his two vice presidents.

So, what can the US do now?

First, Washington should reassert support for the Arab League's peace formula (which is also endorsed by the European Union and Turkey).

The US should also highlight the threat that the Syrian situation poses for regional peace. Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan are directly affected by the crisis. Several Arab countries in the Gulf are indirectly affected by the arrival of a growing number of Syrian refugees. In time, the Syrian crisis could destabilize a large part of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Next, the US should endorse a Franco-British move to return to the UN Security Council with a new draft resolution based on the Arab League's peace formula. British Foreign Secretary William Hague is right in suggesting that

the extent of Arab anger prompted by last week's veto might persuade Russia and China not to veto a second time.

A delegation of the Syrian pro-democracy opposition should also be invited to the Security Council to present evidence of the latest massacres, notably in the besieged city of Homs.

Outside the diplomatic arena, the US could initiate (or participate in) a number of other moves.

With enough logistical support, a number of "reception points" could be set up close to Syrian borders to receive refugees and ferry food and medication to cities attacked by Assad.

Syrian revolutionaries, after all, are already in control of Zabadani close to the Lebanese border, and could seize control of Dera'a on the Jordanian frontier. Embryonic "safe havens" already exist in Lebanon and Jordan. And Turkey has created three such "reception points" on its border with Syria, catering for over 20,000 Syrian refugees.

A number of Iraqi tribes have also set up facilities to receive Syrian refugees, often from Sunni tribal groups related to them.

Such facilities could be re-organized, expanded and protected under the UN flag without a Security Council resolution. (The UN has similar facilities in 22 countries across the globe.)

The US could also help stop the flow of arms to Assad by providing satellite intelligence to the governments of Turkey, Iraq, Greece and Cyprus, countries used by Iran and Russia to ferry guns to Damascus.

In the past three months, Turkey has stopped two arms shipments from Iran to Syria, thanks to tip-offs from lorry drivers. However, bearing in mind that tens of thousands of trucks from Iran pass through Turkey each month, spotting military cargos is not easy.

The Obama administration has always been understandably nervous

about military intervention. However, the alternative to military intervention is not surrender.

Britain and France are studying plans for helping the Syrian Free Army obtain weapons needed to defeat Assad's forces in battles in urban areas. Better armed, the SFA could attract a larger number of defectors from the Assad camp. Syrian sources tell me that whole units are ready to "switch sides" if they are assured of securing the arms needed for "making a difference."

As I understand it, Turkey is determined to remain in the lead in efforts to end the Assad regime. Visiting Washington last week, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu informed administration officials of his country's "deep concern" about allowing Assad to hang on to power by killing people. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is even prepared to take military action, Ankara sources tell me. And several Arab countries — most notably Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar — have indicated they would support a Turkish military initiative.

Assad's strategy is based on the assumption that his opponents and the Western democracies would shy away from the prospect of a long conflict. Support from Iran and Russia has encouraged him in his defiance. However, despite appearances, that support is far from firm.

As opportunist powers, Iran and Russia would not be prepared to pay the full price needed to prolong a Syrian regime that, deep down, neither really likes. Iran and Russia will back Assad only as long as they believe that the Western democracies and their regional allies might throw in the towel.

Thus, the US must make it clear that it is in this one for keeps — for as long as it takes the Syrian people to liberate themselves.

San Francisco Chronicle (USA)

JOEL BRINKLEY *Foreign matters*

Russia, China see their fates reflected in Syrian turmoil

It's no surprise that on the very day Russia insisted it would not support a U.N. resolution calling for an arms embargo on Syria, the state also announced that it will continue selling Syria vast quantities of arms and ammunition, used to kill thousands of protesters.

"As of today, there are no restrictions on our delivery of weapons," Anatoly Antonov, Russia's deputy defense minister, said at a news conference. "We must fulfill our obligations, and this is what we are doing."

Maybe Russia faces no legal restrictions, but what about plain, simple morality? On the day Antonov spoke, Syrian exile groups reported that government forces shot and killed more than 60 people during an attack on a Damascus suburb — almost certainly firing Russian bullets. Russia is Syria's principal arms supplier.

Almost the entire world wants to see Syrian President Bashar Assad thrown out of office — every nation save for Russia, China and a few other states like India that revel in being contrary. It obviously matters little to these countries that Assad, who has now slaughtered more than 6,000 of his own citizens, is indisputably guilty of massive crimes against humanity. By Tuesday, UNICEF announced, at least 400 Syrian children have been killed.

On Feb. 4, Russia and China vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution — drawn up by the Arab League, not the Western nations the two states so resent — calling for an end to the carnage and urging Assad to step down. The vote was 13-2 — on the bloodiest day since the uprising began. Syrian troops massacred more than 200 people.

Why are both Russia and China so intent on blocking the world's effort to stop Syria's Pol Pot? As William Hague, the British foreign secretary, put it: "We have between 30 and 100 people being killed violently, every day. We have the torture and abuse of huge numbers of people, including children. How many people need to die before the consciences of world capitals are stirred?"

All of that "for a little rotten dictator," Leon Aron, director of Russian studies at the American Enterprise Institute, told me.

Tens of thousands of antigovernment



Syrian President Bashar Assad (left) welcomes Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to the presidential palace in Damascus on Tuesday.

protesters turned out Feb. 4 in Moscow once again, in subzero weather, calling for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to step down. These demonstrations have become a regular feature of Russian life since monitors discovered rampant fraud in December's parliamentary elections.

More and more often now, Russians are repeating an old joke about Putin's "sovereign democracy" that goes like this: What is the difference between democracy and sovereign democracy? It's the same as the difference between a chair and an electric chair.

In China, meanwhile, angry Tibetans

are in open revolt. For years, the only sign of their fury over continuing Chinese occupation and religious repression had been two dozen Buddhist monks who lit themselves on fire — including three more last week. Now Tibetans are staging a full-blown uprising. Chinese troops have killed at least six people and wounded dozens more. Today, Tibet is under undeclared martial law.

Like Assad, the autocrats in both Russia and China are facing their own popular revolts. Is it any wonder that neither of them was willing to support a U.N. resolution calling for regime change? Both of them certainly fear that, sooner or later, that sword will be turned on them.

As it is right now, both Russian and Chinese leaders sound just like Assad, blaming others for the popular anger over their own ugly repression. In Damascus, Assad continues to loudly proclaim that foreign-backed "terrorists" are responsible for the ferment and death.

Xinhua, the state-run Chinese news service, quoted a foreign ministry spokesman saying: "Overseas forces for Tibet independence have been fabricating rumors and distorting the truth to discredit" China.

And in Russia, a state-owned TV station ran a documentary that accused Michael McFaul, the new U.S. ambassador, of paying protesters to take to the streets. That tells me the leaders of both countries are running scared. In Syria, both Russia and China see reflections of themselves. Russia also faces a more practical concern. Its arms dealers have contracts with Syria worth up to \$6 billion, a Moscow-based security institute reported recently. So Antonov, the deputy defense minister, found himself stammering through baseless circumlocutions as he tried to explain that Syrian forces couldn't possibly be using Russian arms to shoot protesters.

"We have agreements with Syria" governing the permitted uses of weapons, he protested. "This has been recorded in documentation."

Shame on you.

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Joel Brinkley, a professor of journalism at Stanford University, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning former foreign correspondent for the New York Times. To comment, go to sfgate.com/chronicle/submissions/#1.

The Weekly Standard (USA)

the Democratic candidate, is gay, liberal, and a zealous campaigner. Either of the GOP candidates, former governor Tommy Thompson or ex-House member Mark Neumann, could beat her. When Neumann gave up his House seat in 1998 to run (unsuccessfully) for the Senate, by the way, he was replaced by Paul Ryan.

In Hawaii, Democrat Dan Akaka is stepping down after three terms, and there's only one Republican with a realistic chance of winning his seat, former governor Linda Lingle. Fortunately for Republicans, Lingle is running. She didn't have to buck a Democratic tide

in a presidential year when she won the governorship in 2002 and 2006. With Obama, a native of Hawaii, leading the ticket, she'll have to overcome a strong partisan headwind.

Where does this leave us? Duffy projects a Republican gain of three to six seats. The Rothenberg Report says two to five. A year ago, I'd have said four to seven. Today, three to six seems about right, with emphasis on the three. But my rule of politics is that the future is never a straight line projection of the present. In November, Republican prospects may look better—or worse. ♦

Assad@axisofevil.com . . .

Leaked emails show Westerners truckling to the Syrian regime. BY LEE SMITH

In the fall of 2007 Israel reportedly hacked into Syria's air defense systems and disabled them, as a prelude to bombing a nuclear facility in the Syrian desert. This vaunted cyber exploit, it turns out, might not merit its spectacular reputation. Last week, the shadowy online activist group known as Anonymous penetrated 78 email accounts from Syria's ministry of presidential affairs and posted their contents online. The hackers found that many of the accounts, including that of the allegedly computer-savvy Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, used one of the world's weakest passwords: 12345. So much for Syrian cybersecurity.

The hacked emails are a downscale version of the WikiLeaks cables. There is little diplomatic sophistication. In the fashion of third-world Arab nationalist bureaucracies, everyone addresses everyone else as Your Excellency. One Excellency kept a stash of porn in his

email account, another Excellency seems to have sexually harassed an attractive Her Excellency. Not surprisingly, many of the Excellencies are fixated on Israel, and any story or—more often—image that reinforces their negative feelings is c'd to a long list of similarly obsessed Excellencies.

The Mossad was responsible for 9/11, writes Fawaz Akhras, the father of Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad, and a London physician. He emails a presidential adviser to say that he has heard his suspicions verified on BBC. The unlucky recipient has to humor him; yes, old man, for the better part of a decade Syria has been telling anyone who would listen that it was the Jews.

There are also few surprises regarding the workings of the presidential palace in Damascus. The place is run by petty bureaucrats whose power rests entirely on the willingness of others to commit acts of terrorism—against either Syria's neighbors or their fellow Syrians—on their behalf. When the Assad regime at last finds its back

against the wall, these are not the sort of figures who will be fighting it out to the end. Rather, they will seek refuge among the many foreign friends they've made over the years—the journalists, businessmen, and politicians who solicited their assistance in arranging an audience with President Assad.

For what is most interesting about these emails is the picture they paint of a sick and grasping Western elite, the top echelon of an open society, that came on bended knee to curry favor with a dictatorship. Journalists from the three major U.S. networks vied for exclusive interviews with Bashar, even as the slaughter of unarmed Syrian civilians was under way. Other emails, requests, and meetings preceded the uprising that has cost more than 7,000 Syrians their lives. But even then Assad's reputation was well known. He probably ordered the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. He turned Damascus International Airport into a hub for foreign fighters seeking passage into Iraq to kill U.S. troops. This was the world leader that American political figures wanted to cozy up to.

The emails show that former Fannie Mae CEO and Obama bundler James A. Johnson and his wife Maxine Isaacs dined out with Assad's advisers. And former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Clinton White House official Martin Indyk tried to broker a meeting between his old boss and Assad.

The regime's gatekeeper is Bouthaina Shaaban, a 58-year-old media adviser to Assad. Anyone from Western media or political circles who wants to call on the dictator comes through her. With a Ph.D. in English literature from Warwick University (she's published on Shelley), she started her political career as Hafez al-Assad's translator. In August 2011, the former Fulbright scholar, who spent her research year at Duke, was sanctioned by the Treasury Department as one of the "senior Assad regime officials who are principal defenders of the regime's activities."

Shaaban's email cache shows her fine-tuned sense of status. When she's invited to speak at a panel in Ankara,

Lee Smith is a senior editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

her assistant requests two seats for her since the flight offers neither first-class nor business. When she finds out she's not scheduled to deliver the keynote address, she directs her assistant to cancel her appearance. Former CBS anchor Dan Rather requests an interview with Assad in October 2010 for his new HDNet show, but Shaaban tells the Syrian ambassador to the United States Imad Moustapha to decline. "You mentioned in your letter that the HDNet station has a limited number of audience and therefore we kindly ask you to apologize."

Those journalists to whom Shaaban granted access were best friends forever. One exchange features Shaaban and Alix Van Buren—who conducted an interview with Assad for *La Repubblica*—blowing cyber kisses to each other across the Mediterranean. Who knows what journalistic ethics are like in Rome, but Van Buren's editors may be surprised to find that Van Buren considers the interview a joint effort to get the Syrian president's message out to the masses. "Did you notice that Charlie Rose practically copied our interview from top to bottom," Van Buren writes in an ingratiating email from May 2010. She thanks Shaaban ("you and I, what a team!") for the lovely presents—Valentino perfume, a jewelry box—and spares nothing in the way of flattery. And yet eventually Van Buren pushes her luck a little too far. She writes Shaaban to request privileged access for a colleague, Gad Lerner, who is planning a trip to Damascus. Lerner, as it turns out, is Jewish. Van Buren furiously pleads his case—he is "independent (i.e., doesn't belong to any lobby)," he has signed petitions against Netanyahu, and Shaaban should ignore the fact his signature is next to that of Bernard-Henri Lévy—but the Syrian apparatchik has to reject her dear friend's request. "Many of those signatories," Shaaban writes, "have indeed a history of strong support for Israel, and their long term aim is to serve the true interests of Israel."

American journalists flattered the regime as well, but with less luck. In November 2011, more than half a year into the uprising, Brian Williams's

producer at NBC wrote to request an interview, as did Scott Pelley's producer at CBS's *Evening News* a few weeks later. With deaths mounting by the hour, it was quite a feeding frenzy last fall. Bob Simon's producer at *60 Minutes* sought an advantage. He reminded his Syrian correspondent that "*60 Minutes* interviewed President Hafez al-Assad back in the 1970s." After a few paragraphs of boilerplate PR for his show ("For the last 43 years, it has featured stories on the most important newsmakers of our time . . ."), the producer signs off, "We would be most honored to have President al Assad on our program." God only knows what Barbara Walters's staff wrote to actually get her prized interview with Assad in December—those missives weren't leaked.

The hacked emails show how Assad's advisers sought to prep him for the Walters interview. Sheherazad Jaafari, a press attaché at the Syrian mission to the United Nations, and daughter of Syria's U.N. ambassador, Dr. Bashar Jaafari, boasted of her research into American media. Her advice was to turn any accusations directed at Assad back on American policymakers. For instance, when asked about torturing civilians, Assad should remind the viewing audience about Abu Ghraib, and explain that "Syria doesn't have a policy to torture people, unlike the USA, where there are courses and schools that specialize in teaching policemen and officers how to torture." She contends that "the American Psyche can be easily manipulated."

In fact, only a small number of Americans are susceptible to the Syrian regime's hamfisted propaganda, but on the evidence of the emails, they never needed to be manipulated.

"Dear Bouthaina, I hope this finds you well," writes Martin Indyk in May 2010.

Some close friends of mine will be visiting Damascus from May 25-29, for tourism. However, they are influential people in Washington and I think that you and Walid [presumably Walid Mouallem, Syrian foreign minister] would benefit from meeting them and they would certainly benefit from

meeting both of you. Jim was Chief of Staff to Vice President Walter Mondale in the Carter Administration. He has also served as Chairman of the Brookings Institution. I have appended his resume so that you will get a fuller picture. Put simply, he is very influential in the Obama White House and in the Democratic Party.

Jim, or James A. Johnson, was an Obama bundler who was also part of the vetting committee for Obama's vice president. The Wikipedia entry appended to the email explained that Johnson withdrew "when it was reported that he had received loans directly from Angelo Mozilo, the CEO of Countrywide Financial, a company implicated in the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis." The entry also shows that Johnson was the CEO of Fannie Mae when it "improperly deferred \$200 million in expenses. This enabled top executives, including Johnson . . . to receive substantial bonuses in 1998." Who knows why Indyk included a record of Johnson's misdeeds. Maybe he was just trying to put Shaaban at ease—Johnson wasn't one of these self-righteous Washington crusaders, but someone with plenty of political enemies of his own, just like the regime in Damascus.

It was Johnson's wife, Maxine Isaacs, who later thanked Shaaban for the hospitality in Damascus.

Dear Bouthaina,

I can't thank you enough for the fun, interesting and most memorable dinner last night. We had a wonderful time and are most grateful to you for taking time from your incredibly busy schedule to spend it with us. We loved the restaurant and will never forget the magnificent [sic] view of your magnificent city. We all hope one day to have the privilege of returning your hospitality in Washington and Los Angeles. Again, with thanks . . .

Sincerely, Maxine Isaacs,
Lecturer on Government,
Associate, Shorenstein Center on
the Press, Politics and Public Policy,
Harvard University

Shaaban replies in kind to the Harvard lecturer:

It only goes to show that it is not very difficult to make the world a better

place for every one. We have been trying, and I am now even more inspired to continue. Please stay in touch and come back again for a longer vacation.

Indyk's efforts to get President Clinton to visit Damascus in November 2009 came up empty. He wrote Shaaban about a delegation of U.S. officials that he was taking to Jerusalem for the annual Saban Forum of the Brookings Institution, where Indyk is the director of the foreign policy program, and he proposed a stop in Damascus along the way: "I'm sure you will agree that first hand exposure to the views of President Assad—especially before they hear the views of the Israeli leadership—would do much to enhance their understanding of Syria's approach to strategic issues in the region at a critical moment."

Not surprisingly, Shaaban was receptive, as was her boss. "I am glad to let you know that President Assad also welcomed the idea of receiving [sic] President William Clinton and the accompanying delegation."

A month later, Indyk explains to Shaaban that Clinton has decided not to go to Damascus. Shaaban then takes her revenge. She writes that Indyk's delegation will not meet with Assad; nor will they even enjoy the privilege of meeting with Shaaban or Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem. It's not clear if Clinton backed out—perhaps sensing that a meeting with Assad, after he'd already met with North Korea's Kim Jong Il, was a fasttrack to Jimmy Carterdom—or if Indyk had invoked the possibility of the former president's participation to get access for the rest of the group.

In any case, among all the Americans who wanted comity with the Syrian regime, it would be unfair to single out Indyk for censure. He has long been an advocate of the Syria-Israel track of the peace process. And yet he was sensible enough to back off in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination, when the Bush administration, along with France and Saudi Arabia, isolated Assad. In attempting to set up a meeting between Clinton and the Syrian president, he was probably responding to the new dynamic put in place by

the Obama administration. The White House wanted to engage the Syrians, and Indyk wanted a piece of the action.

The fact remains that long before Bashar al-Assad turned his army, security services, and paramilitary gangs against Syrian civilians, long before the death toll climbed into the thousands, the blood on his hands was there for anyone with eyes to see. Damascus supported Hezbollah and Hamas, which committed terrorism

against Israel; it waged a campaign of assassinations and bombings against Lebanon's beleaguered democrats; it supported insurgents in Iraq who targeted American troops.

In spite of all that, Americans who should have known better petitioned this bloody regime for favors and friendship. With its policy of engaging Assad, the Obama White House set the tone: It is small wonder the administration has no policy to get rid of him. ♦

Polarization and the Independents

An ever smaller number of swing voters will decide the presidential election. BY JAY COST

Late last month, Gallup published a summary of President Obama's job approval ratings for 2011. The pollster's findings were stunning: Eighty percent of Democrats approved of the president's performance through 2011, as did just 12 percent of Republicans. The difference between these two numbers—Gallup calls it the "party gap"—was a whopping 68 points.

This is not a novel development. Of the 10 largest party gaps in the poll's storied history, 8 have occurred during the Obama and George W. Bush presidencies. Indeed, we have seen a very strong party gap in recent presidential elections as well. Obama won 89 percent of Democrats and 9 percent of Republicans in 2008, for a party gap of 80 points; the party gap for Bush in 2004 was 82 points. This is a stark shift from relatively recent political history. Richard Nixon's party gap in 1972 was 54 points; Jimmy Carter's in 1976 was 69 points; Ronald Reagan's in 1984 was 67 points; and even Bill Clinton's in 1996 was 71 points.

Jay Cost is a staff writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

How do we account for this increasing polarization? Much of it has deep roots. From roughly the time of the Civil War to the Great Depression, the two parties were strictly regional coalitions built not on grand ideological divisions but on old antipathies from the battlefield. The Democrats usually won the South and the big Northern cities, while the Republicans typically won most everything else. This meant that both parties had liberals and conservatives in their ranks. Consider, for instance, the tumultuous decade of the 1910s. The Democrats had in their coalition conservative Tammany Hall and the borderline radical William Jennings Bryan; the Republicans had Nelson Aldrich, the machine boss of Rhode Island, and Robert La Follette, the premier progressive of Wisconsin.

This all began to change in the 1930s, when FDR worked to rebuild the Democratic party as a progressive coalition. Roosevelt destroyed Tammany Hall in favor of Fiorello LaGuardia, a nominal Republican and strong progressive. However, FDR could not complete the ideological realignment he began, failing to curb the power of the Southern conservatives within his

Haaretz (Palestine occupée / Occupied Palestine)

Iran helping Syria sidestep sanctions, documents prove

Tehran has given Assad more than \$1b in effort to overcome oil embargo

By Barak Ravid

Iran has been helping Syria bypass the international sanctions imposed on it for massacring civilians, according to documents from the Syrian president's office obtained by Haaretz.

The documents show that Iran has given the Syrian regime more than \$1 billion, which would help it overcome the oil embargo and other moves including restrictions on flights and sanctions against the central bank.

The documents were leaked following a cyber-attack by hackers known as Anonymous against the e-mail server of the Syrian president's office. Seventy-eight employees in President Bashar Assad's office had their e-mail hacked. One of these accounts belonged to the minister of presidential affairs, Mansour Azzam; it included two documents signed by him that dealt with relations between Syria and Iran.

The two documents were authored two months ago and detail discussions by senior Iranian delegations visiting Syria. The documents are written in ambiguous language and only in a number of places do they detail ways Syria would be aided to bypass sanctions. The document repeatedly refers to Syria's wish to "learn from the Iranian experience in this area."

The United States, Turkey, the European Union, the Arab League and other countries have imposed severe sanctions on Syria due to the regime's attacks on civilians. As part of the sanctions, all Arab League members have ceased contact with the Central Bank of Syria, and commercial flights from Arab countries to and from Syria have stopped. The European

Union has imposed an oil embargo on Syria.

Around 20 percent of Syria's gross domestic product derives from oil sales, with 90 percent of Syrian oil being exported to the EU.

On December 8, Azzam sent Assad and other senior figures a document entitled "Memo on the visit of the Iranian delegation to Syria." The delegation included 10 senior members of the office of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and representatives of the Central Bank of Iran and other Iranian ministries. The delegation met with Syrian Prime Minister Adel Safar, the head of the Syrian central bank, and the ministers of finance, trade and oil.

As a result of the disturbances around the country and the sanctions, the Syrian regime is undergoing an economic crisis. The regime needs revenue, in part to pay the armed forces and the gangs of thugs – the Shabiha – it uses against the demonstrators. It also needs to pay the salaries of the tens of thousands of officials whose loyalty is vital.

According to the document authored by Azzam, the Iranian delegation announced that it has allocated \$1 billion so Iran could buy basic supplies from Syria. Most of the items are very basic and include meat, poultry, olive oil and fruit. It is unclear if Iran actually needs these items or if this is a way to pump up the Syrian economy.

In parallel, the Iranians agreed to export to Syria fertilizer and raw materials for the petrochemical industry; it would spread out payments over a long period.

The Iranian delegations also discussed ways the Syrians could bypass the embargo on oil exports. The Iranians, who have large pe-

troleum deposits, promised to examine the purchase of 150,000 barrels of oil from Syria per day for a year "to use it domestically or resell it to others." This way Syria would be able to continue to export oil despite the sanctions.

In return, Iran would supply Syria spare parts for the petroleum industry that are hard to come by due to the sanctions.

The document also shows that the two countries discussed ways to bypass sanctions on flights and air cargo. Turkey, for example, has closed its airspace to aircraft traveling to or from Syria, and most Syrian flights cannot land in most airports in Europe and the Arab world.

One option discussed is the creation of a hub in Iran for Syrian aircraft, bypassing the current hub in the United Arab Emirates. The Iranians also offered to service Syrian Air's planes.

The Iranians also proposed the creation of an air-and-ground corridor for transferring goods to and from Iran. This would be done through Iraq, bypassing Syria.

As for banking, they discussed setting up a joint bank for transferring money through Russia and China, which are not taking part in the international sanctions against Syria and Iran.

"Iran has promised to relay to Syria its know-how on ways for transferring funds from the country abroad and back, based on the experience Iran has accumulated in this field," it says.

The second document, dated December 14, 2011, states that "the central banks of Syria and Iran agreed to use banks in Russia and China to ease the transfer of funds between the two countries, in view of the current conditions in Syria and Iran."

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Reprise des affrontements entre pro et anti-Assad à Tripoli, l'armée se déploie en force

Des affrontements armés ont opposé hier à Tripoli des hommes armés de deux quartiers rivaux, Bab el-Tebbaneh et Jabal Mohsen, l'un soutenant le régime du président syrien Bachar el-Assad et l'autre le contestant. Les incidents ont fait quatre blessés civils, dont Jihad Mohammad Sabeh qui se trouvait à Bab el-Tebbaneh, Khaled Saydawi et Mohammad Ali Assad, ainsi que deux blessés de l'armée qui s'est déployée sur les lieux.

Selon des témoins sur place, l'incident a été provoqué lorsque des habitants de Bab el-Tebbaneh ont accroché, la veille, des photos de Bachar el-Assad sur lesquelles ils ont écrit « le bourreau » et planté des drapeaux de l'Armée syrienne libre dans leur quartier. Les échanges entre les deux parties ont commencé hier dans l'après-midi après la prière du vendredi, qui a été suivie de deux manifestations anti-Bachar en plusieurs endroits de la ville.

Une explosion, très probablement une roquette de type Energa, a été entendue à Bab el-Tebbaneh dans l'après-midi. Une autre a eu lieu entre le quartier al-Saydeh et le marché au blé Souk el-Kameh, toujours à Bab el-Tebbaneh. Plusieurs habitants du secteur ont fui leurs domiciles. Les coups de feu ont été entendus après l'explosion des roquettes vers 15h15.

« Il y a une très importante présence armée et des tirs dans le quartier sunnite de Bab el-Tebbaneh et celui, alaouite, de Jabal Mohsen », a déclaré à l'AFP une source au sein des services de sécurité. « Une personne qui circulait en voiture à

proximité a été blessée par les tirs », a-t-elle dit sous le couvert de l'anonymat.

Elle a indiqué que l'armée s'était déployée plus tôt dans la journée dans les deux quartiers mais qu'elle avait fini par se replier dans une rue séparant ces deux secteurs. « Deux soldats ont été blessés dans les affrontements », a encore dit cette source.

Un responsable du Parti arabe démocrate alaouite, Abdel Latif Saleh, a démenti les informations selon lesquelles des éléments du parti ont tiré en premier, soulignant la volonté des alaouites de se conformer aux directives de l'armée.

Sitôt après le déploiement de la troupe, celle-ci a demandé aux deux parties rivales de retirer les armes afin de permettre aux soldats de se redéploier dans les deux quartiers. Selon l'Agence nationale de l'information, l'armée a riposté aux tirs. C'est ce que confirme un habitant de Tripoli qui a affirmé à *L'Orient-Le Jour* que l'armée a réagi cette fois-ci fermement et avec détermination, contrairement aux précédents déploiements dans ce quartier névralgique où elle ménageait les deux parties.

En soirée, les échanges de coups de feu devaient reprendre de plus belle, alors que l'armée s'est déployée tout le long de la rue de Syrie qui sépare les deux quartiers. Une roquette est tombée en soirée dans la localité de Zahiriya.

Plusieurs contacts politiques ont été effectués pour mettre fin aux affrontements. De Paris où il se trouve, le Premier ministre, Nagib Mikati, est entré en contact avec le commandant en



Manifestation massive hier contre les massacres à Homs, à Tripoli.

chef de l'armée, le général Jean Kahwagi, à qui il a demandé de prendre les mesures nécessaires pour juguler les incidents et ramener le calme dans la ville.

Le chef de l'Etat, Michel Sleiman, a appelé la troupe et les forces de l'ordre qui se trouvent sur le terrain à faire preuve de fermeté et à réprimer les auteurs de troubles, insistant sur la nécessité pour les habitants des deux quartiers de se conformer aux directives de l'armée et des forces de l'ordre en vue de ramener le calme.

Le ministre de la Jeunesse et des Sports, Fayçal Karamé, a dénoncé les incidents qui, a-t-il dit, « coïncident avec les craintes formulées à propos de certains plans suspicieux visant à transformer la ville de

Tripoli en une arène sur fond de crise syrienne ». Selon lui, le Liban deviendrait ainsi une plate-forme à partir de laquelle se déclencheraient des guerres civiles qui s'étendraient à toute la région. Et le ministre d'en appeler aux forces de l'ordre qu'il a invitées à œuvrer en vue de parvenir à un règlement solide afin de faire échec à la discorde.

Pour sa part, le chef du conseil de commandement du mouvement islamique al-Tawhid, cheikh Hachem Minkara, a regretté les incidents de Tripoli qui sont, selon lui, « un moyen d'attiser la discorde ». Le dignitaire sunnite a refusé le principe de transposer au Liban la crise syrienne.

Le député du courant du

Futur, Khaled Zahraman, a indiqué dans un entretien que les réunions se poursuivent afin de prévenir tout dérapage à Tripoli aussi bien qu'au Akkar. Il a espéré que la voix des « sages » puisse être plus entendue que celle des fauteurs de troubles, mettant en garde contre les risques de zizanie. « À l'ombre des dangers qui nous guettent, nous devons être prudents et tabler sur le dialogue comme moyen de consolider la scène libanaise », a-t-il dit.

En soirée, on devait apprendre qu'une réunion a groupé, au domicile du député Mohammad Kabbara, les parlementaires de la ville avec leur collègue Ahmad Karamé, dépêché par le Premier ministre, et plusieurs notables de Tripoli.

The Daily Star (Liban / Lebanon)

Syria risks replicating role played by Lebanon in 1980s

Cautious interest grows in a military intervention to break cycle of violence

By Nicholas Blanford
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: When the uprising against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad took hold in March last year, it was defined initially as a confrontation pitting peaceful democracy-inspired protesters against a corrupt and sclerotic autocracy. Nearly a year later and with more than 5,400 people dead, the struggle is shaping into an Sunni-led insurgency against an entrenched Alawite elite.

The rebel Free Syrian Army has claimed responsibility for a growing number of attacks against the regular Syrian army in recent weeks, winning popular support on the ground, stealing the spotlight from a fractious exiled political opposition and helping transform the confrontation into an armed conflict. Today, it is the FSA, not the bickering civilian political opposition, that is defining the direction of the struggle against the Assad regime.

The failure to reach an international consensus at the United Nations Security Council last Saturday has dashed hopes for now of a diplomatic solution to the worsening crisis in Syria. While the U.S., Russia, Europe, Turkey and Arab states scramble to try and revive the diplomatic track, there is growing – albeit cautious – interest in exploring the possibility of a military solution to break the impasse.

A direct Western-led military intervention is being discounted for now. But Western and Arab countries are mulling an option of military support for the FSA in the hope that a campaign

of attrition will wear down the regular Syrian forces and eventually undermine the Assad regime. The notion is already winning public support in Washington. U.S. senators Joe Lieberman and John McCain have both called for some level of support to be given the FSA, while Republican presidential nominee Newt Gingrich has recommended “supplying weapons” and providing the necessary backing to the Syrian opposition. It is rumored – but not proven – that Qatar already may be supplying funds and weapons to the FSA. One report suggested that the Qataris are ready to supply Milan anti-tank missiles to the opposition once a reliable channel has been found to smuggle the weapons into Syria.

Still, any Western or Arab military support for the ill-equipped FSA almost guarantees a prolongation and intensification of a conflict that already has killed several thousand people and brought the country close to the brink of a sectarian civil war.

“I understand the moral outrage that has led some to demand military intervention. But few simple military solutions present themselves,” said Andrew Exum, a military analyst at the Washington-based Center for a New American Security and author of the Abu Muqawama counterinsurgency blog.

Still, there is little international appetite to replicate last year’s NATO mission in Libya which helped topple Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

A Western intervention in Syria – even if limited to setting up no-fly zones or safe havens – poses far greater challenges than in Libya. Syria’s population density is almost 30 times greater than that of Libya and is mainly packed into a handful of cities, which increases the risk of civilian casualties. The Syrian army is five times larger than the former Libyan army under Gadhafi and much better equipped. Although most of Syria’s

anti-aircraft missile systems are ageing or obsolete, its air defense network is sufficiently large to pose a challenge to Western aircraft seeking to destroy them prior to policing a no-fly zone. The recent transfer from Russia to Syria of supersonic P-800 Yakhont anti-ship missiles would represent a grave threat to an amphibious task force off the Syrian coast.

“The Syrians will almost certainly resist any intrusion into their sovereignty, so to execute either a NFZ [no-fly zone] or safe haven would mean a fairly extensive air war to reduce Syrian air defenses,” Exum said. “We should also note that any such air operations would take place in some of the most militarily and politically sensitive airspace on Earth.”

Syria sits at the nexus of several volatile geopolitical fault lines in the Middle East. The looming fate for Syria is that it could replicate the role played by Lebanon in the 1980s – a country beset by civil wars and subject to regional and international meddling.

“Syria is already an arena for proxy competition between Saudi Arabia and its allies and [rival] Iran and its allies,” said Aram Nerguizian, a military analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and author of a report published in December on the risks of military intervention in Syria. “Anything that would involve direct Western intervention would be deeply destabilizing at the regional level.”

However, backing the Free Syrian Army is seen by some as a more palatable alternative to direct intervention. The FSA is composed of battalion-sized units of deserters from the regular army and civilian volunteers. The FSA’s hit-and-run guerrilla-style tactics have helped it establish a few territorial pockets, mainly in the northern Idlib province, some districts of Homs and in Zabadani near the border with

Lebanon. But it is lightly armed, suffers from a shortage of weapons and ammunition and lacks a cohesive command and control structure. Furthermore, a dispute appears to have arisen among senior opposition commanders. On Monday, Gen. Mustafa Ahmad al-Sheikh, the most senior officer to have deserted the Syrian army, announced the creation of the Higher Revolutionary Council to oversee military operations. But Col. Riad al-Assad, who heads the FSA from Turkey, refuses to recognize the new council. Col. Assad founded the FSA in August last year, but is unlikely to cede command just because a more senior officer subsequently chooses to defect. By the same token, a defecting general will not take orders from a lowly colonel simply because the colonel chose to join the opposition ahead of him. Issues such as these would have to be addressed before foreign states would commit to a program of support for the FSA.

Leadership disputes aside, turning the FSA into a coherent military force will require the “coordinated action by the intelligence services of a coalition of the willing,” said Jeffrey White, a military analyst with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The FSA, he said, would need an assured supply of arms and ammunition – especially anti-tank missiles – secured means of communication, advice on how to coordinate operations across different regions of Syria, and intelligence on Syrian army operations and vulnerable military infrastructure.

“The intelligence services of the U.S., the U.K., France, Turkey, Jordan and other states in the region have the know-how and capabilities to do these kinds of things,” White said. “It would be important to have cooperation from one or more of the states bordering Syria, especially Turkey, in order to establish base facilities, training camps, supply routes and infiltration routes.”

The Daily Star (Liban / Lebanon)

Iran and Turkey, divided interests over Syria

By Christopher Torchia

Associated Press

ISTANBUL: Turkey and Iran, regional heavyweights and heirs to imperial pasts, expanded trade in the past decade and papered over their traditional rivalry with diplomacy and rhetoric. Now these neighbors have staked out opposing positions in Syria, where outside players seek to sway an outcome to the bloodshed that could, in turn, alter power balances in the Middle East.

Iranian-Turkish tensions could grow if regional efforts to end the violence intensify as expected after Russia and China vetoed a U.N. resolution calling for the ouster of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Ankara wants him to leave, while Tehran supports him. At the same time, they want to preserve warm ties that mask fundamentally different tactics and visions.

Turkey's willingness to clash over Syria is likely to be tempered by reliance on Iran for one-third of its oil supplies, as well as natural gas, that have helped to power its impressive economic engine. The Turks have also sought to make mediation a centerpiece of foreign policy, and that includes hopes for a diplomatic solution to the dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Turkey, NATO's biggest Muslim member, hosts the Syrian opposition and has compared Assad, a former ally, to Slobodan Milosevic, the ousted Serbian leader whose war crimes trial was interrupted by his death. Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, is in the United States this week to coordinate efforts to isolate the Syrian regime.

Even before the protests in Syria, Turkish economic investments and other involvement there countered Iranian influence, said Savas Genc, an associate professor of international relations at Istanbul's Fatih University. Now with the region in turmoil, the two sides will struggle to maintain their "constrained friendship," he wrote in an email.

Iran and Syria have remained staunch friends, united in hostility toward the United States and Israel, and support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the Hamas group in Gaza.

An Iranian official Wednesday said in Damascus that Iran strongly supports the Syrian government, and rejects

killings by any side as well as "foreign interference" that he alleged was organized by the United States and Israel.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahyan, Iran's deputy foreign minister for Middle East and African affairs, dismissed allegations that members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard were fighting alongside Syrian troops.

"Iran is itself committed not to interfere in Syria's affairs, and is at the same time, rendering political, moral and economic support to Syria," he said.

Some Turkish officials have downplayed hints of discord with Iran, but Bulent Arinc, Turkey's deputy foreign minister, exposed the frustration.

In a meeting with ruling party members last weekend, Arinc accused Iran of betraying religious principles in what he described as its silence on Syria's attempts to crush the uprising.

"Oh, the Islamic Republic of Iran! You carry the word 'Islamic' in your name, and I don't know how worthy you are [of that name], but did you

Turkey, NATO's biggest Muslim member hosts the Syrian opposition

utter a single sentence about the last two days' events in Syria?" he said.

The comment, cited by Turkey's Anadolu news agency, coincided with a surge in attacks by Syrian forces on the city of Homs. Arinc leveled similar charges against Iraq and Lebanon, and said sarcastically: "What joy that only Turkey felt this pain."

Turkey has deviated from Western positions, notably in its recent split with former ally Israel, and in opposing sanctions against Iran over suspicions that it is developing nuclear weapons, a charge that the Iranians deny. Trade between Iran and Turkey reached \$15 billion last year, and officials on both sides have said they are aiming for twice that volume by 2015.

Yet maneuvers over Syria threaten to develop into a proxy contest for clout in a region convulsed since last year by uprisings against authoritarian regimes.

"Even though Turkey has good relations with Iran, it's obviously contending for greater influence within the

region," said Julie Taylor, a political scientist with the RAND Corporation, a U.S.-based research center. "And if there was a change of the Syrian government, you would have Iran's influence in the region diminished."

Another RAND expert, Fred Wehrey, said Turkey had "sort of thrown up its hands" after its efforts to persuade Assad to reform failed, and that increased economic pressure on Syria was likely on the agenda during Davutoglu's trip to Washington. He said options for Turkey included the creation of a "liberated zone" in northern Syria and aid to the Syrian opposition, as well as an alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to squeeze the regime.

The danger, analysts believe, is that Iran could counter any aid to Syrian army defectors by resupplying Syrian forces, thereby escalating the conflict, and a Sunni Muslim-dominated alliance between Turkey and Gulf nations could stir sectarian tensions. Iran is Shiite-led, and Assad belongs to Syria's minority Alawites, a Shiite offshoot sect that has stood firmly by him.

Ties between Iran and Turkey were already showing cracks, partly over Turkey's decision to host a NATO defense shield radar that would warn of any Iranian ballistic missiles.

Hasan Ozturk, research coordinator at the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, said Turkey, initially optimistic, felt let down by setbacks in joint projects involving oil exploration and mobile communications, and might slow its outreach to Iran.

Similarly, Ali Engin Oba, a retired Turkish diplomat, said Turkey was a "little bit fed up" with Iranian policies that hurt Turkey's efforts to promote regional cooperation and create "a lot of trouble for us with regard to our policy with the United States and also Europe."

Still, the two countries work to stay cordial. This week, Iran said 11 Iranian pilgrims abducted in Syria had been freed with the help of "friendly and influential" countries, and Turkey confirmed it had secured their release through contacts.

"Sometimes, there are different comments on Turkish-Iranian relations, but we have never lost contact on humanitarian issues," Davutoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, said on Turkey's NTV.

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

'ASSAD REGIME, PKK OUTDATED COLD WAR STRUCTURES'

ALI H. ASLAN WASHINGTON

Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has said Syria's Assad regime and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are "outdated regimes and structures" from the Cold War which will soon be eliminated.

"We wanted him [Assad] to be Syria's Gorbachev, but he chose to be Syria's X TeX bP6 3 Fedc glu, who gave a speech on Thursday at George Washington University comparing the parallels between the events in Syria and the massacres carried out by the former Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, in Bosnia during the '90s.

Davutoğlu discussed the failure of Assad's regime and called for a "new world order," pointing out that Turkey wants to be on the "right side" of history.

Davutoğlu also reiterated Turkey's support for the recent political upheaval in the Arab World. Linking the "Arab awakening" with an ongoing, regional confrontation between Cold War structures and new, dynamic forces in society, Davutoğlu said if dictators think they can resist change, they are "delusional."

Adding that Turkey will not remain indifferent to the massacres in the region, Davutoğlu said, "To show that we support and are in solidarity with the Syrian people, Turkey wants to establish an international platform to discuss the uneasy situation in Syria." Davutoğlu also said that, with this goal in mind, Turkey is currently reassessing the situation in Syria in cooperation with the Arab League. He is expected to raise the same issues during official talks with the United States administration on Monday.

Davutoğlu also addressed questions from Kurdish students from Turkey who were present in the audience, saying each society has internal problems. While highlighting that Kurds and Turks will solve it "shoulder to shoulder," Davutoğlu described the PKK as "an outdated, Cold War structure."

Davutoğlu added that no one in Turkey is in jail because of their identity, taking the opportunity to point out that some suspects are accused of organizing a coup or supporting terrorist activities.



PHOTO © AA. HAKAN GÖKTEPE

FM Ahmet Davutoğlu addressed an audience on Thursday at the George Washington University, discussing the failure of the Assad regime and calling for a "new world order."

France supports Turkey's proposal for int'l conference on Syria

After Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's statement announcing that Turkey will not remain indifferent to a massacre in its region and will create an international platform to support the Syrian people, France gave a boost to Turkey's proposal for an international conference on Syria.

In a press briefing held on Thursday, the spokesperson for the French Foreign Ministry, Bernard Valero, said that France welcomed Turkey's proposal for an international conference on Syria. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé is in

touch with his Turkish counterparts, primarily FM Davutoğlu, and wants to end the current regime in Syria, Valero said. In a speech at George Washington University, Davutoğlu stated that Turkey wants to set up an international platform to find a solution to the Syria crisis. To that end, he is holding consultations with several countries.

Backing Davutoğlu's statement, Valero emphasized that international observers must be able to act freely in Syria and hold all necessary talks. The UN and the Arab League must facili-

tate the return of international observers to Syria and make it possible for them to work in an efficient way. Turkish FM Davutoğlu is reported to have discussed Syria via telephone during his visit to Washington. He had a telephone meeting with Catherine Ashton, the European Union High Representative for Foreign Policy. During the meeting Davutoğlu and Ashton discussed the developments in Syria and Ashton invited Davutoğlu to the next meeting of the European Council for Foreign Relations.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Russia, China complicit in carnage inflicted on Syrians

By their double veto at the UN, they have chosen to back the Al Assad regime that is already wet spaghetti

BY FAWAZ TURKI
Special to Gulf News

The adjectives (or perhaps they were epithets) used to describe it were vociferous and blunt, rarely used in diplomatic parlance: the Syrian regime was identified as barbaric, criminal, tyrannical, savage, murderous and the rest of it, all intended to point to a whole gamut of villainy committed by a government that, for the last 11 months, has slaughtered, incarcerated and tortured its own people.

Yet irrespective of the emotive language resorted to by various diplomats at the UN, it was clear from the outset that the resolution that came up for a vote at the Security Council last week, based on an Arab League plan intended to halt the bloodbath in Syria, would be still-born, blocked as had been anticipated by the double veto from Russia and China. The act soon had grotesque consequences. Bashar Al Assad's regime took the veto as a green light to crush the protesters.

Thus in the deadly assault on Homs, regime forces have bombarded the city indiscriminately, killing hundreds of men, women and children. To date, close to 6,000 have been killed across the country, with countless others imprisoned, tortured and disappeared.

Given the horror, it is not surprising then that the Security Council resolution received a resounding 'yes' vote from nations in locales as disparate as Western Europe and North America, the African continent and the Arab world, Latin America and South Asia. Thirteen in all, with no abstentions. It is even less surprising that by casting a veto, in effect becoming complicit in the carnage inflicted on the Arab people of Syria by a regime inexorably headed to the dust-bin of history, Russia and China have lost a lot of friends in the Arab world and beyond. Arabs, let's face it, will not forget who stood by them as they struggled for freedom in the Arab Spring and who opted to be on the wrong side of history, backing two-bit dictators, autocrats and lunatics. Meanwhile, Al Assad, along with his cohorts, continue to live in a world of fantasy, probably convinced that he could duplicate what his late father, Hafez Al Assad, had done in Hama exactly 30 years ago this month. The equally brutal Al Assad Sr had at the time ordered his army and secu-

rity forces to conduct a scorched earth operation in the city in order to quell a revolt by the Sunni community there. As many as 20,000, civilians were annihilated in a matter of days. According to Robert Fisk, the legendary British journalist, who reported extensively on the massacre while it was ongoing, and then wrote about it in more harrowing detail in his book *Pity the Nation* (1990), what happened in Hama in the second week of February 1982 was "the single deadliest act by an Arab government against its own people in the modern Middle East". And it appears that Al Assad Jr plans to outdo his dad in perfidy.

At the Library of Congress in Washington, old issues of *Tishreen*, the Syrian state-owned newspaper, are readily available to researchers prepared to take the trouble of hopping on a subway to Capitol Hill station where this splendid institution is located. In one issue of *Tishreen* at the time of the massacre, an editorialist glibly explained away the dreadful events in Hama by writing that the rebels were "armed gangs and terrorists" (sound familiar?) who "pounced on our citizens

while sleeping in their homes and killed whomever they could kill of women and children ... driven like mad dogs by their black hatred". (If this is responsible journalism, I'm holding on to my day job.)

Hysteria and despair

Three decades later, another state-run newspaper ominously vowed last Sunday (this from a secondary source in the *Washington Post*, Feb 6) that "Damascus will press its crackdown until stability is restored". And sure enough, by mid-week, relentless rocket and mortar attacks pounded Homs, creating, in the words of a BBC correspondent on the scene, "an atmosphere of hysteria and despair" among the population.

What have Moscow and Beijing wrought, entering the history books as enablers of a regime that wantonly bombards its own cities on its own citizens' heads? Search me. What is clear is that Russia and China, by their double veto, have chosen to back a regime that is already wet spaghetti, inevitably doomed to a fate similar to those sputtering, bombas-

tic regimes that had been given the boot by their people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen in recent months. By choosing to do that they have chosen an avoidance of moral commitment, a crass abdication from the claims and realities of history.

Then, as if to rub salt into the wound — mere days after his government vetoed a resolution that would have blocked the regime in Damascus from continuing to wage a full-scale war against its citizens — Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, visited the Syrian capital and declared with a straight face that the Syrian government was "completely committed to the task of stopping the violence". Say what now, Comrade Sergei!

Fawaz Turki is a journalist, lecturer and author based in Washington. He is the author of *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile*.



DANA A. SHAMS/Gulf News

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Syrian uprising spills over into Lebanon

Iraq claims jihadists are crossing over and delivering arms to opponents of regime amid renewed assault on Homs

Gulf News Report

Dubai Syrian forces continued to bombard Homs yesterday as Iraq claimed jihadists are crossing into Syria and weapons are being sent to opponents of President Bashar Al Assad's regime. The bloodshed showed no signs of abating, even spilling over into Lebanon.

Activists said 25 people were killed across the country, including a 55-year-old woman among seven who were killed in the latest attacks in many districts of Homs which also saw house-to-house raids. Food and medical supplies are running low in blockaded areas and many people are trapped in their houses.

UAE RED CRESCENT AUTHORITY FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN

The UAE Red Crescent Authority yesterday launched a three-day nationwide campaign to raise funds for Syrians displaced to Jordan and Lebanon by the unfortunate events in their country.

The donation drive comes in response to humanitarian appeals and in cooperation with international humanitarian agencies and Red Cross and Red Crescent charities. The campaign will be aired through visual and audio media, as well as by print media.

The RCA will receive donations through special accounts in Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank, Al Hilal Bank, Sharjah Islamic Bank and Dubai Islamic Bank, as well as via SMS messages.

— WAM

official Syrian Arab News Service said. Al Kholi was the director of the Hamish Hospital in Damascus, it said.

"The situation is clearly getting worse," Theodore Karasik, director of research at the Dubai-based Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, was quoted as telling AP. "What happened in Aleppo [two blasts on Friday] is the first sign of moving toward a breakdown of the regime. It is unlikely that [Ali] Assad can win this with force."

In Lebanon, two people died and 24 were wounded in fierce clashes between Sunni hostiles to Syria's regime and Alawites who support it, a security official said. With the country in worsening turmoil, Saudi Arabia has circulated a new draft for the General Assembly similar to the earlier one.

But Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said Moscow could not support a move at the UN General Assembly resting on "the same unbalanced draft resolution text".

The UN assembly is due to discuss Syria tomorrow and vote later in the week on the draft resolution. The Arab League will meet in Cairo today to discuss the idea of a joint Arab-UN monitoring mission and is likely to launch a "Friends of Syria" coalition. Meanwhile, Syria has told Libya and Tunisia to close their embassies in Damascus within 72 hours.

See also Pages 9 & 12

Syria: Intervention by process of elimination

This is a chance for stakeholders to commit to removing it from its metaphorical resistance axis and reorienting it with its neighbourhood

BY MISHAAL AL GERGAWI
Special to Gulf News

After Russia and China vetoed the Syria resolution in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Bashar Ja'afari, Syria's ambassador to the UN, asked if it made sense for a country (read regime) to step up its campaign against its own people on the eve of such a resolution. He explained further, deducing that this was proof that there indeed are militant terrorist groups in Syria who are committing those crimes.

But the track record of the Syrian regime's army and iron grip over the state raises serious questions of exactly how such a group would be able to effectively bombard the city of Homs with heavy artillery and tanks for so many days undetected — these are not suicide bombers. What everyone at the UNSC seems to agree on is that the death of civilians must stop; the latest UN estimates place the death toll above 6,000. So here is the point: For the sake of thwarting the Syrian argument, it doesn't matter who's doing the killing. If it is indeed the Syrian government then they've lost their legitimacy. And if it is the armed terrorists groups that can shell Homs and more recently Daraa days on end with the Syrian regime helpless, then the latter's legitimacy has been lost on the grounds that it can no longer maintain order, let alone protect its own people.

In short, whether the regime and its apologists (old Arab leftists, resistance axis states, Hezbollah, Russia, China etc) admit to its actually committing those crimes against its own citizens or not is irrelevant as long as they do admit that such atrocities are taking place.

The world's responsibility is to stop the massacre of civilians. If the Syrian regime wants to accuse a vague collective of anti-Baath, Muslim Brotherhood and pro-Israel terrorists so be it. But it should also know that a regime that cannot stop such a group, evidently with tanks and heavy artillery, for 11 months has already declared itself unable to maintain order, let alone lead. This is no longer about a blood detesting ophthalmologist-turned-president by process of accidental fraternal elimination. This is about kids with blown jaws but do not die for another day, this is about children dying in their parents' funerals and others skinned and beheaded. Syria is, both, the most politically entrenched and the most morally demanding conflict we are yet to deal with since the advent of the Arab Spring. The question now is how do you deal with an exponentially rising death toll — the death toll in December was 5,000.

Complicating matters further, the opposition groups are not completely united. There is Burhan Galioun's Syrian National Council (SNC), Hussain Abdul Azim's Syrian National Coordination Committee (NCC), the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Free Officer Corps, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, independent

Islamists and youth activists divided into several national coalitions. There is still the question of the Alawites themselves, as well as the Shiite and Christian minorities and Kurdish interests. Should the Syrians miraculously succeed in toppling the regime on their own, regional and international players will do to Syria what its Baathist regime, among others, did to Lebanon. Left to their own devices, a civil war among the Syrians seems inevitable.

Peace-keeping mission

Of course there are still some diplomatic tactics that must play out; the GCC has expelled Syrian ambassadors last week. There is still the recognition of the SNC by the international community, uniting the opposition around it and the Friends of Syria pressure clique. Alas, the comments of Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, after his visit to Syria that Bashar Al Assad had promised him to end bloodshed while the shelling of Daraa and Homs continued paves the way for military and political intervention.

And so because of all the above, I propose a long-term mission of military and political intervention. It would begin with a military intervention to topple the regime, roughly along the lines of what a fellow writer recently wrote in a UAE newspaper about "Turkish-Jordanian-GCC [ground troops], fighting the regime on both northern and southern fronts, with US and Nato air and intelligence ground support." In addition, I suggest simultaneously offering a general amnesty with a deadline for the regime's military and civilian apparatus in return for immediate defection, which would likely hasten the implosion of the regime.

It would then require a peace-keeping mission that would also be embedded with observers to ensure Syrian people's own transition to a representative democracy (read guarantees about rights of minorities) backed by a sustainable economy. Arming the FSA or any other opposition group at this point could lead to the emergence of post-Al Assad militias; we've seen glimpses of this in Libya. After Al Assad is toppled this would lead to retributions that would eventually turn into a sectarian war, one that is sure to have a regional fall out; think Lebanon, Israel, Iran, Turkey and Jordan just to name a few. This is a chance for Syria's stakeholders to commit to removing it from its largely metaphorical resistance axis and reorienting it with its neighbourhood. It is also one of those rare cases where the long-term responsibility of Syria's neighbours' to its crisis is driven by idealism and realism.

Mishaal Al Gergawi is an Emirati current affairs commentator. You can follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/algergawi

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Al Qaida behind bombings — report

Extremists said to be involved in Syria uprising

Washington (AFP) The Iraqi branch of Al Qaida carried out two recent bombings in Damascus and was likely behind suicide bombings on Friday that killed at least 28 people in the Syrian city of Aleppo, *McClatchy Newspapers* reported.

Citing unnamed US officials, the newspaper chain said the incidents appeared to verify Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's charges of Al Qaida involvement in the uprising against his rule. The Syrian opposition has claimed the Al Assad regime staged the bombings to discredit the pro-

democracy movement, the report said.

The first Damascus attack was on December 23, when suicide bombers detonated cars packed with explosives outside intelligence agency compounds, killing at least 44 people. On January 6, at least 26 people were killed and dozens injured in a bombing against a second compound.

The Al Qaida presence in Syria also raises the possibility that extremists will try to hijack the uprising, the newspaper said.

Moscow's Assad mania

Confronting the US and Europe is at odds with Russia's interests

GEOPOLITICS

Dmitri Trenin

Two senior Russian officials, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Mikhail Fradkov, the director of Foreign Intelligence, have just been to Damascus. Their mission was not to nudge Bashar Al Assad from power and offer him exile in Russia. Rather, the talk was about dialogue with the opposition, offering a referendum on a new constitution, and the Arab League resuming its "stabilising" mission. Russia, for its part, would stand firm alongside China at the UN Security Council, preventing a formal condemnation of the Syrian regime, any outside military intervention, or any sanctions against it.

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

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

Russia's stance on Syria is often explained in terms of Syria's importance to Moscow. It is true that

Syria is positioned in the strategic heart of the Middle East, and that Moscow's links to the Assad family go back four decades.

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

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

The Russian government is openly conservative; it abhors revolutions. This, however, is more than a self-serving ideological stance. When the Kremlin – or Fradkov's office – looks at the Arab Awakening, they see democratisation leading directly to Islamisation. In their view, Syria's uprising could have even worse consequences in terms of sectarian violence and the potential to affect the country's neighbours, particularly Lebanon and Israel.

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

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

tion looms on the horizon. Such a war could only make sense if it were the first act of a more serious drama. Russians suspect that the real reason for the West's pressure on Damascus is to rob Tehran of its only ally in the region. Behind the activity of the Gulf States, particularly Qatar, in the Syrian issue Moscow sees the rising regional influence of Saudi Arabia, Iran's bitter rival in the region.

Turkey's "neo-Ottoman" ambitions are also playing a role. What the Russians are most worried about, however, is that Israel may strike at Iran, dragging in the United States and thus precipitating a major war with Iran sometime this year.

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

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

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

Dmitri Trenin is Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center

The National (EAU / UAE)



Syrians outside their consulate in Bur Dubai yesterday demonstrate their opposition to the Assad government. Jeff Topping / The National

Syrians in Dubai rally against Assad

His regime and its violence denounced by peaceful protesters

Carol Huang

DUBAI // About 1,000 Syrians gathered near their consulate after Friday prayers to protest against the bloodshed in their home country.

Men stood atop cars leading chants while the crowd waved Syrian flags, beat drums and raised signboards.

"God, Syria and freedom!" they shouted as they cycled through chants supporting the uprising and denouncing President Bashar Al Assad and his predecessor and father, Hafez.

"Freedom – whatever it takes is better than what we have now," read the placard of 26-year-old

Rama Imad, who came with her husband and son.

The crowd demonstrated near the consulate in Bur Dubai, which police had blocked off. Officers stood behind the crowd for more than an hour before asking it to disperse.

Many Syrians present said they had gathered in the area several times before, from as early as last March when the uprising in the country started. More than 5,400 people have died since then, the UN estimated last month.

Yesterday's demonstration drew the largest crowd by far, they claimed, spurred by the siege of the Syrian city of Homs.

Yasir Zeirs, 24, with a Syrian flag draped around his shoulders, said two friends of his were killed there last week.

Protesters also expressed anger at Russia and China, which last week vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling on Mr Al Assad

to relinquish some of his powers.

"The people support the Free Syrian Army!" the crowd chanted, referring to the armed opposition formed by army defectors and other rebels. "Our souls and our blood for Homs!"

"The Syrian people are one! One, one, one!" they shouted.

"You can see people from all over Syria," said Yamen, 34, who declined to give his last name.

A man who gave his name as Abu Abdulrahman brought his four children to the event, saying it was "for their freedom and their future". He said he had lived through previous crackdowns, but that at least today such violence could be documented.

Many in the crowd held up their mobile phones to capture images of the event, though police on occasion instructed some to stop. Residents nearby watched from their balconies. The local authorities

had expected the crowds and arrived early yesterday morning, said Maj Gen Mohammed Al Mansour, the general manager of protective security and emergency for Dubai police.

A few dozen men in uniform, riot gear and plainclothes could be seen. They had shown up at previous gatherings but allowed them to carry on for a limited time, said Hassan Hamza, 35, a protester.

When an officer finally stood atop a car and asked everyone to leave, the crowd repeated a chant from earlier: "Thank you, thank you, UAE!"

The demonstration ended quietly, with only one minor dispute. It was between a handful of men and a taxi driver whose car, parked in the area at the time, had suffered dents in its bonnet after being used as a podium.

✉ chuang@thenational.ae

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Syria veto fuels Russian isolation

Moscow aligned closely with Al Assad

A long-standing rift between Russia and Qatar over support for Islamist groups has widened after last week's Security Council vote

Joe Lauria
Foreign Correspondent

NEW YORK // The fallout from Russia's United Nations Security Council veto on Syria last week has accentuated a long-running dispute between Moscow and Doha over Qatar's support for Islamist groups.

Worried about external influences on its domestic Islamists, Russia has accused Qatar of backing extremists in Chechnya and Libya and now hints Doha is aiding what Moscow and Damascus brand as terrorists in Syria.

As Arab League president, Qatar has pushed the league's plan for Syrian President Bashar Al Assad to step aside, threatening Russia's most important ally in the Arab world.

Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, suggested last month that Arab nations send peacekeeping troops to Syria, where the UN says more than 7,000 civilians and government troops have been killed in almost a year of increasingly brutal fighting.

Ali Al Ahmed, a scholar with the Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington, said Qatar has co-opted Islamist groups in Syria to help bring down Mr Al Assad.

The ultimate aim, he said, is to weaken Iran's influence in the region by removing its long-time ally in Damascus.

And Qatar's strategy challenges Russia on two fronts: threatening its extensive interests in Syria – where it has critical access to a warm water port for its warships – as well as supporting Islamist groups at a time when Russia is dealing with its own extremists.

Russia is battling strong Islamist rebellions in areas such as Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, in the North Caucasus.

Moscow-Doha relations have been rocky since the 2004 assassination of the former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Doha, after Russia accused Doha of supporting terrorism in the breakaway republic.

Moscow was furious after Qatar's arrest and conviction of two Russian agents for the murder.

Relations improved with then-President Vladimir Putin's 2007 visit to Doha.

But last November, days after the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, criticised Qatar's involve-

ment in Libya, the Russian ambassador complained he was assaulted by Qatari customs agents at Doha airport trying to seize his diplomatic pouch.

Vitaly Churkin, Russia's UN ambassador, has said extremists in Syria have outside support. He has not named any countries, but analysts say he had Qatar in mind.

The Syrian government, for its part, has openly accused Qatar of arming extremists.

A Western diplomat in New York said yesterday that Russia was offered an amendment to the Security Council resolution on Syria that would have called on the opposition there to reject extremism.

But Moscow dismissed the offer and, along with China, vetoed the resolution, saying it could open the door to foreign military intervention.

That vote has now led to a call for a boycott of Russian and Chinese goods in Qatar.

But Russia's exports to Qatar are tiny – barely US\$25 million (Dh91.8m) in 2008, mainly items such as infrastructure for gas production, plastics, construction equipment and halal reindeer meat.

Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi, a Qatari-based Muslim scholar, issued a fatwa on Monday calling for the boycott.

He is said to have branded Moscow and Beijing "enemies of the Arab people", in remarks on his Al Jazeera television show, which is seen by 80 million people.

"The [Qataris] are very angry at the veto," said Mr Al Ahmed. Mr Al Qaradawi, he said, "is the most famous religious leader" in the region and is a supporter of the Syrian opposition.

"The Chinese are content with market forces in the region but for the Russians it is strategic and political," said George Lopez, a professor at Notre Dame University in the United States.

The fallout from the veto has instead been mostly political.

A report circulated on the internet about a confrontation in New York last week between the Qatari prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al Thani, and Mr Churkin.

The Algerian news agency ISP reported that Mr Al Thani told Mr Churkin before the Security Council vote: "I warn you against any veto on the crisis in Syria. Rus-



A picture released by Sana, the official S

sia has to accept the UN decision, otherwise they will lose all the Arab countries."

Mr Churkin reportedly replied: "If you speak to me again that way, there will be no such thing as Qatar from today."

The Russian envoy hastily arranged a media conference at the UN last week to deny the "incredible" story.

"Someone is trying very hard to drive a wedge between Russia and the Arab world," he said.

If the Russians lose Syria, the situation could turn rapidly as Moscow may have to look elsewhere in the Arab world for an ally, says Mr Lopez.

He pointed out that if a bill in the US Congress to cut military aid to Egypt passes in retaliation for the recent arrests of 19 Americans in Cairo, then Moscow might find an opening for a new ally in the region.

"It is increasingly plausible that the Egyptian military would go for it" and allow Russia a naval base on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, he said.

With Syria so volatile, things could quickly evolve in unexpected directions, he said.

foreign.desk@thenational.ae