

Syrien in Anklage vor UN- Generalversammlung

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Die vom Qatar präsidierte Generalversammlung der Vereinten Nationen hielt eine Spezialsitzung über die Lage von Syrien ab. Die Hohe Kommissarin für Menschenrechte, die südafrikanische Advokatin Navi Pillay legte einen erschreckenden Bericht der auf die Al-Assad-Verwaltung zurückgeführten Missbräuche vor; der besonders die Vergewaltigungen betonte. (Als sie den Internationalen Strafgerichtshof (IStGH) für Ruanda präsidierte, hatte Frau Pillay eine Jurisprudenz entwickelt, die „kollektive Vergewaltigungen“ in Genozid verwandelte.) Sie meinte, die Uneinigkeiten im Schosse des Sicherheitsrates ermunterten die Repression.

Die syrische Regierung kündigte ein Referendum für den 26. Februar an, das das Projekt einer neuen Verfassung betrifft. Wenn es angenommen wäre, würde es der Führungsrolle der Baas Partei ein Ende setzen und ein pluralistisches System gründen. Das Weiße Haus bezeichnete das Projekt als „lächerlich“.

In Kairo endlich rief der Große Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb für eine starke Aktion der arabischen Liga auf. Diese machte ihre Absicht, die syrische Opposition zu bewaffnen, offiziell.

- Nora Benkorich, Forscherin im Collège de France, schreibt einen freien Tribüneartikel im *Le Monde*. Ohne die Doxa der populären Revolte in Frage zu stellen, unterstreicht sie die Gegenwart von Dschihad Kämpfern bei den Rebellen und die Notwendigkeit für die Letzten, sich von den Ersten zu unterscheiden, wenn sie die Unterstützung behalten wollen, die sie in der Bevölkerung besitzen.
- Jonathan Littel führt seine Geschichte über seinen Aufenthalt in Syrien während des Monates Januar fort. Er wird gleichzeitig von *Le Monde* und *El País* veröffentlicht. Der Autor ist ein französisch sprechender Schriftsteller, aber lebt in Barcelona. Er soll Bernard-Henri Lévy ablösen, mit dem er schon in Bosnien, Tschetschenien und Afghanistan gearbeitet hat. Jede Episode ist Gelegenheit eine Botschaft zu vermitteln: die Episode von Mittwoch erklärt, dass die freie „syrische“ Armee wirklich aus Syrern besteht, sie aber über wenig Mittel verfügt und ausländische Waffen braucht, während die nationale Armee in kompletter Auflösung steht; die von Donnerstag erklärt, dass die Rebellen keine besondere Religion haben und nicht sektiererisch sind, sondern die Mannigfaltigkeit der Bevölkerung darstellen. Die Leser von *Le Monde* und *El País* verstehen wahrscheinlich nicht warum Jonathan Littel beschlossen hat geheim in Syrien einzureisen, wo doch das Land den Journalisten gerade freien Zugang gab. Die zwei Blätter haben in der Tat übersehen zu sagen, dass der Schriftsteller die Nationalität eines Staates hat, der sich mit Syrien in Krieg befindet und der seine Golan Provinz besetzt.

Die Erzählung des Schriftstellers entspricht absolut nicht den Zeugenaussagen, die wir von Personen die in Bab Amr leben, bekommen haben. Er kommt mehrere Male auf seine Gespräche mit Leutnant Tlass der Al-Faruk Brigade zurück. Es ist nun selbst von der internationalen Presse akzeptiert, dass die Al-Faruk Brigade an „Al-Qaida“ gebunden ist, was aus ihr nicht unbedingt einen Förderer der Gewissensfreiheit macht. Besonders hielt Leutnant Tlass, im Augenblick der Reportage, schiitische iranische Zivilisten eingesperrt, die er gekidnappt hatte, was Jonathan Littel sorgfältig seinen Lesern verschweigt, um nicht seine idyllische Beschreibung von friedlichen Bürgern zu trüben, die nur wegen Selbstverteidigung bewaffnet sind, und das Gemeinwohl anstreben.

- Auch im *Le Monde* erscheint eine freie Tribüne von Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, die die internationale Krise um Syrien herum als eine Vorerscheinung der Krise mit Iran darstellt und lädt ein, die Stellungnahmen der Großmächte in dieser Perspektive nochmal zu lesen.
- Der *Tagesspiegel* studiert die Antworten der Anrainerstaaten von Syrien. Der Vorgang zielt darauf ab die Unmöglichkeit zu zeigen, einen eventuellen konventionellen Krieg allein auf Syrien zu beschränken.
- *Le Temps* annonciert, dass die Schweiz ihre Botschaft in Damaskus sperrt und ihre Staatsangehörige auffordert das Land schnellstens zu verlassen.
- Die Friedens-Passionaria Marinella Corregia empört sich im *Il Manifesto* über die einseitige Desinformierung (d.h. die Kriegspropaganda der NATO). Auf Dokumente gestützt, zeigt sie wie das syrische Szenario eine Abklatscherzählung der von Libyen ist, ohne jegliche Verbindung mit der Realität auf Ort.
- Sir Malcom Rifkin, Präsident des Komitees des britannischen Nachrichtendienstes entwickelt im *The Daily Telegraph* die Position von Premierminister David Cameron: der Druck auf Syrien muss verstärkt werden. Das ist auch die Position der USA, im Gegensatz zu Frankreich und Deutschland, die für eine Friedenskraft der Vereinten Nationen plädieren. M. Rifkin versichert, dass es möglich ist, das Al-Assad-Regime mit wirtschaftlichen Sanktionen zu ersticken. Der Artikel richtet sich nur an Leser, die die Gründe für die Aufhebung der wirtschaftlichen Sanktionen der arabischen Liga ignorieren: das Schließen der jordanischen Grenze würde ein Einstürzen Jordaniens in wenigen Tagen herbeiführen, weil es fast ausschließlich über diesen Weg versorgt wird und total vom syrischen Wasser abhängt.
- Das *Wall Street Journal* enthüllt, dass die USA das syrische chemische Waffenlager per Satellit überwachen, damit die Islamisten nicht darankommen. Es handelt sich natürlich hier, um den Ängsten Israels gerecht zu werden. Jedoch fürchten Letztere auch den Gebrauch dieser chemischen Waffen von Seiten der el-Assad-Regierung, anlässlich eines Diversions-Krieges gegen sie. Der Jerusalem Post erklärt seinerseits, dass Tsalch sich auf diese Möglichkeit vorbereitet.
- *L'Orient-Le Jour* macht einer Polemik Echo, welche auf dem Web seit der Aufladung einer Video des Oberst Riad el-Asaad erschienen ist. Der Chef der freien „syrischen“ Armee hat seinen Schnurrbart rasiert und seinen Bart wachsen lassen. Ist er ein Islamist?
- *Gulf News* bringt das Wort des libanesischen Abgeordneten Walid Dschumblatt. Laut des Vize-Präsidenten der Sozialistischen Internationale, ist es die el-Assad-Verwaltung die die Ankündigungen über Al-Qaida organisiert hat, um die freie „syrische“ Armee zu diskreditieren. Problem: man versteht nicht gut, wie und warum

Damaskus Habelhakim Belhaj angeheuert und geschickt hätte, die Oppositionsarmee zu organisieren, noch wie und warum sie Ayman al-Zawahiri hätte manipulieren können, um zu ihrem Sturz aufzurufen.

- Eine Debatte stellt Anthony Elghossain und Brian Kappler in dem *The National* einander gegenüber. Der erste behauptet, dass das R2P Konzept (Verantwortung zu schützen) von regionalen Organisationen (NATO, GCC, Arabische Liga) angerufen werden kann, um in Syrien einzugreifen. Der zweite bemerkt, dass ein solcher Präzedenzfall auch von der CIS [ex-Sowjetunion], oder gar von der SCO (Shanghai CoopOrg) in anderen Lagen angerufen werden kann, was das internationale Recht vollkommen zunichtemachen würde.
- *The Saudi Gazette* bringt den Ruf des Großen Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb der Al-Azhar Universität in Kairo für eine starke Reaktion der arabischen Liga gegen die „Killermaschine von Bachar el-Assad“.
- Im *China Daily*, He Wenping bedauert, dass der Westen seine dominante Position in den Medien ausnützt, um allein seine Version über Syrien zu bringen, dass er die anderen Stimmen der Welt erstickt und eine Diffamationskampagne gegen Russland und China anstimmt, die seine Meinung nicht teilen.

Das Foto des Tages

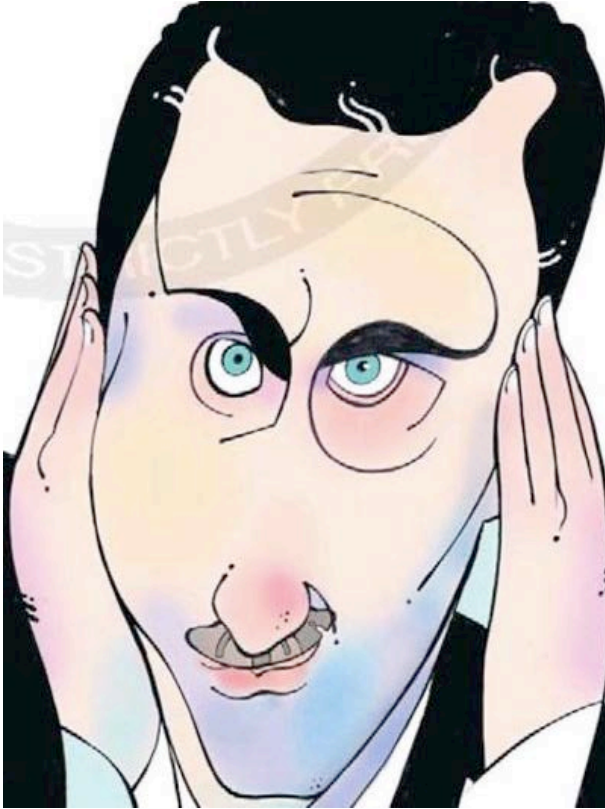


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Das meist verbreitete Foto der Welt, um die Artikel über Syrien zu illustrieren ist ein Klischee aus dem Vorort von Damaskus. Ein Kind mit Fahrrad kreuzt loyale Soldaten, deren Fahrzeug mit dem Portrait des Tyrannen geschmückt ist.

Auf dem ersten Blick gab es keinen ideologischen Grund dieses wenig ausdrückliche Foto zu fördern. Außer man wollte die öffentliche westliche Meinung auf eine politische Wende vorbereiten. Das Kind scheint die Soldaten nicht zu fürchten. Und diese flößen keine Angst ein. Die anmutige Geste des Offiziers, der vom Lastwagen heruntersteigt, erweckt eher ein Ballett als eine Diktatur.

Die Zeichnung des Tages



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Bachar el-Assad stopft sich die Ohren zu, um nicht das Geschrei seines Volkes zu hören.



© Pang Li, China Daily

Die Chinesen wurden in ihrem nationalen Stolz verletzt, als die amerikanische UN-Botschafterin Susan Rice sich durch ihr Veto „angeekelt“ erklärte. Auf dieser Zeichnung von Pang Li, wird der chinesische Panda, der die Friedenstaube verbindet, von einem Amerikaner mit einem rauchenden Revolver in der Hand angeklagt, sie verletzt zu haben.

Le Monde (France)

L'ONU associe l'intensification des violences en Syrie au veto sino-russe

Haut-commissaire pour les droits de l'homme, M^{me} Pillay dénonce des crimes contre l'humanité

New York (Nations unies)
Correspondante

Répression impitoyable, tortures, viols, atrocités, crimes contre l'humanité... Le tableau de la situation en Syrie dressé par le haut-commissaire de l'ONU aux droits de l'homme Navi Pillay devant les 193 membres de l'Assemblée générale de l'organisation, lundi 13 février, était une litanie de faits plus condamnables les uns que les autres. « Nous avons entendu une fois de plus un compte rendu terrifiant et révoltant », résumait quelques minutes plus tard l'ambassadeur allemand Peter Wittig.

L'appel de la Ligue arabe à la formation d'une force arabo-onusienne est perçu comme un pari « perdu d'avance »

« Chaque membre de la communauté internationale doit agir maintenant pour protéger de toute urgence la population syrienne, a imploré M^{me} Pillay, après avoir estimé que la nature et l'étendue des exactions perpétrées par les forces syriennes indiquent que des crimes contre l'humanité ont vraisemblablement été commis » depuis mars 2011.

« Des informations indépendantes, crédibles et corroborées indiquent que ces exactions font partie d'une campagne large et systématique d'agression contre les civils », a-t-elle ajouté, précisant qu'elles étaient perpétrées avec « l'aval ou la complicité des autorités au plus haut niveau ».

Selon des déserteurs de l'armée syrienne, « les militaires ont reçu l'ordre de leurs commandants de recourir à la torture », a encore expliqué l'avocate sud-africaine, citant le cas d'hôpitaux « utilisés comme des centres de détention et de torture ». En décembre 2011 déjà, suite au rapport de la commission d'enquête du Conseil des droits de l'homme, M^{me} Pillay avait appelé le Conseil de sécurité à saisir la Cour pénale internationale (CPI) de la situation en Syrie. Un appel auquel les quinze pays membres, faute de consensus, sont restés sourds.

Depuis cette date, selon elle, « les violations flagrantes et systé-

matiques des droits de l'homme ont non seulement continué, mais nettement augmenté ».

Citant des « informations crédibles », le haut-commissaire a notamment estimé à plus de 300 le nombre des personnes tuées dans des bombardements aveugles de zones civiles à Homs, ces dix derniers jours. Une intensification des violences dont elle fait porter le blâme à la Russie et la Chine, auteurs de deux doubles veto successifs contre des projets de résolution condamnant Damas. « L'échec du Conseil de sécurité à trouver un accord sur une action conjointe forte paraît avoir encouragé le gouvernement syrien à lancer une attaque acharnée, d'une force absolue, pour écraser la contestation », a souligné Navi Pillay.

Peu de temps avant qu'elle ne prenne la parole à l'initiative du président qatari de l'Assemblée générale, l'ambassadeur syrien, Bachar Al-Jaafari, avait vainement tenté, sous de vagues prétextes procéduraux, de faire annuler son intervention. Le Qatar et l'Arabie saoudite, deux pays du Golfe coauteurs avec l'Égypte d'un projet de résolution qui devait être soumis aux 193 membres mardi, et mis au vote sous quarante-huit heures, ont d'ailleurs été pris pour cible par M. Jaafari lors de son discours fleuve sur la Syrie, victime, selon lui, d'une large « conspiration ».

L'appel lancé par la Ligue arabe au Conseil de sécurité pour la formation d'une force conjointe arabo-onusienne était perçu, à l'ONU, comme un pari « perdu d'avance ». La proposition, jugée « audacieuse », non sans sarcasme, par un diplomate, nécessiterait au minimum un accord de cessez-le-feu, le vote – sans veto – du Conseil de sécurité, le feu vert de Damas et l'octroi de troupes par plusieurs pays. « Autant dire qu'à Moscou, c'est jour de fête ! », plaisante une source à l'ONU, la création d'une opération de maintien de la paix prenant plusieurs mois.

En attendant, c'est une résolution sans valeur contraignante que vont faire adopter Arabes et Occidentaux à l'Assemblée générale, où le veto est impossible. Similaire au texte condamnant Damas et soutenant le plan de sortie de crise de la Ligue arabe torpillé par un veto russo-chinois il y a dix jours, le projet appelle également à la nomination d'un envoyé spécial de l'ONU pour la Syrie. ■

ALEXANDRA GENESTE



A Homs, les soldats du bataillon Farouk de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) contrôlent le quartier de Baba Amro depuis près d'un mois.
MANI POUR LE MONDE

Entrés de façon clandestine en Syrie en janvier, l'écrivain Jonathan Littell et le photographe Mani se sont rendus à Homs, cœur du soulèvement contre le régime de Bachar Al-Assad.

Baba Amro, bastion libéré

L'Armée syrienne libre contrôle ce quartier d'Homs, où elle tient tête à une armée régulière mieux équipée mais en pleine déliquescence

TEXTE : JONATHAN LITTELL
PHOTO : MANI

Baba Amro, c'est un Etat dans l'Etat. B. le soldat qui parle est un bel homme au visage fin et mobile et aux yeux brillants, illuminés autant par sa foi que par le jeûne qu'il respecte depuis qu'il a rejoint l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), en décembre 2011. Ce n'est pas un déserteur, comme la plupart de ses camarades, mais un civil d'Alep qui, choqué par les crimes du régime, a décidé de prendre les armes. Son affirmation, bien sûr, date d'avant le 4 février, jour où l'Armée syrienne - *Jaysh-e-Assad*, appellent les opposants, « l'Armée des Assad » -, a débuté un pignonnement intensif du quartier, faisant plusieurs centaines de morts. Jusque-là, Baba Amro était considéré un « quartier libéré ».

C'est le genre de quartier populaire du bout de la ville où les bourgeois, en temps normal, ne mettent pas les pieds, un quartier d'immeubles de quatre ou cinq étages en béton, parfois recouverts de plaques de pierre polie et la plupart du temps inachevés, serrés les uns contre les autres le long de ruelles où deux véhicules peinent à se croiser, et peuple de travailleurs et de femmes voilées qu'on aperçoit à peine. Aux coins des rues, des vendeurs ambulants offrent des bols de foul que l'on dévore avec les doigts ; les gendarmes portent écharpe et bonnet noir-blanc-vert, tricotés par leurs mères, ou bien bleu et orange : les couleurs de la révolution ou bien celles du Al-Karama, le club de foot d'Homs. Devant la mosquée Gilani, les catafalques vides s'entassent, prêts à l'usage ; derrière, deux tombes sont déjà creusées dans la terre-plein, au cas où les tirs des snipers rendraient le cimetière inaccessible. Il fait un froid de grogne, humide et perçant, le ciel est gris, nuageux dans une brume devant laquelle se découpent les façades des immeubles et les minarets, et à travers laquelle résonnent les coups de feu, les déflagrations subites des obus, et les appels à la prière.

L'ASL tient le périmètre du quartier. Là, on est sur une vraie ligne de front, qui traverse des appartements chamboulés, criblés d'impacts de balles explosives et d'obus, remplis de boue et de débris, de canapés renversés, de télévisions brûlées, de lits déchaquetés. A l'ouest, face aux vergers et au stade, c'est Haqura, où Mani et moi vivons depuis presque une semaine avec une unité ASL. A part deux ou trois obstacles, les civils ont tous fui. Les ruelles qui donnent sur le no man's land sont défendues par des sacs de sable, obstacles désolés face aux tanks. Les murs des appartements et des jardins ont été percés pour que les combattants puissent se déplacer à couvert. Le poste de commandement (PC) d'Hassan, le commandant de l'unité, donne sur une rue assez large, et l'on prend souvent le thé sur le trottoir, groupes autour d'un brasier, malgré le risque d'un obus de mortier : « *Inchallah* », rient les hommes.

« Si le monde nous abandonne pour soutenir Assad, on va être obligés de déclarer le djihad »

Abdel Razzak Atlas
officier de l'Armée syrienne libre

Un matin, on est réveillés par des tirs plus soutenus que d'habitude. Des soldats debout dans l'appartement, secouent ceux qui dorment, tirent mitrailleuses, ceintures de cartouches et RPG (lance-roquettes) de la chambre qui sert de dépôt d'armes. On les suit en courant vers le PC, puis dans une rue bordée d'immeubles où on monte à l'étage. Dans une pièce dévastée, un combattant lâche des rafales de mitrailleuse par un trou d'obus ; un autre, dans le salon, tire des coups de *rusi*, nom local du kalachnikov, l'odeur de la cordite emplit l'appartement. On nous explique : un sniper s'est mis à tirer, depuis le grand immeuble en construction en face, sur des

civils, faisant quatre blessés. L'ASL riposte, pour tenter de le déloger. Ça durera environ quatre heures, durant lesquelles on se faufile d'un appartement à l'autre pour observer. Les positions de l'armée régulière ne sont pas loin, 200, 400 mètres, on voit clairement les sacs de sable si on risque un oeil. Quand on est sur les toits, on entend les balles siffler ou claquer dans les murs ; de temps en temps, la déflagration d'un RPG secoue l'air. L'ASL ne cherche pas à prendre les positions ennemies, juste à forcer les snipers à se retirer et à cesser les tirs contre les civils.

Baba Amro n'a pas été sécurisée d'un coup. En novembre, au dernier passage de Mani, un barrage des forces de sécurité contrôlait encore un carrefour central, et ses snipers tiraient dans toutes les rues autour, coupant de fait le quartier en tranches. « On a réussi à les encercler, nous explique un adjoind d'Hassan, et on leur a coupé les vivres. Puis, quand les observateurs de la Ligue arabe sont venus [début janvier], on s'est servis d'eux pour négocier leur retrait, sans effusion de sang. Il y a toujours un autre barrage au bout de l'avenue, mais il est beaucoup plus vulnérable maintenant, et ne tire plus sur les gens, par peur de notre riposte. »

Pour les combattants de l'Armée libre, la protection des civils est l'essence de leur mission. « Dans son principe, l'armée devrait être neutre », martèle un après-midi le lieutenant Abdel Razzak Atlas, un des dirigeants de la *katiba* Al-Faruk qui se vante d'être le premier officier syrien à avoir fait défection en juin 2011. « Elle est là pour protéger le peuple et la nation. Or, elle fait le contraire ». B. le volontaire d'Alep, qui, le soir venu, recite à ses camarades de magnifiques poèmes en arabe classique, est plus lyrique que son chef : « Nous nous battons pour notre religion, pour nos femmes, pour notre terre et, enfin, pour sauve notre peau. Eux, ils se battent seulement pour sauver leur peau. »

Quasiement tous les combattants de l'ASL ont dû, avant leur désertion, participer à des opérations de répression. Très peu

sont prêts à admettre avoir tué des gens. « Moi ? J'ai tiré en l'air », disent-ils presque tous. Mais leur dégoût pour ce qu'ils ont été obligés de faire, leur sentiment de culpabilité est palpable. Ça se sent dans l'insistance que chacun met, quand on le rencontre, à exhiber sa carte militaire. Le témoignage d'un ancien soldat rencontré quelques jours plus tard au centre-ville vaut pour tous : « On nous a emmenés dans les rues pour combattre des gangs armés. Je n'ai vu aucun gang armé. Les officiers nous ont dit : "Les munitions ne valent rien, tirez, tirez autant que vous pouvez." »

Les déserteurs décrivent une armée régulière en pleine déliquescence. A plusieurs reprises, les officiers ASL, avec qui je me trouve reçoivent des informations précises et détaillées, de la part d'officiers restés en service ; ils en reçoivent aussi, pour de l'argent ou pour la cause, armes et munitions. Le lieutenant Atlas m'expliquera comment il avait tenté, en mai, d'organiser avec d'autres officiers la mutinerie de deux brigades et d'un bataillon. « Tout était prêt. Mais les autres n'ont pas voulu aller jusqu'au bout, de peur d'être écrasés par l'aviation. » C'est là tout le sens de la demande d'une *no fly zone*, répétée à chaque manifestation - demande qui surprend l'Occident car, à la différence de Mouammar Kadhafi, Bachar Al-Assad n'a pas encore déployé son aviation contre des civils. « Si nous obtenons une *no fly zone*, insiste Atlas, le motif de l'armée se mutinera. Le régime sera fini. »

« C'est une armée de voleurs, grogne Abu Amar, un sous-officier. Tous ceux qui peuvent payer n'y vont pas, seuls les pauvres y vont. C'est une armée incompétente, qui ne fonctionne pas. Elle ne sert qu'à engraisser la communauté *alalouite*. » Cette secte dissidente du chiisme, considérée comme hérétique par beaucoup de musulmans, est celle du clan Assad et de la majorité des dirigeants des forces de sécurité. Il y a peu d'*alalouites* dans l'ASL, mais il y en a, j'en rencontre un, Fadel, à un barrage de Baba Amro : « Quand j'ai vu l'armée tuer des civils, m'explique-t-il devant ses camarades, je me suis dit : "Je ne suis pas avec

eux, je suis avec le peuple." Ce n'est pas "je suis *alouite*, donc je suis avec les *alouites*". Non. S'ils font mal, j'essaie de faire bien. » Néanmoins, l'immense majorité des combattants de l'Armée libre sont sunnites, et cela se voit à leurs symboles, les noms des *katiba* comme Khalid Ibn Walid (principal général du Prophète) ou bien Kawafil et Shuhada (« les Caravanes des martyrs »). Ce que beaucoup critiquent violemment. « Pourquoi ils choisissent des noms comme ça ? », s'exclame M., sunnite lui aussi, activiste réfugié à Beyrouth. « C'est notre révolution, pas la révolution du Prophète ! On a nos propres martyrs, ils pourraient prendre leurs noms. »

A bout de cette « sunnitisation » de la révolution, il y a la tentation du djihad. C'est sans doute le plus grand risque qui guette l'Armée libre, car cela ferait le jeu de Bachar Al-Assad. Mais cet argument ne décourage pas les officiers de l'ASL, à Homs du moins. Abdel Razzak Atlas nous le dira de manière explicite : « Si ça continue, on va vraiment devenir comme Al-Qaïda. Si le monde nous abandonne pour soutenir Assad, on va être obligés de déclarer le djihad, pour faire venir des combattants du monde musulman et internationaliser le conflit. » Atlas insiste : ce n'est pas sa vision personnelle, le complot militaire d'Homs en a discuté et tous approuvent. D'autres officiers me le confirmeront. Il faut souligner que cette idée n'est pas le fruit d'une radicalisation religieuse, mais d'un calcul stratégique, aussi naïf soit-il. Pour Atlas, une déclaration du djihad pourrait déboucher sur un chaos à l'irakienne, peut-être même sur une guerre régionale, et ce risque forcerait la main de l'Occident, obligé enfin d'intervenir. Ce jeune officier syrien connaît mal le monde extérieur, ses logiques et ses contraintes. Mais il exprime l'appel des masses soulevées contre le régime : « Le peuple veut une intervention de l'OTAN ! » Ce n'était pas le cas il y a un mois ; le désespoir a changé la donne. ■

Prochain article : « Une révolution populaire »

La révolution syrienne menacée par les djihadistes

Nora Benkorich

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Le samedi 10 février, à Damas, le général de brigade et médecin Issa Al-Khawli, directeur de l'hôpital militaire Ahmad Hamish, laisse planer l'hypothèse d'une entrée en lice des djihadistes en Syrie, qui serait de mauvais augure pour le mouvement d'insurrection pacifiste et pro-démocrate. D'une part, elle risque de conduire la communauté internationale, qui s'est déjà montrée pusillanime à l'idée de condamner la brutalité de la répression du régime, à faire un nouveau pas en arrière.

D'autre part, elle donnerait au pouvoir l'alibi dont il a besoin pour justifier un usage accru de la violence. A ce jour, l'assassinat d'Issa Al-Khawli n'a pas encore été revendiqué. Les médias officiels ont affirmé, conformément à l'argumentaire de Damas, que des « groupes terroristes armés » originaires d'Homs, Hama et Daraa étaient derrière l'opération – ce qui permet au passage de légitimer la répres-

sion de ces trois bastions de la contestation. Bien que cette allégation soit pourfendue par la plupart des milieux d'opposition syriens, qui accusent le régime de fabriquer des attentats pour travestir leur révolte, la menace est à prendre au sérieux. Pourquoi ?

Le jour de l'exécution d'Al-Khawli, des Américains ont déclaré à des journalistes du groupe de presse McClatchy qu'ils étaient convaincus qu'Al-Qaïda portait la responsabilité de deux attentats survenus à Damas et de l'attaque-suicide de vendredi à Alep. D'après un rapport des services de renseignements américains, l'organisation djihadiste terroriste chercherait à accroître son influence, émusée par la mort de son ancien chef Ousama Ben Laden, au Pakistan, en mai 2011.

Deux jours plus tard, le leader d'Al-Qaïda, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, accredité ces propos en lançant un appel aux musulmans du monde entier à soutenir la rébellion syrienne et à s'investir davantage dans le combat armé « contre le régime concréux et pernicieux ». Cet appel, diffusé dans une vidéo qui circule sur YouTube depuis dimanche, constitue la première exhortation explicite de l'organisation à prendre une part active au soulèvement syrien. Jus- qu'à présent, elle est restée à la marge du « printemps arabe ».

Plus étonnamment, les modalités de

l'assassinat d'Al-Khawli ne sont pas sans rappeler les méthodes employées par les djihadistes de l'avant-garde combattante pour éliminer des centaines de personnalités proches du régime. Cette organisation, convaincue que seule « *djihad armé dans la voie de Dieu* » pouvait faire tomber le « régime infidèle du tyran Assad » (pere), a mis en œuvre de nombreux attentats contre des symboles du pouvoir entre 1976 et 1982. Sa première opération, lancée en février 1976, était précisément un « assassinat ciblé ».

« L'opposition, tant civile que militaire, devra se démarquer de ce mouvement, voire le combattre »

Dans la ligne de mire : Muhammad Ghara, militaire, alouite et baasiste – les trois critères de sélection établis par les djihadistes – chef de la branche des services de renseignements d'Hama. Le module opérant : il a été assassiné devant chez lui par une cellule de trois hommes, appelée *outra* (famille), menée par un émir (prince) chargé d'exécuter la cible pendant que les deux autres se partageaient les mis-

sions de surveillance et de retrait. Issa Al-Khawli, alouite, baasiste et grade de l'armée syrienne, répond aux « critères de sélection » des djihadistes de l'avant-garde combattante.

Selon l'agence de presse officielle Sana, il a été assassiné par un groupe composé de trois hommes. L'information a été confirmée par l'opposant Nizar Nayyuf, qu'on ne peut soupçonner de sympathie pour le régime. Dans sa revue en ligne *Al-Haqiqat* (« La Vérité »), ce rescapé des prisons du Baas, qu'il a pu quitter pour des raisons de santé – il a failli mourir d'un cancer –, rapporte les propos de témoins oculaires affirmant que la victime a été abattue devant son domicile sous les yeux de son épouse et de ses enfants, par un groupe de trois hommes se répartissant les rôles d'exécution, de surveillance et de retrait.

Le plus troublant est que l'opération intervient deux semaines après l'annonce de la création du Front de la victoire du peuple syrien, organisation djihadiste dirigée par un certain Abou Muhammad Al-Golani. Hostile à l'ingérence des Occidentaux qui « se présentent en sauveurs du peuple opprimé d'Irak qu'ils tuent des musulmans par tout », des Turcs vus comme « les nouveaux alliés des Américains », de la Ligue arabe décrite comme un instrument des Américains pour « donner une

chance au régime de résoudre la crise, quitte à tuer tous les citoyens syriens » et de Tian « qui cherche à restaurer l'Empire perse », ce mouvement estime que « le seul moyen de sauver la nation de l'égarément est le retour des djihadistes ».

Rappelons que l'action armée des djihadistes de l'avant-garde combattante a servi d'alibi au régime de Hafez Al-Assad non seulement pour annihiler tous les rivaux gênants du Baas – les Frères musulmans, les nassériens et les communistes, etc. –, mais aussi pour rallier les minorités négligées par le discours sectaire des djihadistes, et un large pan de la majorité sunnite hostile à leur discours extrémiste à sa cause. Si elle veut préserver sa « révolution pacifique », l'opposition, tant civile que militaire, devra se démarquer de ce mouvement, voire le combattre en le renvoyant dos à dos avec le régime, au risque d'être jetée dans le même panier commun de des djihadistes, comme par le passé. ■



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Quartier de Bab Drib à Homs le 26 janvier. Abou Soufiane (à gauche) est un rebelle qui se charge de mettre en ligne les vidéos des atrocités du régime. A ce titre, il est exposé chaque jour à la souffrance des civils.

MANI POUR LE MONDE

Entrée de façon clandestine en Syrie en janvier. L'écrivain Jonathan Littell, et le photographe Mani se sont rendus pour « Le Monde » à Homs, cœur du soulèvement contre le régime de Bachar Al-Assad.

Une révolution populaire

Hommes, femmes, enfants, imams, militants : leur vie est rythmée par les manifestations. Exutoires des douleurs et catalyseurs de la révolte

TEXTE : JONATHAN LITTELL
PHOTO : MANI

Depuis onze mois la vie quotidienne, en Syrie, est rythmée par les manifestations. La plus importante est celle du vendredi. Elle suit un rituel immuable, comme en ce 20 janvier à Bab Amro. Dès la fin de la prière de midi, les hommes, dans la mosquée, lancent le *takbir*, « Allah u akbar ! », et se déplacent par la porte. Dehors, les activistes, au milieu de grappes d'enfants déchaînés, attendent avec les drapeaux et les banderoles. Le cortège se forme, défille par les ruelles, puis remonte une avenue en scandant des slogans et en agitant panneaux et photos de martyrs au pied d'un immeuble où guettent parfois des snipers du régime. Aux carrefours, des soldats de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), armés, veillent. Le cortège en rejoint d'autres sur une grande rue qui traverse le quartier. Je monte sur un toit avec des activistes qui filment la manifestation, pour embrasser le spectacle du regard : il y a au moins deux mille personnes, peut-être même trois mille.

« S'ils ne tiraient pas sur les manifestants, me dit un vieux monsieur, tout Homs serait dans la rue. » Au centre, des centaines de femmes forment des lignes, bras sur bras, poussent de nouveau le *takbir* et se mettent à sauter au rythme des tambours et des chants révolutionnaires entonnés par les meneurs, debout sur une échelle au milieu d'un cercle de danseurs. Sur un côté, une masse de femmes voilées, mer de foulards blancs, roses ou noirs avec des bébés et des ballons, poussent des youyous et reprennent, avec les hommes, les slogans des meneurs. Autour, les balcons sont bondés. C'est une ambiance de liesse folle, de joie furieuse, désespérée.

Dès la fin de la manifestation, des dizaines de jeunes m'entourent, essayant désespérément leurs quatre mots d'anglais. Chacun me montre ses cicatrices, des coups de marteau, des brûlures à l'électricité, des impacts de balles ou d'éclats d'obus. Le fr-

re de l'un a été tué par un sniper en traversant la rue, la mère de l'autre par un bombardement : tout le monde veut raconter tout, tout de suite. Ils agitent leurs téléphones : « *Chouf, chouf, regarde!* » Un cadavre marbré de traces de tortures, un autre au crâne défoncé, un autre encore pour lequel la caméra s'attarde sur chaque blessure, trous à l'aine, à la jambe, à la poitrine, à la gorge. Partout où on va, c'est la même chose. Dans un point de première urgence à Al Khaldiye, au nord de la ville, le smartphone d'une jeune infirmière apparaît avant même le thé : sur l'écran, un homme agonise sous les mains d'un médecin qui tente futilement de l'intuber, à même le sol, au pied du divan sur lequel je suis assis. C'était un chauffeur de taxi, il s'est pris une balle dans le visage et gît dans une immense flaque de sang, sa cervelle déversée au sol. « Tu vois les mains, là ? », dit l'infirmière. C'est moi. Elle passe au film suivant, le thé arrive, je le bois sans quitter le petit écran des yeux. Chaque téléphone, à Homs, est un musée des horreurs.

Le même soir, toujours à Al-Khaldiye, nouvelle manifestation. Au coin de la place centrale trône une copie en bois, peinte en noir et blanc et recouverte de photos de martyrs, de la célèbre vieille horloge d'Homs, datant de l'époque coloniale française : le « centre-ville », maintenant, se trouve ici. C'est sur cette même place qu'aura lieu le massacre du 31 février, le lendemain de mon départ, environ cent cinquante morts sous les obus.

Une grande banderole insiste sur l'allégeance des manifestants au Conseil national syrien (CNS) : « Non, à l'opposition imaginaire, création des bandes d'Assad. Le CNS nous réunit, les factions nous dispersent. » Partout autour, des montagnes d'ordures encombrant les rues, depuis le début de la révolte, la municipalité n'envoie plus des boueurs dans les quartiers de l'opposition. Les chants et les danses, qui prennent la forme du *zibr*, les danses mystiques des soufis, soulèvent la foule, les meneurs lancent les slogans : « *lillah, nous sommes avec toi / Tebilis, nous sommes avec toi / Rastan,*

nous sommes avec toi jusqu'à la mort! » La volonté d'union des communautés, face au régime, est explicite : « *Nous ne nous révoltons pas contre les alaouites ou les chrétiens ! Le peuple ne fait qu'un!* » - « *Wahad, wahad, al-shaabi suri wahad!* », hurle la foule. « *Le peuple syrien ne fait qu'un!* » Debout sur les épaules d'un homme, un garçon roux d'une dizaine d'années, Mahmoud, mène la foule qui chante le « tube » culte du poète assassiné Ibrahim Qasboush, Va-t'en, Bachar!

Ce qui frappe, dans ces manifestations exubérantes, c'est l'extraordinaire puissance qu'elles dégagent. Elles ne servent pas seulement d'exutoire, de dévouement collectif pour toute la tension accumulée jour après jour, elles redonnent aussi de l'énergie aux participants, les emplissent quotidiennement d'un plus de vigueur et de courage pour continuer à supporter les meurtres, les blessures et les deuil. Le groupe génère l'énergie, puis chaque individu la réabsorbe, c'est ça aussi qui servent la musique et les danses. Ce ne sont pas que des défis ou des mots d'ordre, ce sont aussi, comme le *zibr* soufi, des générateurs et des capteurs de force. La révolution syrienne, chose rare, ne tient pas que grâce aux armes de l'ASL. Ni même au courage des révoltés, elle tient aussi grâce à la joie, au chant et à la danse.

Les mots d'ordre, l'opinion des quartiers quant aux questions brûlantes que sont l'allégeance au CNS ou l'intervention militaire étrangère n'émergent pas seulement dans les manifestations. La musique joue aussi un rôle-clé. Dans un quartier de la Vieille Ville, le vendredi 27 janvier, l'imam cite les proches du Prophète, Abu Bakr en particulier, pour insister sur la solidarité entre les habitants. Son prêche monte, prend des accents aigus lorsqu'il évoque les morts du quartier : « *Dieu est grand!* », concluent en chœur les fidèles. « *Tout ce sang versé, crié l'imam, c'est notre sang, toutes ces âmes tuées sont nos enfants. Mais quand bien même, nous disons à nos oppresseurs, à tous ceux qui*

sont dans la démesure: quoi que vous fassiez, la victoire sera pour nous! » Ici, le rituel ressource et unifie la communauté. Sa volonté collective, dégagée au fil des conversations tout au long de la semaine, est focalisée par le prêche : grâce à lui, plus qu'à tout autre mécanisme sous cette longue dictature, on peut parler d'une « opinion publique ». Les moukhabarat, les services de sécurité du régime, rendant impossible toute visite en quartier chrétien ou alaouite, je n'aurai hélas pas l'occasion de juger comment ça se passe chez eux.

« S'ils ne tiraient pas sur les manifestants, tout Homs serait dans la rue »
Un habitant d'Homs

Dernière couche de cet oignon de la résistance civile, les activistes. A Al-Bayyara, un quartier très pauvre limitrophe d'Al-Khaldiye, un activiste local, Abu Omar, nous fait visiter les rues, nous montre les impacts d'obus, les avenues à snipers, les gens qui abattent les oliviers pour se chauffer. Devant une boutique où l'on achète des amandes, une foule d'enfants nous entoure, et un beau jeune homme de 17 ans, en training bleu, apostrophe Mani : « *Ils ont arrêté mon père, ils ont arrêté mon frère, ils ont battu ma mère! Ils sont venus m'arrêter, et s'ils me trouvent, ils me tuent! Tout ça parce que je sors et je dis que je n'aime pas Bachar!* » C'est le meneur de la manifestation locale. Il tend le cou et se pince la glotte : « *Ma seule arme, c'est ma voix!* » Il se retourne, lève le bras et se livre à une démonstration spontanée de son art, entonnant un chant révolutionnaire.

Un autre jeune l'accompagne au tambour d'aiselle, les gamins reprennent les refrains en battant des mains, sa voix est claire et belle dans la lumière du soir. Mais il connaît le danger. La veille, nous avions assisté à une manifestation dans la Vieille Ville, aujourd'hui, le meneur, Abu Annas,

est à deux doigts de la mort, grièvement blessé à la poitrine par un obus de blindé. Le jeune homme qui nous avait amenés à cette manifestation, dans l'intention, avortée, de témoigner en direct sur Al-Izira, se fait appeler Abu Bilal. Lui est un activiste de l'information, un de ceux qui se chargent de témoigner au quotidien sur la répression. Nous habiterons plusieurs jours avec lui et ses amis, dans une maison discrète de la Vieille Ville, à quelques centaines de mètres à peine de la citadelle d'Homs d'où les forces du régime mitraillent en permanence dans les rues.

Chaque matin, nous nous entassons dans une voiture avec deux ou trois membres de cette équipe qui, bravant les snipers, partent filmer funéraires, blessés, et morts. Omar Telouai, de Bab Shaa, est l'un des plus connus. Il apparaît dans ses vidéos à visage découvert, une écharpe aux couleurs de la révolution autour du cou, pour scanner, à chaque victime, un bref discours rageur sur les circonstances, le lieu, la date. Le soir, dès le retour à la maison, Omar, Abu Bilal et les autres se ruent sur leur ordinateur portable. Au gré d'une connexion Internet vacillante, ils envoient leurs films sur YouTube, ils diffusent les liens via les réseaux sociaux et donnent des interviews à des chaînes de télévision, presque toutes arabes.

Les médias occidentaux n'utilisent que très peu ces sources, considérant souvent qu'en l'absence d'un de leurs propres reporters sur le terrain ces vidéos d'horreur « ne peuvent être authentifiées ». Alors que ces images, parfois tremblantes, cassées au plus près des atrocités commises par le régime syrien, représentent un travail d'information inestimable, pour lequel ceux qui les tournent risquent quotidiennement leur vie. Comme me le dira un soir Abu Sli-mane, un activiste de Baba Amro : « *Nos parents ont été soumis par la peur. Nous, on a brisé le mur de la peur. Soit on vaincra, soit on mourra.* » ■

Prochain article : « Médecin, victime, bourreau »

Le Figaro (France)

Syrie: la Ligue arabe veut armer les insurgés

Alors que Homs était pilonné avec une rare violence, Damas a rejeté toutes les accusations de « crimes contre l'humanité ».

ALAIN BARLUET

PROCHE-ORIENT Fournir des armes à l'insurrection syrienne. Celle-ci le réclamait de longue date pour desserrer l'étau de l'armée loyaliste. La Ligue arabe, désormais, l'envisage ouvertement.

Tandis que la ville de Homs était pilonnée mardi par des bombardements d'une violence rarement atteinte, des diplomates de l'organisation panarabe ont affirmé que des pays de la région seraient prêts à armer les rebelles si le pilonnage des villes syriennes ne cessait pas. Dans leur nouveau plan, qu'ils ont entériné dimanche au Caire, les ministres de la Ligue ont décidé de fournir à l'opposition « toutes sortes de soutien politique et matériel ». Cela inclut la fourniture d'armes, ont précisé mardi des diplomates arabes. Cette hypothèse a déjà été évoquée récemment par l'émir du Qatar, Cheikh Hamad Ben Khalifa al-Thani, qui s'est dit favorable à l'envoi de troupes arabes afin de « mettre fin à la tuerie ». Le double veto russo-chinois au Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, le 4 février,

et l'impasse diplomatique actuelle incitent désormais les pays du Golfe, en pointe contre Damas, à relancer l'idée.

L'idée a aussi fait son chemin au-delà de la région. Aux États-Unis, le sénateur John McCain a appelé Washington à armer l'opposition. Il y a quelques jours, la chaîne CNN révélait que le Pentagone et le Centcom, le commandement militaire



Alain Juppé a mis en garde contre « toute intervention extérieure à caractère militaire » en Syrie

américain chargé du Moyen-Orient, procédaient à un « passage en revue préliminaire des capacités militaires américaines » pour se tenir prêts à tout scénario.

En revanche, d'autres voix s'élèvent, y compris dans le Golfe, pour s'alarmer des risques d'une escalade dans la militarisation du conflit. Une ligne également défendue à Paris, où l'on réfute tout scénario à la libyenne. Officiellement, il n'est pas question d'aider mili-

tairement l'opposition. Tout juste n'exclut-on pas un éventuel soutien logistique, sous la forme, par exemple, de matériels de communication.

Lundi, Alain Juppé a mis en garde contre « toute intervention extérieure à caractère militaire » en Syrie, au lendemain de la proposition de la Ligue arabe de déployer une mission de Casques bleus. Mardi, le porte-parole du Quai d'Orsay a précisé que « la France étudie avec ses partenaires à New York toutes les options mises sur la table par la Ligue arabe », y compris une force onusienne. Les objectifs, les moyens et surtout la faisabilité d'une telle opération dans le contexte très confrontationnel du Conseil de sécurité restent à éclaircir.

C'est d'ailleurs pourquoi Paris mise sur un nouveau projet de résolution de la Ligue arabe condamnant Damas et qui, pour échapper à un veto russe, serait soumis cette fois à l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU, peut-être dès cette semaine. Une question délicate qui sera évoquée lors d'une rencontre entre Alain Juppé et son homologue russe Sergueï Lavrov, jeudi à Vienne. ■

El-Assad agite le leurre d'un référendum en Syrie

Alors que l'armée continue de pilonner plusieurs villes, un vote sur la Constitution aurait lieu le 26 février.

PROCHE-ORIENT Le régime de Bachar el-Assad a offert mercredi un semblant d'ouverture en annonçant la tenue, le 26 février, d'un référendum sur une nouvelle Constitution. Mais il n'a pas pour autant mis un terme à la répression. L'armée a pris d'assaut la ville rebelle de Hama et bombardé un oiseau à Homs, pilonné sans relâche depuis onze jours. Damas soutient qu'il s'agit d'un sabotage mené par des « groupes terroristes ». Les forces de sécurité ont pris également d'assaut le quartier de Barzé, à la périphérie de Damas, « érigé des barrages et procédant à des perquisitions et arrestations », a indiqué l'Observatoire syrien des droits de

l'homme. Ces combats ont fait une vingtaine de morts. Dans ces conditions, la communauté internationale a accueilli avec incrédulité l'annonce d'un référendum visant officiellement à instaurer « un État démocratique basé sur le pluralisme politique ». Le nouveau texte prévoit que « le président de la République sera élu directement par le peuple pour deux mandats successifs » et que « la religion du président est l'islam ». Cette annonce intervient à la veille d'une réunion de l'Assemblée générale

de l'ONU qui doit se prononcer ce jeudi vers 22 heures (heure française) sur un projet de résolution condamnant la répression. L'adoption de cette résolution, quelques jours après le blocage d'un texte similaire au Conseil de sécurité, est très probable, mais elle n'aura qu'une portée symbolique. Moscou, qui soutient le régime de Bachar el-Assad, a déjà fait savoir que les tentatives d'isoler Damas constituaient « une erreur ». La Russie étudiera la proposition de la Ligue arabe de déployer une force conjointe ONU-Arabes en Sy-

rie, mais juge qu'un cessez-le-feu est nécessaire avant l'envoi de soldats de maintien de la paix. Le chef de la diplomatie russe, Sergueï Lavrov, qui rencontrera aujourd'hui son homologue français, Alain Juppé, a Vienne, a refusé de dire s'il était favorable à la proposition française de créer des couloirs humanitaires en Syrie.

Corridors humanitaires

Hier, devant la commission des Affaires étrangères du Parlement européen, le ministre français des Affaires étrangères s'est dit certain que « Bachar el-Assad tombera et devra rendre compte du massacre de son peuple ». Il a appelé l'UE à

apporter « tout son appui » au groupe des « Amis du peuple syrien » qui doit se réunir le 24 février à Tunis. Sont espérés à ce rendez-vous les treize membres du Conseil de sécurité (sur quinze) ayant voté, le 4 février, sur le premier projet de résolution, les pays de l'UE, ceux de la Ligue arabe ainsi que de grands émergents. Le patron du Quai d'Orsay a indiqué que des sanctions « plus dures encore » sont en préparation. Afin de coordonner les efforts, Alain Juppé a souhaité que son homologue turc Ahmet Davutoğlu soit convié au prochain Conseil européen des Affaires étrangères, le 27 février à Bruxelles. ■

A. T. (avec A. B. à Strasbourg)

6000
Le nombre de victimes de la répression depuis onze mois

Le Figaro (France)

Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier

L'auteur, chercheur associé à l'Institut Thomas More, explique comment la Russie se trouve isolée dans cette région, après y avoir beaucoup investi.

L'alliance Moscou-Damas dans un Moyen-Orient en effervescence

Dans l'affaire syrienne, c'est avec constance que la diplomatie russe s'emploie à invalider les affirmations hâtives quant à l'instauration d'un grand partenariat russo-occidental. Moscou bloque toute résolution des Nations unies condamnant les exactions basistes et multiple les tactiques dilatoires pour laisser à Bachar el-Assad le temps d'écraser le mouvement insurrectionnel. Ce faisant, les dirigeants russes révèlent l'importance qu'ils confèrent à leur alliance avec l'apareil d'Etat syrien.

On sait les tenants et les aboutissants de cette alliance instaurée aux temps de la « Russie-Soviétique » : effets de remanences, contrats énergétiques et militaires-industriels, ouverture de la base navale de Tartous aux bâtiments de guerre russes. Au vrai, la Syrie demeure le seul véritable point d'appui de la Russie en Méditerranée et au Proche-Orient. Il serait pourtant erroné de réduire la politique russe à la simple défense de positions laborieusement acquises.

Derrière le clan Assad, il y a l'Iran avec qui la Russie entretient d'étroits rapports. De fait, il existe entre Moscou et Téhéran un partenariat géopolitique

qui s'exprime à travers des coopérations énergétiques multiples, nucléaire civil compris, et d'abondants livraisons d'armes à l'Iran, non sans restrictions toutefois. Enfin, l'attitude de Moscou est ambiguë vis-à-vis des ambitions militaires nucléaires iraniennes. Aussi la bataille diplomatique entre Russes et Occidentaux autour de la Syrie peut-elle être considérée comme l'anticipation d'une crise majeure à propos de l'Iran.

La volonté opiniâtre dont Moscou fait prises dans le Grand Moyen-Orient ne signifie pas que l'on assisterait au retour en force de la Russie ou à une résurgence de la « stratégie des mers chaudes ». Si

re de l'orthodoxie, Vladimir Poutine n'avait pas hésité à faire prévaloir les thèses eurasistes pour mieux avancer ses pions au Moyen-Orient. Arguant du passé tatar et de l'ancienne présence de l'Islam sur des terres autrefois assujetties par la Horde d'or, il avait présenté la Russie comme un grand pays musulman, ce qui lui avait assuré le soutien de l'Iran et de l'Arabie saoudite pour obtenir un statut de pays observateur au sein de l'Organisation de la conférence islamique (OCI).

Parallèlement à cette diplomatie religieuse, Poutine cherchait à mettre sur pied avec le Qatar et l'Iran une « Opep du gaz », d'autres pays producteurs du Grand Moyen-Orient, à l'instar de l'Algérie, étant approchés. Les dirigeants russes

tions américano-saoudiennes, causée par les attentats du 11 septembre 2001, et elle instrumentalisait les inquiétudes suscitées par les difficultés de la guerre en Irak. Les monarchies du Golfe semblaient alors en quête de réassurances stratégiques.

D'après, les révoltes et insurrections dans une partie du monde arabe, avec en toile de fond les rivalités entre sunnites et chiïtes, ont mis en effervescence le Grand Moyen-Orient. Face à l'Iran, l'Occident et les monarchies du Golfe resserrant leurs liens diplomatico-militaires. Plus largement, une grande alliance sunnite s'esquisse, Turquie incluse, et la diplomatie russe est conduite à se replier sur les régimes iranien et syrien, mettant ainsi à mal son image et ses positions dans l'ensemble de la région.

Au total, les projets russes dans la région se sont révélés être des mirages et la marge de manœuvre du Kremlin est singulièrement réduite. L'espoir d'un grand marché diplomatique au terme duquel la Russie démontrerait ses positions, pour enfin voter une résolution coercitive à l'encontre de Damas, est d'autant plus improbable. Dans le proche avenir, gageons que la Russie ne sera guère plus accommodante sur la question iranienne.

La bataille diplomatique entre Russes et Occidentaux autour de la Syrie peut-elle être considérée comme l'anticipation d'une crise majeure à propos de l'Iran

L'on prend comme point de référence les années 2000, les recompositions en cours bousculent la diplomatie russe et les pertes alors réalisées se révèlent être des mouvements tactiques de faible portée. En dépit de l'idée complaisante d'une « sainte Russie » qui serait le conservatoi-

participaient aussi à la ruée vers le marché libyen et ils entendaient développer leurs exportations d'armes jusque dans le golfe arabo-persique où ils courtoisèrent l'Arabie saoudite, les Émirats arabes unis et quelques autres. La manœuvre consistait à jouer sur la détérioration des rela-



DESINS DORRITZ

Libération (France)

Réfugié au Liban, l'imam salafiste de Deraa se présente comme le premier religieux à avoir appelé au renversement de Bachar al-Assad. Cheikh Louai al-Zouabi redoute une guerre civile entre communautés :

«En Syrie, le mouvement pacifique est terminé»

REPÈRES

LE SALAFISME

Le mot *salaf* signifie «les pieux ancêtres». C'est un courant sunnite revendiquant un retour à l'islam des origines.

«La révolution continue tant qu'il y a un nourrisson vivant parmi nous.»

Une pancarte lors d'une manifestation

LES ALAOUITES

Cette secte hétérodoxe du chiisme dont est issue la famille Al-Assad représente environ 10% de la population, en majorité sunnite. Le pays abrite d'autres minorités musulmanes, comme les druzes ou les ismaéliens.

«Prière de nous informer de ce que vous avez besoin en termes de médicaments et de nourriture.»

Message par pigeon voyageur aux habitants de Bab Amr à Homs



Par JEAN-PIERRE PERRIN
Envoyé spécial au Akkar (Liban)
Photo PAUL ASSAKER

C'est dans un village du Akkar, une région pauvre du nord du Liban, à proximité de la frontière syrienne, que se cache cheikh Louai al-Zouabi, imam de la prière du vendredi de la ville de Deraa, où a commencé l'insurrection syrienne, emprisonné pendant six ans (1993-1998) par le régime syrien, il se revendique comme le premier religieux à avoir appelé publiquement au renversement de Bachar al-Assad. Secrétaire général du mouvement salafiste al-Mu'minin Yousharkoun («les croyants participent»), ce religieux, âgé d'une quarantaine d'années, qui a séjourné en Afghanistan et en Bosnie, affirme incarner une tendance moderniste au sein de ce courant particulièrement radical qui prône un retour à l'islam des origines (*salaf* signifiant «les pieux ancêtres») et défendre des idées de tolérance au sein d'un courant qui ignore jusqu'à ce mot. Comment a commencé l'intifada dans la ville de Deraa?

Par l'arrestation et la torture d'une douzaine d'enfants – le plus âgé avait 12 ans – qui avaient écrit sur les murs : «Le peuple veut faire tomber le gouverneur». Leurs pères ont ensuite voulu négocier leur libération avec les forces de sécurité. Ils se sont entendus dire : «Si vous revenez, on va vous arrêter et obliger vos femmes à venir nous baiser les pieds.» Une avocate, qui voulait défendre les enfants, a été emprisonnée et ils lui ont rasé la tête, ce qui est plus inacceptable que de la tuer. C'est ce qui a fait descendre les gens dans la rue, le 20 mars. On a tiré sur eux, y compris depuis un hélicoptère. Six personnes ont été tuées. Et si on a libéré les enfants, on a arrêté ceux qui manifestaient. C'est ce qui a fait éclater l'insurrection. J'ai alors publié une fatwa sur Internet appelant les Syriens à protester. C'était une fatwa pacifique interdisant aux manifestants de tuer les gens des services de sécurité et vice-versa. Mon but était d'amplifier la révolution de façon pacifique. Mais quand le régime a commencé de façon systématique à tuer les gens, j'ai pro-

mulgué une seconde fatwa permettant à l'Armée libre syrienne [l'ALS, ndr] de protéger les civils.

Aujourd'hui, la guerre est à Homs. Le régime peut-il reprendre la ville ?

Le régime a certes l'intention de régler militairement et de façon définitive la révolution mais contrôler tout Homs, c'est impossible. Actuellement, la révolution maîtrise 70% du territoire syrien la nuit et, selon les activités des révolutionnaires, de 20 à 40% le jour. Ce qui demeure une énigme pour le régime, c'est que l'ASL n'a pas de base fixe. Donc, dès que les forces de sécurité voient un combattant de l'ASL traverser un quartier, elles bombardent toute la zone.

Existe-t-il un risque de guerre civile ?

Je crains cette guerre civile. Ici, au Liban, quand on parle des chiïtes, on a l'impression que ceux-ci se réduisent au Hezbollah. C'est la même chose en Syrie. Quand on parle des alaouites, on a l'impression qu'ils sont tous

INTERVIEW

avec le régime. Mais beaucoup, parmi la société alaouite, ont de bonnes raisons de participer à la révolution. C'est vrai aussi que le régime a commencé à renforcer cette minorité. A Homs, ils ont reçu des armes, comme les alaouites qui vivent dans les autres régions. A présent, on peut dire que chaque alaouite est mieux armé qu'un soldat de l'armée nationale. Ainsi, les événements vont de telle façon qu'on a l'impression que tous les alaouites sont avec le régime.

Si le pouvoir reprend Homs, la révolution est-elle menacée ?

Cela pourrait affaiblir le mouvement pendant une certaine période et le peuple va en souffrir. Mais ce que je crains surtout, c'est que le régime en profite pour ouvrir un front avec Israël, avec l'aide de l'Iran. Pour un régime créé par la Stasi [la police politique allemande, qui a formé les services secrets syriens], une fuite en avant qui ferait exploser la région n'est pas inconcevable. C'est la guerre de 1973 [contre Israël], qui a permis au père de Bachar [Hafez al-Assad] de gouverner la Syrie pendant si longtemps. Pourtant, cette guerre, il l'avait perdue mais il a su négocier. Si on en arrivait à cette fuite en avant, cela provoquerait une guerre régionale.

Vous qui êtes salafiste, êtes-vous favorable à une intervention occidentale ?

Nous souhaitons un soutien international à la révolution.

Y compris armé ?

Bien sûr ! Car, maintenant, le mouvement pacifique est terminé. Nous avons la capacité humaine de combattre, mais ce qui nous manque, ce sont des armes, du matériel, de la logistique et je veux transmettre ici une idée essentielle à l'Occident : une fois que la révolution aura gagné, nous respecterons les conventions internationales et voudrions avoir de très bonnes relations avec la communauté internationale. Il faut que l'Occident négocie avec l'opposition qui est sur le terrain et dans le combat effectif. Pas avec ceux qui ont des cravates [le Conseil national syrien, qui représente les principales formations d'opposition, ndr] et dont l'influence est limitée. Moi, je suis en communication avec 70% des leaders du terrain, qu'ils soient islamistes, laïcs, druzes...

Et si l'Occident veut vérifier ce que je représente militairement, je suis prêt à faire exécuter des opérations militaires en des endroits déterminés à l'avance. Cette révolution est forte parce qu'elle est populaire, qu'elle englobe toutes les composantes du pays, pas seulement les islamistes. Il y a un risque que le monde extérieur comprenne de façon incorrecte notre révolution, qu'il croie qu'elle est islamiste. C'est pourquoi je me suis senti le devoir de venir expliquer ce qui se passe en Syrie et dissiper tout malentendu. En Egypte, les salafistes ne veulent pas que les chrétiens bâtissent ou réparent des églises... Mon islam m'oblige non seulement à permettre leur construction, mais à y participer, même si je dois porter les pierres sur mes épaules. Notre ennemi est celui qui est injuste, pas celui avec lequel on est en désaccord. C'est une révolution dans le salafisme. Pour la première fois, un cheikh salafiste veut que la reconnaissance de l'autre se fasse indifféremment de sa religion, de ses opinions politiques, de ses origines, et accepte non seulement de reconnaître ses différences mais de les accepter. Je n'ai pas d'objection à ce que la Syrie ait un président chrétien, druze ou alaouite, à condition qu'il établisse la justice. ➤

Libération (France)

Syrie: l'ONU n'a pas dit sa dernière résolution

HUMANITAIRE Un texte sur l'envoi d'une force conjointe doit être voté aujourd'hui par l'Assemblée générale.

Quelques jours après les vetos russe et chinois qui avaient provoqué la colère des Occidentaux et d'une grande partie du monde arabe, une nouvelle tentative pour condamner la répression en Syrie a lieu à l'ONU. L'Assemblée générale doit en effet voter aujourd'hui un projet de résolution, non contraignant, à la différence de ceux approuvés par le Conseil de sécurité.

Cessez-le-feu. La Russie, principal soutien avec la Chine du régime du président Bachar al-Assad, s'est déclarée prête à étudier la proposition de la Ligue arabe de déployer une force conjointe ONU-Arabes en Syrie, tout en jugeant qu'un cessez-le-feu préalable à l'envoi de soldats de maintien de la paix était nécessaire. Une position partagée par Pékin, qui a dépêché en Egypte un émissaire, Li Huaxin, pour s'entretenir avec Nabil al-Arabi, le secrétaire général de la Ligue arabe. Appelant la Syrie à mettre un terme «immédiat» aux violences, la vice-ministre chinoise des

Affaires étrangères, Cui Tiankai, qui accompagnait Xi Jinping, le probable futur numéro 1 chinois lors de sa visite aux Etats-Unis hier, a souligné que la Chine «attachait une grande importance au rôle joué par la Ligue arabe dans la recherche d'une solution politique au problème syrien».

«Si la résolution est partisane et ignore que des gens sont tués par des groupes armés de l'opposition, elle sera inutile.»

Sergueï Lavrov ministre russe des Affaires étrangères

De son côté, le chef de la diplomatie turque, Ahmet Davutoglu, a exhorté hier les Nations unies à s'impliquer non seulement sur le plan politique, «mais aussi sur le plan humanitaire». Il a appelé de ses vœux l'ouverture d'un corridor en Syrie qui permettrait d'avoir accès aux personnes souffrant du manque de nourriture et de médicaments. Une idée soutenue par Paris dès le mois de novembre et qui fera l'objet de la rencontre prévue

aujourd'hui à Vienne entre le ministre français des Affaires étrangères, Alain Juppé, et son homologue russe, Sergueï Lavrov.

Nature. En dépit de signes d'ouverture à l'égard d'une solution de maintien de la paix, Russie comme Chine ont rappelé leur souhait de voir émerger un dialogue avec les autorités syriennes, émettant de nombreuses réserves quant à la nature de la nouvelle résolution proposée à l'ONU. «Si la

résolution est partisane et ignore le fait que des gens sont tués par des groupes armés de l'opposition, alors elle ne sera pas utile», a déclaré Lavrov, jugeant qu'isoler le régime d'Al-Assad était une «erreur». «Tout le monde appelle à la fin immédiate des violences sanglantes en Syrie. Mais si le Conseil de sécurité fait un mauvais choix, cela risque d'engendrer encore plus de violences», a pour sa part estimé son homologue chinois.

JULIETTE RABAT

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

„Kein Libyen-Szenario für Syrien“

Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga bei Merkel / Amerika: Friedenstruppe unrealistisch

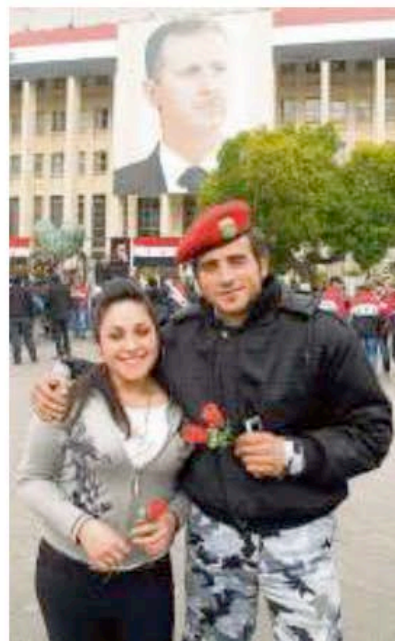
ban./rüb./P.K. BERLIN/WASHINGTON/PEKING, 14. Februar. Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel und der Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga, Nabil al Arabi, haben einander versichert, im Falle Syriens komme ein „Libyen-Szenario“, also ein militärisches Eingreifen von außen, nicht in Betracht. Frau Merkel empfing Arabi am Dienstag im Bundeskanzleramt. Am Sonntagabend hatten die Außenminister der Liga in ihrem Syrien-Beschluss jedoch mit einer Militärintervention gedroht. In der Resolution der Liga heißt es, indem das Regime von Präsident Assad die Forderungen der Liga erfülle, „vermeidet Syrien die Folgen einer militärischen Intervention“.

Mit der Kanzlerin besprach Arabi Möglichkeiten, Russland doch noch für einen Sanktionsbeschluss des UN-Sicherheitsrates zu gewinnen. Frau Merkel äußerte vor dem Treffen in der Öffentlichkeit, die Europäische Union unterstütze die Haltung der Arabischen Liga und sei zu weiteren Sanktionen gegen Syrien bereit. Sie würdigte, dass die Arabische Liga eine feste Haltung zu den Menschenrechtsverletzungen in Syrien eingenommen habe. In dem anschließenden Gespräch wurde deutlich, Erwartungen von Teilen der syrischen Opposition, es solle ein militärisches Vorgehen zur Beseitigung des Assad-Regimes geben, würden sich nicht erfüllen. Frau Merkel und Arabi sprachen sich dagegen aus, hieß es in Berlin. Den Einsatz einer Friedensmission mit UN-Blauhelmsoldaten und arabischen Truppen, den die Arabische Liga gefordert hatte, hatte das Assad-Regime schon abgelehnt.

Auch die Außenminister der Vereinigten Staaten und der Türkei bekräftigten jedoch am Montagabend, dass eine Friedensmission in Syrien ohne Zustimmung der Führung in Damaskus nicht möglich sei. Voraussetzung für solch ein Eingreifen sei die Unterstützung der syrischen Regierung, sagten Hillary Clinton und Ahmet Davutoglu in Washington. Präsidentensprecher Jay Carney sagte, ohne einen Waffenstillstand in Syrien und ohne eine Resolution des UN-Sicherheitsrates sei eine solche Mission nicht denkbar. Liga-Generalsekretär Arabi hatte sich vor dem Außenministertreffen der Arabischen Liga vom Sonntag für eine neue Beobachtermission der Liga und der Verein-

ten Nationen ausgesprochen. Das hatte auch der deutsche Außenminister Guido Westerwelle befürwortet.

Frau Merkel und Arabi vermieden es, über einen Einfluss von Al Qaida auf Entwicklungen in Syrien zu sprechen. Der Generalsekretär der Liga erläuterte Vorstellungen über ein „Treffen der Freunde Syriens“, das am 24. Februar in Tunis abgehalten werden solle. Er machte die Erwartung deutlich, Deutschland möge sich



Pro Assad: Syrischer Valentinstag Foto AFP

beteiligen. Frau Merkel legte sich nicht fest. Außenminister Westerwelle hatte sich aber früh für die Einrichtung einer „Syrien-Kontaktgruppe“ ausgesprochen, wie sie in Tunis zusammenfinden soll.

In Washington waren sich die Außenminister Clinton und Davutoglu einig, dass humanitäre Hilfe für die Menschen in Syrien nötig sei, um dem Mangel an Nahrungsmitteln und an Medizin zu begegnen. Die Türkei bemühe sich beim UN-Menschenrechtsrat in Genf um eine humanitäre Initiative, sagte Davutoglu. Die UN-Hochkommissarin für Menschenrechte Navi Pillay hatte am Montag vor der UN-Vollversammlung dem Assad-Re-

gime eine „Todesschuss-Taktik“ vorgeworfen. Es lasse gezielt auf unbewaffnete Demonstranten schießen. Zehntausende Menschen seien in Syrien willkürlich festgenommen worden, darunter zahlreiche Minderjährige. 25 000 Syrer hätten bereits im Ausland um Asyl gebeten, weitere 70 000 seien innerhalb der Landesgrenzen auf der Flucht. „Das Ausmaß und die Art der Angriffe der Sicherheitskräfte auf Zivilisten, die umfassende Zerstörung von Häusern, Kliniken, Schulen und anderen zivilen Einrichtungen deutet auf eine Billigung oder Mittäterschaft der Behörden auf höchster Ebene hin“, sagte Frau Pillay. Sie drängte den UN-Sicherheitsrat zum Handeln. Nach Gesprächen mit EU-Ratspräsident Herman van Rompuy und EU-Kommissionspräsident José Manuel Barroso verteidigte jedoch der chinesische Ministerpräsident Wen Jiabao die Haltung seiner Regierung, die mit Russland eine Resolution des Sicherheitsrats verhindert hat. Die dringendste Aufgabe in Syrien sei es, Krieg und Chaos zu vermeiden. Dazu diene die chinesische Politik.

In Homs, der Hochburg der syrischen Regimegegner, sollen Truppen des Assad-Regimes am Morgen mit der Bombardierung des Stadtteils Baba Amr begonnen haben. Das teilte die in London ansässige „Syrische Beobachtungsstelle für Menschenrechte“ mit. Im Durchschnitt fielen zwei Raketen pro Minute; es sei der schwerste Beschuss seit fünf Tagen. Mehr als 100 000 Syrer sitzen nach Angaben von Aktivisten wegen des Dauerbeschusses in der von regimetreuen Truppen belagerten Stadt Homs fest. Die Menschen aus dem Viertel Baba Amr könnten nicht mehr fliehen, sagte ein Oppositioneller der Deutschen Presse-Agentur. Jedes Fahrzeug, das die Gegend verlassen wolle, werde angegriffen. Nach Angaben von Aktivisten kamen bei den Attacken am Dienstag mindestens 24 Personen ums Leben.

In der von deutscher Seite als „Informationsgespräch“ gekennzeichneten Unterredung der Bundeskanzlerin mit dem Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga beschrieb Arabi die Entwicklung in einzelnen arabischen Ländern im zweiten Jahr der Arabellion. Der „Wind des Wechsels“ habe die Region erreicht. Frau Merkel sagte in allgemeiner Form politische und wirtschaftliche Unterstützung zu.

Junge Welt (Allemagne / Germany)

Unerwünschte Informationen

Arabische Liga und Vereinte Nationen ignorieren Bericht der Beobachtermission. Von Karin Leukefeld, Damaskus

Mit seinem Rücktritt als Chef der Beobachtermission der Arabischen Liga (AL) hat der sudanesisch-ägyptische General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa Al-Dabi am Sonntag die Konsequenz daraus gezogen, daß sich die Liga nicht mit seinem Bericht über die Lage in Syrien befaßt hat. Der Report der Beobachter, die einen Monat lang in allen Provinzen Syriens die Situation dokumentiert hatten, war im zuständigen Außenministerkomitee der Liga noch bei der Debatte um eine Syrienresolution im UN-Sicherheitsrat zur Sprache gekommen. Das hatte vor wenigen Tagen bereits der stellvertretende syrische Außenminister Feisal Mekdad bei einem Pressegespräch in Damaskus kritisiert. Der Report habe »Syrien nicht verteidigt«, sagte Mekdad, allerdings sei er »objektiver und professioneller als manche Berichte« gewesen, die in seiner Zeit als syrischer Botschafter bei den Vereinten Nationen gelesen habe. »Der Bericht spiegelt die Realität wider«, das habe aber

einigen arabischen, vor allem aber westlichen Staaten nicht gefallen.

Aus diplomatischen Kreisen in Syrien war zu erfahren, Al-Dabi sei bei einem Treffen mit Botschaftern in Damaskus unter Druck gesetzt worden, harte Fakten zu präzisieren, sonst werde man sich nicht damit befassen. Al-Dabi habe daraufhin erklärt, der Bericht sei nicht von ihm, sondern von den Beobachterteams geschrieben worden. Sollte die Befassung mit dem Bericht verweigert werden, werde er selber an die Öffentlichkeit gehen. In Kairo habe dann der Außenminister und Ministerpräsident Kataris, Scheich Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jaber Al-Thani, den Missionschef bei einem persönlichen Gespräch aufgefordert, den Bericht nicht vorzulegen, sondern nur mündlich eine Zusammenfassung vorzutragen. Der Vorsitzende des Außenministerkomitees gilt als scharfer Gegner Syriens.

Anderer Berichte sehen die Demission Al-Dabis hingegen als Folge der internationalen Kritik an seiner Per-

son. Menschenrechtsorganisationen hatten dem sudanesischen General mangelnde Fähigkeiten vorgeworfen, unter anderem weil er als General in der südsudanesischen Provinz Darfur eingesetzt gewesen war. Der Rücktritt ist zudem eine logische Reaktion auf die Entscheidung der Liga, die am Wochenende einer weiteren Beobachtermission in Syrien eine Absage erteilt hatte. Stattdessen soll nun mit Hilfe des UN-Sicherheitsrates eine »internationale Friedensstruppe« in dem Land stationiert werden.

Auch die UN-Vollversammlung, die am Montag (Ortszeit) in New York auf Antrag Kataris die Lage in Syrien diskutierte, ignorierte den Bericht der Beobachtermission, und befaßte sich stattdessen mit einem Papier des UN-Menschenrechtsrates von Anfang Dezember. UN-Menschenrechtskommissarin Navi Pillay wiederholte bei der Sitzung ihre »Abscheu« vor der Gewalt, die der syrische Staat »vor allem in Homs« anwende. »Die syrische Regierung hat nachdrücklich ihre Verpflich-

tung vernachlässigt, die eigene Bevölkerung zu schützen«, so Pillay. »Jedes Mitglied der internationalen Gemeinschaft muß jetzt handeln, um die Bevölkerung zu schützen.«

Der syrische UN-Botschafter Baschar Al-Jafari entgegnete, Syrien habe »das Recht, seine Bürger zu schützen, Terrorismus und bewaffnete Gewalt zu bekämpfen«. Internationale und regionale politische Kräfte führten Krieg gegen Syrien, um das Land zu destabilisieren und nicht, um Reformen in Syrien auf den Weg zu bringen. Die syrische Führung habe »keine Mühen gescheut«, um auf die »legitimen Forderungen nach Reformen« zu reagieren. Das vorgeschlagene Reformprogramm basiere auf »politischer Pluralität«, so Al-Jafari.

Nach fast viermonatiger Arbeit hat am Montag ein Komitee in Damaskus den Entwurf für eine neue Verfassung an Präsident Baschar Al-Assad übergeben. Der Text wird vermutlich noch in dieser Woche veröffentlicht, die Syrer sollen später per Referendum darüber entscheiden.

Süddeutsche Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Westen will Sanktionen gegen Syrien verschärfen

EU plant Strafen für Banken / Russland und China lehnen Einsatz von Friedenssoldaten ab

München – Die Europäische Union und die USA planen, ihre Sanktionen gegen die Regierung von Präsident Baschar al-Assad in Syrien zu verschärfen. Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel sagte am Dienstag nach einem Treffen mit dem Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga, Nabil el-Arabi, in Berlin, die Liga habe zu den Menschenrechtsverletzungen durch das Regime eine „feste Haltung“ eingenommen. „Die Europäische Union unterstützt diese Haltung, und wir werden sie auch durch weitere Sanktionen unterstützen.“ Die EU-Außenminister werden Ende des Monats darüber beraten. Im Gespräch sind Strafen gegen syrische Banken sowie ein Verbot von kommerziellen Flügen nach Europa. Ein Ölembargo gegen Syrien ist bereits in Kraft.

US-Präsident Barack Obama und Großbritanniens Premier David Cameron bereiten in einem Telefonat am Montag ebenfalls über schärfere Strafen, wie die britische Regierung mitteilte. Zudem habe man über weitere Schritte bei den UN sowie der neuen „Gruppe der Freunde Syriens“ gesprochen. Diese Gruppe soll sich zum ersten Mal am 24. Februar in Tunesien treffen. Teilnehmen sollen laut der Arabischen Liga neben arabischen Staaten auch regionale und internationale Akteure, unter ihnen die Türkei, die USA und Mitglieder der EU.

US-Außenministerin Hillary Clinton empfing in Washington ihren türkischen Kollegen Ahmet Davutoglu, um die Konferenz vorzubereiten. Beide bekräftigten ihre Unterstützung für einen Friedensplan der Liga, der einen geregelten Übergang der Macht in Syrien ermöglichen soll. Davutoglu kündigte an, über den UN-Menschenrechtsrat in Genf erreichen zu wollen, dass Syrien humanitäre Hilfe in die von der Armee belagerten Gebiete lässt. Auch schloss er nicht aus,

Schutzzonen für Zivilisten an der türkisch-syrischen Grenze einzurichten, wie es syrische Oppositionelle fordern. Dies werde aber bei dem Treffen in Tunesien keine Rolle spielen.

Clinton machte deutlich, dass sie den geregteten Einsatz von UN-Friedenssoldaten und einer damit verbundenen Fortsetzung der Beobachtermission wenig Chancen sieht. Damaskus weigert sich, einen solchen Einsatz ins Land zu lassen – und

Russland und China haben klargestellt, dass sie es weiterhin ablehnen, Syrien zu etwas zu zwingen. Die beiden Veto-Mächte im UN-Sicherheitsrat hatten sich zuletzt bereits einer Resolution verweigert, die das syrische Regime nur verbal verurteilt und zur Teilung der Macht aufgefordert hätte. Die UN-Hochkommissarin für Menschenrechte, Navi Pillay, kritisierte am Montag, dies habe Assad ermutigt, noch entschiedener gegen Aufständische im Land vorzugehen.

Spitzenvertreter der EU forderten den chinesischen Ministerpräsidenten Wen Jiabao bei einem Treffen in Peking auf, den Druck auf Damaskus zu erhöhen. Die EU rufe „alle Mitglieder des UN-Sicherheitsrats dazu auf, in dieser entscheidenden Phase verantwortlich zu handeln“, sagte Ratspräsident Herman Van Rompuy. Wen betonte, China ergreife in dem Konflikt nicht Partei, sondern wolle nur „Krieg und Chaos“ verhindern.

Das syrische Regime setzte unterdessen die Gewalt gegen seine Kritiker mit unverminderter Härte fort. In der Stadt Homs kam es nach Angaben von Aktivisten am Dienstag zum heftigsten Beschuss seit Tagen. Oppositionsvertreter berichteten, es fehle an Lebensmitteln und Brennstoff. Verwundete könnten nicht versorgt werden, Plünderer trieben in der Stadt ihr Unwesen. SZ

Blauhelme für Homs?

Zu den blauen Helmen gehören typischerweise nicht schwere Patronengürtel und Kettenfahrzeuge, sondern nur Handfeuerwaffen und weiße Jeeps. Die „Peacekeepers“, wie sie bei den Vereinten Nationen (UN) offiziell heißen, kommen meist auch in so kleiner Zahl, dass die verfeindeten Truppen in einem Konflikt sie nicht als zusätzliche Armee wahrnehmen, sondern nur als neutrale Beobachter. Auf dieses sanfte Image sind sie dringend angewiesen: Denn anders würden die jeweiligen Regierungen sie kaum freiwillig ins Land lassen. Und sonst könnten die UN, wenn eine

Blockade im Sicherheitsrat ihnen eine robustere militärische Intervention unmöglich macht, nicht einmal auf diese sanftere Alternative zurückgreifen.

An diese Alternative denken jetzt viele im Fall Syriens – nur spricht wenig darüber, dass das Assad-Regime ausländische Truppen freiwillig ins Land lassen würde. Und die Erinnerung an Blauhelmsoldaten in Darfur und Bosnien mahnt auch den Westen zur Vorsicht: Solange Kämpfe noch toben, können die „Peacekeepers“ mit ihrem leichten Gerät wenig tun, außer zuzuschauen. Am Ende macht sie das vielleicht mitschuldig. rst

Süddeutsche Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Syrer sollen über neue Verfassung abstimmen

Präsident Assad verspricht Referendum am 26. Februar / Entwurf sieht Ende des Monopols der Baath-Partei vor

Von Rudolph Chimelli

Paris – Nach elf Monaten offener Rebellion hat Syriens Präsident Baschar al-Assad am Mittwoch eine Volksabstimmung über eine liberalisierte Verfassung angekündigt. Sie soll am 26. Februar stattfinden. Nach dem Entwurf wird die Kontrolle der Regierung den Baath-Partei über Staat und politisches Leben abgeschrieben. Parteien sollen zugelassen werden, soweit sie sich nicht auf religiöse oder ethnische Grundlagen berufen. Die Amtszeit des Präsidenten, dessen Religion der Islam sein muss, wird auf zwei Mal sieben Jahre beschränkt. „Die islamische Rechtsprechung ist die Grundlage jeder Gesetzgebung“, heißt es in dem Text.

Assad hatte im vergangenen Juli ein Gesetz zugelassen, das im Prinzip ein Mehrparteiensystem vorsah. Im Oktober setzte er einen Ausschuss ein, der eine neue Verfassung erarbeiten sollte. Gemäß der alten Verfassung von 1973 ist die Baath-Partei „führend in Staat und Gesellschaft“. In der vergangenen Woche

haben die Experten dem Präsidenten den Entwurf für das neue Grundgesetz überreicht. Ursprünglich sollte das Referendum über die liberalisierte Verfassung frühestens im März stattfinden. Offenbar angesichts internationalen Druck und der bevorstehenden Syrien-Debatte in der Uno-Vollversammlung wurde der Termin vorgezogen. Die neue Verfassung soll „die Würde jedes syrischen Bürgers garantieren und seine Grundrechte sichern“. Das Land soll „zu einem Vorbild für öffentliche Freiheiten und Pluralismus“ werden. Assad wurde in der Verordnung von der amtlichen Nachrichtenagentur mit den Worten zitiert, das neue Grundgesetz werde Syrien helfen, „alle unsere Wünsche auf ein Land zu erfüllen, das künftigen Generationen ein glänzendes Beispiel sein wird“.

Freiheit wird in dem Dokument als „heiliges Recht“ bezeichnet. Jede Verletzung persönlicher Freiheit soll strafbar werden. Syrien wird als „multi-konfessionell und multi-ethnisch“ definiert. Das syrische Volk sei Teil der arabischen Na-

tion. Der Staat achte alle Religionen und garantiere die Freiheit sämtlicher Kulte. Nach dem Vorschlag sollen 90 Tage nach dem Referendum Wahlen für ein Parlament stattfinden. Ein Termin für Präsidentschaftswahlen wird nicht genannt. Unter Baschar al-Assad, der seit zwölf Jahren an der Macht ist, sowie unter seinem Vater Hafes hat die Familie das Land seit

Freiheit wird im Entwurf „heiliges Recht“ genannt, Syrien „multi-konfessionell“.

vier Jahrzehnten diktatorisch regiert. Ob die Verkündung der Volksabstimmung zur Beruhigung der Lage beiträgt, war am Mittwoch noch nicht zu übersehen.

Bei der Stadt Homs, die seit 4. Februar unter Beschuss liegt, geriet am Mittwoch eine Erdölleitung in Brand. Die Regierung sprach von Sabotage. Die Aufständischen hingegen behaupten, Kampfflugzeuge des Regimes hätten die Ölleitung

beschossen. Mehr als 100 000 Einwohner lebten in der Stadt unter Belagerungszustand. Auch die benachbarte Stadt Hama wurde nach Mitteilung des in London beheimateten Syrischen Observatoriums für Menschenrechte angegriffen. Telefonleitungen und mobile Verbindungen seien unterbrochen.

Unterdessen treten die internationalen Bemühungen um eine Waffenruhe auf der Stelle. Die von der Arabischen Liga empfohlene Entsendung von UNO-Truppen lehnt Damaskus weiterhin ab. Die Liga arbeitet an der Vorbereitung eines Treffens der „Freund Syriens“, das am 24. Februar in Tunis stattfinden soll. Westliche Staaten erwägen die Bildung einer „Syrien-Kontaktgruppe“. Nach den von der Uno übernommenen Angaben der syrischen Opposition sind seit Beginn des Aufstands im vergangenen Frühling etwa 5400 Menschen ums Leben gekommen. Das Regime in Damaskus behauptet mehr als 2000 Soldaten und Polizisten seien von den aufständischen getötet worden.

Tageszeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

„Gewalt noch schlimmer“

SYRIEN Die UN-Hochkommissarin für Menschenrechte, Navi Pillay, beklagt in New York eine „Todesschusstaktik“ des Regimes. Zudem gebe es mehr als 18.000 Gefangene

AUS GENÈVE ANDREAS ZUMACH

Die UN-Hochkommissarin für Menschenrechte, Navi Pillay, hat dem Regime von Syriens Präsident Assad vorgeworfen, mit einer gezielten „Todesschusstaktik“ gegen Oppositionelle vorzugehen. In einer Rede vor der UN-Generalversammlung in New York kritisierte die Südafrikanerin am Montagabend zugleich das russisch-chinesische Veto gegen eine Syrien-Resolution des Sicherheitsrats.

„Die Führung in Damaskus geht mit Panzern, Artillerie und Scharfschützen gegen unbewaffnete Demonstranten vor, und ohne Warnung wird auf Menschen geschossen, die friedfertig für ihr Recht eintreten“, erklärte die Hochkommissarin für Menschenrechte bei ihrem Auftritt vor der Generalversammlung. „Art und Ausmaß“ der von den Sicherheitskräften begangenen Taten zeigten, dass „seit März 2011 wahrscheinlich Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit begangen wurden“. Mit ihrem Veto gegen eine Syrien-Resolution des Sicherheitsrates hätten Moskau und Peking das Assad-Regime noch ermutigt, kritisierte Pillay. Seitdem sei „die Gewalt noch schlimmer geworden“.

Nach den Erkenntnissen der Hochkommissarin sind in Syrien „allein im letzten Jahr 5.400 Menschen ums Leben gekommen, vor allem Zivilisten und Soldaten, die nicht auf Zivilisten schießen wollten“. Es sei praktisch unmöglich, diese Zahl zu aktualisieren, weil das Regime



Diese Männer wurden in der Haft von syrischen Sicherheitskräften misshandelt Foto: reuters

„Wir schicken ja auch keine Soldaten in die USA“

SYRIENS UN-BOTSCHAFTER DSCHAAFARI

allen Beobachtern den Zugang verweigere, kritisierte Pillay. „Aber wir wissen, dass es jeden Tag mehr werden.“ Die Hochkommissarin sprach von einer „großen und systematischen Kampagne der Aggression gegen Zivilisten“ in Syrien. Es gebe „mehr als 18.000 Gefangene“, für die kein Haftbefehl vorliege. Sie habe den UN-Sicherheitsrat aufgefordert, den Internationalen Gerichtshof einzuschalten.

Die Proteste gegen das Regime stuft Pillay als „weitgehend friedlich“ ein, wobei der bewaffnete Widerstand in letzter Zeit aber zunehme.

Syriens UN-Botschafter Baschar Dschaafari wies die Vorwürfe zurück. Sein Land kämpfe „nur gegen Terroristen“. Der von der Arabische Liga vorgeschlagene Einsatz von UN-Blauhelmsoldaten zum Schutz der Demonstranten sei absurd. „Wir schicken ja auch keine Soldaten in die USA, um die Occupy-Wall-Street-Demonstranten zu schützen.“ Zu einer Blauhelm-Mission der UNO wird es nicht kommen, da Voraussetzung hierfür die Zustimmung des Assad-Regimes und ein Waffenstillstand in Syri-

en wären. Das erklärten nach Russland und Chinas gestern auch die USA, die Türkei sowie Frankreich, Großbritannien und Deutschland.

Bei einem Treffen mit dem Generalsekretär der Arabischen Liga, Nabil Elarabi, am Dienstag in Berlin kündigte Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel weitere Sanktionen der EU an „zur Unterstützung des Kampfes gegen das Assad-Regime“. Merkel erklärte, die Arabische Liga habe zu Syrien eine „feste Haltung eingenommen, die deutlich auf die Menschenrechtsverletzungen durch die Regierung Assad“ hinweise. Die EU unterstütze diese Haltung und werde sie durch weitere Sanktionen untermauern.

Tagesspiegel (Allemagne / Germany)

LIBANON



Einwohner: 4 Millionen
Staatsform: parlamentarische Republik
Staatschef: Michel Sulaiman
Besonderheiten: von Konfessionen dominiertes, fragiles politisches System

Der Libanon ist am unmittelbarsten betroffen von den Kämpfen und möglichen Umwälzungen in Syrien. Denn der Libanon ist wirtschaftlich, politisch und sozial am meisten verflochten mit Syrien - stand das Land doch jahrzehntelang unter direkter syrischer Kontrolle...

Doch die Angst davor, dass der Konflikt übergriffe und das fragile konfessionelle Gleichgewicht im Libanon durch den Zusammenbruch bringen könnte, führt dazu, dass sich alle Parteien zurückhalten und abwarten. Am Wochenende gab es die ersten drei Toten in der nordlibanesischen Stadt Tripoli...

Bisher sind etwa 5000 Flüchtlinge aus Syrien über die Grenze gekommen, zumeist im Norden in der Region um Wadi Khaleid, wo mehrheitlich Sunniten leben und viele Familienbande über die Grenze hinweg existieren.

ISRAEL



Einwohner: 7,5 Millionen
Staatsform: parlamentarische Republik
Staatschef: Schimon Peres
Besonderheiten: die gefühlte Bedrohung durch den Iran beherrscht die politische Agenda

Israel scheint die Entwicklungen in Syrien im Gegensatz zu denen im Iran ziemlich gelassen zu verfolgen. Hatte es zunächst so ausgesehen, als würde die politische Führung des Staates am liebsten als Status quo festhalten wollen...

Die Sicherung der kurzen Grenze wurde bereits verstärkt, nachdem palästinensische Demonstranten im Frühjahr aus Syrien kommend einfach nach Israel einmarschiert waren. Eine neue Zentralregierung in Damaskus wäre nach Einschätzung israelischer Kommentatoren eher schwach und damit kaum in der Lage sein, Druck zur Rückgabe des besetzten Golan zu machen...

Allerdings sind nicht alle Analysen Israels überzeugend: Armeechef Benny Gantz hatte kürzlich das kuriose Angebot gemacht, den Alewiten - der schiitischen Sekte, der die Assad-Familie angehört - Asyl auf dem besetzten Golan anzubieten. Vor dem Hintergrund, dass die Rückgewinnung der Golan-Höhen für Haifa al Assad und damit wohl auch für seinen Sohn eine höchst emotionale Angelegenheit war, bei der es um die persönliche Ehre ging, ist das entweder als Witz oder Provokation zu verstehen.

An der Grenze

Die Arabische Liga wirkt geeint. Doch wie verhalten sich Syriens Nachbarn?

VON ANDREA NÜSSE

Der lange geplante Antrittsbesuch des Generalsekretärs der Arabischen Liga, Nabil al Arabi, in Berlin gab Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel die Gelegenheit, der Regionalorganisation den Rücken zu stärken. Die EU unterstützte die „feste Haltung“ der Arabischen Liga zu Syrien und werde sie „durch weitere Sanktionen untermauern“...

Doch die Zeit drängt. Das syrische Regime geht weiter brutal gegen die Opposition vor, in der Protesthochburg

Homs sitzen nach Angaben von Aktivisten mehr als 100.000 Syrer wegen des Dauerbeschusses fest. Und der jüngste Vorschlag der Liga - ein Friedenseinsatz mit den UN in Syrien - hat noch einmal deutlich gezeigt, dass die Organisation alles andere als geeint ist in ihrer Haltung zu diesem Konflikt. Insbesondere einige Nachbarländer wollen sich der Konfrontation mit dem Regime des syrischen Präsidenten Baschar al Assad nicht anschließen.

Der Libanon, dessen Regierung von der mit Syrien verbündeten Hisbollah dominiert wird, wies den Beschluss zurück, der auch den Ausbau der Beziehungen zur syrischen Opposition vorsieht. Und das Nachbarland Irak, enger Verbündeter des Iran, stimmte nur aus Opportunismus zu. Ein Parlamentarier der irakischen Liste erklärte: „Der Irak will in der Liga nicht isoliert dastehen. Denn dann wird der nächste arabische Gipfel

nicht in Bagdad stattfinden. Und das würde bedeuten, dass Katar weiterhin in allen Sitzungen den Vorsitz hätte, was auch Assad nicht will.“ Katar gilt als treibende Kraft hinter der harten Haltung gegenüber Syrien.

Allen arabischen Nachbarn ist gemeinsam, dass sie wenig Einfluss auf das Assad-Regime haben. Dessen Drohung, der Untergang seines Regimes werde die gesamte Region in Flammen setzen, nehmen sie aber sehr ernst, zumal der Konflikt immer stärker konfessionelle Züge annimmt. Damit ist die nicht-arabische Türkei wohl der wichtigste Spieler, da sie der Opposition und der Freien Syrischen Armee Unterstützung gewährt. Israel dagegen schaut relativ gelassen zu - weil es seine Grenze zu Syrien als gesichert ansieht und Forderungen nach einer Rückgabe des besetzten Golan in jedem Szenario in weite Ferne rückt.

TÜRKEI



Einwohner: 74,7 Millionen
Staatsform: parlamentarische Republik
Staatschef: Abdullah Gül
Besonderheiten: dynamische Außenpolitik einer selbstbewussten Regionalmacht

Über Jahre war Syrien ein Schlüsselstaat in der türkischen „Null Problem“-Außenpolitik. Mit möglichst harmonischen Beziehungen zu allen Nachbarstaaten wollte Ankara in der Region für Stabilität und Ruhe sorgen, um das politische Gewicht der Türkei zu erhöhen und die wirtschaftlichen Exportchancen zu verbessern. Der südliche Nachbar Syrien, mit der Türkei durch eine 900 Kilometer lange Landgrenze verbunden, war dabei ein wichtiger Faktor. Syrien sollte der Türkei das Tor zum Nahen Osten öffnen. Die Vstimpflicht zwischen beiden Staaten wurde abgeschafft, gemeinsame Kabinettsitzungen wurden angesetzt. Doch dann brachen die Unruhen in Syrien aus, und alles wurde anders.

Nachdem sich die türkische Regierung monatelang vergeblich bemühte, Baschar al Assad zu Reformen in Syrien zu bewegen, kam im vergangenen August der Bruch. Heute ist die Türkei überzeugt, dass Ruhe und Stabilität in Syrien nur noch ohne Assad möglich sind. Deshalb bot Ankara der syrischen Exilopposition die Möglichkeit, sich auf türkischem Boden zu versammeln. In Aufangängen an der Grenze wurden teilweise über 10.000 syrische Flüchtlinge versorgt, derzeit sind es rund 7500. Unter den Flüchtlingen waren auch Deserteure der syrischen Armee - sie konnten den Widerstand gegen Assad durch den Aufbau der „Freien Syrischen Armee“ von der Türkei aus organisieren.

Für die Lösung des Konflikts beim Nachbarn koordiniert die Türkei eng mit der Arabischen Liga und dem Golf-Kooperationsrat. Einer Militärintervention steht sie offiziell ablehnend gegenüber, weil ein militärischer Konflikt beim Nachbar nach der Türkei selbst schaden könnte. Einige türkische Experten vermuten aber, dass hinter den Kulissen über eine türkisch-arabische Friedenstruppe nachgedacht wird.

IRAK



Einwohner: 29 Millionen
Staatsform: föderale Republik
Staatschef: Dschalal Talabani
Besonderheiten: in Schiiten und Sunniten gespaltenes Land, in dem der Iran und die Türkei um Einfluss rivalisieren

Irak und Syrien, früher die beiden rivalisierenden Baath-Regime in der Region, verbindet eigentlich eine historische Feindschaft. Doch die Beziehungen hatten sich in den letzten Jahren verbessert. Heute ist der Irak für Syrien der wichtigste Partner, wenn es gilt, westliche Sanktionen und Embargos zu umgehen: Er liefert bereits fast 20 Prozent seiner Exporte in das östliche Nachbarland, neue Kooperationen wurden im vergangenen Jahr vereinbart. Diese Solidarität erklärt sich sicher auch damit, dass der Irak schiitisch dominiert und damit seit dem Sturz von Saddam Hussein näher an den Iran gerückt ist, einen der letzten Getreuen Syriens. Doch besonders in den westlichen Provinzen des Irak, die an Syrien grenzen und die von Sunniten bewohnt werden, ist wiederum die Solidarität mit den Aufständischen im Nachbarland besonders groß. Dabei spielt die gemeinsame sunnitische Identität eine Rolle, aber vor allem gibt es Familien- und Stammesbande über die Grenze hinweg. Die Provinz hat Hilfspolizei, Geld und angeblich auch Waffen nach Syrien gebracht. Der irakische Vize-Innenminister hat zudem vom Einsickern von Al-Qaida-Kämpfern gesprochen. Offiziell lässt Bagdad keine Waffen über die Grenze.

Sonach ist der Irak im Falle Syriens eine Gratwanderung, eine einheitliche Position gibt es nicht. Ohne sich in der Arabischen Liga und Teilen der eigenen Bevölkerung zu isolieren, stimmte die Regierung von Nuri al Maliki im November 2011 gegen Wirtschaftssanktionen gegen Damaskus und sprach sich gegen einen Regimewechsel aus. Militärinterventionen von außen wird der Irak aufgrund seiner eigenen Erfahrungen ohnehin nicht mittragen. Immer wieder versucht al Maliki, zwischen der von Katar und den Golfstaaten zu einem harten Kurs angetriebenen Liga und Baschar al Assad zu vermitteln. Doch selbst Schiiten befürchten, bei einem Fall des Assad-Regimes werde der Iran seinen Einfluss im Irak ausbauen wollen. Die irakische Regierung ist zugleich nach dem Abzug der US-Truppen verstärkt dem Zerrn durch den Iran und die Türkei ausgesetzt, die nun um Einfluss rivalisieren und in Syrien gegensätzliche Positionen vertreten.

In der Anbar sollen nun Flüchtlingslager eingerichtet werden - wahrscheinlich in erster Linie für die Iraker, die sich nach der US-Invasion 2003 und dem anschließenden Bürgerkrieg nach Syrien geflüchtet hatten. Mit einer Million Iraker hatte Syrien die weitaus meisten Flüchtlinge aufgenommen, was im Nachbarland nicht vergessen ist.



JORDANIEN



Einwohner: 6,3 Millionen
Staatsform: Monarchie
Staatschef: König Abdullah II.
Besonderheiten: zumeist homogene sunnitische Bevölkerungsstruktur und Meister im Abfeuern von Konflikten in Nachbarländern

König Abdullah II. hat sich mit Stellungnahmen zu Syrien lange zurückgehalten. Als die Golfstaaten und die USA, enger Verbündeter des Königreiches, im Herbst das Regime von Baschar al Assad zu attackieren begannen, zog Jordanien nach. Abdullah war der erste arabische Staatschef, der im November 2011 den Rücktritt Assads forderte - in der britischen BBC. Damit stellte er sicher, dass die US-Gelder für politisches Wohlbefinden weiter fließen. Außerdem will Jordanien aus wirtschaftlicher Not näher an die reichen Golfstaaten rücken, die sogar eine Aufnahme des Wüstenstaates in den Golf-Kooperationsrat prüfen. Deshalb kann Jordanien

diese Staaten nicht verprellen. Zudem will Abdullah II. nie wieder so isoliert dastehen wie im ersten Golfkrieg, nach der Invasion des Irak in Kuwait, als sein Vater nicht der arabisch-amerikanischen Kriegskoalition beitrug. Anders als der Libanon und der Irak hat Jordanien eine relativ homogene sunnitische Bevölkerung und ist daher den konfessionellen Verwerfungen weniger ausgesetzt.

Doch in Jordanien sind die Islamisten die treibende Kraft für Reformen - und sie unterstützen auch die Aufständischen in Syrien, deren Bewegung immer stärker islamisiert zu sein scheint. Damit wird die Solidarität mit der syrischen Demokratiebewegung gefährlich für den König, der viel von politischen Reformen redet, aber wenig durchsetzt. Stattdessen entlässt er regelmäßig die Regierungschefs. Ein Umsturz in Syrien, nach dem die sunnitische Bevölkerungsmehrheit wieder stärkeren Einfluss haben würde, hätte wohl gleichzeitig eine Stärkung der islamistischen Opposition in Jordanien zur Folge. Nachdem Tunesien und Ägypten bereits das bisherige „Musterland“ Jordanien im politischen Reformprozess überholt haben, steht König Abdullah seit dem Ausbruch des Aufstands in Syrien unter noch größerem Handlungsdruck.

Der Standard (Autriche / Austria)

Brisante Syrien-Gespräche in Wien

Die jüngste Entwicklung in Syrien verleiht den Gesprächen des russischen Außenministers Sergej Lawrow am Rande der UN-Antidrogenkonferenz in Wien besondere Brisanz. Am Mittwoch traf Lawrow Michael Spindelegger.

Josef Kirchengast

Wien – Die Ankündigung eines Verfassungsferendums durch den syrischen Präsidenten Bashar al-Assad (siehe Artikel unten) änderte die Ausgangslage für das Treffen zwischen Außenminister Michael Spindelegger und seinem russischen Amtskollegen Sergej Lawrow, das für Mittwochabend im Wiener Außenministerium angesetzt war.

Russland begründet sein Veto gegen eine Resolution des UN-Sicherheitsrates zu Syrien bisher unter anderem damit, dass durch stärkere Einflussnahme von außen die Lage im Land noch schwieriger und Reformen zusätzlich erschwert würden. Den Hinweis, dass Russland selbst Waffen an das syrische Regime liefert, kontert Moskau mit der (nicht näher erläuterten) Behauptung, die syrischen Regimegegner („Terroristen“) erhielten ihrerseits Waffen aus dem Ausland.

Im Gegensatz zu Russland und im Einklang mit dem jüngsten Vorstoß der Arabischen Liga und mehreren westlichen Staaten spricht sich Spindelegger klar für einen Uno-Einsatz aus, um die Gewalt in Syrien zu beenden. Frankreich, dessen Außenminister Alain Juppé ebenfalls an der Wiener UN-Konferenz teilnimmt, hat zuletzt eine Wende



Einwohner der syrischen Aufständischen-Hochburg Homs in einem Schutzquartier.

Foto: Reuters

angedeutet. Nachdem Juppé noch am Montag gemeint hatte, ein internationaler Militäreinsatz könne „die Lage nur verschlimmern“, schloss der Pariser Außenamtssprecher Bernard Valero tags darauf eine UN-Friedensmission in Syrien nicht mehr aus.

Lawrow selbst war vor etwa einer Woche bei Assad und wurde in Damaskus von jubelnden Massen empfangen. Russland unterhält in Syrien seinen einzigen Flottenstützpunkt im Mittelmeer.

Lawrow zeigte in Damaskus erwartungsgemäß Verständnis für den Präsidenten. „Ein jeder Staatschef in je-

dem Land muss sich seiner Verantwortung bewusst sein. Sie sind sich Ihrer bewusst“, sagte Lawrow zu Assad laut russischen Nachrichtenagenturen.

Ein Treffen zwischen Lawrow und Juppé in Wien wurde offiziell nicht angekündigt, aber allgemein erwartet. Nicht geplant ist eine gemeinsame Pressekonferenz.

Als weiteres heißes Thema des Gesprächs zwischen Spindelegger und Lawrow galt der Atomstreit mit dem Iran. In jüngster Zeit verdichten sich die Hinweise, dass Israel schon bald einen Militärschlag gegen iranische Atomanlagen starten könnte. Russlands Syrien-Position wird auch in diesem Konnex gesehen: Angesichts ei-

nes drohenden Flächenbrandes in der Region wolle Moskau seinen syrischen Brückenkopf unter allen Umständen halten.

An der UN-Konferenz über die Bekämpfung des Drogenschmuggels aus Afghanistan am heutigen Donnerstag in der Wiener Hofburg nehmen auch Uno-Generalsekretär Ban Ki-moon, der afghanische Außenminister Zalmai Rassoul und US-Vizeaußenminister William Burns sowie weitere Regierungsmitglieder aus zahlreichen Staaten teil. In einer politischen Absichtserklärung sollen Ziele etwa zu koordiniertem Vorgehen gegen die Geldwäsche von Erlösen aus Drogengeschäften formuliert werden.

SCHWERPUNKT:

Umgang mit Regime in Damaskus

Tribune de Genève (Suisse / Switzerland)

Dix jours dans l'enfer de Homs, la « capitale rebelle » pilonnée

Le régime de Bachar el-Assad a lancé hier l'un des assauts les plus violents sur la troisième ville du pays. Au mépris des morts civiles

Andrés Allemand

Deux roquettes à la minute. Une véritable pluie de bombes s'abatant sur les quartiers sunnites acquis à l'opposition. Et puis les tirs de snipers, postés sur les toits. Troisième ville de Syrie et « capitale de la révolution », Homs a subi hier le pilonnage le plus violent de ces derniers jours, assure l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme. Les forces loyalistes, depuis dix jours, entreprennent d'écraser les bastions rebelles défendus par les nombreux déserteurs ralliés à l'Armée libre syrienne.

Les écraser, quitte à tuer sans retenue des centaines de civils. Plus de 300, selon l'opposition. Et d'innombrables blessés. Voilà qui provoque l'indignation de la haut-commissaire de l'ONU aux droits de l'homme. Car pour Navi Pillay, cela ne fait pas l'ombre d'un doute: ces « attaques sans discernement » contre des zones densément peuplées ont été « encouragées » par le veto qu'opposent Moscou et Pékin à toute initiative du Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies. C'est une carte blanche à Bachar el-Assad.

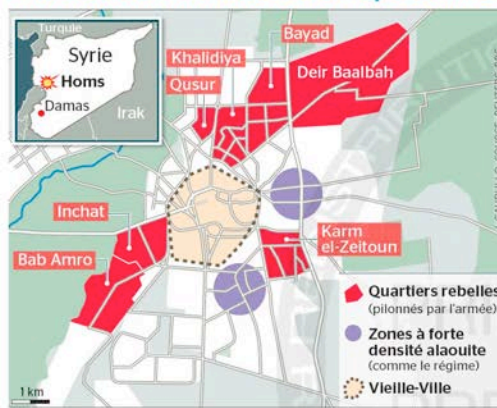
Les fantômes de la mort

Comment les habitants survivent-ils sous les bombes? Ici, un bâtiment s'effondre, tuant une famille entière. Là, c'est un hôpital de fortune qui subit des tirs. « La situation est tragique », s'alarme Hadi Abdallah, l'un des rares contacts



Près du quartier de Bab Amro, des familles se terrent dans des abris. AFP

La ville de Homs transformée en champ de bataille



joint par l'Agence France Presse malgré la coupure presque totale des communications téléphoniques. Ce membre du Conseil de la révolution de Homs affirme que les gens sont « entassés dans les abris » et que « depuis une semaine les morts sont enterrés dans les jardins, car même les cimetières sont visés par des tirs ». Surtout, la situation est critique pour les femmes enceintes, les cardiaques, les diabétiques et tous les blessés qui ne peuvent être évacués vers des hôpitaux de fortune. Lesquels, d'ailleurs, manquent cruellement de médicaments.

De retour de Homs, où il s'est rendu avec l'écrivain franco-américain Jonathan Littell, le photjournaliste Mani décrit dans *Le Monde* une population survivant sans électricité depuis que les

transformateurs ont été détruits par les forces loyalistes. Et faute de fuel, les gens se chauffent au bois. Depuis longtemps, les enfants restent cloîtrés à la maison pour ne pas être la cible des snipers. Mais ils n'y sont pas non plus en sécurité, note Paul Wood, le reporter de la BBC. La nourriture commence à manquer. Et outre les bombes, des milices protégées surnommées *shabithas*, c'est-à-dire « fantômes », passent de maison en maison, semant la mort parmi les civils.

Les tunnels de survie

Pour survivre, habitants et combattants cassent les murs séparant les maisons afin de pouvoir circuler à couvert, à l'abri des balles. Un tunnel aurait même été creusé, selon France 24, pour désenclaver le quartier de Karm el-Zeitoun. On l'a surnommé le « tunnel de Rafah », en référence à ceux creusés dans cette ville palestinienne, entre la bande de Gaza et l'Égypte.

Paul Wood raconte comment les quartiers sunnites, largement acquis au soulèvement, sont pilonnés depuis les zones alaouites et chrétiennes. Même s'il dit avoir croisé des loyalistes sunnites et des rebelles chrétiens ou alaouites, le risque de dérive vers un conflit purement confessionnel est réel. Le photographe Mani, pour sa part, note que les familles alaouites et sunnites fuient les quartiers multi-confessionnels, les premiers trouvant refuge dans des zones loyalistes, les seconds cherchant abri parmi les rebelles en dépit des bombardements.

La dérive confessionnelle est-elle encore évitable? En tout cas, le Conseil national syrien s'y emploie. Aujourd'hui à Doha, il doit désigner un nouveau président. Or, parmi les trois favoris, figure un chrétien: l'opposant historique George Sabra.

Le Temps (Suisse / Switzerland)

Faire pression sur Damas, casse-tête onusien

> ONU Pour dépasser la paralysie du Conseil de sécurité, les Occidentaux et la Ligue arabe poussent à l'adoption d'une résolution

Stéphane Bussard NEW YORK

Mercredi, au moins 33 personnes ont été tuées en Syrie dont un enfant. Homs, la « capitale de la révolution », était quasiment coupée du monde. Parallèlement, pour tenter de réduire la pression intérieure et extérieure, le président syrien Bachar el-Assad a annoncé la tenue d'un référendum le 26 février sur une nouvelle Constitution pour supprimer son article 8 assurant le monopole du parti Baas depuis 1963.

Cette tentative de réforme qualifiée de « plaisanterie » par la Maison-Blanche, n'atténue pas le bilan des morts (quelque 6000) qui ne cesse de s'alourdir depuis le début de la contestation, à la mi-mars 2011. Mais que font les Nations unies? L'ONU n'étant que l'expres-

sion de la volonté des Etats, blâmer l'organisation pour son impuissance peut vite être perçu comme un exercice futile. Il reste que face à la tragédie syrienne, la paralysie du Conseil de sécurité paraît ir- réelle, quasi scandaleuse, même si prendre des mesures contre Damas équivaut à toucher au sensible et dangereux domino moyen-oriental. Le blocage provoqué par le double veto russe et chinois est d'autant plus apparu au grand jour que, lundi, le haut-commissaire de l'ONU aux droits de l'homme, Navi Pillay, a tapé du poing sur la table devant l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU à New York. Sans s'embar-asser de précautions diplomatiques. « Plus la communauté internationale tardera à agir, plus la population civile va souffrir des innombrables atrocités commises contre elle », a-t-elle déclaré. La scène est piquante. Les institutions onusiennes chargées des droits de l'homme et basées à Genève (Conseil des droits de l'homme et Haut-Commissariat) ont parfois eu mauvaise presse au Palais de verre surplombant l'Eas River. Or aujourd'hui, ce sont elles qui sont les plus en pointe pour dénoncer les crimes (contre l'humanité?) commis en Syrie et appeler à l'ac-

tion. Pour montrer que l'ONU reste mobilisée, l'Assemblée générale à New York a néanmoins pris les devants. Elle doit voter ce jeudi un projet de résolution défendu par l'Egypte qui préside le groupe arabe. Le projet, qui reprend 90% des points figurant dans la résolution ayant échoué devant le Conseil de sécurité, « condamne fermement les violations continues et systématiques des droits de l'homme et

Moscou craint que le Conseil de sécurité ne se transforme en « machine à changer les régimes »

des libertés fondamentales par les autorités syriennes telles que l'usage de la force contre des civils et les exécutions arbitraires ». Elle appelle, sur la base du plan élaboré par la Ligue arabe, de cesser les violences et de protéger la population, elle exhorte les forces armées et l'armée syrienne à se retirer des villes. La résolution n'est pas contraignante, mais elle est politiquement importante. Elle est soutenue par la Suisse, l'Union

européenne, plusieurs Etats occidentaux. Au sein du camp arabe, hormis l'Algérie, l'Irak et le Liban, elle devrait obtenir un large soutien.

Parer au blocage du Conseil de sécurité en recourant à l'Assemblée générale? La démarche rappelle la célèbre « résolution Achéson » de novembre 1950, en pleine guerre de Corée. Cette résolution de l'Assemblée générale aussi dénommée « Union pour le maintien de la paix » avait été adoptée pour contourner les veto soviétiques. Or dans le cas présent, la Russie, davantage que la Chine, apparaît comme le moteur du front du refus. Jeudi, elle va sans doute proposer, comme elle l'a fait au Conseil de sécurité, de renégocier chaque mot, chaque virgule et tenter de mettre sur un même plan les violences étatiques et ces-

les de l'opposition. Cette position russe n'est toutefois pas surprenante. Moscou a été échaudé par les opérations libyennes menées en vertu d'une résolution 1973 interprétée à tort par les Occidentaux comme un blanc-seing pour provoquer un changement de régime. Or le Kremlin craint que le Conseil de sécurité ne se transforme en « machine à changer les régimes ». L'intransigeance de Moscou s'explique aussi par le contexte interne: le pouvoir russe redoute au plus haut point une contestation similaire et ne changera pas d'attitude avant l'élection présidentielle du 4 mars. Il y a enfin les intérêts géopolitiques de Moscou au Moyen-Orient. La Syrie est, avec l'Iran, l'un des principaux alliés de la Russie. La « lâcheté » équivaudrait à sacrifier ses intérêts dans la région.

La Suisse ferme son ambassade à Damas

La Suisse fermera « ces prochains jours » son ambassade à Damas, la capitale syrienne, a annoncé mercredi soir Didier Burkhalter sur les ondes de la RSR. « Nous avons retiré notre ambassadeur

très vite, mais nous avions maintenu notre ambassade », a expliqué le chef de la diplomatie suisse, qui a conseillé à tous les ressortissants helvétiques de quitter la Syrie « au plus vite ». ATS

IL MEGA-RADUNO DEGLI SPIONI AL SERVIZIO DEI DITTATORI

Dubai, c'è anche l'italiana Area (già in affari con Assad)



La protesta di un gruppo di oppositori siriani davanti alla sede di Area spa (L'espresso)

di **Giovanna Loccatelli**

Beirut

Tre giornate imperdibili per chi si occupa di sorveglianza elettronica: è l'Iss world Mea. Letteralmente sta per "sistemi di supporto intelligente", il più grande raduno internazionale, off-line per la stampa, in Medio Oriente e Africa.

Qui si danno appuntamento le società leader nel settore della sorveglianza, delle comunicazioni e i funzionari di intelligence, operatori telefonici, dirigenti della polizia di tutta l'area che si occupano di intercettazioni legali, indagini elettroniche e raccolta di informazioni in rete. L'iniziativa, organizzata dall'azienda Telestrategies, principale produttrice di eventi di congressi di telecomunicazioni negli Stati Uniti, ha preso il via sabato all'Hotel Marriott di Dubai e durerà fino a oggi.

Illustrazione di **Maritima Nardi**



SIRIA stragi continue, la Lega Araba in stallo

Dialogo con Assad. Poi un piano di pace, sospensione della Siria, sanzioni e voto di osservatori. Fino all'ultima carta, la richiesta dello spingimento di Caschi Blu. La crisi siriana è stata per la Lega Araba un momento di prova. La prima rivoluzione della Primavera Araba in cui le è stato chiesto dall'intera comunità internazionale di assumere un ruolo di protagonista. Un ruolo che l'organizzazione panaraba ha fatto fatica ad assumere, soprattutto a causa delle divisioni interne. E che ha messo a nudo tutta la sua debolezza, con un valzer di annunci e nulla di fatto, mentre l'Onu e la comunità internazionale aspettano ancora dei passi concreti. E ieri il governo siriano ha respinto "categoricamente" le accuse mosse dalla Commissione Onu per i diritti umani, secondo cui nel Paese sono stati compiuti "crimini contro l'umanità".

Innanzitutto sul terreno anche ieri sono di segnalare decine di vittime - almeno quaranta, secondo fonti dell'opposizione - nelle città di Homs e Idlib, due dei centri principali dell'Esercito libero siriano. Proprio ad Homs sarebbero stati catturati un generale e 18 traufficiali e sufficienti delle forze di sicurezza fedeli al presidente Bashar al Assad.

non rivelare niente che non dovrebbero. Questa è una paranoia che avverti ovunque; non puoi mai sapere se sia acceso un qualsiasi kit ben nascosto o che una pulce stia registrando le conversazioni. All'Iss di Kuala Lumpur, l'anno scorso, pensavo che i cellulari 3G fossero intercettati e i messaggi letti... I partecipanti non erano, ovviamente, interessati a me, erano tutti presi dall'attrezzatura, tutti generazionali, che avrebbero potuto acquistare. E i venditori erano alla ricerca di grandi contatti".

fonino di un urgente ed inviabile attraverso internet ad un sito o ad un computer remoto sulla rete.

Sillustra come "lo spyware viene installato sui cellulari degli utenti anche senza che essi ne siano a conoscenza". Intervistato, Eric King di Privacy International spiega che in queste occasioni le società che operano nel mercato vendono - legalmente - i loro prodotti, il tutto avvolto da un alone di segretezza. "Si respira una strana atmosfera, i partecipanti sono tutti guardinghi, cercano di agire e muoversi discretamente, stanno molto attenti a

nologiche sul mercato, sono due e riguardano le intercettazioni telefoniche e l'utilizzo di software spyware per cellulari.

Il grande fratello delle intercettazioni

"UNA dimostrazione di come avvengono le intercettazioni e come utilizzare propriamente questi strumenti", si legge nel programma del primo seminario. E l'altro si intitola "Capire il Mobile Spyware": è un software-respìa il cui scopo è leggere le informazioni presenti nel tele-

liste delle informazioni"; "Monitoraggio del traffico crittografato, dimostrazione del prodotto e training"; "Monitoraggio dei social network e dimostrazione di utilizzo di prodotti investigativi"; "Monitoraggio di dati di massa, dimostrazione di intercettazioni, analisi e training".

Come emerge dalla lista agenda, oltre a nuovi media (specialmente Facebook e Twitter), l'interesse delle compagnie si focalizza sulla localizzazione e monitoraggio dei cellulari e sull'intercettazione di massa. "Le Novità", così etichettati i seminari con le ultime innovazioni tec-

stato ritrovato nel palazzo dell'intelligence di Mubarak dopo la rivoluzione di gennaio; Amessys del gruppo Bull, che già nel 2007 aveva venduto i suoi prodotti a Gheddafi. Presenti all'appello anche le italiane Hacking Team, Ips del gruppo Resi di Apollia e Res-lab di intercettazione; le tedesche Ultimaco e Trovitor; la francese Vupen e la cinese Ziesec. Sette le sessioni principali di Dubai: "Iss per le intercettazioni"; "Iss per il monitoraggio del social network"; "Iss per la localizzazione, sorveglianza e intercettazione dei cellulari"; "Iss per la raccolta e ana-

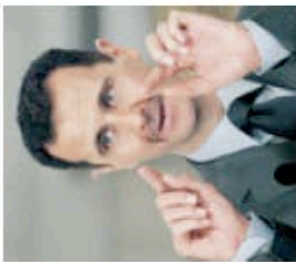
Controllo di Facebook e Twitter nel mirino

LE PROSSIME tappe del 2012 saranno a Praga, 5-7 giugno; a Brasilia, 24-26 luglio; a Washington DC, 10-12 ottobre; a Kuala Lumpur, 11-13 dicembre. Imagogori sponsor dell'Iss sono alcune popolari società, recentemente alla ribalta della cronaca per aver venduto le proprie attrezzature a regimi sanguinari. Non mancano nella lista l'italiana Area spa, nota per gli affari con la Siria; Gamma International, il cui accordo di vendita è

Il Fatto (Italie / Italy)

MULTIPARTITISMO E ISLAM L'ULTIMA OFFERTA DI ASSAD

Referendum tra 10 giorni per salvare il regime



Francesca Ciccardi
Damasco

Il regime di Damasco annuncia che la nuova Costituzione siriana sarà sottoposta a referendum il prossimo 26 febbraio, così come aveva già promesso all'inizio dell'anno. I media statali informano che la Costituzione aprirà la porta a un sistema politico "basato sul principio del pluralismo" e che "il potere sarà esercitato democraticamente attraverso le elezioni", le quali si terranno 90 giorni dopo l'approvazione del progetto costituzionale. Il presidente Bashar Al Assad continua così la propria *road map*, che appare poco sincera e realista mentre l'Esercito e le forze di sicurezza intensificano la repressione e gli attacchi contro i civili. Ieri le



Manifestazione pro-regime a Damasco. In alto, Bashar al Assad (foto: L'espresso)

truppe d'élite della Quarta Divisione, comandata dal fratello di Assad, Maher, sono entrate nel quartiere ribelle di Barzeh, a Damasco, dove i tank non erano penetrati fino a questo momento. La città centrale di Homs è rimasta sotto i bombardamenti governativi per il tredicesimo giorno consecutivo, secondo gli attivisti locali. Anche Idlib, alla frontiera con la Turchia, è sotto assedio così come Deraa

Dopo mezzo secolo finirebbe il dominio del partito di famiglia Baath

l'opposizione all'estero, così come per i ribelli armati, le riforme arrivano troppo tardi. Ma nel cuore del regime, a Damasco, c'è ancora chi ha fiducia in una soluzione negoziata del conflitto, che è ormai guerra aperta in molte zone del paese, tranne la capitale. "Il regime ha gestito male la situazione fin dall'inizio, non ha voluto ascoltare e ha portato l'opposizione a prendere le armi", dice Kadri Jamil, uno storico politico siriano di sinistra, che fino a poco tempo fa non avrebbe potuto parlare apertamente, neanche uscire allo scoperto. Jamil assicura che molte cose sono cambiate dall'inizio della rivoluzione e che il regime si è aperto, permettendo, per esempio, la creazione di nuovi partiti politici oltre al Baath, unico e al governo da mezzo secolo. Lo

stesso Jamil ha fondato il Partito della Volontà del Popolo e come opposizione tollerata dal regime è favorevole al dialogo, e crede in un cambio democratico, anche sotto la presidenza di Assad. "Il governo deve capire e accettare che è necessario fare delle concessioni, che non può più avere il potere assoluto", dice Jamil.

"CI DEVE ESSERE un dialogo immediato con i gruppi armati e la creazione di un governo di unità nazionale con tutte le forze politiche, che favorisca una riconciliazione nazionale", propone Jamil. Ma ciò appare sempre più difficile, dopo tutto il sangue versato e una guerra che è sempre più a carattere settario. Jamil crede che il movimento di protesta originale - coloro che sono scesi in strada nel marzo dell'anno scorso e che continuano a farlo malgrado i protettori del regime - potrebbe svolgere il ruolo di mediatore.

Anche per il regime, è ormai una questione di vita o di morte, e Assad non sembra disposto a lasciare il potere. Difficile sapere se rispetterà le sue promesse, considerate una "bellezza" dagli Usa mentre un "passo positivo" dalla Russia, ma di certo sarà difficile portare a termine un referendum sotto i colpi di mortaio.

L'opposizione boccia la proposta mentre l'Esercito continua la repressione

Il Manifesto (Italie / Italy)

SIRIA • Si ripete la stessa operazione mediatica: come per la «guerra umanitaria» in Libia

La (dis)informazione a senso unico

Marinella Correggia

Mentre sulla Siria va avanti il grande gioco diplomatico e dalla Siria continuano ad arrivare versioni contrastanti e contrapposte delle violenze che insanguinano il paese ormai da quasi un anno, vale la pena cercare di rompere l'assedio mediatico e la narrazione a senso unico (in favore degli insorti, ovvio) data da governi e media occidentali. Questo per cercare di fare un po' di chiarezza ed evitare il ripetersi di uno scenario alla libica. Anche in vista, per chi ne sia interessato, della manifestazione fissata per domenica prossima a sostegno del Consiglio nazionale siriano (Cns) a cui pare abbiano aderito fra gli altri Cgil, Arci, Acli, Libera.

Basato in Turchia (ma il suo leader Bhouran Gharioun vive a Parigi da decenni, sostiene però di rappresentare l'80% dei siriani), il Cns, attraverso i suoi «osservatori sui diritti umani» da Londra e i cosiddetti «Comitati di coordinamento locale», è la fonte quasi esclusiva delle notizie pubblicate sui media che accreditano la versione di una «rivolta a mani nude contro il dittatore».

A differenza dei settori dell'opposizione favorevoli al negoziato e non alla lotta armata né all'ingerenza straniera, il Cns rifiuta ogni possibile negoziato e mediazione (come il Cnt libico, a suo tempo). Non ne ha bisogno, perché ha trovato molti alleati fra i paesi occidentali e le petromonarchie del Golfo, ai quali ha chiesto da tempo l'imposizione di una *no-fly zone* «per la protezione dei civili» (per esempio in ottobre e in gennaio: <http://www.wallstreetitalia.com/article/1307700/siria-oppo-sizione-invo-ca-intervento-onu-serve-no-fly-zone.aspx>). Del resto come va-

ri analisti hanno spiegato, soprattutto nel caso siriano la *no-fly zone* non avrebbe senso e dovrebbe piuttosto sfociare in un vero e proprio sostegno aereo anti-Assad.

Il Cns ha stretto in dicembre un patto di collaborazione (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/middleeast/factional-splits-hinder-drive-to-topple-syrias-assad.html?_r=1&page-wanted=all) con il cosiddetto "Esercito siriano libero".

Il rappresentante del Cns in Italia (e organizzatore della manifestazione del 19 a Roma) è Mohammed Nor-Dachan. Sul sito del Cns risulta affiliato alla Fratellanza musulmana (<http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/members/item/241-mohammad-nour-dachan.html>). Lui sostiene che l'EsL è fatto di «soldati, sottufficiali e ufficiali che hanno scelto di rifiutare di sparare alla gente comune disarmata e non è un esercito di guerra, ma ha solo l'obiettivo di difendere le manifestazioni». In realtà l'EsL è responsabile di uccisioni di soldati e civili siriani (ci sono elenchi nominativi documentati) e atti di sabotaggio e terrorismo (di recente decine di morti in esplosioni ad Aleppo). Accanto all'EsL l'intervento armato occidentale e delle petromonarchie c'è già e da tempo. Non sotto forma di bombardamenti ma di finanziamenti e invio di armi, consiglieri e mercenari.

Mentre la Turchia offre la base logistica all'EsL, Qatar e altri paesi non fanno mistero del loro appoggio «diplomatico» e finanziario e in armi; a metà gennaio lo sceicco Bin Khalifa Thani ha dichiarato la volontà di mandare truppe. Inglesi e francesi hanno confermato di aver mandato unità ad assistere i rivoltosi. Sono state scoperte armi inglesi avviate clandestinamente, sul suolo siriano

sono già operativi commandos e forze speciali. L'obiettivo è di creare delle «zone liberate» così da legittimare l'intervento «umanitario» esterno.

Da tempo l'opposizione siriana ottiene armi (<http://rt.com/news/syria-opposition-weapon-smuggling-843/>). Obama pensa di replicare i successi libici: nessun uomo, nessun morto americano, ma consiglieri e soldati. Indiscrezioni raccolte dal *Guardian* sulla presenza di reparti speciali britannici e americani al fianco degli insorti. E le voci diffuse dal sito israeliano *Debka* (vicino al

Mossad, ma informato) su truppe inglesi e qatariote con i ribelli a Homs.

Poi ci sono i mercenari libici. Dopo un incontro, in dicembre, di Ghalioun a Tripoli con i nuovi leader, centinaia di volontari libici sarebbero partiti per la Siria, sparpagliati tra Homs, Idlib e Rastan (http://www.corriere.it/esteri/12_febbraio_10/olimpio-siria-insorti_a9528996-53da-11e1-a1a9-e74b7d5bd021.shtml). La missione è coordinata dall'ex qaedi-sta Abdelhakeem Belhaj, figura di spicco della nuova Libia, e dal suo vice Mahdi al Harati.

**L'UNICO FILM CHE UNISCE L'ITALIA
... A FORZA DI RISATE**

MEDUSA FILM PRESENTA

CLAUDIO SIRIO ALESSANDRO SIANI
**BENVENUTI AL
NORD**
UN FILM DI
LUCA MINIERO

ANGELA FINOCCHIARO - VALENTINA LODOVINI - NANDO PAONE
e con la partecipazione di PAOLO ROSSI e GIACOMO RIZZO

AI CINEMA DI MILANO
COLOSSEO - DUCALE - GLORIA - PLINIUS
THE SPACE CINEMA ODEON
UCI CINEMAS BICOCCA - UCI CINEMAS CERTOSA

El Mundo (Espagne / Spain)

Lío europeo ante el caos sirio

Merkel apoya una misión de paz que rechaza Sarkozy, mientras Cameron ve con Obama cómo aumentar la presión

ROSALÍA SÁNCHEZ / Berlín
Especial para EL MUNDO

Angela Merkel se colocó ayer firmemente del lado de la Liga Árabe en el conflicto sirio. Tras reunirse en Berlín con su secretario general, Nabil al Arabi, la canciller alemana olvidó que estaba hablando de países no democráticos y aseguró que esa organización «ha encontrado indicios graves de violaciones de derechos humanos y ha asumido una posición firme que la Unión Europea comparte», por lo que su Gobierno apoyará «nuevas sanciones» contra el régimen.

«El presidente [Bashar] Asad ya no tiene nada que hacer al frente de Siria» y tiene que dejar vía libre a una transición pacífica, sostuvo la canciller, según reveló ayer Georg Streiter, uno de sus portavoces. Merkel insistió en que «es

necesario que cese de inmediato la violencia».

Las nuevas sanciones, que deberán ser aprobadas en Bruselas el próximo 27 de febrero, incluyen el bloqueo de los activos del Banco Central sirio en los Estados miembros de la UE y la prohibición de las exportaciones e importaciones con ese país. Además, quedará vetada la entrada de más de un centenar de funcionarios de Damasco y tampoco podrán realizarse vuelos comerciales a Europa. Todo el conjunto se sumará al embargo petrolero, ya en vigor.

Merkel se mostró receptiva a la propuesta de la Liga Árabe de enviar una misión de cascos azules de la ONU, pero prefirió no pronunciarse al respecto hasta que no quede aclarada la postura de París. El ministro francés de Exterio-

res, Alain Juppé, advirtió en Burdeos contra «toda intervención de carácter militar exterior», aunque su portavoz, Bernard Valero, ha dado a entender que no se descarta el próximo envío de una fuerza de paz y que se está debatiendo esta posibilidad con Naciones Unidas en Nueva York.

Y mientras la canciller alemana y Nicolas Sarkozy se coordinan con Bruselas –un proceso que suele caracterizarse por su dilatación en el tiempo–, Washington y Londres anunciaron ayer por su cuenta que Barack Obama y David Cameron, en una conversación telefónica, acordaron aumentar sus esfuerzos conjuntos para elevar la presión sobre el dictador sirio. Según ellos, Asad debe dar paso a una transición democrática como aconseja la Liga Árabe.

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

El Asad presenta un proyecto de Constitución de dudosa viabilidad

EE.UU. y la oposición siria descalifican el referéndum sobre el texto del día 26



Algunos habitantes de la bombardeada Homs se cobijaron en un refugio del barrio de Bab Amro

TOMÁS ALCOVERRO
Beirut. Corresponsal

El próximo 26 de febrero tiene que celebrarse en Siria el referéndum anunciado el pasado agosto sobre la nueva Constitución.

El texto fue entregado solemnemente al rais, Bashar el Asad, por la comisión de juristas que lo ha elaborado durante cuatro meses, dentro del programa de reformas pregonadas por el presidente para *democratizar* el régimen paso a paso, sin precipitarse por los acontecimientos que ensangrientan a la población, provocados por la intensificación de represiones gubernamentales y de

actos guerrilleros y atentados, reconocidos hasta por EE.UU., de confusos grupos de la insurrección. En la Casa Blanca, el proyecto fue calificado de "ridículo".

El ministro de Asuntos Exteriores francés, Alain Juppé, defendió ayer en el Parlamento Europeo que estén armándose algunos grupos de oposición, "para protegerse, pero la agresión, la responsabilidad de la agresión contra la población civil, viene muy claramente del régimen".

La tragedia de Siria, del régimen y de la oposición, es que no se vislumbra el menor compromiso para evitar el derramamiento de sangre. El Consejo Nacional

Sirio, en el exilio, que pretende representar a los grupos de la oposición, divididos, sobre todo, respecto a una intervención militar extranjera, como en Libia, ya ha declarado que el Gobierno de Damasco carece de la "autoridad moral de proponer una nueva Constitución que sólo aspira a mantener al régimen en el poder". Lo importante es que el Estado controla el ejército y las fuerzas de seguridad, no la adopción de una nueva Carta Magna.

Bashar el Asad, inmutable, está empeñado en continuar, por una parte, con las anunciadas reformas políticas, y por otra, con el uso despiadado de la fuerza

Irán proclama avances en su programa nuclear

■ Irán proclamó ayer, en una ceremonia transmitida en directo por la televisión estatal, que ha logrado nuevos avances en su programa nuclear. El presidente, Mahmud Ahmadineyad, anunció el desarrollo de una nueva generación de centrifugadoras capaces de enriquecer uranio a un ritmo tres veces más rápido que las anteriores, y que los reactores han comenzado a operar por primera vez con combustible fabricado en Irán. Según la agencia oficial de noticias, fue el propio Ahmadineyad quien introdujo la primera barra del combustible nacional en el reactor de investigación médica de Teherán. También anunció la puesta en funcionamiento de 3.000 nuevas centrifugadoras en Natanz, la mayor central del país, donde ya hay 9.000. "Nuestro camino nuclear no se detendrá", lanzó Ahmadineyad en desafío a las sanciones impuestas por Occidente, que le acusa de esconder objetivos militares. A la ceremonia de ayer asistieron familiares de científicos nucleares asesinados -según Teherán- por Israel y Estados Unidos.

ABC (Espagne / Spain)



Un niño pasa junto a militares leales a Al-Assad en Harasta, cerca de Damasco

Siria anuncia apertura política sin detener el baño de sangre

► Prepara una consulta constitucional mientras extiende la represión a Hama

DANIEL IRIARTE
CORRESPONSAL EN ESTAMBUL

El régimen sirio anunció ayer la celebración de un referéndum constitucional, seguido de unas elecciones le-

gislativas, pero sin detener la represión y el baño de sangre. Lo que hizo que la Casa Blanca calificara de «irrisoria» la propuesta siria. El referéndum, previsto para el 26 de febrero, pretende ratificar el proyecto de reforma de la Constitución en el que ha estado trabajando una comisión gubernamental en los últimos meses, y que establece el multipartidismo político. Según la agencia estatal Sana, la nueva Constitución limita el poder

del líder sirio con un máximo de dos mandatos presidenciales de siete años. Sin embargo, esta nueva normativa se llevará a cabo al término del actual período de gobierno, en 2014. De este modo, Bashar al-Assad podría participar en las elecciones y mantenerse en el poder otros dieciséis años. El texto garantiza la libertad de credo, pero también impone que el presidente del país sea un musulmán, y prohíbe la formación de parti-

dos religiosos. Ambas circunstancias parecen difíciles de tragar para los Hermanos Musulmanes y otros islamistas suníes de la oposición, que consideran a los alautes (la confesión religiosa a la que pertenece la familia Al-Assad) como herejes. La Hermandad tiene un importante papel en el opositor Consejo Nacional Sirio, a pesar de que, según numerosos activistas de base, su peso en esta plataforma es totalmente desproporcionado respecto a su capacidad real en el interior, más bien escasa.

Este gesto ha sido interpretado como un intento de atajar la presión internacional contra el régimen. La Asamblea General de la ONU votará hoy una propuesta de Qatar y Arabia Saudí, basada en el plan de la Liga Árabe, que exige el cese inmediato de la violencia. No obstante, la resolución, a diferencia de las del Consejo de Seguridad, no sería vinculante.

Pero, al mismo tiempo, el Ejército sirio castigó ayer con artillería la ciudad de Homs por decimotercer día consecutivo, al tiempo que extendía los bombardeos a Hama. «Están bombardeando algunos barrios con morteros y cohetes desde camiones. Hay disparos por toda la ciudad», explica a ABC un activista de la Alta Comisión para Ayuda a Siria, una organización humanitaria creada por opositores en el interior del país, y cuya sede está en Estambul.

«Las líneas telefónicas y los teléfonos móviles están cortados. Los contactos que hacemos son a través de teléfonos por satélite», asegura el activista. Esta organización cifra en al menos 22 los muertos a manos de las fuerzas de seguridad. Asimismo las fuerzas especiales dirigidas por Maher al-Assad, hermano del presidente, asaltaron el barrio Douma, de Damasco, en busca de disidentes.

AFP

Publico (Portugal)



Funeral militar em Damasco; o regime diz que 2000 soldados já morreram

Na Síria, clandestino Jonathan Littell no "outro lado do espelho"

● Homs era o destino. Só o percurso dá uma história, a primeira que o romancista Jonathan Littell vai publicar no jornal *El País*. A viagem começa em Trípoli, a cidade do Norte do Líbano onde confrontos entre apoiantes do regime sírio e opositores fizeram três mortos no fim-de-semana. A companhia vai mudar mas um trio permanece: para além de Littell, Mani, um fotógrafo, e "A Cólera", alcunha de um libanês que escolheu "a revolução em vez do casamento" marcado, e desde Julho transporta feridos, activistas ou jornalistas pela fronteira.

"Vamos por caminhos cheios de lama, entre casas e campos de lavoura, cruzando-nos com crianças ranhosas e mal vestidas, colmeias, alguns cavalos", descreve o autor de *As Benevolentes*. Os dois telemóveis de "A Cólera" estão sempre a tocar: "O Exército Livre tem observadores em todo o lado para prevenir os movimentos de tropas ou a colocação de barreiras de controlo móveis, as mais perigosas". "A Cólera" tem uma granada escondida junto ao volante; se o apanharem, não será com vida".



Littell, nascido em Nova Iorque e a viver em Barcelona, é autor de *As Benevolentes*, vencedor do Prémio Goncourt

Raides intensificam-se em Homs, árabes admitem armar oposição

Estados Unidos dizem estar a estudar proposta da Liga Árabe para envio de uma missão de paz conjunta com as Nações Unidas

Sofia Lorena

● As forças do Presidente Bashar al-Assad intensificaram ontem os bombardeamentos contra a cidade de Homs, no Centro da Síria, ao mesmo tempo que atacaram noutras frentes, obrigando os residentes de uma localidade junto à capital a fugir. Enquanto as bombas caem nos bairros residenciais de Homs, a terceira cidade do país, na Assembleia Geral da ONU o conflito continua a ser debatido e as acções do regime são descritas como atrocidades que o Tribunal Penal Internacional deveria investigar.

"O horror da brutalidade que estamos a testemunhar em Homs é um presságio sombrio de que o pior está por acontecer", avisou em Nova Iorque a alta comissária da ONU para os Direitos Humanos, Navi Pillay.

Pelo menos 19 pessoas foram mortas ontem, a maioria em Homs. "O bombardeamento de Bab Amr é o mais violento dos últimos cinco dias. Em

média, caem dois *rockets* por minuto", disse à AFP Rami Abdel Rahman, do Observatório dos Direitos Humanos, que reúne informações a partir de activistas no terreno. A ONU falou na segunda-feira em 300 mortos desde o início do ataque, há dez dias.

"Não sabemos o que fazer com os feridos. Desde que o assalto começou, temos mais de mil", disse à Al-Jazira o activista Hadi al-Abdallah, do bairro de Bab Amr, bastião da revolta que o regime quer esmagar. "Há mulheres grávidas, pessoas com doenças cardíacas, diabetes, e sobretudo feridos que não conseguimos tirar daqui", descreve. "Cada vez que a comunidade internacional faz uma declaração forte, o regime decide vingar-se de nós. É esta a tendência que observamos."

A violência não esteve contida à "cidade da revolução". Activistas ouvidos pelo *Guardian* deram conta de confrontos em Altarib, perto de Aleppo, a capital económica do país. Mais a sul, junto a Damasco, os ataques cen-

taram-se em Rankous, um dos subúrbios da capital onde o Exército Livre, formado por desertores, conseguiu erguer alguns *checkpoints* há duas semanas. Segundo disse o activista Ibn al-Kalmoun a *Washington Post*, as linhas telefónicas foram cortadas e muitos habitantes fugiram.

Todo "o apoio material"

Depois do veto da Rússia e da China a uma resolução a pedir a Assad para deixar o poder, é na Assembleia Geral que se discute o conflito. "Quanto mais tempo a comunidade internacional demorar a agir mais a população civil vai sofrer atrocidades", disse Navi Pillay na Assembleia. Depois do Conselho de Segurança, os países árabes vão tentar fazer passar uma resolução na Assembleia. Aqui não há veto mas as decisões não são vinculativas.

A frente diplomática trava-se também em encontros bilaterais. A secretária de Estado Hillary Clinton esteve ontem com o ministro dos Negócios

Estrangeiros da Turquia, país que pondera a abertura de corredores humanitários para tentar levar ajuda às populações. Os EUA disseram estar a estudar a última proposta da Liga Árabe - o envio de uma missão de paz conjunta dos árabes e da ONU, iniciativa que Damasco rejeitou de imediato e que muitos países só aceitariam com o aval do Conselho de Segurança.

No texto em que pediu a criação da missão, a Liga também decidiu "fornecer todo o apoio político e material" à oposição, uma frase que abre a porte a armar os opositores. Diplomatas presentes no encontro e ouvidos ontem pela Reuters confirmam essa interpretação. "É inaceitável que Assad assassine civis enquanto assistimos em silêncio", diz um desses diplomatas. "Vamos começar por dar apoio financeiro e diplomático mas se os assassínios do regime continuarem, os civis terão de ser ajudados a proteger-se. A resolução dá aos estados todas as opções para proteger os sírios."

Publico (Portugal)

Ao mesmo tempo que ataca Homs, Assad anuncia referendo à nova Constituição

● O mesmo regime que bombardeia há 13 dias, sem descanso, a cidade de Homs prometeu referendar até ao final do mês uma nova Constituição para instaurar o multipartidarismo na Síria. A oposição diz que a iniciativa chega “com 11 meses de atraso” - agora só o afastamento do Presidente Bashar al-Assad seria aceitável.

Apesar do cenário de guerra vivido no país, Damasco diz que a consulta acontecerá no próximo dia 26 e que, 90 dias depois, os sírios serão chamados a eleger um novo Parlamento.

A nova Constituição deixa cair a cláusula 8, um artigo que definia o partido Baas, no poder há quase 50 anos, como “dirigente do Estado e da sociedade”. Em seu lugar, estipula o princípio do “pluralismo político” - apesar de proibir a formação de partidos com base religiosa, excluindo assim a Irmandade Muçulmana - e prevê que o Presidente passe a ser eleito “por sufrágio universal directo, por dois mandatos de sete anos cada”.

Estas eram algumas das exigências da oposição quando, em Março, saiu pela primeira vez à rua. Mas 11 meses de repressão e milhares de mortos depois, já não aceita aquilo que a



Soldados em momento de pausa

Rússia definiu como “um importante passo em frente” dado por Damasco. “A verdade é que Assad aumentou a matança na Síria. Ele perdeu toda a legitimidade e não estamos interessados em constituições podres, novas ou velhas”, disse à Reuters Melhem al-Droubi, do Conselho Nacional Sírio, que junta vários grupos da oposição.

No terreno, as forças do regime

lançaram um novo ataque contra Hama, a quarta maior cidade da Síria, célebre pelo massacre de dez mil civis em 1982, às mãos dos soldados enviados pelo pai do actual Presidente para esmagar uma rebelião sunita. As comunicações com a cidade foram cortadas, mas os activistas dizem que os tanques abriram fogo contra três bairros, e uma coluna militar vinda do aeroporto avançou para o centro da cidade.

Em Homs, as forças governamentais voltavam a metralhar o bairro de Baba Amr, epicentro dos combates. Ao amanhecer, um oleoduto que passa junto ao bairro explodiu - o Governo falou numa acção de sabotagem, a oposição diz que foi a aviação do regime a atingir a estrutura - e já ao final do dia uma mesquita local foi bombardeada.

Perante estes “escandalosos massacres”, o chefe da diplomacia francesa, Alain Juppé, voltou a defender a abertura de corredores humanitários para levar ajuda às zonas sitiadas. Dificilmente, porém, o projecto passará no Conselho de Segurança da ONU, por obrigar ao envio de uma força militar que nem russos nem ocidentais aceitam. **Ana Fonseca Pereira**

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

An economic blockade can defeat Assad



MALCOLM RIFKIND

Syria's critics should not be mesmerised by the Russian and Chinese UN vetoes

I have had to meet some really nasty dictators over the years. Most of them, such as Fidel Castro and Robert Mugabe, could be unexpectedly amiable, with an infectious sense of humour, and I had to remind myself of their vicious treatment of their own people. The most sinister, however, was Hafez al-Assad, whom I met in Damascus in 1995. He smiled with his lips but never with his eyes, which were cold and implacable. He was the butcher of Hama, who had killed between 20,000 and 40,000 of his fellow citizens in 1982, the last time the Syrian people rose against the Assad regime.

His son, the mild-mannered, skinny ophthalmologist who studied in London, has "only" 7,000 deaths on his conscience, so far, but this is pretty certain to get far worse. Can anything be done to prevent a full civil war and the deaths of tens of thousands?

Military intervention has, rightly, been ruled out. The Syrian insurgents, unlike their Libyan forerunners, do not already control large stretches of territory; this enabled Nato air power to protect the Libyans and prevent civilian massacres. In any event, the Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN would prevent any Nato attack having the international legitimacy that was crucial to getting world and Arab opinion on side in Libya.

Last week I had dinner with a former Russian prime minister who has many years of experience in the Middle East. He accepted that the Arab springs in Syria and elsewhere were spontaneous, popular uprisings and not the result of Western mischief, as claimed in Damascus, Tehran and, occasionally, Moscow. But he was adamant that Russia's opposition to action through the UN would not change. The Russians had, he believed, made a serious mistake in allowing intervention in Libya. They would not do so again.

Does that mean that the world must watch, helplessly, from the sidelines while the carnage mounts? No, it does not. There are two crucial factors that provide an opportunity for a critical increase in pressure on the Assad regime that could bring about its downfall in a few months.

The first is the transformation of the role of the Arab League. For many years supine and impotent, it is now being outspoken in its support of real pressure. Its members have withdrawn their ambassadors from Damascus, suspended Syria, withdrawn their monitoring mission because of Assad's failure to stop the violence, and imposed sanctions. I suspect that Qatar

and Saudi Arabia are already giving material support, perhaps including weapons, to the Syrian insurgents. The second strong advocate for action is Turkey, the most powerful Muslim state in the Middle East, with a long shared border with Syria. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, has become Assad's bitterest critic and is already providing help to Syrian opposition forces.

There should now be a two-pronged effort to defeat Assad, led by the Arab League and Turkey with support from the US and Europe. Part of that strategy should be to direct help to the Syrian resistance. Britain and the West should provide communications equipment, body armour, logistical support and intelligence as well as greater diplomatic and political assistance.

The key, however, needs to be economic. The Syrian economy is deteriorating badly. The tourism industry has collapsed. The Syrian government has admitted that oil sanctions have already lost it more than \$2 billion. Its currency is close to being in free fall. What is needed now is a total economic embargo on Syria, imposed and co-ordinated by the Arab League, Turkey, the US and the EU.

Much of this could be achieved regardless of Russian opposition. Turkey can seal its border with Syria, as can Jordan. Syria's border with Israel is already closed. There should be maximum Arab and US pressure on Iraq to do likewise. Such an embargo would be difficult for Lebanon (the one other country with a border with Syria) to enforce, but other measures can be taken. As part of the

embargo, a naval blockade could help prevent much of Syria's imports and exports being carried by sea. The Russians would be furious, but there is little they could do about it, faced with a united opposition.

A further step would be both realistic and worthwhile. The Arab League has already proposed stopping all commercial flights to Syria. This should be extended and the air space around Syria's borders closed. This could be easily enforced and, unlike no-fly zones over Syria itself, would not risk actual combat.

Some might be concerned that ordinary Syrians would suffer hardship as a result of a total economic embargo. That cannot be denied, but it would be preferable to all the bloodshed that would be part of a protracted civil war. Such an embargo, if enforced, would stop the violence and spell the end of Assad's regime. Assad no longer has allies in the Arab world. The Iranians would like to help him but are, themselves, in an economic mess. Closing the air space around Syria, combined with a naval blockade, would also stop most of the arms supplies.

The international community must not be mesmerised by the Russian and Chinese UN vetoes. There is much that can and should be done to end the suffering of the Syrian people.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP was defence secretary and then foreign secretary between 1992 and 1997

Comment on Malcolm Rifkind's view at
» telegraph.co.uk/personalview

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Assad reforms are dismissed as 'laughable' while killing goes on

By Rosa Prince in New York

SYRIA'S President Bashar al-Assad yesterday promised to deliver a referendum on a new constitution within two weeks and democratic elections within months even as his forces launched fresh attacks on civilians in rebel cities.

Opposition leaders immediately rejected the offer to hold a vote on a new constitution on Feb 26 followed by multi-party elections within 90 days.

The White House dismissed the referendum as "laughable". "It makes a mockery of the Syrian revolution," said Jay Carney, the White House spokesman.

At the United Nations in New York, where there were renewed attempts to unite international opinion against the regime, Mr. Assad's pledge was dismissed as "hot air".

The General Assembly will vote tonight on a motion supporting a plan by the Arab League to send a joint peacekeeping force to help end the 11-month conflict, in which at least 6,000 people have been killed.

The vote is not legally binding but British officials said that if significant numbers of countries voted in favour, it would increase pressure on Russia and China, both of which vetoed a UN Security Council resolution backing the Arab League plan. The League proposal called for Mr. Assad's departure within months.

Asked about the possibility of elections in Syria, one senior British official said:

Above: a boy at a Syrian army checkpoint in the city of Harasta, near Damascus. Left: smoke billows from a refinery in Homs, which was subjected to a 13th day of shelling by Assad forces



hood and autonomy-seeking Kurdish parties would be excluded from participating.

Mr Assad, who has been in power for 12 years, succeeding his father, who ruled for 29 years, made clear, however, that the onslaught against rebels would continue. A new offensive was launched in the town of Hama, while the besieged city of Homs was shelled for the 13th day in a row. In the capital Damascus, troops carried out a search and arrest operation.

Melhem al-Droubi, a member of the exiled opposition Syrian National Council and the Muslim Brotherhood, rejected the proposal. "The truth is that Bashar al-Assad has increased the killing and slaughter in Syria," he said. "He has lost his legitimacy and we aren't interested in his rotten constitutions, old or new."

Hundreds of people have been killed in the bombardment of Homs. Activists and aid groups have warned of a growing humanitarian crisis, with food running short and wounded people unable to get proper care.

Thomas Countryman, assistant secretary for international security and non-proliferation at the US State Department, said that Iran and Russia were providing weapons to Syria that could be used against anti-government protesters, although he would not provide specifics about the kinds of weapons.

He also said the US was concerned about the status of chemical weapons in light of the conflict.

France say gives legitimacy to the violent crackdown by the Assad regime.

Mr Assad responded to growing international outrage at his bloody crackdown by offering to stage a referendum on a new constitution that could effectively end five decades of single-party rule. The proposed charter would drop Article 8 of the Syrian constitution which declares the ruling Baath party as the "leader of the state and society".

The referendum would be followed by elections to appoint a new president who could serve for up to two terms of seven years each. New parties could not be based on a religion or regional interests, meaning the outlawed Muslim Brother-

"We're not taking it too seriously. Assad has said a lot of hot air in the past."

France suggested that a new, binding Security Council resolution could be put to the vote as soon as next week. Alain Juppé, the French foreign minister, said he would work with Russia to agree on a form of words it could accept and added that the resolution could involve the creation of "humanitarian corridors" to allow peacekeepers access to civilians.

Moscow has insisted that it will back international moves to end the crisis only if both the Syrian government and opposition are required to commit to a ceasefire - a demand that Western powers including Britain, the United States and

The Herald (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Cameron in sanctions threat to Syrian leader

Bid to increase pressure on Assad over brutal crackdown

BEN GLAZE

DAVID Cameron and Barack Obama could tighten sanctions against Syria to increase the pressure on President Bashar Assad, Downing Street has warned.

A No 10 spokesman said the Prime Minister and the US President were disappointed at the failure to agree a United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) condemning the regime's crackdown on anti-government protesters.

The pair have previously called on President Assad to step down and talked about the latest violence in a telephone call.

A Downing Street spokesman said: "They expressed disappointment at the Russian and Chinese vetoes of the draft UNSCR.

"They agreed on the need for

international unity against the regime's attacks on its own citizens, including further action at the UN and a broad and strong coalition in the new Friends of Syria group. They discussed the possibility of increasing the pressure on Mr Assad's regime through additional sanctions."

The warning came as Government forces attacked opponents of President Assad on several fronts yesterday, sending residents fleeing from one town near the capital and bombarding the city of Homs for an 11th day running, activists said.

Citizens of Homs, Syria's third-largest city, faced a humanitarian crisis. Food and fuel were scarce and most shops shut due to shelling and rocket fire that have trapped people in their homes.

With Mr Assad seemingly



DAVID CAMERON: Disappointed at Russian and Chinese vetoes.

oblivious to condemnation of the tactics employed to crush the uprising against his 11-year rule, Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia pushed for a new resolution at the UN supporting their peace plan.

The redoubled diplomatic effort came as the UN human rights chief chastised the Security Council for failing to act on Syria, saying Mr Assad had been

emboldened by its failure to condemn him.

"I am particularly appalled by the ongoing onslaught on Homs," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said.

Mr Assad is struggling to put down demonstrations and stop insurgent attacks.

Conflict flared anew yesterday morning in Rankous, a town near the capital Damascus that was hit by Government shelling. In Homs, a city in western Syria at the heart of the uprising, the opposition neighbourhood of Baba Amro was struck at dawn by the heaviest shelling in five days, the Syria Observatory for Human Rights said.

Activist Hussein Nader said it was not possible to go to the streets to survey the damage or look for casualties.

"They are hitting the same spots several consecutive times, making venturing out there impossible," Mr Nader said. "Residents are trapped. We

have a man who sustained severe burns and is dying and he needs a hospital."

The man was in a truck picking up wounded people in Baba Amro overnight when it was hit by rocket fire, he said.

Mohammad al-Mohammad, a doctor at a makeshift hospital in Baba Amro, appeared in a video with a wounded youth he said was shot by sniper in his side.

"The bullet ended up in his stomach. This is a critical condition that needs transportation to a proper hospital," Dr Mohammad said.

Food and fuel prices had tripled and gangs were looting houses, activists said.

Mohammad al-Homsi said the situation was getting worse.

"Army roadblocks are increasing around opposition districts. There is a pattern to the bombardment now. It is heavy in the morning, then gives way to an afternoon lull and resumes at night," Mr Homsi said.

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Assad's reform offer undermined as his troops continue onslaught

By **DONALD MACINTYRE**

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday set a date for a referendum on a new constitution this month in a gesture called into question by his troops' relentless armoured assault on opponents in several cities.

The vote, scheduled for 26 February, would be on a new draft constitution allowing some political pluralism and limiting presidential terms.

But while constitutional change was a central goal of the uprising last March, that has been overtaken by demands for Mr Assad's departure.

There were also doubts about how a referendum could be organised across the country amid violence that has claimed more than 5,400 lives.

White House press secretary Jay Carney called the move "quite laughable"

in the face of ongoing brutality by Syria's military. He said it "makes a mockery" of the country's uprising.

The violence continued unabated yesterday. In Homs – where the dissident neighbourhood of Baba Amr has been shelled for the past 13 days and where an oil pipeline was attacked yesterday – residents spoke of dire conditions in which they desperately foraged for food during lulls in the assault.

And in Hama, activists said regime forces sprayed residential districts with sustained machine gunfire.

The umbrella group, the Local Coordinating Committees, put yesterday's deaths across the country at 13 while the UK-based Syrian Human Rights Observatory put it at five.

Reuters news agency reported that official forces searched homes in the Barzeh district of the capital, Dama-

It would also limit presidents to two terms of seven years.

Mr Assad's father Hafez held power for 29 years until his death, since when his son has ruled for 11.

Sergei Lavrov, foreign minister of Russia, which opposes calls for Mr Assad to quit, called the new draft "a step forward" that was "better late than never".

But Khalef Dahowd, whose National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria represents several opposition groups, said: "The people have demands, and one of these demands is the departure of this regime."

The declaration for a referendum comes 24 hours before a scheduled vote before the UN General Assembly.

While not binding, the vote is likely to see a majority backing the resolution calling on President Assad to stop the killing in Homs and other cities.

HAFEZ AL-ASSAD

Bashar al-Assad's father ruled Syria for 29 years until he died in 2000 and his son took over



scus, apparently looking for Army defectors and making arrests.

The state news agency Sana claimed the new constitution would make Syria "an example to follow in terms of public freedoms and political plurality".

It would permit the creation of other parties besides the ruling Baath party, although not ones based on religion or region, apparently ruling out a legal role for the Muslim Brotherhood or parties explicitly representing Kurds.

The Scotsman (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Mistrust at vow on vote

OUR CORRESPONDENT IN DAMASCUS

SYRIAN President Bashar al-Assad has announced a referendum will be held at the end of this month on constitutional reform – but his troops yesterday renewed efforts to crush the opposition with military might.

The referendum will vote on a draft constitution that would effectively end nearly 50 years of single-party rule, Syrian state TV reported yesterday. The new document removes Article 8 which declares the Baath Party, in power since 1963, the “leader of the state and society”.

Once the referendum has taken place, elections would be held with 90 days.

“The political system of the state will be based on a principle of political plurality and democ-

“[Troops] shot their guns in the air and arrested passers-by”

Activist in Barzeh district

cracy will be practiced through the voting box,” Syria TV cited the draft as saying.

But evidence of the president’s promises of “a new era in co-operation with all spectrums of the Syrian people” was in scant supply on the ground yesterday as troops continued to bombard rebellious suburbs of Homs, and laid siege to part of Damascus.

Forces from the president’s elite 4th Division, backed by armoured personnel carriers, stormed the Barzeh district of the capital, in the closest deployment of troops to the centre of the city so far in the 11-month uprising. Roadblocks were set up in the early morning, and 4x4s, trucks and buses carrying troops drove into the district.

One activist said: “They shot their guns randomly in the air and arrested passers-by. They took more than 100 residents of



An oil pipeline was set on fire in an explosion at Bab Amro, near Homs, yesterday as violence continued

Picture: Reuters

Barzeh. They ordered students going to school to return to their homes. Then they ran raids, breaking into houses, smashing and looting possessions and taking the men prisoner.”

Troops were searching for the armed militia men that call themselves members of the Free Syrian Army, residents said. Even in the centre of the capital, the heartland of the regime, members of the opposition have formed armed cells.

For the past few months, as night fell over Barzeh, crowds have gathered among the crumbling old city walls to shout for the downfall of the regime. Such

protests last only minutes – and have been violently dispersed up by security forces. But recently – when surrounded by their own militia men – the crowds had become ever more openly defiant and have been able to hold large celebratory protests for nearly a month.

“Now we have our fighters to protect us; the regime knows this and they don’t dare to come here. We are not safe, but now if the regime wants to come he has to bring tanks and troops,” said Asra, a Sunni Muslim who has been calling for the demise of the regime since early April.

Yesterday, troops stationed

at the Tishreen Military hospital in Damascus had slipped away from their posts, activists said. They defected to Barzeh, prompting the violent crackdown by Mr Assad’s men.

Opposition figures have quickly rejected the referendum as another ploy by the regime.

Omar al-Khani from the Syrian Revolution Co-ordinators Union said: “[Bashar al-Assad] will bring his *shabiha* [government militia drawn from the ruling Alawite sect] and few supporters, to vote and declare himself the winner. He will show the images on Syrian national television and use them to say that everybody supports him.”

Mr Khani also claimed the regime would threaten people to vote favourably: “The regime will say, ‘Those people who don’t support this new law and who don’t want to join this referendum are supporting the terrorists.’”

Syria is a country in crisis, and it is hard to see how a referendum can be carried out efficiently and credibly at short notice. Clashes between security forces and emboldened, increasingly militarised rebels are being reported from virtually all parts of the country. In a conflict that looks increasingly like a civil war, it may be too late for such political measures.

Meanwhile, France said it was negotiating a new UN Security Council resolution on Syria with Russia, Mr Assad’s ally and main arms supplier, and said it also wanted to create “humanitarian corridors” to ease the plight of civilians caught up in the violence by allowing aid groups access.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said he would hear French foreign minister Alain Juppe’s views, but added: “If the plan is to use the Security Council and UN to adopt some language to help legitimise regime change, then I’m afraid international law does not allow this and we cannot support such an approach.”

New York Times / International Herald Tribune (USA)

Syria answers U.N. with shelling

BEIRUT

Latest assault on Homs is reported as severe as calls for diplomacy fail

BY NEIL MACFARQUHAR
AND RICK GLADSTONE

The Syrian government on Tuesday brushed aside a stern castigation from the top United Nations human rights official about its deadly attacks on civilians, calling her assessment propaganda as Syria's military resumed what one activist described as the "brutal shelling" against the central city of Homs.

A day after the official, Navi Pillay, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, offered a grim appraisal of the Syrian conflict, activists said the shelling resumed in earnest at 6 a.m. Tuesday, with rockets and tank shells whistling into parts of the city as often as every two minutes.

It was the heaviest shelling in at least five days, activists said, particularly targeted at the neighborhood Baba Amr. Videos uploaded on YouTube showed gray and black smoke billowing high overhead as shells crashed into the buildings, while the staccato rattle of machine gun fire sounded constantly.

"The idea of safety doesn't exist anymore in Baba Amr," said Omar Shakir, an activist in the neighborhood reached via Skype. "Scary is all that exists."

The neighborhood was hit by occasional mortar shells overnight, he said, with the heavier shells starting at first light.

Although some people managed to flee the heart of the area, it was hard to leave entirely because it was hemmed in by government forces as it has been since the shelling started on Feb. 4.

Food was running low, despite efforts by residents to open a shuttered mini-market to get what they could.

"We are under full siege. It is horrible here," Mr. Shakir said. "I have not tasted bread for the past five days."

He estimated that 60 percent of the buildings in the neighborhood had been damaged by the shelling.

Explosions erupted in the background as he spoke. Another activist said four men from Hama had managed to reach the neighborhood overnight to deliver much-needed medical supplies



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Civilians fleeing from fighting on Tuesday after tanks of the Syrian Army entered the northwestern city of Idlib.

as well as baby formula, blankets and clothes. The men wore four layers of clothes to carry as many items as they could, said the activist, identified only by his nickname, Abu Omar.

The Syrian government contends that it is attacking foreign-inspired terrorist gangs in Baba Amr, and that the fires are tires set alight to make it seem as though the buildings are burning. Syria has severely limited the foreign media's access to the country, so claims about the fighting in Homs were impossible to verify independently.

But with diplomacy stalled, the renewed onslaught seemed to reflect Ms. Pillay's accusation at the United Nations that the Syrian authorities were interpreting the repeated international failure to end the violence as a green light to escalate deadly attacks on its political opponents with indiscriminate brutality and "overwhelming force."

The Syrian Arab News Agency, which is controlled by the government, said Tuesday that the Foreign Ministry had

sent Ms. Pillay a letter emphasizing its "absolute rejection" of her claims.

"The Ministry pointed out that the commissioner has been turned into a tool in the hands of some countries targeting Syria and ignoring the terrorist crimes committed by the armed groups," the news agency said.

Ms. Pillay's appraisal, delivered in a tone of cold frustration, was presented on Monday at an unusual meeting of the General Assembly devoted entirely to the Syrian conflict, despite strenuous objections from Syria and a few of its dwindling number of allies, notably Iran and North Korea.

Ms. Pillay's remarks, and the support for her expressed by the United States, the Arab League and a wide spectrum of diplomats at the public forum of a U.N. General Assembly meeting, amounted to a strong rebuke to Syria. But her frustration also seemed directed at the inability of the United Nations, the Arab League or any other group to devise a workable proposal to help resolve the

crisis in Syria, now nearly a year old.

"The longer the international community fails to take action, the more the civilian population will suffer from countless atrocities committed against them," Ms. Pillay said.

On Tuesday, China, which with Russia vetoed an Arab and Western plan to urge President Bashar al-Assad to step aside, said it had sent a Foreign Ministry envoy, Li Huaxin, to Cairo for what were called "frank and useful" talks with Nabil al-Araby, the head of the Arab League, news reports said.

Mr. Araby has been canvassing support for a joint Arab League-U.N. peacekeeping force in Syria, but the authorities in Damascus have rejected the idea outright and Russia has spoken dismissively of it.

Rich Gladstone reported from New York. Hwaida Saad contributed reporting from Beirut. Alan Cowell from London, Liam Stack from Cairo, and Steven Lee Myers from Washington.

New York Times / International Herald Tribune (USA)

Syria sets date for vote on constitution

BEIRUT

Proposal for referendum, to be held Feb. 26, comes amid unyielding violence

BY NEIL MACFARQUHAR
AND ALAN COWELL

With Syrian cities under fire and residents saying life is ever more unbearable, President Bashar al-Assad has set a date later this month for a referendum on a new constitution, the state-run SANA news agency said Wednesday, a gesture apparently intended to offer some kind of government-controlled change after almost a year of the most sustained crackdown in the Arab Spring protests.

The plan has been discussed for some time, and Mr. Assad said in January that the referendum would take place in March. But, SANA said, the Syrian leader has now issued a decree setting Feb. 26 as the date for a ballot.

Even before the violence worsened, the idea of a referendum had seemed to pale before the severity of the crisis, and it was not clear how voting could take place peacefully in some areas where government forces are fighting daily battles with army defectors, analysts said.

The administration of President Barack Obama dismissed the idea as "laughable," Reuters reported. "It makes a mockery of the Syrian revolution," the White House press secretary, Jay Carney, told reporters aboard Air Force One as Mr. Obama headed to Wisconsin. "Promises of reforms have been usually followed by increases in brutality and have never been delivered upon by this regime since the beginning of peaceful demonstrations in Syria. The Assad regime's days are numbered."

Reuters also reported that military units backed by armored personnel carriers rumbled into the Barzeh neighborhood of the capital, Damascus, on Wednesday and that elite troops searched houses and made arrests, apparently looking for military defectors.

The call for constitutional change was made by opposition figures at the beginning of the Syrian uprising last March, but their demands have since hardened into a clamor for Mr. Assad's departure, a refrain echoed by much of the Arab League and many Western nations, but not by China and Russia.

Last year, Mr. Assad had also promised elections in February, but the announcement Wednesday spoke only of a referendum on constitutional changes.

On Sunday, Mr. Assad received a draft of the new constitution from a panel set up in October to frame it, SANA said, describing the document as transforming "Syria into an example to follow in terms of public freedoms and political plurality in a way to lay the foundation for a new stage that will enrich Syria's



The announcement of a constitutional referendum Wednesday by President Bashar al-Assad, whose photo adorned sandbags near Damascus, drew scorn from the White House.

cultural history."

The announcement of a date for a referendum came after 13 days of bombardment of parts of Homs, where a fuel pipeline fire blazed Wednesday as residents recounted days of deprivation,

"Promises of reforms have been usually followed by increases in brutality and have never been delivered upon."

with rockets and tank shells exploding around them as they sought to escape by bribing government soldiers during lulls in the fighting.

A young woman who fled Homs for Beirut spoke Tuesday of the hellish experience that she and others had endured, trapped in their dwellings without heat while desperately awaiting breaks in the military offensive to forage for food or try to flee.

Such is the sense of deprivation in some Syrian areas that on Wednesday,

French officials in Paris urged the creation of humanitarian corridors to permit access for international aid workers.

Activists also spoke of a renewed assault in Hama, a city just north of Homs in west-central Syria that was the scene of a massacre in 1982 in which the forces of Mr. Assad's father killed 10,000 people. The reports said government forces in Hama were blasting residential areas with sustained machine gun fire.

According to Syrian state television, the draft constitution permits a president to be elected to two seven-year terms, setting a limit for the first time in decades. Mr. Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, ruled for 29 years before his death 11 years ago, when his son took over.

The draft would also dilute the status of the Baath Party as "the leader of the state and society" by permitting political pluralism. The constitution would forbid the creation of parties based on religion, profession or regional interests — apparently forestalling the legalization of the Muslim Brotherhood or Kurdish parties in the northwest of the country,

Syrian television said.

Talk of a new constitution offered a counterpoint to events on the ground.

By Wednesday, Homs's agony had been compounded by a huge blaze after the fuel pipeline was hit in Baba Amr, a neighborhood where activists have reported shelling for 12 straight days. Images posted by activists on social networking sites showed thick black smoke billowing over what seemed to be residents' homes.

SANA said an "armed terrorist group" had blown up the pipeline supplying diesel fuel to Damascus and to the south of the country.

With diplomacy stalled, the French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, took his turn Wednesday in efforts to restart international negotiations on a solution in Syria after Russia and China vetoed a plan backed by the Arab League and Western nations almost two weeks ago that would have required Mr. Assad to step down.

Speaking to a French radio station, he said moves were under way to overcome Russian objections before a "sym-

bolic" resolution at the United Nations General Assembly is submitted on Thursday, Reuters reported. He also urged the U.N. Security Council to discuss the creation of humanitarian corridors to permit aid to reach "the zones where there are scandalous massacres."

The young woman who fled Homs, a 19-year-old student who spoke on the condition of anonymity because her parents were still in the city, arrived in Beirut on Tuesday. She said that troops allowed civilians to escape Saturday and Sunday and that people bribed soldiers to ferry them out of the Inshaat neighborhood on tanks or to clear roadways for them to drive their cars out. She described a city where "all roads were closed, and even if they weren't, the shelling makes it impossible for you to go anywhere."

Alan Cowell reported from London. Hwaida Saad and an employee of The New York Times in Beirut and Rick Gladstone in New York contributed reporting.

Dallas Morning News (USA)

Dissidents' divided front poses problems

Array of factions has would-be supporters unsure who could lead

BEIRUT — At a rented house just outside Syria's border, a dissident known only as "the Doctor" maps out attacks. Planners speak by Skype with fighters on the ground in Syria, while others raise money, drumming up cash from fellow exiles to buy weapons.

The safe house offers a glimpse into the Free Syrian Army, a group of army defectors and others who are trying to overthrow President Bashar Assad by force.

The FSA has emerged as a significant hope for many Syrians who have all but given up on peaceful resistance against government tanks and snipers waging a deadly crackdown on protesters. But the group is highly decentralized — and comprises just one faction in a deeply divided and fractious Syrian opposition.

As the West and Arab states consider offering direct support to Assad's opponents, there are serious questions about whether any opposition group is prepared to take the helm after more than 40 years



The Associated Press

Syrian rebels take aim during weapons training outside Idlib, Syria. The president's greatest advantage is the weakness and lack of unity among those trying to overthrow him.

tech-savvy young people desperate to cast off a suffocating dictatorship. Also within opposition ranks are various ideologies and motivations, from secular forces to religious conservatives to outright radicals. Separately, there are worries that al-Qaeda will take advantage of the chaos.

One of the main umbrella groups to emerge, the Syrian National Council, is mainly

made up of exiles abroad, but appears to be divided over how much to embrace an armed force that not only protects protesters, but carries out attacks on the regime.

"We're an orphan group with a fighter surplus, but a serious deficit in weapons, ammunition and funding to finance our military operations against Assad's criminal army," said the man who asked to be identified as "the Doctor"

UPDATE In the region

FIGHTING RENewed: Syria's military resumed what one activist described as the "brutal shelling" of the city of Homs. Activists said food supplies are running low.

U.N. RESOLUTION: Egypt circulated a U.N. General Assembly resolution strongly condemning human rights violations by the Syrian regime and backing an Arab League plan aimed at ending the 11-month conflict. Diplomats said the resolution could be put to a vote as early as Thursday and is likely to be adopted.

From wire reports

— a *non de guerre* he gained for his help in treating the wounded before he fled Syria.

The rebel fighters are mainly armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades stolen from the military or bought on the black market, he said. Funding comes from exiles overseas.

In the yard, three uniformed men were training an activist smuggled across the border, teaching him to organize protests.

Tear down posters of Assad

wherever you find them, a bearded man instructed the young man. Knock on doors to rally supporters. "Shout to remind people of how Assad's criminal army is killing them and torturing their women and kids"

Above all, he added, always keep a lookout for snipers on rooftops.

The Free Syrian Army's main leadership is based in Turkey and has operatives spread out in other neighboring countries, along with its fighters on the ground inside Syria.

The group has claimed responsibility for attacks on regime soldiers and security forces, often ambushing convoys or checkpoints, killing dozens of troops. At the same time, it tries to convince more soldiers to break with the military and join its ranks.

The FSAs true numbers are impossible to determine. A Jordan-based Western diplomat, who monitors developments in Syria, estimated it has about 20,000 followers, a third of what the group claims to have.

Elizabeth A. Kennedy
and Jamal Holley,
The Associated Press

Los Angeles Times (USA)

Assad announces vote on a new constitution

PATRICK J. McDONNELL
REPORTING FROM BEIRUT

With Syria plunging toward civil war, President Bashar Assad announced Wednesday that a nationwide referendum would be held this month on a new constitution that is the centerpiece of what he says is a plan to reform the country.

The opposition dismissed the announcement as an effort to buy time, and it was unclear how the government could hold a referendum in a country riven by violence. Large areas of Syria are no longer even under government control.

The new constitution would enshrine freedom of speech and worship, along with other basic liberties, and end the monopoly on power held by Assad's Baath Party, which has ruled for four decades.

The state-run Syrian Arab News Agency said the changes could "turn Syria into an example to follow in terms of public freedoms and political plurality."

But Assad's foes say the government regularly tramples on rights guaranteed in the current constitution. They scoffed at the pro-

posed reforms as a sign of desperation.

"This shows Assad is living in an alternate reality," said Rafif Jouejati, a U.S.-based spokeswoman for the Local Coordination Committees, a Syrian opposition coalition. "It's completely impractical."

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney labeled the proposed referendum "laughable."

"It makes a mockery of the Syrian revolution," Carney told reporters aboard Air Force One.

The referendum is probably meant in part to assuage Syria's dwindling list of foreign allies, notably Russia, which along with China vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution this month that backed a plan for Assad to give up power. Russia has pressed Assad to push ahead with reforms.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking in The Hague, called the plan for a referendum "a step forward."

Even as Assad announced the referendum, a thick plume of black smoke billowed from a fuel pipeline in the city of Homs, which has become a focus of the escalating conflict.

The government and the opposition accused each other of attacking the pipeline in Syria's third-largest city.

Opposition activists said the government had launched new assaults on Homs and other rebel strongholds. The opposition reported at least 32 people killed across the country, according to Al Jazeera, the pan-Arab satellite TV network.

In Homs, opposition and human rights activists have accused security forces of indiscriminately shelling civilian areas. The official news agency denied that, saying "armed terrorist groups" were bombing residences in Homs in an effort to spread panic.

At the United Nations, diplomats were working on a General Assembly resolution condemning the Syrian government, which may come to a vote as early as Thursday. General Assembly action carries less legal weight than a Security Council resolution, but cannot be vetoed.

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Special correspondent
Rima Marrouch
contributed to this report.

San Francisco Chronicle (USA)

‘Brutal shelling,’ deaths lead to fears of civil war

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT — Syrian government forces renewed their assault on the rebellious city of Homs on Tuesday in what activists described as the heaviest shelling in days, as the U.N. human rights chief raised fears of civil war.

Troops loyal to President Bashar Assad have been shelling Homs for more than a week to retake parts of the city captured by rebel forces. Hundreds are believed to have been killed since last Saturday, and the humanitarian conditions in the city have been worsening.

Homs was under “brutal shelling” on Tuesday, the Local Coordination Committees activist group said, citing its network of witnesses on the ground.

With diplomatic efforts bogged down, the conflict in Syria is taking on the dimensions of a civil war, with army defectors clashing almost daily with soldiers.

U.N. human rights chief Navi Pillay warned on Monday that the Security Council’s failure to take action has emboldened the Syrian government to launch an all-out assault.

The uprising began last



Associated Press

Civilians flee after Syrian army tanks enter the northwestern city of Idlib on Tuesday.

March as mostly peaceful protests against Assad’s authoritarian rule, but has become more militarized in the face of the brutal military crackdown.

Pillay told the General Assembly that more than 5,400 people were killed last year alone, and the number of dead and injured continues to rise daily.

She said tens of thousands of people, including children, have been arrested, more than 18,000 reportedly are still arbitrarily detained and thousands more are reported missing. In addition, 25,000 people are estimated to have sought refuge in neighboring

countries and more than 70,000 are internally displaced.

Also Monday, the Obama administration said it backs Arab League plans to end continuing violence in Syria but noted several obstacles to deploying a proposed international peacekeeping force to the country and withheld full endorsement of the idea.

The administration has said repeatedly it does not see a military solution to the crisis in Syria, yet U.S. officials indicated they would consider the Arab League call for peacekeepers and discuss it with various countries to see whether such an idea is feasible.

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

U.S. on Watch for Syria WMDs

Satellites and Other Surveillance Equipment Used to Monitor Suspected Storage Sites

By ADAM ENTOUS
AND JAY SOLOMON

WASHINGTON—The U.S. and some Mideast allies are intensifying surveillance of Syria's chemical and biological depots amid fears that the weapons could go loose if unrest escalates out of control.

Syrian forces stepped up their assault on rebellious cities Wednesday, the Associated Press reported, while President Bashar al-Assad ordered a referendum for Feb. 26 on a new constitution that would create a multiparty system in a country that has been ruled by his autocratic family dynasty for 40 years.

Mr. Assad has also talked of holding parliamentary elections after the referendum. But after months of the regime's crackdown, the opposition dismisses any talk of reform, saying that they don't believe Mr. Assad will really loosen his iron grip on power and that his ouster is the only solution.

The U.S. is using satellites and other surveillance equipment to monitor suspected chemical and biological weapons storage sites in Syria, military officials said, reflecting Washington's concerns about a growing proliferation threat.

Officials say, however, that they have seen no evidence so far to suggest that any of the stockpiles are in immediate danger of being overrun by antiregime forces or Islamist militants, which they believe are currently incapable of conducting raids of the necessary sophistication. Facilities where stocks of nerve agents and mustard gas are stored are guarded by regime loyalists and were

providing rebels with more capability.

U.S. officials said they believe the Syrian regime has strong reasons to secure their weapons stockpiles. "Most countries that have [chemical weapons] stocks view it as a strategic, not tactical, tool—and strategic tools are usually pretty well protected," a U.S. official said.

The Obama administration has intensified coordination with Syria's neighbors, particularly Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, to guard against the potential of Syrian weapons of mass destruction moving outside its borders, U.S. and Arab officials said.

The U.S.-led effort underlines Washington's concern over the increasing violence in Syria and the lack of options to address it after China and Russia this month vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for President Assad to step aside.

Activists on Tuesday reported some of the heaviest shelling of Homs yet in the 11th day of a siege that activist groups say has left hundreds of Syrians dead. Along with battles between troops and defectors around Hama, in which five government soldiers were killed, 20 civilians were killed by government forces across Syria on Tuesday, the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported. Another opposition group, the Local Coordination Committees, reported 40 people killed.

Arab states continued to prepare a new U.N. General Assembly resolution that would ramp up diplomatic pressure on the Assad regime. The Arab League on Sunday passed its own Syria resolution, proposing a

series of bombings in Syria. Officials say some Sunni militants have entered Syria from neighboring Iraq. The U.S. believes at least some of the arms being used by rebels in Syria were supplied by Sunni tribes in Iraq.

U.S. military leaders believe they need a clearer picture of the array of rebel forces on the ground before considering taking any steps to aid any of the groups with equipment. Potential options include providing nonlethal communications gear to the rebels, officials said.

At a Senate hearing Tuesday, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, highlighted the gap in U.S. intelligence about Mr. Assad's opponents. "We don't have as clear an understanding of the nature of the opposition. We are working with the intelligence community to develop it," Gen. Dempsey said.

It took the U.S. months to assess the opposition in Libya. U.S. military officials said the situation is even more complicated in Syria, where Mr. Assad commands heavily armored brigades, sophisticated air defenses, thousands of rockets and chemical weapons.

"You thought Libya was hard," a U.S. military official said of any potential intervention.

Pointing to the threat posed by Syria's chemical and biological weapons stocks, Gen. Dempsey said: "We are watching the trend lines on their military to make sure they are still under control of the regime."

Gen. Dempsey said the Free Syrian Army currently is the centerpiece of the opposition and is "for the most part" made up of fighters from Syria, but he added: "We also know that other regional actors are providing support and that complicates the situation."

Intelligence agencies are working

series of bombings in Syria. Officials say some Sunni militants have entered Syria from neighboring Iraq. The U.S. believes at least some of the arms being used by rebels in Syria were supplied by Sunni tribes in Iraq.

Gen. Dempsey didn't confirm reports about al Qaeda's involvement but said the group's presence in Syria shouldn't be discounted. "All of the players in the region, it seems, have a stake in this. Those who would like to foment a Sunni-Shia standoff, and you know who they are, are all weighing in in Syria," he said.

The U.S. and its allies have long monitored Syria's chemical weapons stockpile.

"Syria is a country of significant proliferation concern, so we monitor its chemical weapons activities very closely," White House National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor said. "We will continue to work closely with like-minded countries to impede proliferation to Syria's chemical weapons program."

Separately, Gen. Dempsey said that on a trip to Egypt over the weekend, he tossed out his planned agenda for meetings and told his counterparts, including the country's military ruler, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, that they had to resolve U.S. complaints over the treatment of pro-democracy groups and detained Americans.

"I am convinced that potentially they were underestimating the impact of this on our relationship," he said. "When I left there, there was no doubt that they understood the seriousness of it."

Egypt is pursuing charges that more than 40 people, including 16

The Washington Post (USA)

Assad sets Feb. 26 vote on constitution

It would expand some freedoms but falls short of opposition demands

BY LIZ SLY

BEIRUT — Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Wednesday ordered a referendum to be held Feb. 26 on a new constitution, a move that appeared unlikely to defuse the country's rapidly escalating crisis.

The document allows multiple political parties to compete in elections for the legislature, sets a limit of two seven-year terms on the president and eliminates a clause that guarantees political supremacy to Assad's Baath Party, according to copies of the draft circulating in the Syrian press.

But it also gives sweeping powers to the president to decree laws, appoint the government and dissolve parliament, and seemed designed to ensure that the current system remains largely intact. With most members of the opposition calling for the ouster of the Assad regime, activists said the document falls far short of their demands for radical change.

"It's a non-starter," said Shakeeb al-Jabri, a pro-democracy activist who is based in Beirut. "It's incredibly weak. The powers it gives to people are limited. It confirms our fears that there will be no true reform under Assad, only cosmetic reforms."

The announcement comes amid a major offensive launched by Syrian security forces to quell the country's 11-month-old revolt, in which more than 5,400 people have been killed, according to the United Nations. Hundreds have reportedly died in this latest assault, many of them in the besieged neighborhood of Bab Amr in the city of Homs, which has emerged as the epicenter of the increasingly armed revolt.

On Wednesday, security forces expanded the offensive to include the city of Hama, and attacks have also taken place in opposition strongholds in the northern province of Idlib, the eastern province of Deir el Zour and the southern province of Daraa. The human rights advocacy group Avaaz said it had documented 20 deaths in Wednesday's attacks.

Activists also questioned how the government intended to hold a



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Syrian rebels participated in a weapons-training exercise outside Idlib on Tuesday, a day on which Syrian security forces renewed their assault on the rebellious city of Homs.

referendum at a time when violence is engulfing the country. "I'm not sure how people are supposed to go out and vote when their towns and cities are under bombardment," Jabri said.

The intensity of this latest offensive, which began on the eve of a failed attempt by the United States and its allies to secure a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Syria, suggests the government may be hoping it can crush the uprising before Feb. 26. The resolution, which was intended to add weight to an Arab League proposal for Assad to surrender power, was vetoed by Russia and China.

Russia has since thrown its full support behind Assad's reform program, which had been promised since the start of the uprising nearly a year ago. In a speech in January, Assad pledged to hold a referendum in February, and on Wednesday, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the move as "better late than never."

"Of course, we believe that the adoption of a new constitution in Syria is a step forward toward political pluralism," Lavrov said after talks with his Dutch counterpart, Uri Rosenthal, in The Hague.

'Lot of gambling going on'

The announcement of a date for the vote came ahead of an expected flurry of diplomatic activity in the coming days aimed at solving the Syria crisis, which many fear could escalate into a full-blown war and spill beyond its borders.

Lavrov is expected to meet

Thursday with French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe to discuss a French proposal for a new Security Council resolution. Later in the day, the U.N. General Assembly is due to vote on a nonbinding resolution put forward by the Arab League that would condemn the brutality of the Syrian security forces and call for their withdrawal from residential areas.

On Feb. 24, officials from the United States, the European Union and the Arab League are among those expected to attend a Friends of Syria meeting called by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in Tunisia to explore ways of helping the Syrian opposition in its efforts to force Assad's departure. A French Foreign Ministry spokesman told reporters in Paris on Wednesday that Juppe plans to raise the possibility of opening "humanitarian corridors" into Syria to aid suffering civilians, a suggestion that has been raised before but not seriously pursued.

The moves point to a sharp divide within the international community between those who want Assad to leave, led by the United States, and those backed by Russia, including Iran and China, who support his program of limited reforms twinned with a crackdown against the opposition.

Neither strategy seems likely to work, said Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"There's a lot of gambling going on," he said. "The Russians are betting on Assad being able to do

the one thing he's never done, which is reform. And the U.S. is betting on something we're not able to accomplish, which is to persuade the regime to step down."

"If these don't work, you'll have more insurgency and more civil war," he said.

In office until 2028 plausible

Assad hailed the constitution as heralding a "new era in cooperation with all spectrums of the Syrian people to achieve what we all aspire for," in comments quoted by the official news agency SANA.

The document also seemed likely to assure his survival for many years to come. The last referendum, held in 2007, saw 97.62 percent of the population endorse Assad's second term as president, up from 97.24 percent in 2000, when he first took office.

Parliamentary elections would be held 90 days after the constitution is approved, but Assad would remain in power until his current term expires in 2014. The president would retain control over the security services and also over who would be able to compete in the elections, making it plausible he could remain in office until 2028.

One clause gives the president the right to take unspecified "measures needed to remedy the situation" in the event of a "grave danger that threatens national unity or well-being, territorial integrity, or that hinders state institutions," a description that could be applied to the current crisis.

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USA Today (USA)

Remake U.N. Security Council

By Lionel Beehner

The U.N. Security Council's inability to pass a resolution condemning Syria is the latest failure of the institution at preventing mass violence. In 1994, the council voted to pull peacekeepers out of Rwanda shortly before its genocide. The same body declared safe havens for Bosnian Muslims in 1993, only to stand by as Serbs slaughtered thousands of them.

The tragedies above underscore the urgent need to reform the council, whose permanent membership — the United States, U.K., France, Russia and China — still reflects the postwar realities of 1945, not those of today. President Obama made waves in 2010 after promising India a permanent seat, but there has been radio silence from the White House since then. Here's a simple plan his administration should get behind:

Expand the permanent five to include five more members with veto powers — presumably Germany, Japan, India, Brazil and South Africa — but require that a resolution can be blocked only by two vetoes rather than one. This plan, which Yale historian Paul Kennedy describes as “both desperate and ingenious” in his book *The Parliament of Man*, would make the council more representative of the actual balance of power, enhance its legitimacy and require greater coalition-building. Sure, there will be hackles raised — why Brazil and not Mexico? — but given these states' size, location and economic output, they are the logical candidates. Plus, there would remain rotating members to give other states a vote.

A relic of World War II

The need for reform is not a new phenomenon. Even as the U.N. has swelled to 193 members, with a ballooning \$36 billion bureaucracy and more than 100,000 peacekeepers deployed around the world, the Security Council looks remarkably unchanged since 1946, when the five victors of World War II rewarded themselves with permanent seats. To reform the body requires an amendment to the U.N. Charter and support from two-thirds of the General Assembly — which explains why only three have passed since 1945.

Yet without reform, the council risks abdicating its role to other institutional forums such as the G20, where the U.S. exerts even less influence. In short, the institution will become “neutered,” as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said after the Syria vote — a fossilized body that is neither effective nor legitimate.

Given the body's task of maintaining peace and security, many of the world's



By Don Emmert, AFP/Getty Images

Resolution condemning Syria: Russian Ambassador to the U.N. Vitaly Churkin, center, stays still while Portuguese Ambassador Jose Filipe Moraes Cabral, left, and South African Ambassador Baso Sangqu vote yes Feb. 4 at the U.N. Security Council.

Failure to act over Syrian atrocities is just the latest sign of ineptitude. WWII-era panel should reflect today's world.

thorniest disputes end up at its doorstep, much like how hot-button domestic issues end up on the Supreme Court's docket. Yet imagine the legitimacy or legal authority the court would carry if its justices were still property-owning white males. That is how much of the world views the Security Council.

To wit: Europe comprises less than 10% of the world's population but gets two of the council's five permanent seats. India has more than 1 billion people, while Japan is the U.N.'s second largest contributor. Yet both powers, puzzlingly, are not permanent members. The entire continents of Africa and Latin America are also left out.

Any proposal to reform the council, of course, runs into obvious snags. A major concern is that a larger permanent membership will make consensus more difficult. But this plan maintains the institution's balance of power and keeps the veto — what former ambassador Thomas Pickering calls the “ghost at the picnic” — without making the voting process too unwieldy or creating a two-tiered permanent membership. If anything, this reform plan makes it more difficult for any one

country to unilaterally block a resolution.

But would Congress go along? The biggest fear in Washington is that an expanded Security Council would dilute American power and harm our ability to block resolutions that condemn Israeli actions. But these fears are overblown. First, nearly all the states shortlisted for membership are democracies whose interests often align with ours. Not to mention that India's membership would provide a useful check against China's rise. Of course, occasions will arise when the U.S. does not get its way, but that is how a deliberative and representative body is supposed to work. And yes, reform will require the United States to form coalitions and persuade others to join it in blocking resolutions against Israel. But this process would make America feel less isolated using its veto, while enhancing Israeli security over the long run.

New alliances

It will also be hard — if not impossible — to persuade the Chinese or Russians to water down their vetoes or throw open the door to the Indians or Japanese. But neither will want to be on record as blocking reform. The new reconfiguration could also align with their interests because they'd no longer face the formidable bloc of the U.S., Britain and France, and might also find common cause with entrants such as South Africa or Brazil.

The U.N.'s lack of leadership on Syria demonstrates it is high time to reform its most esteemed body. A “neutered” Security Council is in nobody's interest, least of all the United States'.

Lionel Beehner is a fellow with the Truman National Security Project and a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors.

Jerusalem Post (Palestine occupée / Occupied Palestine)

Arab League may weigh arming Syrian opposition

Clinton hints intervention possible only with Assad's assent • Activist: Regime using chemical weapons

• BY OREN KUSSLER and Reuters

Syrian forces attacked anti-government rebels and civilians in cities and towns across the country Tuesday, as Arab officials confirmed regional governments would be ready to arm the resistance if the bloodshed did not stop.

The western city of Homs, the heart of the uprising against President Bashar Assad's 11-year rule, suffered a bombardment of pro-opposition neighborhoods for the 11th day running. Twenty people were reported killed nationwide Tuesday.

Residents also fled from Hama, a rural town near the capital Damascus, as it came under government artillery fire.

With Assad seemingly oblivious to international condemnation of his campaign to crush the revolt, Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia pushed for a new resolution at the United Nations supporting a peace plan forged at a meeting in Cairo on Sunday.

But Arab League diplomats said that arming the opposition forces was now officially an option.

A resolution passed at the meeting urged Arabs to "provide all kinds of political and material support" to the opposition, which would also allow arms transfers.

"We will back the opposition financially and diplomatically in the beginning, but if the killing by the regime continues, civilians must be helped to protect themselves. The resolu-

tion gives Arab states all options to protect the Syrian people," an Arab ambassador said.

In Washington, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the peacekeeper proposal would be tough to get through, given Russian and Chinese support for Damascus. Clinton seemed to suggest that foreign troops could only be deployed to Syria with Assad's permission.

"There are a lot of challenges to be discussed... and certainly the peacekeeping request is one that will take agreement and consensus," she said at a press conference with her Turkish counterpart. "So we don't know that it is going to be possible to persuade Syria. They've already, as of today, rejected that."

Clinton also appeared to hint that Assad might somehow, of his own accord, adopt the Arab League plan and step down.

"No one wants to see a civil war in Syria. So we have to encourage the Assad regime, and those who support it, to understand that there's either a path toward peacemaking and democratic transition - which is what we are promoting - or there's a path that leads toward chaos and violence, which we deplore," she said.

The threat of military support was meant to add pressure on the Syrian leader and his Russian and Chinese allies but it also risks leading to a Libya-style conflict or sectarian civil war.

"We think fighters linked to al-Qaida and some Sunni armed groups are sending



DRUSE RALLY in the village of Majdal Shams yesterday. (Bar Sahmer/Reuters)

fighters to Syria to participate in the fighting there as a kind of moral support," said one senior Baghdad security official.

Conflict flared anew on Tuesday in Hama, near the capital Damascus. One activist said many residents had fled the town from government shelling.

One activist said Assad's regime has used chemical warfare in order to ease its entrance into Homs. Awar Al-lazak - an officer who defected from the Syrian army, whose he worked in the chemical warfare department - told Al-Naba the government had used nerve gas under the supervision of Rus-

ian and Iranian scientists, and intends to do so again in other parts of the country. The charges could not be immediately confirmed.

In Homs, a strategic city on the highway between Damascus and commercial hub Aleppo, the pro-opposition neighborhood of Baba Amro was struck at dawn by the heaviest shelling in five days, the Syria Observatory for Human Rights said.

"Twenty people were killed nationwide," it said, adding to an estimated toll of more than 400 since the assault began on February 3.

"They are hitting the same spots several consecutive times,

making venturing out there impossible. The shelling was heavy in the morning and now it is one rocket every 15 minutes or so," one activist said by satellite phone.

"Residents are trapped. We have a man who sustained severe burns and is dying and he needs a hospital," he said, adding that the man was in a truck picking up wounded people in Baba Amro overnight when it was hit by a rocket fire.

A doctor at a makeshift hospital in Baba Amro, appeared in a video with a wounded youth he said was shot by a sniper in his side.

"The bullet ended up in the stomach. This is a critical condition that needs transportation to a proper hospital," he said. "We appeal to anyone with conscience to intervene to stop the massacres of Bashar Assad and his cohorts."

Opposition activist Mohammad al-Homsi said the humanitarian situation was getting worse, with food and fuel short and prices tripling. Army roadblocks had been set up around opposition districts, Homsi said from the city.

Shelling was also reported in the town of Hama.

At the United Nations, diplomats said a draft General Assembly resolution, supporting the Arab League plan and calling for the appointment of a joint UN-Arab League envoy on Syria, could be put to a vote on Wednesday or Thursday.

The resolution is similar to a

Security Council draft vetoed by Russia and China on February 4, which condemned the Assad government and called on him to step aside.

There are no vetoes in General Assembly votes and its decisions are not legally binding.

An Arab League proposal for a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping mission to be sent to Syria elicited a guarded response from Western powers, who are wary of becoming bogged down militarily in Syria. It was rejected out of hand by the Assad government.

Russia, Assad's main ally and arms supplier, also showed little enthusiasm, saying it could not support a peacekeeping mission unless both sides stopped the violence first.

The Syria conflict, the most prolonged of the revolts in the Arab world, which saw the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya toppled last year, is shaping up to be a geopolitical struggle reminiscent of the Cold War.

Russia wants to retain its foothold in the region and counter US influence. Assad is also allied to Iran, which is at odds with the United States, Europe and Israel.

The Arab drive against Assad is led by Sunni-ruled Gulf states, who also see Shi'ite Iran and its shadowy nuclear program as a threat.

Analysts say the conflict could spread across the Middle East's ethnic, religious and political fault lines if it is not resolved.

IDF prepares for possible Syrian diversionary attack

Concern mounts that Damascus would use chemical weapons against Israeli targets

• BY YAAROV KATZ

drawn up a number of operational responses to a range of scenarios that could evolve along the northern front. Nevertheless, Israel fears that Assad under pressure, could turn the military force – that he has been using in an attempt to quell the ongoing uprising against his regime – against Israel.

That is likely why the IDF Spokesman's Office sent out pictures taken on Tuesday of OC Northern Command Maj-Gen. Yair Golan and commander of the Northern

Corps Maj-Gen. Gershon Hacohen touring Mount Hermon and looking toward Syria – showing that the IDF is preparing for attacks along the border.

Israel's concern comes in on recent reports that Assad is using nerve gas against the opposition. This has led Israel to reassess the possibility that Syria is might now be more willing to use chemical weapons against Israeli targets.

Syria is believed to have one of the most extensive chemical weapon arsenals in the

world that reportedly includes Sarin, VX and Mustard Gas.

Israel is also considering the possibility that Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons will fall into terrorist hands.

This stems from intelligence obtained by the West which indicates that advanced conventional military platforms have already been moved out of Syria by Hezbollah.

Concern over the stability of Syria's chemical arsenal comes at a time when

only about 60 percent of Israelis are in possession of gas masks. The IDF is currently lacking NIS 1.2 billion to complete the production and distribution of gas masks to the rest of the public.

The Home Front Command and Defense Ministry are in talks with the Treasury in an effort to obtain the remaining required budget. Earlier this month, *The Jerusalem Post* reported that the distribution of the gas masks will be suspended in March due to the shortage in funds.

Jerusalem Post (Palestine occupée / Occupied Palestine)

Analysts ponder Syrians, Arabs, Turks – and a wary Washington

In growing Syria crisis, Obama has few options • 'US efforts are being outpaced by the rate at which the Syrian regime is willing to kill people'

• BY ANDREW QUINN

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – Eleven months into the bloodiest uprising of the Arab Spring, US President Barack Obama is staking his Syria policy on a fragile and untested international coalition that has few palatable options for ending the violence.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called the new "Friends of Syria" group, which includes US Arab allies as well as Turkey, the best chance to build up Syria's fragile opposition and forge a political solution after Russia and China blocked any UN moves to resolve the crisis.

But the United States is playing little more than a supporting role in the new group, while some of its key allies are taking more assertive positions that may yet pull Washington into a dangerous civil war in the crossroads of the Middle East.

"The rate of impact of our efforts is being outpaced by the rate at which the Syrian regime is willing to kill people," said Steven Heydemann, a Syria expert at the US Institute of Peace.

"The US strategy, as it stands now, is simply too little, too late, and that's a growing point of tension within the administration."

The US debate over Syria policy comes amid rising fears that the conflict has already tipped out of control, with weapons and material support flowing to rebels from Iraq and elsewhere.

Arab League diplomats said a resolution the group passed on Tuesday could allow for arms supplies to Assad's opponents. That could thrust the Obama administration into an uncomfortable position of tacitly backing Arab allies who defy its own public warnings about military involvement in

the conflict.

"Right now, the opposition can probably obtain arms from raiding Syrian military supplies, adding defectors and making some black market purchases," said a US official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The White House on Tuesday reiterated its wariness of an arms race in Syria.

"We still believe that a political solution is what's needed in Syria and there is still a chance for it if the international community acts quickly," White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said.

"We do not want to contribute to the further militarization of Syria, which would take the country down a dangerous and chaotic path," he said. "However, we do not rule out additional measures should the international community wait too long and the situation grow dire."

Syria's situation is already dire enough, as President Bashar Assad's forces are stepping up attacks on both opposition forces and civilians caught in the crossfire.

"The war has become a matter of survival for the Assad regime. It is approaching the upper limit of violence it can employ, and if it is not yet 'all in,' it may soon be so, with potentially devastating effects on the population," Jeffrey White, a Middle East analyst at the Washington Institute, said in a policy paper issued on Tuesday.

Clinton is expected to discuss potential additional measures to stem the crisis when she travels to Tunis on February 24 for the first meeting of the new Syria contact group.

US officials acknowledge that Syria's meltdown presents serious policy challenges for the United States, exacerbated by Washington's long history of tensions with the Assad



'NOW IS NOT the time to rule out any option.' John McCain (right), ranking Republican on the US Senate Armed Services Committee, confers with its chairman, Carl Levin, last July. (Reuters)

government and the tenuous nature of its contacts with the opposition.

"The reality, as hard as it is to admit, is that there are very few realistic options at our disposal," said Mona Yacoubian, a Middle East expert at the Stimson Center, adding that steps such as economic sanctions may be overwhelmed by the urgency of the moment.

Some powerful voices in Congress – including some who were doubtful about the Libya effort – have recently suggested that the US look at supporting a more direct approach.

"Now is not the time to rule out any option that could save innocent lives in Syria," Republican Sen. John McCain said this week in a letter calling for a Senate committee hearing on Pentagon contingency planning.

Clinton, who lobbied Russia unsuccessfully to back a strong UN resolution on Syria, this week hinted she believed there might still be time to win Moscow's support for tougher measures although she conceded that an Arab League proposal for

peacekeeping forces was untenable.

Heydemann said Washington now appeared to hope that the Friends of Syria group will evolve into an effective partner for the political opposition, helping it to overcome internal differences and mature into a viable alternative to Assad's long and bloody rule.

But he and others agree that sooner or later the Obama administration will have to come to grips with the fact that Syria's crisis has already taken on a military dimension, and that it will soon be time to handle it that way.

"As the Obama administration agonizes over arming the opposition, the arming is already happening," said Tony Badran, a research fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a Washington think tank whose members are often associated with neoconservative views.

"They need to get in on it and supervise that framework and have a measure of control and influence. You don't want it to proliferate with the US completely in the dark."

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Le clic de Rania MASSOUD

Le colonel, sa barbe, et l'image de la révolution syrienne



Dans l'histoire ancienne, la barbe était une source de fierté pour les hommes qui la portaient. Elle symbolisait sagesse, maturité et virilité... Si l'on voulait humilier son ennemi, on lui rasait le visage. Dans *Historiae Augustae*, un recueil de biographie d'empereurs romains écrit à la fin du IV^e siècle, on rapporte comment Lucius Verus (qui régna de 161 à 169) s'était attiré les sarcasmes de la population pour s'être fait couper la barbe pour complaire... à une courtisane syrienne.

De nos jours, la barbe, perçue comme un signe d'appartenance identitaire et religieuse, est de loin moins appréciée. Souvent interdite au bureau et dans les fonctions publiques, la barbe – un peu comme le voile d'ailleurs – suscite la polémique.

C'est le cas du nouveau « look » capillaire du colonel Riad el-Asaad, chef de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL). Arborant d'habitude une moustache, le colonel est récemment apparu dans une vidéo le visage couvert d'une courte barbe poivre et sel (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5H-5rwoPdBo>). Se disant « choqué » par cette image, un internaute syrien publie un billet sur le site d'opposition « al-Moundassa », réprimandant le colonel Assaad et l'accusant d'offrir une occasion de plus aux pro-Bachar el-Assad de traiter les opposants de « salafistes fondamentaux et radicaux » (<http://the-syrian.com/archives/66830>).

« Mon colonel, vous êtes devenu un symbole national, vous représentez l'image de la révolution syrienne maintenant, écrit "Firas Free". Ne savez-vous pas ce que les gens pensent lorsqu'ils voient un homme porter la barbe ? (...) Mon colonel, (votre look) cause du tort à la révolution. À mon avis, vous ne l'avez pas fait exprès, vous n'avez tout simplement pas réfléchi aux intérêts de la révolution. (...) Et, de mon côté, je ne sais plus quoi penser... »

« C'est pathétique ! réagit un internaute sous le billet de Firas. (Le colonel Assaad) est libre de son corps, l'important est qu'il fasse de son mieux pour protéger le peuple (syrien). » « L'auteur de cet article est très naïf, il faut regarder au-delà des apparences (...), écrit un autre. La barbe n'est pas réservée aux islamistes. D'ailleurs, les hommes de Bachar sont les plus barbus de tous ! » « Le colonel Assaad est un combattant, tu crois qu'il a le temps de se raser tous les jours ? demande un troisième. Et puis où est le problème s'il est croyant ? Jusqu'à quand continuera-t-on de vivre dans la mentalité sectaire du régime ? »

Dans la vidéo en question, diffusée le 2 septembre 2011 sur YouTube par « Les Syro-Américains pour la démocratie », le colonel rebelle adresse un message aux Syriens de l'étranger souhaitant qu'ils rentrent dans leur pays pour combattre auprès de l'ASL. « Vous êtes les vrais ambassadeurs de la Syrie à travers le monde et le peuple a besoin de votre soutien politique, moral et financier, affirme le colonel Assaad dans la vidéo. Il y a déjà beaucoup de gens à l'intérieur du pays qui sont prêts à se battre contre le régime, mais il faut dire que nous serons incapables de protéger la vie de ceux qui décident de venir de l'étranger. Si un mal leur arrive, nous serons tous perdants... »

Le colonel Riad el-Asaad est-il donc un islamiste radical ? Ce n'est pas, en tout cas, ce qu'on peut déduire de son message au ton modéré... Pour en savoir plus, consultons Google (en arabe) : « Votre recherche – colonel Riad el-Asaad salafiste – n'a donné aucun résultat. Assurez-vous que tous les mots sont épelés correctement. Essayez des mots-clés différents. Essayez des mots-clés plus généraux. Essayez de supprimer certains mots... »

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Éclairage

Assiégée, la ville fait appel aux pigeons voyageurs



La pratique colombophile, une tradition ancienne, est implantée depuis des siècles en Syrie.



Un message attaché à la patte, les pigeons voyageurs font la navette entre les quartiers, transmettant les dernières nouvelles.

Pratiquement coupés du reste du monde, des militants de Homs ont décidé de recourir à des méthodes ancestrales pour communiquer : des pigeons voyageurs font la navette entre les quartiers, transmettant les dernières nouvelles.

« Que Dieu soit avec toi, que Dieu te guide à Baba Amr » – l'un des quartiers les plus bombardés –, crie Omar, un pseudonyme, posté sur le toit d'une maison en lâchant un pigeon dans le ciel de Homs, selon des vidéos diffusées récemment sur Internet. Quelques minutes plus tôt, ce militant du quartier de Baba el-Sbaa enroulait un papier à l'aide d'un fil bleu autour de la patte de l'oiseau, dans l'espoir que les habitants de Baba Amr, situé à plus de deux

kilomètres de là, accuseront bien réception. « Militants de Baba Amr, prière de nous informer de ce dont vous avez besoin en termes de médicaments et de nourriture », lit-on dans le message.

Pilonnée depuis le 4 février par les forces du régime de Bachar el-Assad, la troisième ville de Syrie, surnommée la « capitale de la révolution », est isolée et privée d'eau, d'électricité et de télécommunications, avec des chars encerclant les rues désormais désertes des quartiers sensibles.

« Merci Bachar de nous avoir fait revenir au Moyen Âge », commente Omar, entouré de plusieurs compagnons. Si les militants ont lancé leur révolte grâce notamment aux réseaux so-

ciaux, ils se voient aujourd'hui obligés de recourir à une tradition ancienne en Syrie, où la pratique colombophile est implantée depuis des siècles. « Les habitants de Baba Amr nous informent des massacres commis chez eux par le régime et nous indiquent quelle route prendre pour faire parvenir les secours », explique Omar, la voix parfois couverte par le bruit assourdissant des explosions et des bombardements. Les militants parviennent à envoyer leurs vidéos par voie satellitaire – un moyen qui n'est pas à la portée de tout le monde – et se servent parfois de talkies-walkies au sein d'un même quartier. « Ils ont transformé Homs en une grande prison, les gens n'osent pas sortir de

chez eux et ne peuvent rien faire, les shabbiha (milices prorégime) sont partout », affirme Omar. « Les boulangeries ont fermé leurs portes, j'ai vu des parents nourrir leurs enfants de pain rassis avec de l'eau, ça vous donne la chair de poule », s'indigne-t-il.

Le jour même, un pigeon revient, salué par les militants toujours postés sur les toits. « Dieu est grand, l'oiseau est revenu avec un message ! » clament-ils. La lettre est porteuse d'un cri de secours, mais aussi de défi : « Des militants de Baba Amr aux militants du vieux Homs, nous avons besoin d'aides médicales et alimentaires, bien reçu votre message. Vive la Syrie ! À bas Bachar el-Assad ! »

(© AFP)

Déluge de feu sur Homs et Hama

Révolte Les efforts diplomatiques redoublent d'intensité pour résoudre la crise syrienne.

Les forces gouvernementales syriennes ont bombardé hier les villes de Homs et de Hama, et mené pour la première fois une opération dans le quartier de Barzé à Damas. Au total, les violences auront fait hier de 33 à 52 morts, selon les sources.

Dans la capitale syrienne, des troupes d'élite appuyées par des véhicules blindés ont dressé des barrières dans les rues principales du quartier résidentiel de Barzé, où elles ont effectué des perquisitions et procédé à des arrestations. Les soldats de la quatrième division blindée et de la garde républicaine ont tiré en l'air pour disperser les habitants. Selon les habitants de ce quartier du centre-nord de Damas, les militaires recherchent des activistes et des membres de l'Armée syrienne libre. A Hama, l'armée a bombardé les quartiers résidentiels de Faraya, Ouhlat, Bachoura et al-Hamidiya. Des troupes venues de l'aéroport se sont dirigées vers la ville. A Homs, les loyalistes ont plommé pour la troisième journée consécutive des quartiers sunnites. Une explosion a visé un oléoduc alimentant une raffinerie. Les Comités locaux de coordination ont rapporté des cas de suffocation parmi les habitants de Baba Amro, en raison de la fumée dégagée par l'explosion.

Dans la province de Deraa, une école de 16 ans a été tuée par balles près du village d'al-Nouaimi, où une campagne de perquisitions et d'arrestations est en cours. Dans la

même province, dans une vallée proche du village de Selim d-Joulane, l'armée encerclé environ 30 soldats dissidents et lance des bombes dans cette vallée. Dans la province d'Alep, neuf civils, sept soldats et quatre militaires dissidents ont été tués ces dernières 24 heures dans des affrontements dans la localité d'al-Atareh. Dans la province d'Idlib, trois civils ont été tués près de la ville de Jar el-Choughour à la suite de l'explosion d'une bombe. Et à Dair ez-Zor, des perquisitions ont lieu dans la localité d'al-Achara, où 16 personnes ont été arrêtées.

Et, comme tous les jours depuis des mois, les condamnations des violences en Syrie se sont succédé hier. La Turquie a exhorté l'ONU à obtenir que l'aide humanitaire puisse parvenir aux civils touchés par les violences. Le gouvernement britannique et le Vatican ont lancé un appel conjoint « pour un arrêt immédiat des violences en Syrie ».

Pour sa part, le ministre russe des Affaires étrangères, Sergueï Lavrov, qui doit rencontrer son homologue français, Alain Juppé, aujourd'hui à Vienne pour discuter de la situation en Syrie, a estimé que les tentatives de certains pays d'isoler le président syrien Bachar el-Assad et son gouvernement étaient « une erreur ». « Malheureusement, certains de nos partenaires ont depuis longtemps fait une croix sur le gouvernement syrien. Nous pensons que seul le diabo-

lisme politique peut apporter une solution, mais le dialogue doit inclure la Syrie », a-t-il ajouté, assurant que Moscou est favorable « au rejet des interférences étrangères ». La proposition française d'insérer des « corridors humanitaires » en Syrie ne peut aboutir que si elle est approuvée par toutes les parties syennes, a en outre estimé M. Lavrov. « Il va me falloir beaucoup de force de conviction » face à M. Lavrov, a répliqué M. Juppé. « Je lui dirai que la Russie s'isole dans la communauté internationale (...) et que ce n'est pas une bonne chose pour elle de s'isoler à ce point », a-t-il ajouté. Par ailleurs, M. Juppé a prévu « la chute certaine d'Assad, qui devra rendre compte, sans aucun doute ».

Devant l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU
Dans ce contexte, l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU doit se prononcer aujourd'hui sur un projet de résolution qui condamne la répression, moins de deux semaines après le blocage d'un texte similaire au Conseil de sécurité. L'adoption du texte est très probable mais sa portée sera surtout symbolique. Les délégations arabes à l'ONU ont toutefois jugé inacceptables les amendements proposés par la Russie pour atténuer le projet de résolution. « Les Arabes les ont rejetés et vont de l'avant », a déclaré le représentant d'un pays occidental, dont les propos ont été confirmés par plusieurs de ses collègues. « La situation en



A Hama, au nord de Damas, des soldats syriens loyalistes font le signe de la victoire. Local Media/APP

Par ailleurs, le ministre turc des Affaires étrangères, Rafik Abdessalam, a expliqué que son pays chercherait à dégager « un consensus et un message unifié » lors de la conférence du « groupe des amis du peuple syrien » qu'il accueillera le 24 février. Et enfin, les autorités helvétiques ont annoncé que la Suisse va fermer son ambassade à Damas. Elles ont conseillé à tous les ressortissants helvétiques de quitter la Syrie « au plus vite ».

(Sources : agences et rédaction)

Qassem: Syria will not change Lebanon

Hezbollah deputy chief describes the protests against Assad's regime as unsuccessful

BEIRUT: Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem said Wednesday that March 14's bet that regional developments will change the balance of power in Lebanon is a losing one.

Speaking one day after a March 14 rally to mark the seventh anniversary of statesman Rafik Hariri's assassination, during which his son former Prime Minister Saad Hariri said he assumed responsibility for supporting the popular uprising in Syria, Qassem called the demonstrations "unsuccessful."

"No matter what developments take

place in Syria, and they [developments] appear to be in the interest of the regime and its sustainability ... they will not change the equation in Lebanon because the equation in Lebanon is of people's resistance, and it holds justice, and could not be shaken by tomades," Qassem said, adding that that "the resistance today is part of a defense strategy that was decided in Cabinet."

Speaking during a lecture at the Lebanese University in Hadath, Qassem said March 14 wants to "transform the north into a ... reserve to defeat the [Syrian] regime and Syrian stability, as well as shelter arms and people."

In his Tuesday speech via satellite from Paris, Hariri called on Hezbollah to surrender its arms to Lebanese authorities in order to relieve the Lebanese people of the danger of violence. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea also spoke at the Tuesday rally,

ly, and called for the departure of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's Cabinet, saying "this government is in a state of disarray."

Mikati postponed Cabinet sessions at the beginning of this month following a ministerial dispute over appointments to key public administration posts.

Several other politicians also weighed Wednesday on the topics tackled at the rally. MP Antoine Zahra, a member of the Lebanese Forces, said Wednesday that "we cannot but support a people revolt for their freedom and democracy ... we can't go back to the Syrian regime as it was."

He echoed Geagea's calls for Cabinet to step down, as "ministers are unable to carry out their responsibilities," and said that the insistence of Hezbollah to "lead the game and obstruct and control the state will not lead to any results."

Future Movement MP Samir Jisr said the issue of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, set up to investigate and try the killers of Rafik Hariri and others - will not be up for discussion at any future national dialogue session, given that the matter was agreed upon during a previous session and that Hezbollah's weapons were the sole item to be discussed.

"The matter now is the issue of weapons and we are in principle with President [Michel Sleiman's] proposal to resume dialogue but first we have to discuss the items on the agenda."

National dialogue has been stalled for over a year, with March 14 insisting that Hezbollah's arms should be the sole topic, and Hezbollah saying it will discuss a national defense strategy but not its weapons.

Future Movement MP Hadi Hobeish said his party was open to discussion

with Hezbollah, "despite their position regarding the STL." The party has dismissed the U.N.-backed STL as "an American-Israeli" court, and has vowed not to turn over the four suspects indicted by the court, who are Hezbollah members. Hariri Tuesday called on Hezbollah to reconsider its strands on the tribunal.

Ex-Minister Mohammad Shatah, an adviser of Saad Hariri, praised the latter's vow to prevent any Sunni-Shiite strife as a result of the collapse of Bashar Assad's regime in Syria.

He added that Hariri had honed in on two key issues: "That you can't deal with the issue of the STL by trying to protect indicted people and obstruct the tribunal's work ... [and] that Lebanon ... cannot be protected by the presence of an army other than the national army, because it weakens Lebanese security."

-The Daily Star

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

Turkey, Arab states ponder recognition of Syrian opposition

NOAH BLASER ISTANBUL

As Western and Arab nations quarrel over what diplomatic measures to take at the Feb. 24 "Friends of Syria" meeting in Tunisia, Syria's nascent political opposition may soon win official recognition from the frustrated opponents of President Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime.

"We are expecting recognition of the Syrian National Council (SNC) from some of our [Gulf state] brethren as well as Turkey" ahead of the meeting, SNC liaison to the Arab League Ahmet Ramadan told Today's Zaman on Sunday. The increasing likelihood that the SNC -- a coalition of opposition voices which has become Syria's de facto opposition group -- will soon see official recognition comes as nations seek a way outside of the UN to punish the Syrian regime for its al-

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SNC announces its opposition to Bashar al-Assad during an inaugural meeting in Istanbul on Sept. 15.

most one-year-long crackdown on opposition groups. "There are many divisions within the SNC, and so there are reservations about recognizing them. But given the recent veto in the UN, it's a unilateral ac-

tion that countries can take to show their support for the opposition movement," said Oytun Orhan, a Syria expert at the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), in a Monday interview with Today's Zaman. "There is no official word in Ankara right now about this, but it is certain that recognizing the council is on the government's table, it is going to be taken more and more seriously in the future," Orhan stated.

"We have a very good relationship with Turkey, though we haven't been talking about official recognition," said Khaled Khodja, an Istanbul-based member of the SNC, to Today's Zaman on Monday. "Turkey may in fact be discussing the issue, but considering that we already have built very close ties to Turkey, we can already say that we are satisfied with our relationship." The Turkish government covers the costs of an official office

for the opposition group in Istanbul and met with a delegation for the SNC on two official occasions.

Recognition for the opposition group has proven elusive since the group first convened in Istanbul in September, and it has fought the perception that it does not comprehensively represent Syria's varied ethnic communities.

Nonetheless on Friday of last week the opposition group earned the critical endorsement of a long-time rival opposition group, the "Local Coordination Committees," when its spokesman Imad Hussari said, "There should be an official recognition of the SNC by several Gulf countries." Ramadan stated on Sunday that a number of Gulf states had confirmed with the SNC that they would be recognizing the group before the late February "Friends of Syria" meeting. Among them are expected to be Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

Regime spies 'behind Al Qaida support for uprising'

Move meant to justify opposition crackdown

Gulf News Report

Dubai Syrian intelligence has orchestrated an Al Qaida call to support the uprising against the regime of Bashar Al Assad, the leader of the Lebanese Socialist Party said.

MP Walid Junblatt said the move was meant to tarnish the image of the opposition and justify Al Assad's crackdown. Lebanese authorities will likely employ the same tactic to bolster their claims that Al Qaida had infiltrated the Bekaa town of Aarsal, he added.

A few months ago, De-

fence Minister Fayeze Gosn said that members of the terrorist organisation had infiltrated the town and later entered Syria. Days after his declaration, twin bombings erupted in Damascus, which the Syrian regime blamed on Al Qaida. The March 14-led opposition slammed Gosn's remarks, saying that he may be linking Lebanon to the developments in Syria.

Ayman Zawahiri, Al Qaida chief, on Sunday voiced his support for Syria's uprising and urged Muslims in several countries to come to the aid of Syrian rebels.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

France, Russia to discuss reworking Syria resolution

Foreign ministers meet in Vienna today to explore new UN initiatives

BY MICK O'REILLY
Senior Associate Editor

Homs Russia's foreign minister will meet his French counterpart in Vienna today to discuss a plan to rework a UN Security Council resolution that aims to end violence in Syria.

After a meeting with Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal yesterday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow would not support any UN resolution "that could legitimise regime change".

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said that his country is trying to rework the resolution to overcome Russian resistance.

Lavrov welcomed the announcement by Syrian President Bashar Al As-

 A new constitution to end one-party rule in Syria is a step forward."

Sergei Lavrov
Russian Foreign Minister

sad that he had ordered a February 26 referendum on a new constitution that would open the way to political parties other than the ruling Baath party.

"A new constitution to end one-party rule in Syria is a step forward," Lavrov said. "It is coming late unfortunately but better late than never."

Juppe also reiterated France's hope that the

Security Council will reconsider creation of "humanitarian corridors" that would allow aid groups to reach Syrian areas that are facing "absolutely scandalous massacres".

Meanwhile in Syria, the restive cities of Hama and Homs were under heavy government bombardment yesterday. In the neighbourhood of Barzeh in central Damascus, elite forces backed by armoured personnel carriers made sweeping arrests and fired machine guns in the air.

Gulf News was in Barzeh during the operation and witnessed opposition sympathisers being pulled, one by one, from a building on Ramadan Street, handcuffed and blindfolded.

See also Pages 11 & 16

Breaking the Syrian deadlock

An Arab League-Nato military operation with Turkey at its helm seems the only alternative to tame an increasingly belligerent Al Assad regime

BY JOSEPH A. KECHICHIAN
Special to Gulf News

There might soon be a military force deployed throughout key Syrian cities that will literally emasculate the Baath regime and save the hapless but immensely courageous people of the great Syrian nation. Whether these will be peace-keepers is a serious question that will determine how long such a presence may last. Moreover, and because Damascus will categorically reject outside intervention, the identities of countries that agree to supply troops will surely decide whether Syria will remain united.

If the moribund Arab League finally agreed to support the Syrian National Council, and called for the creation of a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping mission in Syria, few understand how such a mechanism would be implemented. Goaded by Prince Saud Al Faisal of Saudi Arabia, League foreign ministers approved a resolution that called for "opening communication channels with the Syrian opposition and providing all forms of political and material support to it".

Coming on the heels of a Gulf Cooperation Council-wide decision to withdraw ambassadors from Damascus and expel Syrian diplomats stationed on the Arabian peninsula, Riyadh's latest marker ought to be emphasised.

In fact, this initiative came a few days after Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz expressed serious reservations about the UN Security Council fiasco that resulted in a double veto, votes that will leave permanent scars for years to come for both Moscow and Beijing in this part of the world.

Naturally, Russia refused to support the latest joint Arab-UN peacekeeping mission until such time as a ceasefire is achieved, and the Baath government accepted a UN authorised deployment. For Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, a preamble condition was necessary, namely an end to attacks by opposition-armed groups that apparently needed to be brought "under control".

Chinese stance

Still, meeting with his UAE Foreign Minister Shaikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Lavrov declared that Moscow was "studying" the Arab-UN proposal and seeking "clarification" on some of its elements.

China, which allegedly stood with the downtrodden, declined to voice an immediate opinion on the peacekeeping plan. Its foreign ministry spokesman, Liu Weimin, sidestepped various questions as to whether Beijing would support the joint mission proposal, claiming that China would back the League's "political mediation efforts". It now incites that it might no longer

Inasmuch as the Syrian conflict — and the time has come to affix such a label — has now entered an escalatory phase, any deployment will be violent since Damascus will not open its borders to such a force.

Although Saudi Arabia and several other Arab countries may contribute troops, in reality, an effective force would need to be substantial — perhaps as many as 100,000 men with full logistical complements — which is not on the cards. Simply stated, no Arab country will send its air force to attack Syrian military installations to wear the regime down.

Only Turkey can manage to deploy large land and air assets against Syria and Ankara will only move under a Nato mandate. Consequently, a more realistic option might be to look for an Arab League-Nato alliance, one that will have the wherewithal to put an end to the massacres under way.

Necessary step

Unfortunately, such an engagement, which will require the creation of buffer areas as well as the imposition of a no-fly zone over the country, will be a bloody yet necessary affair. In turn, the SAA, which can only kill its own people and destroy its own cities, will need to be tamed.

Its record in every Arab-Israeli war, as well as the three decades long occupation of Lebanon — ironically under the 1976 League-sanctioned Arab Deterrent Force — along with a shy performance during the 1991 War for Kuwait, all speak for themselves. Under the circumstances, and because the League's military options are limited, League officials should literally turn the page on their latest proposal.

Though a potential League-Nato decision will see Turkey take the lead in pinning the last nails in the Baath coffin, it may be useful to keep in mind that Al Assad chose this course of action.

Truth be told, what motivates a majority within the League today is not to radicalise the hapless Syrian population, but to allow Al Assad a way out, perhaps following the Yemeni paradigm that ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Sadly, because Damascus refuses the League-UN plan, and to avoid a full-fledged civil war, the last available option might well be a League-Nato operation. Obviously, Damascus will put up stiff resistance though Syrians will probably live to rebuild their shattered country.

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Anti-government forces creep up on Damascus

Heavily guarded government offices are silent testimony

MICK O'REILLY
Senior Associate Editor



Reporting from: **HOMS**



They were pulled, one by one, from the modern grey eight-storey building on Ramadan Street in Barzeh, just north of the city centre here, yesterday afternoon.

Their hands were bound in plastic electrical ties, their eyes blindfolded by white bands. Two soldiers pulled each of the 22 one at a time, pulling them onto an old olive-green bus of 1960s Soviet vintage. On board, each was placed in a seat, hands behind their back, head bent forward, touching the cold metal handles of the seat in front. Their white blindfold around their heads offered their only comfort against the cold metal bars of the seat.

That was the least of their worries.

At the rear and front of the bus, soldiers stood sentinel, training their weapons and keeping a close eye on the Free Syrian Army sympathisers arrested earlier yesterday.

One officer walked the aisle of the bus, randomly striking a detainee about the head. The bus was encircled by a half-dozen or so sentries. Just after dawn, troops and security forces in armoured personnel carriers swept into this district, firing machine guns in the air.

For weeks, the largely Sunni district has been the most active in the capital in the protest movement against the 42-year rule of President Bashar Al Assad and his father, the late President Hafez Al Assad.

Little outward sign

By yesterday afternoon, there was little outward sign of the raids which occurred in the Darah Al Mustaha and Haret Al Bustan neighbourhoods of Barzeh. Security remained tight, however, with checkpoints on the roads. Every driver, passenger or pedestrian had to produce national identity cards for scrutiny. For weeks, tension had been running high, with pro-Alawite militia men in an overlooking district managing to keep a lid on anti-government forces.

At the police station, secret police brandishing Kalashnikovs and riding in Mercedes and Ford station wagons, kept a close watch on the detainees.

"These people are terrorists," one bystander told *Gulf News* as the detainees were driven away in the bus, surrounded

by heavily-armed police in unmarked vehicles. "They are trying to overthrow Syria. Good for the police," he said.

Throughout the city, government buildings are becoming increasingly fortified, with sandbag emplacements, razor wire and sentries guarding the grounds. Visitors to the buildings are thoroughly searched, and vehicles are checked for weapons and explosives.

At strategic intersections, military checkpoints are becoming commonplace as Damascus itself tethers on the verge of political violence. So far, authorities have been largely successful in making sure the widespread violence seen in Homs, Daraa and Hama hasn't reached the capital. Yesterday morning, on the main highway north to Homs, Syrian Army forces were on high alert, with a military operation taking place near Al Qastal.

At least 200 soldiers, backed by armoured cars and tanks swept hills looking for anti-government forces. Traffic along the main Damascus-Aleppo highway was backed up for 30 minutes as the military checked vehicles.

Two weeks after, however, security forces swept into the north eastern suburbs to quell anti-government forces. At least 20 people were killed in that operation. Even now, access to the areas is strictly controlled, with checkpoints, tanks, armoured cars and machine gun emplacements maintaining an uneasy calm.

Arrest and detention

In Barzeh yesterday, the military operation destroyed the front of shops and turned back local students who were heading to school, college and university.

The arrest and detention of the men witnessed yesterday by *Gulf News* shows that opposition to the Al Assad rule has reached the heart of Damascus.

Residents of the city have been able to move about relatively normally. Economic sanctions, however, are beginning to bite. Long lines have formed at petrol stations in the city as drivers try to fill up.

Visa, MasterCard and money transfer services between Syria and the rest of the world are impossible, with ATMs reporting a "technical malfunction" for customers attempting to withdraw cash from non-Syrian financial institutions.

Bus services are largely suspended, with the Damascus bus fleet commandeered to move troops around the hotspots and quell tensions. Ordinary citizens are forced to rely on fleets of battered minivans for transit services.

US sees 'challenges' for peacekeepers in Syria

Syria's approval a must for implementing such initiative: Russia

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration said on Monday it backs Arab League plans to end continuing violence in Syria but noted several obstacles to deploying a proposed international peacekeeping force to the country and withheld full endorsement of the idea.

The administration has said repeatedly it does not see a military solution to the crisis in Syria, yet US officials indicated they would consider the Arab League call for peacekeepers and discuss it with various countries to see whether such an idea is feasible.

However, they stressed there would be difficulties in getting required UN Security Council authorisation for a force.

Chief among the hurdles is opposition by Russia and China, which vetoed a far less ambitious Security Council action already this month. Russia has said peace-



Syrian rebels during a training exercise outside Idlib, Syria, on Tuesday. — AFP

effect all of their recommendations. And certainly, the peacekeeping request is one that will take agreement and consensus.”

“So, we don’t know that it is going to be possible to persuade Syria. They have already as of today rejected that, but I think this is what we are trying to explore,” Clinton told reporters after meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu at the State Department.

At the White House, Press secretary Jay Carney said the administration has begun discussions with the United Nations, the Arab League and allies about how an eventual peacekeeping force could work. He said nothing about any U.S. participation, but it would be unlikely in the near term.

For now, talk of a peacekeeping force is preliminary, and largely theoretical. —AP

keepers could not be sent without Syrian government approval; officials in Damascus already have rejected the proposal, calling it unjustified interference in internal affairs. “We support the Arab League’s decisions ... to try to end the violence and move towards a transition,” Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said.

“There are a lot of challenges to be discussed as to how to put into

Oppn disunity benefits Assad

Ranks of anti-regime forces are divided on sectarian and ideological lines

BEIRUT — At a rented house just outside Syria's border, a dissident known only as 'The Doctor' maps out attacks. Planners speak by Skype with fighters on the ground in Syria, while others raise money, drumming up cash from fellow exiles to buy weapons.

The safe house offers a glimpse into the Free Syrian Army, a group of army defectors and others who are trying to overthrow President Bashar Al Assad by force.

The FSA has emerged as a significant hope for many Syrians who have all but given up on peaceful resistance against government tanks and snipers waging a deadly crackdown on protesters. But the group is highly decentralised—and comprises just one faction in a deeply divided and fractious Syrian opposition.

As the West and Arab states consider offering direct support to Assad's opponents, there are serious questions about whether any opposition group is even remotely prepared to take the helm after more than 40 years under Assad family rule. Indeed, Assad's greatest advantage has been the weakness and lack of unity among the disparate forces opposing him.

Since the uprising began in March, a chorus of voices has risen against the regime. Besides the rebel fighters, there are distinguished exiles who hold little sway back home, aging dissidents who spent years locked in Syrian prisons and tech-savvy young people desperate to cast off a suffocating dictatorship.

Also within opposition ranks are various ideologies and motivations, from secular forces to religious conservatives to outright radicals. Separately, there are worries that Al Qaeda will take advantage of the chaos to increase its clout and carry out attacks on Assad's regime.

The FSA allowed the Associated Press to visit one of its safe houses outside Syria on condition its location not be identified to avoid problems with the host country. The simple rented house is one of several the group operates in neighbouring nations.

About 50 dissidents were gathered there, some communicating with commanders in the field via Skype, others coordinating the smuggling of medical supplies and fighters across the border.

They map out plans and advise fighters, sometimes after consulting with fellow operatives in Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the dissidents said.

But so far, they have received no material support from other governments.

"We're an orphan group with a fighter surplus, but a serious deficit in weapons, ammunition and funding to finance our military operations against Assad's criminal army," said the man who asked to be identified as "The Doctor" — a nom de guerre he gained for his help in treating the wounded before he fled Syria.

The rebel fighters are mainly armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades stolen from the military or bought on the black market — or even from corrupt members of Assad's mili-



Syrian army defectors celebrate shortly after they defected and join the anti-Syrian regime protesters at Khaldiyeh area in Syria.— AP file

tary, "The Doctor" said. Funding comes from exiles overseas. Mohammed Jebouri, a 40-year-old Syrian who normally lives in Oslo, Norway, said he raised around \$20,000 last week from Syrian expatriates in Europe and the Middle East. In the yard, three uniformed men were training an activist smuggled across the border, teaching him to organise protests. Tear down posters of Assad wherever you find them, a bearded man instructed the young man. Knock on doors to rally supporters. "Shout to remind people of how Assad's criminal army is killing them and torturing their women and kids."

Above all, he added, always keep a lookout for snipers on rooftops. "I'm not afraid," insisted Hamza al-Hariri, 30, a motorcycle mechanic from Daraa who was smuggled across the Syrian border last week for three days of training.

"All the Syrian people are ready to die for a Syria free of tyrant Bashar Assad."

Unlike Libya's rebel National Transitional Council, which brought together most factions fighting Moammar Gadhafi's regime and was quickly recognised by the international community, Syria's opposition has no leadership on the ground. One of the main umbrella groups to emerge, the Syrian National Council, is mainly made up of exiles abroad.

The group, which has presented the uprising as a peaceful movement against Assad, appears to be divided over how much to embrace an armed force that not only protects protesters, but carries out attacks on the regime.

The FSA, meanwhile, seems

UN resolution likely today

NEW YORK— Egypt circulated a UN General Assembly resolution on Tuesday strongly condemning human rights violations by the Syrian regime and backing an Arab League plan aimed at ending the 11-month conflict in the country.

The draft resolution was finalised by Arab nations a day after UN human rights chief Navi Pillay decried Syria's escalating crackdown on civilian protesters and warned that the Security Council's recent failure to take action has emboldened Assad's government to launch an all-out assault to crush dissent.

worried about being co-opted by other groups.

"There are some opposition parties, whose names I will not mention, that offered to fund and finance our operations but on one condition, which is to follow their agenda. We have rejected their offers," Abu Mohamad al-Shami, an FSA spokesman, told the AP.

Over the weekend, the FSA announced it was uniting with a smaller defectors' group called the Free Officers Movement in an attempt to organize their ranks under a combined body called the Supreme Revolutionary Military Council for the Liberation of Syria.

The Free Syrian Army, however, is still a force trying to gain its footing. The group's main leadership is based in Turkey and has operatives spread out in other neighbouring countries, along with its fighters on

Diplomats said the resolution could be put to a vote in the 193-member assembly as early as Thursday and is likely to be adopted by a wide margin. There are no vetoes in the assembly — unlike the Security Council where Russia and China vetoed a similar, legally binding resolution on February 4. While General Assembly resolutions are nonbinding, they do reflect world opinion on major issues. The proposed resolution makes no specific reference to the Arab League's call Sunday for the Security Council to authorize a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping force for Syria.— AP

the ground inside Syria. The group has claimed responsibility for attacks on regime soldiers and security forces, often ambushing convoys or checkpoints, killing dozens of troops. At the same time, it tries to convince more soldiers to break with the military and join its ranks.

For the most part, though, Syria's military has stood fiercely by the regime, unlike the militias of Tunisia and Egypt, which ultimately backed the revolutions in their countries.

Assad, and his father before him, stacked key military posts with members of their minority Alawite sect over the past 40 years, ensuring the loyalty of the armed forces by melding the fate of the army and the regime.

The FSA's true numbers are impossible to determine. A Jordan-

based Western diplomat, who monitors developments in Syria, estimated it has about 20,000 followers, a third of what the group claims to have. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not allowed to make press statements.

More than 5,400 people have been killed in the 11-month uprising, according to the UN. But that figure is from January, when the UN stopped counting because the chaos in the country has made it all but impossible to check the figures.

Now the conflict is entering a more international phase as the West and Arabs try to help the opposition. That could push the conflict into an even more sectarian turn as alliances form. Majority states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf leaders are lining up behind the mostly Syrian opposition. Russia and China are sticking by Assad, along with Iran.

There also are fears Al Qaeda is in the wings, trying to exploit the situation and possibly to hijack the uprising. In a video message over the weekend, Al Qaeda chief Ayman Al Zawahiri called on Muslims to support Syrian rebels, saying "the butcher (Bashar Assad) isn't deterred and doesn't stop."

The regime has long blamed terrorists for the revolt as a way to keep public support. The Local Coordination Committees, one of the main Syrian activist groups, rejected Zawahiri's statement and said it plays into the regime's hands.

"The Syrians," the group said, "have confirmed that their only battle is against this bloody regime: the number-one enemy of dignified life, human rights, diversity, change and development." — AP

The National (EAU / UAE)

A responsibility to Syria: set up a humanitarian corridor

security

Anthony Elghossain and Firas Maksad

As a state-led killing campaign claims thousands of lives in Syria, the international community continues to debate whether and how to intervene. The double veto by Russia and China has paralysed international efforts to secure a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime and authorising collective action.

But even as efforts to end the killing appear to have hit a dead-end at the UN, international law may allow another path forward.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) – an emerging global norm requiring states to protect their populations from mass atrocities – provides a basis for much needed action. Under R2P, when a state fails to uphold its responsibilities, other states may intervene to protect against atrocities (some would argue that states must intervene). Even so, sceptics counter that “emerging norms” are not binding law and that R2P undermines state sovereignty.

But concepts of sovereignty and human rights obligations have competed, and reinforced each other, since the 19th century. The old idea that politics have responsibilities towards, and not just authority over, their citizens is fundamental to the notion of sovereignty.

Interestingly enough, the earliest modern precedents for humanitarian intervention occurred in Syria's

neighbourhood. Throughout the 19th century, European powers intervened to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Ottoman-ruled Greece and Mount Lebanon. In 1861, fighting between Christians and Druze in Mount Lebanon triggered sectarian tensions in neighbouring Damascus, now Syria's capital, where mobs massacred about 5,000 Christians.

European intervention was relatively swift and decisive. Then, as is the case now, the interplay of power politics and humanitarian standards drove the decision-making process. Then, as should be the case now, the international community linked recognition of sovereignty to human rights guarantees. That political considerations were at play did not somehow detract from the necessary decision to save lives.

Yet, if the core principles of R2P are beyond debate, the doctrine's practical application has raised several important questions. Does the international community have the option or the obligation to intervene? And, if R2P is meant to free humanitarian intervention from the shackles of political paralysis, does every action – including military – require Security Council authorisation?

While these questions will shape legal principles and power politics over the long term, international law currently allows and

encourages regional organisations to diffuse crises in their own backyards. After the humanitarian disaster of Rwanda, Nato interventions in the Balkans and Libya, and a 2009 General Assembly debate on the principles of R2P, the international community now recognises that regional organisations can prevent, address and recover from crises instead of waiting for the politically complex UN process to unfold.

On the current Syrian crisis, the Security Council will likely remain deadlocked as Russia and China assert their geopolitical interests. As such, the Obama administration must lead efforts with regional partners – specifically the Arab League, Nato, and the European Union – to force the Syrian regime to end an escalating campaign of violence against its people.

In one viable and timely course of action, a multilateral coalition would establish a protected humanitarian corridor along the

Syrian-Turkish border. Western diplomats, led by French Foreign Minister Alan Juppe, previously suggested such a move, but later decided to focus their efforts on the now-faltering Security Council process.

It's time to revisit that option. Syrian refugees fleeing violence and destruction could find shelter and medical care in such a corridor. Moreover, the lack of a Benghazi-style enclave has thus far hindered more advanced steps to assist Syrian civilians and military defectors. A corridor protected by Nato, Arab states and Turkey would create the needed space to consider the way forward, while protecting civilians.

Politically, such an approach would create dilemmas for Syrian President Bashar Al Assad and his regime. Already stretched thin, they would have to choose between a direct military confrontation with a much more powerful international force, or ceding territory that could become an incubator for the coming regime change.

Either way, Mr Al Assad cannot win. But it's the world's responsibility to hasten his fall from power in a manner that saves civilian lives and preserves regional order. This can be achieved within the framework of international legitimacy despite the obstruction of narrow interest at the Security Council.

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Does every action – including military – require Security Council authorisation?

The National (EAU / UAE)

Russia warns against efforts to isolate Assad

Moscow opposes any outside attempt to influence affairs there

THE HAGUE // Isolating Damascus in talks to end the violence in Syria would be a mistake, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday.

Speaking at a press conference in The Hague, after meeting his Dutch counterpart Uri Rosenthal, Mr Lavrov took a swipe at countries wanting to isolate President Bashar Al Assad's regime.

"Unfortunately some of our partners long ago wrote off the government of Syria," said Mr Lavrov, whose country together with China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution earlier this month to condemn the violence in Syria.

Mr Lavrov said Moscow welcomed Mr Al Assad's decree ordering a referendum this month on a new constitution which would effectively end nearly 50 years of single-party rule.

He said Russia continued to believe that Syrians should solve their problems without outside interference and only when both Al Assad's regime and pro-democracy forces were involved.

Russia stands as one of the world's last major friends of Mr Al Assad. With the death toll rising to more than 6,000, according to figures from the opposition, Mr Lavrov held direct talks with Mr Al Assad in Damascus earlier this month, refusing to join growing calls on him to step down.

Although his mission was widely criticised by Arab nations and

produced no tangible concessions, Mr Lavrov has cited it as an example for the need for further dialogue.

A new version of the Security Council resolution is due for a nonbinding vote in the UN General Assembly today and is expected to pass.

Russia and China are expected to oppose the new text but no one can veto resolutions in the 193-nation General Assembly.

"As far as the resolution is concerned, we prefer not to be guided by the fact that there is a resolution. We will be guided by the substance of the resolution," Mr Lavrov said.

"If the resolution is one-sided and ignores the fact that people are getting killed by the opposition armed group as well, then it will not be helpful," he added.

The General Assembly resolution drawn up by Saudi Arabia and Qatar calls on Mr Al Assad to put a stop to attacks on civilians, diplomats said.

It also expresses support for the Arab League's plan to end the crackdown in Syria and calls for the naming of a UN special envoy.

Asked about Russia's position on possible aid corridors into Syria, Mr Lavrov said he will meet with the French foreign minister, Alain Juppe, to discuss the idea. France first proposed the aid corridors last November.

In Damascus, dozens of young Syrians gathered in front of the Russian embassy to thank Moscow and Beijing for their support, state television reported yesterday.

★ Agence France-Presse

The National (EAU / UAE)

Is 'responsibility to protect' in Syria an irresponsible idea?

security
Brian Kappler

The principle known as "responsibility to protect", invoked last year to justify foreign intervention in Libya, is now being cited to support some kind of action against the brutal regime in Syria.

The core of the inchoate "R2P" doctrine is that states have a right, even a duty, to protect the population of any other state against genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

On this page yesterday, Anthony Elghossain and Firas Maksad argued, in an essay entitled *A responsibility to Syria: set up a humanitarian corridor*, for a particular plan based on the R2P. But I have a few questions for them.

If, as they claim, the "core principles" of the R2P are "beyond debate", what are they exactly?

For example, if as they also assert this doctrine now frees "regional organisations" to act against sinister sovereign states, who decides which organisations have legitimacy in such matters? (By the way, is Nato really a "regional organisation" in the Middle East?)

Should Nato by itself be able to invoke R2P to help, for example, the oppressed Venezuelans, whose leader could surely be accused (whether justified or not) of some crime against humanity? Could the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States put down "banditry" in the Caucasus – possibly including ethnic cleansing against Russians – by invoking this doctrine to justify a military expedition? Why not? Who decides?

Why do R2P advocates invoke the notion so selectively? Aren't the people of Yemen facing a deeper, broader and longer-running humanitarian crisis than the people of Syria? Where is their international protection? Where are the supporters of R2P when it comes to protecting Tibetans and the Nepalese from Chinese cultural imperialism and violence? Where are they when North Koreans are starving, or when the people of Zimbabwe are impoverished and oppressed? Why single out Syria?

If "concepts of sovereignty and human rights obligations have competed, and reinforced each other, since the 19th century", as the writers assert, how did this process miss King Leopold's Congo, Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Kim Il-sung's North Korea, Idi Amin's Uganda and other hell-holes large and small?

Hasn't a sovereign state's power over its people actually been essentially unlimited in international law ever since the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which ended the Thirty Years War?

Was what the writers call "humanitarian intervention" in the Mount Lebanon area in 1861 truly humanitarian? Or is it better understood as Britain and France jostling for influence in the region by protecting their proxy groups?

Can the writers offer even one example, before or after the UN

was founded, of genuine, disinterested effective humanitarian intervention against a sovereign state because it was abusing its own people on its own territory?

In the case of Syria, would Iran also be free to invoke R2P and take military action to protect the Assad regime from the "armed gangs" said to be killing Syrian soldiers? If Nato and the Arab League can legitimately invoke R2P, why couldn't Iran do the same, on some pretext? Who would be the arbiter of this?

Since R2P is usually defined to cover only certain war crimes and crimes against humanity, what standard of proof must be met before an R2P intervention becomes legitimate? What recourse would a target government have against bogus "proofs" such as those the US offered about Saddam Hussein's (still-missing) chemical or nuclear weapons?

If Nato, the EU and the Arab League did set up a "humanitarian corridor" on the Turkish-Syrian border, who would control it? Who would pay the bills, build the housing, provide for sanitation and food? The Arab League? Turkey? Not the UN, surely?

Would humanitarian aid be limited to those Syrians able to reach this haven? How big would the corridor be? Is the terrain suitable? Is there a big-enough airport nearby?

Would the corridor be used to assemble, train and equip Free Syrian Army forces for military action against the Assad regime? If so, could the corridor truly be called humanitarian? Who would provide force protection for the Free Syrians? Would Free Syrian military forces mingle with civilians?

If on the other hand the corridor is not a military staging ground, what would it accomplish?

Would the regime have the right to attack insurrectionary forces being mustered on his own soil? What if it attacked the part of this safe haven that is to be on Turkish soil? How would the Arab League et al react if this project degenerated into full-scale civil war? If Iran chose to intervene with troops?

Would the Turks welcome the idea of a corridor partly on Turkish soil? How do the Turks feel about Kurdish extremists who seek safe haven just over the Turkish border in Iraqi Kurdistan?

Would this be a precedent for Turkey to set up a similar "humanitarian" corridor on its border with Iraq, to suppress Kurdish banditry and terrorism? Or would it be a precedent for the Kurds to set up their own "humanitarian" corridor on the same border, to limit Turkish aggression? Maybe both?

Why did "western diplomats, led by French Foreign Minister Alan Juppe", abandon the idea of a safe haven, even though the UN Security Council route seemed sure to be blocked by Russia and China?

Could it be that those experienced statesmen understand clearly that the whole notion of R2P, in general and in this case, creates far more problems than it solves?

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The National (EAU / UAE)

Tribal bonds strengthen the Gulf's hand in a new Syria

analysis
Hassan Hassan

Much has been said about the Gulf states' interest in regime change in Syria to steer Damascus away from Tehran and bolster their regional standing. The prevailing narrative is that Syria is a Sunni-majority country and will therefore ally itself with Gulf Sunni Arabs after the overthrow of the Baathist regime. But such an alliance is not a surety. Turkey, a Sunni-majority country and a neighbour, has established strong business relations with the commercial cities of Aleppo and Damascus and hosts prominent opposition figures; it is also bound to seek and assert influence in Syria.

So when the regime falls, as it certainly will, how can the Gulf states gain another advantage besides the inevitable schism between Damascus and Tehran?

The Gulf states are, in fact, better positioned because of deeply rooted tribal bonds that span Syria, especially in Al Jazira region (which makes about 40 per cent of the country), the countryside around cities like Deraa, Homs and Aleppo, and to a lesser degree near Hama, Damascus and even in the Druze stronghold of Suwaida. Channels of communication already exist between Gulf states and tribal leaders in some of these areas. These relationships have been sustained despite efforts by the Baathist regime to weaken tribal loyalties.

Members of the tribes migrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant and Mesopotamia, some with Muslim campaigns in the 7th century and others later in search

of water and grazing for livestock. But the majority of people of most tribes remained on the peninsula.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and Britain in 1916 divided Mesopotamia and the Levant along artificial national borders that persist today, splitting the tribes that spanned from Syria, Iraq and Jordan all the way to the peninsula. Relations, nevertheless, have been maintained.

The Egaidat is the largest tribal confederation in Al Jazira, with at least 1.5 million members, and links mainly to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Al Neim is the prominent tribal confederation in Deraa that includes the houses of Zoubi, Rifai and Hariri, and has a strong presence in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and also in the UAE, especially in the Northern Emirates. Al Eniza is another prominent Gulf tribal confederation with members in Al Jazira, Suwaida, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. Al Dhafir tribe has members in Al Jazira, Hama and a few in Deraa, as well as a presence in Saudi Arabia and less so in Kuwait. The Shammar confederation has at least one million members in Syria and is also one of the largest tribes in Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Several leaders of the Syrian branches of the tribes continue regular visits to the Gulf states and often meet members of the royal families. A significant number have returned to the Gulf and become naturalised citizens mainly in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. Many hold privileged positions in these countries and, as the bloody crackdown in Syria continues, tribal kinships have grown closer, with tribes in Deraa contacting their "cousins" in the Gulf asking for a firm diplomatic and economic position regarding Damascus.

There is a common perception that Syria's population is now predominantly urban, and that tribalism is dwindling further because of the pro-democracy protests. As one influential resident of Deir Ez-Zor said last month: "What is happening is not just a revolt against the regime. It's a revolt by the young against the tribes. Their fathers have been in limbo between Bedouin culture and modern culture, but this generation is breaking free."

That is true to a degree, but details about the protest movement in Al Jazira show that the hold of the tribes remains strong. In the early months of protests, there was friction among the tribes on how to react. Al Jarrah, one of the powerful clans in the city of Al Bukamal, and a part of the Egaidat confederation, is led by a government official, who even armed some of the clan's members to quell protests. This pushed another prominent tribe in the confederation, Al Dandal, to mediate between the government and young protesters, in an effort that failed. By then, some protesters had begun arming themselves and shooting at security forces.

The chief of the Egaidat, who has influence across the tribes in the confederation, asked the pro-government leader to disarm his people and stop working with the security forces. Finally, tribal leaders on all sides agreed to prevent clashes with the security forces and to not interfere in the protests.

Other leaders have refused to take part in the protest movement because they feel it is their responsibility to protect their clan. Abdullah Ghadawi, a political editor for the Saudi newspaper *Okaz* who is from Al Bukamal, told me one tribal leader had said that he was

against the regime but he could not endanger his tribe by fighting. For the same reason, heads of families say they stand by President Bashar Al Assad only to discourage their children from taking part in protests. A similar scenario plays out in Suwaida and Raqqa, where there have been few protests.

This influence will remain strong for the foreseeable future. Politicians may be drawn from the ranks of the educated younger generation, unlike in the past when members of parliament were almost all tribal leaders, but the latter will still be respected.

Another possible trend that favours Gulf influence in Syria is the growing prominence of Salafism (as opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood, which has strong links to Turkey). Salafism is increasing especially in tribal areas, partly because of the return of Syrians who have worked in the Gulf.

How the Gulf states will use these levers of influence remains to be seen, however. "Saudi Arabia has a limited understanding of the nature and diversity of the Syrian opposition," said Emile Hokayem, a Middle East analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, "and risks espousing too closely the perspective of its tribal and Wahhabi interlocutors." Riyadh risks overreliance on the tribes, which remain largely divided.

But if these links are harnessed, the Gulf states' influence will extend from the north of Syria to western Iraq and Jordan, creating a "tribal crescent" in place of Iran's "Shia crescent" that today extends from Iran to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

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The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Al-Azhar calls for bold Arab action on Syria

CAIRO — The head of Egypt's influential seat of Islamic learning, Al-Azhar, called on Tuesday for bold Arab action to stop the Syrian government's "hellish killing machine" while scolding China and Russia for blocking a peace plan in the UN Security Council.

Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb, head of the Cairo-based institution, also urged Syrian protesters fighting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to refrain from turning their struggle into an armed confrontation, two days after Arab League diplomats suggested arming opposition forces could be an option.

"The situation now, brothers, no longer needs statements to condemn and criticize, but it is in desperate need of urgent, serious, and bold action from the Arabs," Tayeb added, without giving details of what kind of action he sought.

"I call on the human conscience to stop this hellish killing machine that works to shed blood. It must be stopped."

Troops in all-out assault on Homs

Syria's army killed at least six civilians Tuesday in the heaviest shelling of Homs for several days, monitors said, as the international community warned of a humanitarian disaster in the city.

The top human rights representative at the United Nations said the world body's inaction had "emboldened" Syria's government to unleash overwhelming force against its own civilians. — Agencies

Moscow Times (Russie / Russia)

Russia Open to Syria Peacekeeper Plan

COMBINED REPORTS

Russia and China, the two countries that vetoed a UN Security Council resolution addressing ongoing violence in Syria, are now weighing an Arab League proposal to station peacekeepers there.

Russia is open to the alternative, but Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday that Russia would not support the peacekeeping plan unless there was a halt to violence by both government forces and their armed opponents.

He suggested that the latter would

be tough to achieve.

“The tragedy is that the armed groups that are confronting the forces of the regime are not subordinate to anyone and are not under control,” Lavrov said. “A halt to the violence must be universal.”

The Obama administration said Monday that it backs Arab League plans to end the violence in Syria but noted several obstacles to deploying a proposed peacekeeping force to the country and withheld full endorsement of the idea.

The administration has said it does not see a military solution to the crisis, yet U.S. officials indicated they would consider the Arab League call for peacekeepers and discuss it with various countries to see whether such an idea is feasible. However, they stressed that there would be difficulties in getting required UN Security Council authorization for a force.

“We support the Arab League’s decisions ... to try to end the violence and move toward a transition,” Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said. “There are a lot of challenges to be discussed as to how to put into effect all of their recommendations. And certainly, the peacekeeping request is one that will take agreement and consensus.”

For now, talk of a peacekeeping force is preliminary and largely theoretical.

A Feb. 24 meeting is scheduled in Tunisia of the Friends of Syria group that will plot efforts to compel Syrian Presi-

dent Bashar Assad to end the crackdown.

Turkey has floated several ideas, including creating protected corridors to assist civilian victims of the violence.

Elsewhere, the UN human rights chief blamed disagreement in the Security Council for encouraging the Syrian government to step up attacks on opposition strongholds.

Russia and China on Feb. 4 vetoed a draft resolution condemning the crackdown and endorsing an Arab League plan for the Syrian leader to step aside.


The Arab League proposal to boost support for the uprising and to send in guarded international response, even as Syrian forces bombarded rebellious districts of Homs and attacked other cities.

Russia, Assad’s close ally and main arms supplier, said it could not support a peacekeeping mission unless both sides ceased the violence first. Some felt the move might only fan the flames of war.

Beirut-based political commentator Rami Khouri said that although the Arab plan was fraught with difficulty, it was also “incredibly bold and incredibly daring.”

“It is the beginning of a very complex process driven by the Arab League,” he said.

It hinged on convincing Russia that it must eventually give up its support for Assad and bringing the opposition together. *(Reuters, AP)*



**PROCESSES:
VIEW**

moscow (4 Neglinnaya Ulitsa)

PRESS

and improve the effectiveness

Case Study

Premier Wen says China not protecting any party in Syria situation

By Hao Zhou

China will not protect any party, including the Syrian government, Premier Wen Jiabao said yesterday, as China enhances its diplomatic efforts on Syrian issues by sending envoys to the Middle East.

"On the issue of Syria, what is most urgent and pressing now is to prevent war and chaos so that the Syrian people will be free from even greater suffering," Wen told a press conference after a China-EU summit in Beijing, according to a transcript of the Xinhua News Agency.

"To achieve this goal, China supports all efforts in consistency with the UN charter and principles, and we are ready to strengthen communication with all parties in Syria and the international community and continue to play a constructive role," Wen said. He added China will "absolutely not protect any party, including the Syrian government."

In New York, the UN General Assembly on Monday reviewed a human rights council's report on the violence in Syria.

High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said the Syrian army has launched "an indiscriminate attack"

on civilians and blamed Russia and China's veto on encouraging Damascus to intensify its attacks, Reuters reported.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said Chinese Ambassador Li Huaxin held talks with Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi in Cairo on Monday. According to Liu, Li will also visit Saudi Arabia and Qatar to exchange views about Syria.

China's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Wu Sike, is scheduled to visit Israel, Palestine and Jordan from February 19 to 23, Liu said.

"China is vetoing violence, turmoil

and interference, but not reform and change," Wan Chengcai, an international politics researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council, told the Global Times. "The Arab League itself is divided, so China should not blindly support the regional bloc, but uphold China's own principle and stance."

Agencies contributed to this story

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China Daily

WANG JINGLIE

Beijing's Middle East policy justified

China, together with Russia, vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution on Feb 4, which urged Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down after months of riots, because it seeks a political and peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis.

China's veto drew worldwide attention, with Western politicians and media taking the lead in criticizing its move. For example, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague accused China and Russia of "betraying the Syrian people" by vetoing a UN resolution condemning the violence. "In deploying them, they have let down the Arab League, they have increased the likelihood of what they wish to avoid in Syria, civil war, and they have placed themselves on the wrong side of Arab and international opinion," he said.

China is a large but responsible country with an independent foreign policy, which means it cannot follow the United States and its Western allies. China's peaceful foreign policy is aimed at building a harmonious world, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and resolving conflicts and clashes between countries through negotiations. Its foreign policy initiatives are unfolding on the basis of the same principles, and its stance on Syria is no exception.

China has maintained communication not only with the Syrian government, but also with the Syrian opposition. For example, it has invited Syrian opposition representatives to Beijing for talks. It is using all possible means to promote a political solution in Syria and making efforts to stabilize the situation to prevent a full-fledged civil war. Therefore, China's foreign policy is beyond reproach.

The problem is that the US and some Western countries are trying to use a UN Security Council mandate to replicate the "Libya model" in Syria. Despite some Western diplomats' pledge ruling out foreign military operation, the resolution, if passed, would have given Western powers the chance they needed to intervene militarily in Syria. And once the Western powers directly intervene in Syria, the country will become another "Libya", which would not only push it into a "dirty" war, but also cause turbulence in the whole of the Middle East.

The world knows that the UN Security Council did not authorize a military strike against Libya; it only imposed a "no-fly zone". But the US-led Western countries used the UN resolution as an excuse to launch indiscriminate bombing on Libya.

There is no reason to believe that the US and its Western allies are interested in safeguarding the interests of the people in the Middle East and, hence, are unhappy with China for altogether other reasons.

After the end of the Cold War, the US embarked on a "two-ocean strategy". So, it has been using the eastward expansion of NATO to achieve its strategic objectives in the Euro-Atlantic region. And in the Asia-Pacific region, it depends on the US-Japan Security Treaty, the new Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation and the establishment of the



PANG LI / CHINA DAILY

Theater Missile Defense System to maintain its sole superpower status.

The Middle East serves as a junction in the global power structure and can create a strong "dumbbell pattern" to reinforce Washington's "two-ocean strategy". That's why despite gradually shifting its strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region, the US has not changed its "two-ocean" and "dumbbell pattern" strategy. How can the Middle East not be an important part of the US' global strategy?

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, Western countries led by the US launched a series of plans to transform the Middle East. These plans included the 1995 "Barcelona Process" of the European Union and the 2008 "Mediterranean Union" of the Mediterranean Summit.

The US National Security Strategy 2002 stressed the importance of sustaining the US' unparalleled status in the world, promoting democracy worldwide and taking preemptive military action against terrorists and tyrants.

In 2004, the US officially introduced the concept of a "Greater Middle East". Under this plan, Washington wanted to group its Western allies to promote political, economic, social, cultural and educational transformation in the Middle East in more than 10 years. Some American scholars believe that the "Greater Middle East" plan looks exactly like the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which 35 Western countries had signed to promote changes in the Warsaw Pact.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are part of Washington's "Greater Middle East" plan. Since it could not succeed in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US is using the

Middle East political crisis to transform the region to its own liking, and the "Libya model", which it has tried to use in Syria, is part of its wider plan.

In fact, the US-led fresh sanctions against Iran, too, are part of that plan. Many people may not know that it was the US and other Western countries that actually helped Iran develop nuclear projects when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was in power in the country. But now they are afraid of reaping what they have sowed.

The West has been a failure in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as far as improving the quality of people's life is concerned. Most people in these countries are suffering the consequences of the ongoing turmoil and bloodshed, and living in fear and misery because of Western intervention. There is no reason why Syria should be like them and why the Middle East should continue to be volatile.

Given the facts, it is not surprising that the US and its Western allies find fault with China's policy. That would not have been the case had China joined the league of self-seeking Western countries and supported the US' policy on the Middle East. China faces criticism because it refuses to be a pawn in the wheeling and dealing of the West.

This is precisely why China should be prepared to encounter difficulties and challenges, including criticisms from the West, on the road to peaceful development. It should also be prepared to take them on and keep pursuing peace and harmony.

The author is a researcher in Middle East Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

CHINA FORUM | HE WENPING

Respect for different viewpoints

Western countries should observe democracy in international relations and their media does not speak for everyone

The veto by Russia and China a week ago, of a UN Security Council draft resolution on Syria, sparked an international furor.

There is no difficulty in understanding that Russia, which is used to speaking tough diplomatic language, blocked the resolution due to its important military, economic and strategic stakes in Syria. Western countries no doubt expected this.

The Western outcry was directed at Beijing's veto and some of the comments were simply absurd.

Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN, disregarding diplomatic manners, said she was "disgusted" by the vetoes by Russia and China, and both have the blood of the Syrian people on their hands. Some said the veto was a result of China's blind adherence to the "obsolete" principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, or was due to China's efforts to coop-

erate with Moscow's diplomatic initiative. Some even made the foolish claim that Beijing was worried about a similar uprising to the "Arab Spring" in China.

Western opinion also focused on the change in China's voting behavior in the UN Security Council, from abstention to a clear-cut veto. Ignoring China's past history of vetoes, though far less than those of the United States, they said China's veto signified Beijing's growing "diplomatic assertiveness" or even "diplomatic arrogance". There were even some who suggested that the votes over Syria marked "the start of a new Cold War".

Such comments are senseless. The diplomatic arrogance is in fact diplomatic self-confidence, and cooperating with Russia is the two countries joining hands to defend the norms of international relations.

As for the suggestion that the veto was the start of a new Cold War, it places too much importance

on what was simply a veto and amplifies the difference on how to solve the Syrian crisis.

In fact, the West's response to the veto by China and Russia once again demonstrates the hegemony and undemocratic nature of today's international relations and international governance.

It stands to reason that members of the UN Security Council will differ on some issues. The US has vetoed resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue dozens of times. According to Rice's own logic, the US is "disgusting" and has had the blood of the Palestinian people on its hands for decades.

A number of Western countries have long been adopting a paradoxical approach to domestic and international issues. On domestic issues, they adhere to the principles of democracy and freedom, and allow pluralistic debate and dissent; but when dealing with international relations, they prefer media assaults, economic sanctions and even military strikes against coun-



A number of Western countries have long been adopting a paradoxical approach to domestic and international issues.

tries holding different views.

In fact, the Western media does not represent international opinion or the people of the world.

But by manipulating the Western-owned media, the West can deliver its views and opinions worldwide in a constant barrage, creating the illusion that the West's views equate to world opinion.

However, the fact is, more than 190 countries around the world and "the silent majority" of world people hate war, cherish peace and support efforts to solve conflicts through mediation and dialogue.

A pluralistic world should allow the existence of diverse voices. And those Western countries that always position themselves on the moral high ground should listen more attentively to others and safeguard peace instead of fanning the flames of conflicts.

With regard to the current crisis in Syria, external forces should balance their pressure on the parties involved and urge both sides to the negotiation table. Efforts should seek to achieve a peaceful and orderly political transition, so civilian casualties are kept to the minimum.

The international community should give Russia and China more time for mediation, rather than forcing a hurried vote in the UN Security Council, which has only escalated the crisis rather than resolve it.

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LI FENG



China Daily

Syrian govt to hold referendum for new constitution on Feb 26

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has decreed to hold a referendum for a new constitution on Feb 26, the official SANA state news agency reported on Wednesday.

"President Bashar al-Assad issued today a decree setting Sunday, Feb 26, as the date for the referendum on the draft constitution," SANA reported.

Syrian state television said the new constitution would allow the "people to govern the people" under a new multi-party democratic system.

It said that under the proposed text, freedom is "a sacred right" and that any violation of personal freedom is considered a crime punishable by law.

Assad received a copy of the draft constitution on Sunday from the head of a national committee entrusted with drafting a new constitution, SANA said, adding that after the president reviewed the draft it would then be referred to the People's Assembly before being put up for a referendum.

The committee's members stressed that the new constitution had been written in a way that would preserve the dignity and rights of the Syrian people, according to SANA.

The committee has also decided to limit the presidential terms to a maximum of two seven-year mandates.

The Syrian president decreed the formation of a national committee on Oct 15 to prepare a draft constitution within four months. The committee comprises 29 academics, lawyers and opposition figures.

Amending the constitution, particularly canceling an article which states that the ruling Baath party is the leader of the nation and the society, has been one of the main demands of Syrian protesters.

The amendment of the article would pave the way for the formation of new political parties besides the Baath party and 11 other closely associated parties known as the National Progressive Front.

At the time, he said it could be put to a popular vote as early as March, although that date for the ballot has now been brought forward.

Syria's government lifted a state of emergency in April last year and in July adopted a law allowing a multi-party political system.

Government raids

Syrian government forces

VIOLENCE MUST STOP

WASHINGTON — China wants an immediate halt to the spiraling bloodshed in Syria and an "inclusive dialogue" between the Syrian government and opposition protesters, a Chinese official said.

"We are following closely the situation in Syria and we hope that the violent activities can be put to an immediate stop," said Vice-Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai, who is accompanying Vice-President Xi Jinping on a US visit. "We hope that Syria can initiate an inclusive dialogue to solve all the problems it faces."

Cui said China attaches "great importance to the role played by the Arab League in seeking a political solution to the Syrian issue".

But he said the UN Security Council is "a highly authoritative international body, so whatever actions it takes, the actions should be taken in a most prudent and responsible manner".

He added that "all people are calling for an immediate end to the bloodshed in Syria. Yet if the Security Council takes one wrong step, it is likely to lead to more bloodshed instead of putting a stop to the bloodshed".

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

attacked the opposition strongholds of Homs and Hama on Wednesday and also raided a district of Damascus in the closest military operation to the capital's center since the uprising against Assad broke out 11 months ago.

Elite forces backed by armored personnel carriers erected roadblocks in main streets of Damascus' residen-

tial Barzeh neighborhood, searched houses and made arrests, witnesses said.

Residents said they were looking for opposition activists and members of the rebel Free Syrian Army, which has provided armed protection for protests against Assad in the district.

AFP—XINHUA—REUTERS