

Le Pentagone confirme son retrait

REVUE DE PRESSE SYRIE #55

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Les chefs militaires US multiplient les déclarations pour justifier leur retrait de la crise syrienne. Le chef d'état major interarmes, le général Martin Dempsey, répète au Congrès et à la presse que la plupart des grandes puissances sont déjà présentes sur le théâtre d'opérations et qu'il est donc impossible de savoir à quels rebelles profiterait une aide US. Cet argument qui permet de garder la tête haute après le double veto russe et chinois, n'en est pas moins vrai.

Quoi qu'il en soit, le département d'Etat et les politiciens israéliens s'opposent à cette ligne.

Pour y faire obstacle à quelques jours de la conférence à Tunis des « Amis de la Syrie », les chercheurs du Washington Institute (le think tank de l'AIPAC) établissent une comparaison avec la guerre de Bosnie dans laquelle les USA avaient finis par s'engager malgré eux. Ils préconisent la création d'une force mandatée par les Nations Unies, commandée par un général musulman turc, et coordonnée par l'OTAN.

- Interrogé par le *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Edward C. Luck, conseiller spécial de Ban Ki-moon pour la responsabilité de protéger, assure que les rebelles syriens aspirent à la démocratie, même si les événements suivent désormais une dérive confessionnelle qu'il impute au gouvernement el-Assad. Cependant, s'éloignant légèrement de la doxa atlantiste, il ne se contente pas d'accuser le gouvernement syrien de ne pas protéger sa population, il souligne que cette obligation incombe aussi à l'Armée « syrienne » libre.
- Le *Tagesspiegel* met en cause l'indépendance de Karin Leukefeld, l'envoyée spéciale en Syrie du quotidien marxiste *Junge Welt*. La journaliste, qui est une bonne connaissance du Proche-Orient est aussi une ancienne assistante du Parti des Verts. Elle publie des articles à contre-courant du reste de la presse occidentale et soutient l'administration el-Assad. Notez que le *Tagesspiegel*, n'ayant pas trouvé à critiquer le professionnalisme de Mme Leukefeld, concentre ses attaques sur sa personnalité.
- Tomas Alcoverro souligne dans *La Vanguardia* que le parti Baas s'est progressivement coupé de sa base populaire au fur et à mesure de la libéralisation de l'économie. En ce sens le référendum constitutionnel qui devrait retirer au Baas son leadership politique n'est jamais que la conséquence institutionnelle d'une réalité de terrain. Cependant, contrairement à ce qu'écrivait Alcoverro qui cède là à l'air du temps,

l'ouverture économique n'a pas été un accaparement clanique des richesses, mais s'est faite lentement sous le contrôle de la famille Assad. En effet, l'économie syrienne n'est pas libérale, mais mixte.

- Michael Jansen de *l'Irish Times* observe qu'armer les rebelles accroît la spirale de la violence et oriente le pays vers la guerre civile. Sans se prononcer sur le fond, il rapporte divers points de vue qui ne laissent aucun doute sur la vanité de cette entreprise : la rébellion n'a aucune chance de triompher par elle-même, et plus elle sera artificiellement prolongée, plus elle laissera des traumatismes dans la société.
- Le Scotsman publie un article de son correspondant à Damas témoignant de l'existence d'une milice du régime qui terrorise les citoyens : les Shabiha. On voudrait en savoir plus, mais le « correspondant » du journal est anonyme. Avant la propagande atlantiste, le mot Shabiha désignait les membres d'un gang de contrebandiers du port de Lattaquié.
- Associated Press rapporte l'assassinat de plusieurs figures politiques par la rébellion. Le fait doit être noté car l'agence new-yorkaise n'a commencé à faire mention de ces crimes que depuis un mois environ. Cette évolution dans le traitement de l'information intervient au moment où les Etats-Unis cherchent à justifier à devant leur opinion publique la limitation de leur soutien à l'opposition armée.
- Mona Alami de USA Today assure que les extrémistes qui se déploient en Syrie ne sont pas des membres d'Al-Qaeda, mais des provocateurs au service du régime. L'Armée « syrienne » libre n'aurait donc aucun lien avec Ayman al-Zawahiri bien qu'il ait appelé au Jihad contre Bachar el-Assad. L'article n'explique pas comment le pouvoir aurait fait pour recruter des agents provocateurs dans les milieux extrémistes sunnites alors que ceux-ci considèrent les el-Assad comme des hérétiques et des usurpateurs.
- L'Agence France Presse fait surgir un nouveau thème : l'armée loyaliste assiégerait la ville antique de Palmyre où des rebelles seraient enfermés. Les combats seraient susceptibles d'endommager gravement le site archéologique classé par l'Unesco au patrimoine mondial de l'humanité.

Les dessins du jour



Mahammad Ali Rajabi stigmatise le ridicule de la Ligue arabe dont les réactions sont inadéquates pour résoudre la crise syrienne. Il met en scène un pétro-prince qui tente d'éteindre un incendie en l'écrasant avec un extincteur.



Wang Xiaoying illustre le double langage des États-Unis, toujours prompts à manier la carotte et le bâton. Le panda chinois, un brin craintif, tente d'amadouer un Oncle Sam qui tente de l'intimider.

Le Figaro (France)

La révolte gagne jour après jour Damas

Avec la paralysie économique, les opposants espèrent le ralliement des milieux d'affaires.

DELPHINE MINOUI
CORRESPONDANTE AU MOYEN-ORIENT

SYRIE « C'est un tournant dans la révolution ! ». Au bout du fil, l'avocat syrien Faisal Badr a retrouvé sa voix des jours d'espoir. Après onze mois d'insurrection largement cantonnée à certaines provinces, Damas, sa ville, a vibré ce week-end sous les cris de « Liberté pour toujours ! Que tu le veuilles ou non, Ba- »

Phénomène encore plus inédit : c'est de Mezze, un quartier aisé de la capitale, qu'est partie, ce vendredi 17 février, la révolte damascène. « C'est un quartier plutôt moderne, situé non loin du palais présidentiel, où habitent des hommes d'affaires, et qui abrite des ambassades et des bureaux des services de renseignements. Jusqu'ici, on avait l'habitude d'y voir défiler des cortèges pro-régime », souligne le juriste, contacté à Damas par téléphone.

Depuis, la contestation ne faiblit pas dans cette capitale où le moindre soulèvement était jusqu'ici rapidement étouffé. Samedi, la cérémonie des funérailles des quatre « martyrs » de la veille s'y est rapidement transformée en une manifestation monstre. « Nous étions plus de 20 000 personnes, malgré le froid glacial, la neige et la présence des forces



Des opposants au régime de Bachar el-Assad assistent, samedi à Damas, aux funérailles de manifestants tués lors des affrontements avec les forces de l'ordre.
HANDOUT / REUTERS

morts en onze mois - qui a fini par « réveiller les endormis ». « Impossible de se faire face à l'offensive meurtrière qui se déroule en ce moment à Homs (au centre du pays) », dit-elle.

Autre phénomène déclencheur : la paralysie économique qui déteint sur tout le pays. « Les commerces fonctionnent au ralenti. Les entreprises vont mal. Les prix flambent », poursuit la jeune révoltée, qui communique quotidiennement avec ses amis restés en Syrie. « Aujourd'hui, même Damas vit au rythme des coupures d'électricité. Dans mon quartier, le courant s'interrompt toutes les trois heures », raconte, pour sa part, l'avocat Faisal Badr.

« Une tactique de Bachar »

Autant de signes qui, selon lui, « sont en train d'inciter certains hommes d'affaires, jusqu'ici restés à l'écart de la révolution, à se désolidariser du régime ». Opitimiste dans l'âme, il reconnaît néanmoins que « la situation peut encore traîner ainsi pendant de longs mois », surtout tant que Bachar el-Assad bénéficiera du soutien de deux alliés de taille, la Chine et la Russie.

Pour Hadeel Koki, il ne reste qu'une solution : « La communauté internationale doit nous venir en aide au plus vite en imposant une zone d'exclusion aérienne et en aidant militairement les soldats de l'Armée syrienne libre. » Selon elle, le référendum prévu le 26 février sur un projet de nouvelle Constitution supprimant l'hégémonie du parti Baas « n'est qu'une tactique de plus de Bachar el-Assad pour tenter de rallier certains pays à sa cause et pour gagner du temps ». Aujourd'hui, elle place tous ses espoirs dans la réunion des « amis de la Syrie » qui se tiendra, ce vendredi, à Tunis. « Espérons qu'il en ressorte un message fort contre Bachar et des objectifs précis pour en finir avec ce régime de la terreur ! », dit-elle. ■

nellement acquises à la cause de Bachar se soulevaient les unes après les autres. Réservez ce qui se passe dans la cité industrielle d'Alep ! C'est le début de la fin... », relève l'activiste Hadeel Koki, réfugiée depuis deux mois en Égypte - dont l'ambassadeur en poste en Syrie vient d'être rappelé « jusqu'à nouvel ordre ».

Pour cette jeune femme de 19 ans, qui a connu les géolés syriennes, c'est l'inflexible brutalité du régime - les ONG estiment à plus de 6 000 le nombre de

de l'ordre », raconte un des participants, qui se présente sous le nom d'Abou Mo'ez.

« Le réveil des endormis »

Encouragés par cette mobilisation inédite, des centaines d'opposants ont à nouveau bravé l'armée, hier, en formant de petits cortèges appelant, cette fois-ci, à la « désobéissance civile ». « Une nouvelle étape est en train d'être franchie en Syrie. Les villes "silencieuses" et tradition-

La Chine pense qu'« il subsiste un espoir »

« LA CHINE pense, comme beaucoup d'autres, qu'il subsiste un espoir que la crise syrienne puisse être résolue par le dialogue pacifique entre l'opposition et le gouvernement », écrit l'agence officielle Chine nouvelle, en insistant sur les bouleversements régionaux qu'entraînerait une

el-Assad. Face aux critiques, Pékin a réagi en dépeçant à Damas son vice-ministre des Affaires étrangères, Zhai Jun, qui a rencontré Assad samedi et a répété le soutien de son pays au projet de référendum constitutionnel du président syrien comme moyen de sortir de l'impasse. (REUTERS)

Libération (France)



Quand Damas ose à son tour la révolte

La capitale syrienne, jusqu'alors fief du régime, a connu samedi sa plus grande manifestation depuis le début du soulèvement. Un tournant.

Par HALA KODMANI

La famille de Samer Al-Khatib a été contrainte de l'enterrer en catimini, hier à l'aube, avec pour escorte une quinzaine de 4x4 des forces de l'ordre, remplis d'hommes armés jusqu'aux dents. Pas question pour le régime que les funérailles du jeune homme, tué la veille pendant la première grande manifestation en plein Damas, soient l'occasion d'une nouvelle mobilisation dans la capitale.

Ce qui s'est produit samedi sur l'autostrade de Mazzeh, une voie rapide qui relie des quartiers ouest de Damas, marque un tournant pour la révolution syrienne, près d'un an après son déclenchement. «La foule était impressionnante, effrayante, extraordinaire !» raconte Salma, jointe par Skype. Elle se trouvait parmi les 15 000 à 30 000 manifestants de «ce jour historique où Damas s'est levée [où nous avons] relevé nos têtes», dit l'opposante quadragénaire, qui agissait jusque-là dans l'ombre. Des rassemblements avaient été préparés à l'occasion des funérailles de quatre jeunes du quartier, tués par balles au cours d'une petite manifestation, vendredi, mais leur ampleur inespérée a provoqué un choc pour les forces du régime et a remonté le moral des protestataires.

CORTÈGES. Sous les flocons de neige, exceptionnels à Damas, des cortèges se sont formés à la sortie des trois différentes mosquées d'où

sont sortis les cercueils des «martyrs» pour les accompagner vers le cimetière voisin. «Alors que les premiers "Alkâh akbar" ont commencé à fuser, la foule grossissait, il en sortait de partout, des hommes et des femmes», raconte un manifestant. Dans un souci de ne pas se heurter aux services de sécurité, les manifestants ont évité les slogans provocateurs que l'on entend souvent ailleurs – «maudite soit ton âme, fils de Hafez !» – ou réclamant la chute du régime. Les premiers cris affirmaient «le peuple syrien est uni», et s'adressaient aux parents des victimes :

RÉCIT

«Nous sommes tous tes enfants, mère du martyr !» ou «Sois fier de ton fils, mère du martyr !». La foule a ensuite afflué vers le cimetière, où d'autres personnes étaient déjà rassemblées et, pendant deux heures, on a assisté au genre de manifestation que les Damasènes n'avaient vu qu'à la télévision à Homs ou Deraa, avec rondes de danse et chants révolutionnaires.

«Non, il ne s'agit pas d'une mobilisation contre le régime, affirmait contre toute évidence l'un des défenseurs du pouvoir de Bachar al-Assad, commentant en direct pour Al-izira les images des manifestations. C'est l'expression légitime de la douleur qui nous unit et de la colère contre les terroristes qui ont abattu les trois jeunes gens.» Ce réveil de la population de Damas est l'instant le plus redouté par le régime, qui fait tout pour l'empêcher depuis le début des troubles. Le calme dans la capitale, verrouillée par les services de sécurité à tous les coins de rue, est l'un des arguments

REPÈRES



► **A Damas** Les forces syriennes ont été déployées hier pour contrer toute contestation après l'appel à la désobéissance civile lancé aux habitants de la capitale.

► **A Homs** Des bombardements intenses ont repris contre le quartier de Bab Amro. De nouveaux renforts ont été acheminés, faisant craindre une offensive massive imminente.

6 000

personnes ont été tuées en Syrie en six mois, dont quatorze dimanche, selon l'Observatoire des droits de l'homme, une ONG basée à Londres.

Libération (France)



majeurs utilisés par le pouvoir, tant à l'intérieur du pays qu'à l'égard de l'opinion internationale, pour minimiser l'importance de la révolte.

«**INDIGNATION PASSIVE**». Le mur de la peur solidement érigé tenait encore en respect les habitants de la capitale, où le régime compte encore des partisans, notamment dans la bourgeoisie et parmi les minorités aux intérêts très liés à ceux de Bachar al-Assad. «Ce soutien, qui n'a cessé de s'éroder ces derniers mois avec l'aggravation de la crise économique, se transforme de plus en plus en indignation passive face à l'escalade meurtrière de la répression, notamment à Homs, dit un expert européen basé à Damas sous couvert d'ano-

nymat. Le basculement est sensible, y compris chez une grande majorité d'hommes d'affaires, qui défendaient encore les réformes de Bachar al-Assad il y a quelques semaines, et l'effritement se ressent dans les appareils de l'État.» Toutefois, la transformation de cette opposition passive en mobilisation massive au cœur de la capitale, comme on l'a vu samedi,

marque un cap. La retenue relative dans la répression de la manifestation de Mazzeh montre bien le souci de ne pas faire de nouveaux «martyrs», qui pourraient enflammer la population de Damas.

«**Les miliciens qui étaient parmi nous n'osaient pas trop réagir, débordés par le nombre des manifestants. J'ai même eu la satisfaction de voir un "chabihia" [sbire du régime] se faire tabasser par des jeunes.**»

L'ÉGYPTE PREND SES DISTANCES

Le Caire a décidé hier de rappeler son ambassadeur à Damas. Le diplomate restera au Caire jusqu'à nouvel ordre, selon le ministère des Affaires étrangères. L'Égypte avait appelé mercredi à «un changement pacifique et réel» en Syrie.

«**Il s'agit de faire tabasser par un groupe de jeunes.**» Damas et Alep (la deuxième ville du pays, située dans le nord de la Syrie), dont la tranquillité faisait encore la joie du régime et le désespoir du mouvement de protestation, bougent de plus en plus depuis une dizaine de jours. Vont-elles basculer de façon décisive dans la révolte? Les comités de coordination locaux, qui animent la mobilisation, ont appelé les habitants des deux villes à une grève générale, hier, et à la désobéissance civile, en solidarité avec les autres régions syriennes insurgées et réprimées. Mais les états-majors du régime de Bachar al-Assad concentrent leurs efforts et leurs plans de bataille pour endiguer le mouvement.

Les sanctions internationales pèsent lourdement sur l'économie syrienne

Selon un homme d'affaires local, cité par la BBC, il n'y a plus de tourisme depuis avril. Le secteur représentait 15% du PIB. Depuis novembre, les exportations de pétrole (30% du PIB) ont cessé. Les réserves en devises de la banque centrale sont passées de 18 milliards d'euros à 8 milliards.

Extraits d'une vidéo du défilé de samedi à Damas, occasionnée par les funérailles de quatre personnes tuées vendredi. Les forces de l'ordre ont ouvert le feu sur les manifestants (à droite), abattant un participant.

PHOTO AFP/YOUTUBE

Crainces d'infiltrations d'Al-Qaeda ou irakiennes, blocage à l'ONU: Washington n'est pas prêt à s'engager.

Les Etats-Unis sur la défensive

Cela fait six mois maintenant que le président américain, Barack Obama, a exhorté Bachar al-Assad à démissionner et que le chef d'Etat syrien répond par des massacres... Une fois de plus, et de façon particulièrement choquante après l'intervention occidentale en Libye, la crise syrienne démontre l'impuissance américaine.

«**Les Etats-Unis ont appelé Bachar al-Assad à démissionner, mais ils ne font rien pour stopper les tueries**», se désole Radwan Ziadeh, un opposant syrien basé à Washington qui tente, depuis des mois, de convaincre l'administration américaine d'en faire plus. Après les échecs répétés au Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, où Américains et Européens n'ont pas réussi à convaincre Russes et Chinois de la nécessité de condamner la répression, Washington mise maintenant sur le groupe des Amis de la Syrie,

qui doit se réunir vendredi à Tunis pour faire pression sur Damas. Toutes les «options» sont à l'étude, assure le département d'Etat, soulignant préférer une issue diplomatique plutôt que militaire.

«**Nous ne pensons pas que davantage de fusils en Syrie ou une intervention internationale soit la bonne réponse**», a expliqué, vendredi, la porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères, Victoria Nuland. «**Nous concentrons plutôt nos efforts pour renforcer et unifier l'opposition afin qu'elle soit préparée au jour où Al-Assad cédera le pouvoir.**»

«**Corridors**». Washington étudie aussi l'idée, proposée par la France, de «**corridors humanitaires**», ou de «**zone protégées**» à la frontière avec la Turquie, où les opposants syriens pourraient se réfugier. Mais la protection de ces espaces nécessiterait une «**no fly zone**», une zone d'interdiction de survol, ce qui signifierait une intervention militaire de grande ampleur, fait-on valoir à Washington. Comme précédemment en Egypte ou en Libye, la retenue américaine s'explique également par la peur que les régimes succédant au dic-

tateur en place ne soient sous influence «**islamiste**», et «**pire encore**» que leurs prédécesseurs. Des agents d'Al-Qaeda «**ont infiltré**» l'opposition syrienne, a mis en garde le directeur du renseignement national, James R. Clapper, qui a vu la signature du réseau terroriste international dans plusieurs attentats à Alep et Damas.

«**Guerre civile**». Les services américains s'inquiètent aussi de voir des combattants sunnites irakiens porter secours aux opposants syriens et les approvisionner en armes. «**Les inquiétudes des Américains sont multiples**, résume Andrew Tabler, spécialiste de la Syrie au Washington Institute for Near East Policy. **Ils ont peur que Bachar al-Assad se cramponne encore au pouvoir, ils craignent que le pays éclate en morceaux, et ils redoutent aussi les armes de destruction massive du régime...**»

Au Congrès et dans l'opposition

«**Nous ne pensons pas que davantage de fusils en Syrie soit la bonne réponse.**»

Victoria Nuland porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères américain, vendredi

républicain, des voix commencent à demander que les Etats-Unis décroisent leurs bras en Syrie. Une lettre ouverte à Obama, signée par une cinquantaine d'experts conservateurs, réclame des «**mesures immédiates pour stopper les atrocités du régime d'Al-Assad**». Il faudrait également «**envisager d'armer l'opposition**», a lancé le sénateur républicain John McCain, estimant que la diplomatie semble avoir «**épuisé**» ses ressources.

«**C'est en continuant à ne rien faire que la communauté internationale va se retrouver avec une guerre civile et le chaos dans cette région**», plaide l'opposant Radwan Ziadeh. «**Les Américains sont dans une situation encore plus compliquée que la nôtre**, ajoute un diplomate européen, car ils ont déjà mené des interventions en dehors du cadre des Nations unies.»

De notre correspondante à Washington LORRAINE MILLOT

«**Les unités militaires d'élite composées ou contrôlées par les alaouites se battront jusqu'au bout, car elles n'ont pas envie de subir le sort des harkis.**»

Le géographe Fabrice Balanche directeur du Groupe de recherches et d'études sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient (Gremmo) à Lyon

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

„Extremistische Gruppen wollen in Syrien Fuß fassen“

Den UN fehlen die Mittel, um Assad rasch zu stoppen, sie rechnen aber mit dem Fall des Regimes. Doch Ban Ki-moons Berater fürchtet, dass sich die Volksgruppen gegeneinander aufwiegeln lassen.

Herr Luck, mutiert in Syrien gerade eine demokratische Rebellion zu einem sunnitischen Aufstand?

Nein, der Volksaufstand geht derzeit nicht von einer einzigen ethnischen oder religiösen Gruppe aus. Doch die gewaltsame Unterdrückung durch die Regierung und die mit ihr verbündeten Milizen hat inzwischen eine sektiererische Stoßrichtung.

Das Regime wiegelt die Volksgruppen gegeneinander auf?

Seine Angriffe zielen auf bestimmte Gruppen. Homs ist heute faktisch in zwei oder mehr Städte geteilt. Die Regierung greift einige Viertel dauernd an, andere aber gar nicht, und die Trennlinien sind religiös. Jetzt machen uns Berichte Sorgen, dass auch von Oppositionsseite nach dem Wie-du-mir-so-ich-dir-Prinzip Menschen entführt werden. Eine solche Lage könnten extremistische Gruppen ausnutzen. Vergangene Woche hat sich ja plötzlich Al Qaida hinter die Protestbewegung gestellt. Die hatte mit den Terroristen natürlich nichts zu tun. Aber das Attentat auf einen syrischen General kürzlich oder die Bombenanschläge in mehreren Städten deuten darauf hin, dass extremistische Gruppen Chaos stiften, um in Syrien Fuß zu fassen.

Distanziert sich die Protestbewegung hinreichend von diesen Gruppen?

Die Opposition trägt keine Schuld daran, dass dieses Problem entsteht, aber auch ihr obliegt eine Verantwortung zum Schutz der Bevölkerung, nicht nur der Regierung. Dem Oppositionsdachverband Syrischer Nationalrat gehören Vertreter vieler Gemeinschaften an. Doch in dem Maße, wie die Repression brutaler wird, könnte auch der Wunsch nach Vergeltung wachsen.

Von wem bekommt die syrische Opposition denn ihre Waffen?

Deserteure haben Waffen mitgenommen, und die Rebellen mögen einige erbeutet haben. Aber es gibt auch Berichte darüber, dass Waffen aus sunnitischen oder anderen Quellen in der Region kommen.

Aus dem Irak, aus dem Libanon, aus Jordanien?

Gut möglich. Die irakische oder auch die libanesische Geschichte sind ja voller Beispiele für Gewalt zwischen bestimmten Volksgruppen. Das darf sich in Syrien nicht wiederholen, die Lage ist so schon schlimm genug. Die syrische Regierung will das ausnutzen und versucht, sich im Ausland als Garant der Ordnung darzustellen. Sie sagt, ohne Assad versinke das Land im Chaos – dabei verursacht ja die Regierung das ganze Unheil.

War die syrische Protestbewegung denn erfolgreich damit, mehr als nur Sunniten im Kampf gegen Assad zu vereinen?

Es gibt in ihr Vertreter vieler Strömungen, aber keine gleichmäßige Verteilung. Einige der Minderheiten in Syrien haben sich angeschaut, was in den anderen Ländern des „Arabischen Frühlings“ geschehen ist, und haben sich aus Angst um ihre Zukunft an die Seite Assads gestellt, von dem sie sich Stabilität erhofften. Kurzfristig mag ihnen das als kluge Taktik erschienen sein. Doch längerfristig verschlimmern sie dadurch ihre Lage. Wenn man sich historische Beispiele von Greueltaten anschaut, dann richtete sich die schlimmste Gewalt gegen Minderheiten, denen eine Bevorzugung unterstellt wurde. Wird eine große Bevölkerungsgruppe gewaltsam unterdrückt, dann kann die Reaktion umso heftiger ausfallen.

Demnach ginge von den Regimegegnern nicht nur für die Alawiten, zu denen der Assad-Clan zählt, sondern auch für die Christen große Gefahr aus.

Das könnte sein. Außerdem gibt es die palästinensischen Flüchtlinge und viele weitere Gruppen, die in Gefahr sind. Die internationale Gemeinschaft hat diese Sorge bisher nur unterschwellig geäußert, muss sie jetzt aber in den Vordergrund rücken. Der Nationalrat und die Nachbarn Syriens müssen über das Radio und im Internet Botschaften der Einheit und der Toleranz aussenden. Selbst in den schlimmsten Krisen von Ruanda, in Kirgistan oder auf dem Balkan waren ei-

nige örtliche Gemeinschaften so gut vorbereitet, dass sie dem Zyklus von Gewalt und Gegengewalt widerstanden haben.

Steht denn die „Freie Syrische Armee“, die gegen Assad kämpft, hinreichend unter Kontrolle der politischen Opposition?

Es gibt sicherlich keinen sehr starken Zusammenhalt, keine straffe Führung. Deshalb muss die Opposition den Kämpfern klarmachen, dass Anschläge in Städten oder Entführungen der falsche Weg sind – erst recht, wenn sie sich gegen bestimmte Volksgruppen richten. Es ist natürlich nicht einfach für die „Freie Syrische Armee“, sich für den Schutz aller Bevölkerungsgruppen gleichermaßen verantwortlich zu fühlen, wenn die Regierungstruppen vor allem gegen eine Gruppe vorgehen.



Edward C. Luck

Im UN-Sicherheitsrat hatte Russland darauf gedrungen, die Verantwortung für die Gewalt nicht nur dem Regime, sondern auch „bewaffneten Gruppen“ zuzuschreiben. Stärken Sie mit Ihren Warnungen nicht diese Sichtweise?

Das mag so aussehen, aber ich setze das nicht gleich. Der Aggressor ist die Regierung, sie und die von ihr gesteuerten Milizen tragen die Verantwortung für die Gewalt. Trotzdem rufen selbst die scharfen Kritiker der syrischen Regierung im Sicherheitsrat auch die Opposition zur Zurückhaltung auf.

Weil die syrische Regierung ihre Verantwortung zum Schutz der Bevölkerung missachtet, geht diese der Theorie nach auf die UN über. Was tun?

Der Menschenrechtsrat hat Syrien-Resolutionen verabschiedet, jetzt auch die Vollversammlung. Selbst der Sicherheitsrat hat sich im vorigen August immerhin auf eine Präsidentenerklärung verständigt, auch wenn er sich nicht auf Sanktionen einigen kann. UN-Generalsekretär Ban Ki-moon hat sich klar für die Menschenrechte in Syrien ausgesprochen.

Mit Verlaub: Das sind Worte. Was kann getan werden?

Man kommt nicht zum Handeln ohne eine solide politische Grundlage, und die ist gelegt worden. Es sind ja trotz der Blockade im Sicherheitsrat weltweit auch viele Sanktionen verhängt worden, die Syrien wirklich zu schmerzen scheinen. Syriens Nachbarn suchen jetzt nach Wegen, humanitäre Hilfe nach Syrien zu bekommen, vor allem in die belagerten Städte.

Frankreich und die Türkei reden von „humanitären Korridoren“. Ist das der richtige Weg?

Das ist eine wichtige Option, aber es stellt sich die Frage nach den Folgen, denn so ein Korridor ginge ja durch syrisches Territorium – auch wenn es natürlich nicht nur den Landweg gibt. Das Konzept der Schutzverantwortung hat nie darauf beruht, in militärischen Antworten ein Allheilmittel zu sehen. Im Fall Syrien glaubt fast niemand, dass es eine Lösung durch eine Militärintervention von außen geben könne. Man kann dort niemanden durch Luftangriffe schützen, denn es gibt nicht die großen unbewohnten Weiten zwischen den einzelnen Bevölkerungszentren wie in der libyschen Wüste; die Kämpfe finden mitten in den Städten statt. Eine Flugverbotszone würde auch nichts nützen, denn Luftangriffe sind nicht das Problem. Doch eine Invasion würde auch niemandem. Also bleibt uns, den politischen und den wirtschaftlichen Druck zu erhöhen. Wir müssen das Regime isolieren und so dessen Unterstützer zum Nachdenken bringen, ob sie sich nicht von dieser Unterstützung lossagen müssten.

Sie reden von Russen und Chinesen?

Die beiden Länder, die im Sicherheitsrat eine Resolution verhindert haben, suchen ja schon eifrig nach neuen diplomatischen Wegen. Auch sie werden nicht ewig an der Seite des Assad-Regimes stehen, wenn dieses weitermacht wie bisher. Wir müssen derweil die Zivilgesellschaft in Syrien unterstützen und die Volksgruppen ermutigen, sich nicht gegeneinander aufwiegeln zu lassen. Wenn sich die Menschen nicht auseinanderdividieren lassen, können im ganzen Land friedliche Widerstandsnester entstehen. Wenn sich dagegen die Spaltungen vertiefen, wird die Lage in Syrien auch nach Assad unhaltbar sein.

Die Fragen stellte: **Andreas Ross**

Großdemonstration gegen Assad in Damaskus

Attentate im Nordwesten Syriens / Amerika setzt Beobachtungsdrohnen ein / China lobt geplantes Referendum

FA.Z. FRANKFURT/WASHINGTON, 19. Februar. Auch in der syrischen Hauptstadt Damaskus weiten sich die Proteste gegen das Regime von Präsident Assad offenbar aus. Nach Angaben der Opposition nahmen am Samstag 15 000 Personen an einem Trauergang für vier Regimegegner teil, die am Freitag getötet worden waren. Nie zuvor hätten so viele Regimegegner in der Hauptstadt demonstriert, teilte die oppositionellen „Örtlichen Koordinierungskomitees“ mit. Der Protestzug fand im zentrumsnahen Stadtviertel Masfah statt, in dem sich zahlreiche Botschaften und Regierungsgebäude befinden. Dort sollen auch die vier Oppositionellen getötet worden sein, die zu Grabe getragen wurden. Nach Angaben des in London ansässigen Syrischen Observatoriums für Menschenrechte stürmten Regierungruppen die ostsyrische Stadt Suchna und erschossen auf der Suche nach unergauchten Oppositionellen eine Frau. Die regimetreuen Streitkräfte gingen ferner mit unverminderter Härte gegen die Stadt Homs und andere Hochburgen der Opposition vor. Es gab Berichte über insgesamt mehr als zehn Tote.

Die staatliche syrische Nachrichtenagentur Sana berichtete von Attentaten im Nordwesten des Landes. Beim Angriff auf ein Auto seien der Staatsanwalt der Provinz Idlib, ein Richter sowie der Fahrer der beiden erschossen worden. Am Samstag sei nahe der Stadt Aleppo ein Stadtrat getötet worden. Nachdem sich in der vorigen Woche Berichte gehäuft hatten, nach denen sunnitische Gruppen im Irak radikalen syrischen Regimegegnern Waffen liefern oder selbst in dem Nachbarland aktiv werden, hat der schiitische irakische Ministerpräsident Maliki nach Agenturberichten eine Überprüfung der 605 Kilometer langen Landgrenze angeordnet. Jeglichen Hinweisen über Waffenumschmelge oder mögliche Reisen von Aufständischen nach Syrien müsse man nachgehen, egal wie dürrig die Informationen seien, sagte Maliki.

Der amerikanische Geheimdienstkoordinator Clapper hatte am Donnerstag ge-



Foto Reuters

Gegen Assad: Kurden protestieren in Qamischli im Nordosten Syriens.

sagt, Anschläge in Syrien trügen die Handschrift der sunnitischen Terrorgruppe Al Qaida. Die amerikanischen Streitkräfte setzen inzwischen angeblich Drohnen über Syrien ein. Wie der Fernsehsender NBC am Wochenende unter Berufung auf Informationen aus dem Pentagon berichtete, sei seit einiger Zeit „eine ganze Reihe“ der unbemannten Flugzeuge über Syrien im Einsatz. Ziel des Einsatzes sei die Beobachtung und Dokumentierung der Angriffe der syrischen Armee auf die Protestbewegung und auf zumeist Zivilisten, berichtete der Sender. Außer-

dem werde die Kommunikation der syrischen Streitkräfte und des Regimes in Damaskus aufgezeichnet. Die Luftüberwachung durch die unbewaffneten Beobachtungsdrohnen sei aber keine Vorbereitung für einen Militäreinsatz der Vereinigten Staaten gegen das Regime von Präsident Baschar al Assad. Offenbar hat die Regierung in Washington die Information über den Drohneinsatz gestreut, um den Druck auf Assad zu erhöhen.

China, das mit Russland eine Resolution des UN-Sicherheitsrats zu Syrien vereinbart hatte, sandte am Wochenende ge-

mische Signale aus. Der stellvertretende Außenminister Zhai Jun forderte am Samstag in Damaskus die Regierung und alle „bewaffneten Kräfte“ auf, die Gewalt einzustellen. Er lobte das von Präsident Assad verfügte Verfassungsreferendum am nächsten Sonntag als möglichen Schritt, um den Konflikt zu lösen. Zhai sagte, er sei über die Lage im Land „extrem besorgt“. Er habe mit der Assad-Regierung darüber beraten, wie China und Syrien ihre Zusammenarbeit „in dieser schwierigen Phase“ verstärken könnten. Unklar blieb zunächst, für welche Gruppe die „Oppositionsvertreter“ sprachen, die der chinesische Botschafter in Damaskus ebenfalls traf. Die amtliche chinesische Nachrichtenagentur Xinhua warf am Sonntag dem Westen vor, es gehe ihm in Syrien um eigene Interessen und nicht um das Wohl des syrischen Volkes. Andererseits teilte das chinesische Außenministerium am Sonntag mit, Peking bevorzuge eine Lösung nach den Maßgaben der Arabischen Liga. Deren Ideen hatten die westlichen Staaten durch die UN-Resolution bestätigt wollen, die indes auch Peking mit einem Veto belegte hatte.

Der stellvertretende syrische Innenminister Hassan Dschilali teilte mit, mehr als 14 Millionen Syrer seien aufgerufen, sich am 26. Februar an dem in der vorigen Woche von Präsident Assad angekündigten Verfassungsreferendum zu beteiligen. Etwa 13 800 Wahllokale würden für die Volksabstimmung geöffnet sein. Die Opposition hat jedoch bereits zu einem Boykott des Referendums aufgerufen, weil die neue Verfassungswar das Monopol der Baath-Partei abschaffe, aber dem Präsidenten weiterhin „uneingeschränkte Vorrechte“ zubillige.

Gemäß einer Verabredung der Arabischen Liga berief Ägypten seinen Botschafter aus Damaskus zu Konsultationen zurück. Der Botschafter befindet sich bereits in Kairo und habe Außenminister Mohammed Kamel Amr am Sonntagmorgen Bericht erstattet, teilte das Außenministerium mit. Der Minister habe dann entschieden, dass der Botschafter „bis auf Weiteres“ in Ägypten bleiben solle.

Junge Welt (Allemagne / Germany)

China für Gewaltstopp

Syrien: Pekings stellvertretender Außenminister zu Gesprächen in Damaskus. Tote bei Trauerzügen und Demonstrationen. Gezielte Morde an Offiziellen. **Von Karin Leukefeld, Damaskus**

Während eines Besuchs des stellvertretenden chinesischen Außenministers Zhai Jun am Wochenende in Damaskus, ist es am Freitag und Samstag bei Demonstrationen und Trauerzügen im Westen der syrischen Hauptstadt zu Auseinandersetzungen mit Sicherheitskräften gekommen.

Zhai Jun war am Freitag zunächst mit seinem Amtskollegen Feisal Mekdad zusammengetroffen und hatte betont, die internationale Gemeinschaft müsse Syriens Souveränität respektieren. China und Syrien hätten über Möglichkeiten beraten, ihre Zusammenarbeit in »dieser schwierigen Phase in Syrien« zu verstärken. Die Volksrepublik tritt – wie Rußland und andere blockfreie Staaten – für einen Dialog zwischen Regierung und Opposition ein. Nach einem Gespräch mit Präsident Baschar Al-Assad am Samstag sagte Zhai Jun vor Journalisten in Damaskus, sowohl die Regierung als auch Gruppen der Opposition und bewaffnete Kräfte im Land müßten »Gewalttaten umgehend einstellen«. Er begrüßte das für den 26. Februar geplante Referendum über eine neue Verfassung, das »im Interesse des syrischen Volkes« sei. Nur in einem stabilen Land könne Syrien umfassende Reformen angehen. China sei »extrem besorgt« über die Eskalation der Krise und hoffe, daß die bevorstehenden Parlamentswahlen friedlich verlaufen würden. Unbestätigten Berichten zufolge traf sich Zhai Jun auch mit Vertretern der innersyrischen Opposition.

Demonstrationen

Im Westen von Damaskus, in dem Ortsteil Alt Mezzeh, kam es am Wochenende zu gewaltsamen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Regierungsgegnern und Sicherheitskräften. Nach dem Trauergottesdienst für drei Jugendliche, die am Donnerstag vermutlich bei Protesten erschossen worden waren, folgte am Freitag eine Menge von »mehr als 10 000 Menschen«, wie ein Augenzeuge berichtete, den Särgen von der Großen Moschee zum Friedhof. Als die frühere syrische Nationalflagge (aus der Zeit der französischen Besatzung



Damaskus am Sonnabend: Trauerzug für am Vortag getötete Regierungsgegner

und des Unabhängigkeitskampfes 1946) gehoben und regierungsfeindliche Parolen gerufen wurden, fielen Schüsse. Fünf Menschen wurden getötet. Zu dem Trauergottesdienst für diese fünf Personen am Samstag seien »auffällig viele Frauen« zur großen Moschee gekommen, berichtete der Augenzeuge. Bei Verhandlungen zwischen Sicherheitskräften und den Organisatoren des Trauerzuges habe man sich geeinigt, keine politischen Parolen zu rufen, sondern lediglich die Särge zum Friedhof zu begleiten. Dennoch wiederholte sich das Geschehen vom Vortag – unter der erwähnten Fahne wurden, regierungsfeindliche Parolen gerufen – und wieder fielen Schüsse. Eine Person wurde getötet, eine Frau sei verletzt worden.

Die Mobilisierung zu den Protesten erfolgte über Jugendliche, die sich per E-Mail, Facebook und andere Chatforen im Internet verständigten, erfuhr die Autorin bei Recherchen. Der Aufruf werde dann von Haus zu Haus verbreitet. Nach Angaben der Lokalen Koordinierungskomitees (LCC) soll

es in Damaskus am Freitag 49 Demonstrationen gegeben haben. Auf der Facebookseite »Syrische Revolution 2011«, die von der syrischen Muslimbruderschaft im schwedischen Exil betrieben wird, hieß es am Samstag: »Das Blut der Märtyrer ruft euch zum Ungehorsam auf.«

Bewaffnete Gruppen

Am Wochenende berichtete die syrische staatliche Nachrichtenagentur SANA erneut von gezielten Morden an Offiziellen. In Aleppo wurde ein Mitglied des Stadtrats ermordet, in Idlib töteten bewaffnete am Sonntag einen ranghohen Staatsanwalt und einen Richter. Die Täter hätten das Feuer auf ihr Auto eröffnet, auch der Fahrer sei erschossen worden. In Idlib kämpften Beobachtern zufolge unterschiedliche bewaffnete Gruppen gegen die syrischen Streitkräfte und teilweise auch gegeneinander um Einfluß. Neben der »Freien Syrischen Armee«, die aus ihrem Hinterland in der Türkei operiert, agieren dort kriminelle Gruppen, Söld-

ner und eingeschleuste salafistische Kämpfer. In Homs gingen die Kämpfe zwischen bewaffneten Aufständischen und syrischen Streitkräften weiter. Die Armee versucht seit mehr als zwei Wochen, das von bewaffneten Aufständischen kontrollierte Viertel Baba Amr einzunehmen.

Das syrische Innenministerium gab derweil die Zahl der Stimmberechtigten, die am kommenden Sonntag bei einem Referendum über die neue Verfassung abstimmen können, mit 14 Millionen bekannt. Rund 13 800 Wahllokale werden landesweit eingerichtet. In Gesprächen vor Ort äußerten sich viele Syrer skeptisch. Auch wenn die neue Verfassung bedeutend besser als die vorherige sei, sei das Procedere nicht in Ordnung, sagte ein Gesprächspartner. Die anhaltende Gewalt im Land werde zur Nichtteilnahme der Regierungskritiker führen.

Mit Ägypten hat derweil ein weiteres arabisches Land seinen Botschafter vorerst aus Damaskus abgezogen. Auch die Schweiz teilte die Schließung ihrer Vertretung in Damaskus mit.

Der Tagesspiegel (Allemagne / Germany)

„Ich kann weitgehend frei berichten“

Karin Leukefeld arbeitet als offizielle Korrespondentin in Syrien. Das irritiert nicht nur die Exilanten

VON MATTHIAS MEISNER

Von Medienblockade ist die Rede, und davon, dass die Regierung von Baschar al Assad die internationale Medienberichterstattung über den Gewaltkonflikt in Syrien eingeschränkt habe. So begründen die Nachrichtenagenturen, dass sie in dem arabischen Land nicht mit Reportern vertreten sind. „Journalisten können nach wie vor nicht frei aus Syrien berichten“, schreibt zum Beispiel Reuters, die Authentizität der Bilder von Demonstrationen lasse sich „kaum überprüfen“. Die Deutsche Presse-Agentur berichtet: „Die wenigen Journalisten, die im Land arbeiten, müssen mit Überwachung, aber auch mit Übergriffen rechnen.“

Bemerkenswert ist vor diesem Hintergrund, dass sich zwei deutsche Tageszeitungen aus dem linken Spektrum, das „Neue Deutschland“ (ND) und die „Junge Welt“, mit Karin Leukefeld eine Korrespondentin leisten, die seit etwa zwei Jahren in Damaskus akkreditiert ist und auch in jüngster Zeit immer wieder nach Syrien reiste und von dort berichtete. Vergleichbar viel erlaubt das Regime derzeit keinem anderen deutschen Journalisten. Leukefeld, Jahrgang 1954, studierte Islamwissenschaftlerin, arbeitet seit 1997 als freie Journalistin, sie war zuvor unter anderem Mitarbeiterin eines PDS-Bundestagsabgeordneten und machte Öffentlichkeitsarbeit für die Grünen. In der Nahost-Region ist sie seit Jahren unterwegs, sie schrieb etwa über die Entwicklungen im Irak und in Ägypten.

Umstritten ist, wie unabhängig die Journalistin in Syrien arbeiten kann – und ob sie sich womöglich zuweilen zum Handlanger des Regimes macht. Im Sommer warfen Exil-Syrer ihr vor, sie rühre für Assad und seine Regierung „die Werbetrömmel“, unterstütze ein „blutiges, die Menschenwürde mit Füßen tretendes Regime“. Kurz zuvor hatte sie sich von der Deutsch-Syrischen Gesellschaft, einem Verein mit guten Kontakten zur Regierung in Damaskus, für einen Vortrag in der ehemaligen syrischen Botschaft in Bonn verpflichtet lassen, Thema: „der sogenannte Arabische Frühling“.

Die Redaktionen von ND und „Junger Welt“, zuletzt die Hauptabnehmer von Leukefeld-Texten, verteidigen die Zusammenarbeit. Detlef Pries aus der ND-Auslandsredaktion meint, seine Zeitung nehme die Angebote gerne an, „um nicht allein auf die Berichterstattung von Agen-



An unabhängigen Berichten aus Syrien mangelt es, viele Nachrichtenagenturen sind dort nicht vertreten.

Foto: Bulent Kilic, AFP

turen angewiesen zu sein, die selbst keinen unmittelbaren Einblick in das Geschehen haben“. Es gehe darum, dass Leukefeld die „Meinungen und Stimmungen aus der Zivilbevölkerung, von Oppositionellen wie von Regierungsvertretern einfängt“. Pries gibt zu, dass die Journalistin Gefahr laufe, von diesen Vertretern – „den einen wie den anderen“ – als Sprachrohr benutzt zu werden. Doch seien ihre Reportagen nicht die einzigen Elemente der ND-Berichterstattung.

Noch weniger distanziert argumentiert Arnold Schölzel, Chefredakteur der „Jungen Welt“, die wegen ihrer extremistischen Ausrichtung seit Jahren im Visier des Verfassungsschutzes ist. Leukefeld sei eine „erfahrene Journalistin“, in der Region „zu Hause“. Das Risiko, sie könnte aus Damaskus Propagandaarbeit für Assad leisten, sei „sehr gering“, versichert er. Im Gegenteil empfinde seine Redaktion die Berichterstattung der Nachrichtenagenturen aus Syrien als „sehr unbefriedigend“, Schölzel nennt diese „dubios, mit unklaren Quellenangaben und von Propaganda durchtränkt“.

In ihren Texten bemüht sich Karin Leukefeld zwar um gewissen Abstand zu Assad. Nie aber erscheint der syrische Staats-

chef als Diktator, der die Opposition im Land brutal unterdrückt. Für sie ist er eher eine „tragische“, an eigenen Reformvorhaben gescheiterte Figur. Kürzlich erschien in der „Jungen Welt“ ein von ihr in Damaskus geführtes Interview mit dem oppositionellen Schriftsteller Louay Hussein.



Assad ist für Karin Leukefeld eine tragische Figur, den Unterdrücker sieht sie nicht

Dieser kritisierte Assad als unehrlich und unglaubwürdig, nannte es andererseits aber inakzeptabel, wie der Westen dem Land seinen Willen aufzwingt. „Syrien ist zum Schlachtfeld der Großmächte geworden“, titelte die Zeitung. Leukefeld sieht das offenbar ähnlich. Im Januar reiste sie für das ND mit bei einer vom Informationsministerium organisierten Fahrt in die umkämpfte Stadt Homs. Sie zitierte Einwoh-

ner mit Kritik an den USA, Frankreich und Katar, die bewaffnete Gruppen in Syrien finanziell unterstützen und von einer Verhandlungslösung ablenken würden.

Andere Blätter bemühen sich auf andere Art: Die „Zeit“ druckte in ihrer jüngsten Ausgabe den Bericht des Schriftstellers Jonathan Littell, der heimlich nach Homs gereist war. Auch der „Spiegel“ entsandte Reporter ins Land, die Texte erschienen ohne Autorennamen. Leukefeld selbst weiß von Kollegen, die als Touristen einreisen oder mit bewaffneten Kämpfern aus der Türkei oder dem Libanon. Sie selbst behauptet, sie könne sich mit ihrer Akkreditierung in Syrien „unabhängig bewegen“ und „weitgehend frei berichten“. Nur „bestimmte Brennpunkte“ dürfe sie wegen der bewaffneten Auseinandersetzungen „nicht allein besuchen“. Dankbar ist sie, dass das Informationsministerium immer wieder zu offiziellen Fahrten einlädt. Die Mitarbeiter der Behörde würden die Journalisten dabei – „anders als früher“ – eigenständig arbeiten lassen, erklärt sie dem Tagesspiegel. Was sie wiederum in anderen deutschen Medien über Syrien lese, halte sie teilweise für „beschämend einseitig und einer professionellen Berichterstattung unwürdig“.

L'Unita (Italie / Italy)

Siria, sangue a Palmira assedio alla città-museo

La sanguinosa repressione del regime di Bashar al Assad si accanisce ora sugli abitanti della città famosa per uno dei siti archeologici più visitati e tutelati al mondo, inserito nel patrimonio mondiale dell'Unesco

Il caso

U.D.G.

Sangue a Palmira. Inizialmente solo sfiorata dalla contestazione e conseguente repressione del regime di Bashar al-Assad, l'antica città di Palmira, nel centro della Siria, da circa due settimane è sotto assedio. Lo riferiscono gli abitanti della città nuova, sorta poco di stante dalla famosa località archeologica inserita tra i siti «patrimonio mondiale dell'Unesco». «I militanti circondano Palmira da tutte le parti: la città della araba, gli uliveti e i palmei, il deserto e la città - ha raccontato al telefono uno dei circa 60.000 residenti, che non ha voluto dire il suo nome per paura di ritorsioni - I soldati (di Assad) si sono installati nel castello arabo che sovrasta le rovine romane e la città nuova e sparano su tutto ciò che si muove».

Altri abitanti hanno riferito che comunque, da quando lo scorso 4 febbraio i soldati hanno preso posizione in forze sotto il comando di un nuovo generale (alawita, come gli Assad) in-

fronti: la cittadella araba, i boschetti di ulivi e i palmei, il deserto, la città stessa», ha raccontato un altro residente contattato telefonicamente dall'Apf. «La pioggia di fuoco delle mitragliatrici colpisce tutto ciò che si muove tra le rovine, che pensano siano in mano ai ribelli». Secondo altre fonti, centinaia di residenti sono già fuggiti. «La maggior parte dei giovani hanno lasciato la città o stanno cercando di farlo, temendo l'arresto, solo gli anziani e i dipendenti dello Stato sono rimasti», ha raccontato un altro abitante, già riuscito a fuggire ad Palmira. Fuggite anche molte donne e ragazze, nel timore di essere violentate. «I carri armati sono schierati anche vicino le rovine romane, all'ingresso della città chiamata in arabo Tadmur. Palmira, residenza della leggendaria regina Zenobia, che nel III sec.d.C. sfidò Roma e divenuta, nel corso dei secoli, un'area di sosta per le carovane in transito lungo la «via della seta» finora era stata risparmiata dalle violenze; secondo i locali, il suo destino è stato segnato quando a capo della sicurezza nella regione è stato sostituito un generale sunnita con uno alawita, appartenente al clan del presidente Bashar al-Assad.

Dalla guerra sul campo a quella diplomatica. La Siria ha richiamato il suo ambasciatore al Cairo dopo una mossa analoga da parte del governo egiziano. Lo rende noto l'agenzia *Mena*, secondo la quale il portavoce del ministero degli Esteri egiziano ha affermato che «il dialogo fra Siria ed Egitto è entrato in una fase di sfiducia». «L'Egitto proseguirà con le misure di pressione verso al Siria finché il regime non cambierà di posizione», ha affermato il portavoce. ♦



Foto Aena

Il sito archeologico di Palmira

viato a sostituire il precedente (sunita), la situazione è improvvisamente peggiorata. Sarebbero decine le persone che si sono allontanate per paura di incontrollabili esplosioni di violenza e molti alberi d'ulivo, una delle più straordinarie attrattive per i turisti che fino a pochi mesi fa sempre più numerosi si recavano a visitare le antiche mura della regina Zenobia, sono stati tagliati e bruciati. Lo stesso sarebbe accaduto a

molte palme da dattero. «Ci vorranno almeno dieci anni per far ripartire la produzione», lamenta un fuggitivo. Le comunicazioni con la città, situata in pieno deserto, sono comunque molto difficili. E chi è fuggito ha paura di parlare, temendo rappresaglie nei confronti di parenti e amici. Ci sarebbero già stati tre uccisi e diversi «scomparsi». E i posti di blocco sono dappertutto.

«Palmira è circondata da tutti i

La Vanguardia (Espagne / Spain)

El partido Baas perdió su espíritu con la llegada de Hafed El Asad al poder en Siria

Fracaso de un sueño árabe

TOMÁS ALCOVERRO
Beirut. Corresponsal

El partido Baas había nacido en 1940 con la ambición de establecer una sociedad árabe unida con un sistema socialista en el que todos serían iguales, sin tener en cuenta sus diferencias religiosas. Y se convirtió en una superestructura vaciada de contenido y dominada por el ejército, por la minoría alauí y el clan de los Asad.

Con el golpe de Estado de 1963, dado sobre todo por militares alauíes en un país de continuos pronunciamientos militares, de cuartelazos desde 1943, cuando Siria consiguió su independencia de Francia, comenzó la hegemonía baasista.

Sus fundadores, Michel Aflak, cristiano grecoortodoxo, y Salah Bitar, un musulmán suní que conoció en su exilio de Beirut, fueron arrinconados, expulsados por los militares radicales.

Aquellos intelectuales formados en Europa habían soñado con una sociedad laica, aunque contaran con el islam. En 1970, con el golpe de Estado palaciego del general Hafez el Asad, también fueron arrinconados Al Yezid y Al Atasi, que habían gober-

nado Siria con revolucionarias aspiraciones de guerra popular a imagen y semejanza de China.

Hafez el Asad, pragmático, quería dar un carácter institucional a su régimen estableciendo una Constitución todavía en vigor, un parlamento, reforzando el sector público y haciendo del Baas el núcleo de un espejismo denominado Frente Nacional Progresista, que agrupaba a otros partidos, como el comunista. En realidad con su gobierno desde 1970 al 2000, año de su muerte, tras la que le sucedió en la jefatura del Estado su hijo Bashar, inaugurando esta república hereditaria que entonces fue aceptada por todo el mundo, queda marginado con el avance de la privatización del Estado.

El Baas, extirpada su ala civil, es dominado por los militares y, en primer lugar, los oficiales de la minoría alauí. Las fuerzas armadas, como en Egipto, son una poderosa institución que engloba un amplio complejo militar industrial, empresas constructoras y negocios de importación y exportación. Esta coalición comercial y militar se extiende a expensas del histórico partido.

El Baas, inspirado en el modelo de partidos comunistas de las democracias populares, cuenta

con un comité central que rige su vasta organización de sindicatos obreros, federaciones campesinas, asociaciones estudiantiles, universitarias, femeninas... Sus lemas de justicia social, de progreso, de libertad, no ocultan la realidad de la sociedad siria, antes militarizada con el pretexto del conflicto con Israel, sometida cada vez mas a la *asabiya* o poder de los clanes gubernamentales.

Hafez el Asad supo tejer una red de alianzas con otras comuni-

La principal función del Baas es desde hace décadas legitimar las órdenes del presidente

dades como la drusa, la kurda, la cristiana, y con influyentes sectores mercantiles suníes, que le permitieron la estabilidad de su régimen, basado, ante todo, en las fuerzas armadas y en los servicios de inteligencia o *mujabarat*. El Baas, vaciado de su contenido, se ha transformado en una máquina administrativa insustituible para el control de la población y la promoción individual. De he-

cho, su principal función es legitimar las decisiones del presidente y suministrar una cobertura ideológica al régimen de los Asad.

Con la llegada al poder de Bashar el Asad se intenta renovar el partido. El doctor Bashar como le llaman su seguidores, en su primera primavera de Damasco, prometi6 reformas políticas y económicas. Su círculo de parientes, sus primos Mohamed y Rami Majluf, convertidos en poderosos empresarios, en hombres de negocios sin escrúpulos, ha reducido más la influencia del partido, fundado por unos idealistas reformadores. El Baas aceptó en uno de sus últimos congresos la economía social del mercado, un sistema híbrido impuesto con el propósito de liberar la economía sin cambiar el ordenamiento jurídico-político de la nación.

Ni los congresos del 2003, del 2005 o del 2010 consiguieron renovar el partido que anhela la regeneración del *hombre árabe* con ideales humanistas de hace siete decenios. Su reforma fue aplazada una y otra vez, por el presidente El Asad invocando circunstancias regionales e imperativos de seguridad. El fracaso del Baas en Siria, y antes en Iraq, es el fracaso de la historia contemporánea árabe.●

A Rússia e a Síria



MARIA JOÃO TOMÁS

Investigadora do Instituto de Estudos Estratégicos e Internacionais (IEEI)

-se o representante dos interesses soviéticos no Médio Oriente e passou a ser um seus maiores importadores de armamento, num negócio que ainda hoje se mantêm, e que vale mais de quatro mil milhões de dólares para os russos. O exército do Presidente sírio está, por isso, muito bem equipado.

Mas não são só as armas que ligam estes dois países. Outros negócios sustentam uma amizade muito valiosa e lucrativa para ambos os lados e que movimentam 19,4 mil milhões de dólares. Para além das importações agrícolas, das indústrias de aço e metalomecânica, dos transportes aéreos, a Rússia tem também importantes interesses energéticos na Síria, de exploração e distribuição de gás e de petróleo, com empresas como a Stroytransgaz e na Tafneft. Em parceria com a companhia de gás Síria, estão concluídos, e em funcionamento, o Gasoduto Árabe, e estações de exploração e tratamento de gás, quer a sudeste, onde se encontram os maiores campos de hidrocarbonetos sírios, como no centro, uma zona ainda numa fase mais inicial de exploração. No que toca à exploração de jazidas petrolíferas, que teve o seu grande impulso em 2007, quando foram feitas descobertas consideráveis que atraí-

o veto da Rússia e da China no Conselho de Segurança da ONU, impedindo que Bashar al-Assad delegasse o seu poder no vice-presidente, é mais uma demonstração da política tradicional destes países, avessos a ingerências externas nos assuntos internos de um país. Mas não é só. Há muitos outros interesses económicos que impedem Putin de deixar cair o Presidente sírio.

As relações entre a Rússia e a Síria datam do tempo da Guerra Fria. Em 1971, a antiga União Soviética instalou uma base de apoio e manutenção naval em Tartus, na zona costeira do Mediterrâneo, e perdeu uma dívida de 9,8 mil milhões de dólares aos sírios. Em 1980, num tratado de cooperação entre os dois países, Hafez al-Assad, pai de Bashar, tornou-

ram investimentos estrangeiros, russos e britânicos, estão também localizadas na mesma zona, mas não são tão atrativas como as de gás, sobretudo depois das sanções impostas à Síria desde o início da rebelião. De qualquer forma, estes investimentos russos são razões mais do que suficientes para que Putin não queira que o seu parceiro de negócio saia do poder.

Aliás, a visita do ministro dos negócios estrangeiros russos à Síria, numa tentativa de arranjar uma alternativa à resolução da ONU, teve como resposta de Bashar al-Assad o bombardeamento intenso da cidade de Holms, que não só está muito próxima da base russa de Tartus, como está situada estrategicamente perto dos mais importantes centros de exploração energéticos sírios.

Este inequívoco compromisso de manter e defender os interesses russos deixa em aberto o papel decisivo que a Rússia vai ter nos tempos mais próximos. Conseguir resistir à pressão da comunidade internacional para afastar o Presidente sírio, assegurando todas as valiosas parcerias e explorações energéticas que tem na região, é sem dúvida o cenário mais favorável para Putin. A perspectiva de uma guerra, que se adivi-

nha cada vez mais certa, apesar de ser comercialmente vantajosa em termos de venda de armamento, não é nada favorável para os outros negócios russos na Síria.

Por outro lado, é importante que a transição do regime sírio tenha uma direta intervenção da Rússia. A minoria xiita que suporta Bashar al-Assad irá de certeza ser substituída por partidos sunnitas, mais de acordo com a maioria da população. Assegurar que as parcerias económicas russas se mantenham irá ser essencial no futuro, e Putin está bem ciente do jogo que terá de fazer.

O que começou como uma rebelião contra um regime ditatorial está a transformar-se num problema político e económico de grandes dimensões que, perigosamente, pode resvalar para um conflito que extravasa as fronteiras sírias.

Acrescem ainda os interesses em enfraquecer a influência dos governos xiitas no Médio Oriente, o que pode explicar também o grande empenho da Liga Árabe e da Turquia na resolução deste problema. Esperemos que a diplomacia e a perspicácia política sejam a solução para a questão síria, porque todos os cenários de guerra são de evitar, ainda mais com o Irão como vizinho e tendo o Cáucaso ali tão perto.

The Irish Times (Irlande / Irland)

Uprising will fail but leave lasting divisions, analysts say



Arming insurgents in Syria has turned a mass protest to topple the regime into a civil war, writes **Michael Jansen**

THE STALEMATE in the power struggle in Syria has pushed the government to escalate its crackdown on rebel-held areas while making the rebels ever more determined to hold on. And it has prompted the Arab League and its western backers to announce financial and material assistance for insurgents.

Their announcement, however, was misleading. For several months now money and arms have been flowing semi-clandestinely to local militias and the "Free Syrian Army", composed of army deserters.

Insurgents are, reportedly, being provided with modern weapons and night-vision and communications equipment, and are being reinforced by veteran fighters from Iraq and Libya, some with al-Qaeda connections.

Arming insurgents is certain to prolong the conflict in Syria and is already transforming what had been campaigning to topple the regime by means of mass protest into a full-scale civil war that could engulf neighbouring Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, and destabilise Turkey.

Government supporters argue the rebellion will be defeated, but not until a great deal of blood is shed and the economy destroyed.

One veteran commentator said, "The last time we fought the Muslim Brotherhood [1978-82], it took four years to end the rebellion. This time, the situation is much worse. It could take longer." Another analyst said the damage to the economy will be great, but "the damage to relations between communities may never be repaired".

Secular, Christian and heterodox Shia Alawite Syrians fear their country will become a wasteland like Iraq, ruled by a sectarian Sunni regime rather than a sectarian Shia one, as in Iraq. They argue Arab Spring uprisings have been hijacked by the well-organised Muslim Brotherhood and ultraorthodox Salafis. The latter adhere to the puritanical Wahabism practised in Saudi Arabia, the font and financier of militant Sunni fundamentalism.

The struggle in Syria is a struggle for the heartland of the

'The last time we fought the Muslim Brotherhood, it took four years to end the rebellion. This time is worse'

"Mashriq", the eastern Arab world, seriously weakened by the absence of Iraq since the 2003 US invasion and occupation. In spite of Syria's authoritarianism, brutality and corruption, secular liberal Arab observers insist the regime must be permitted to facilitate the transition to multiparty rule. They argue that since there is no obvious successor to the regime, current structures must remain in place if Syria is to avoid the anarchy and chaos, murder and mayhem that still afflict Iraq.

The struggle for Syria is becoming increasingly polarised between East and West, with Russia and China supporting the regime and the US and Europe the opposition.

Russia is defending its long-term interests; China seeks to preserve the principle of nonintervention by outsiders in the internal affairs of countries plagued with unrest. Both Russia

and China face dissident minorities and subject peoples within their vast territories. Russia's regional influence began to diminish in the 1970s after the leading Arab power, Egypt, under president Anwar Sadat, turned towards the West and broke with Arab ranks by making peace with Israel.

Syria, a contender for Arab leadership, became Russia's sole regional ally, bought Russian arms and granted it a port to service its Mediterranean fleet. Since the US occupation of Iraq, both Russia and China have lost potentially lucrative oil-exploration contracts in Iraq and have had only marginal regional roles. Arab analysts believe the primary target of the US, the main mover of the western

campaign to oust Syria's rulers, is Syria's ally, Tehran. Washington is currently stepping up economic sanctions and threatening military action if Iran does not abandon its nuclear programme. US and Arab regional experts argue ousting the Syrian regime would diminish Tehran's regional clout and, perhaps, make it more susceptible to pressure to halt its nuclear programme. The US and its allies say Tehran's objective is to make weapons, although Iran denies this accusation, saying it has not yet shifted from enriching uranium for nuclear power generation to building bombs.

The 'ghost' gangs of Assad with a licence to kill

DISPATCH

By A Correspondent in Damascus

PRESIDENT Bashar al-Assad enforces his control of Damascus using an army of toughish corner boys to kidnap, torture, beat up and menace residents suspected of sympathies to the rebels.

Derived from the Arabic for "ghost", the word Shabiha has come to embody the latest repressive twist of Syria's minority dictatorship.

In neighbourhoods such as Moaddemiya, a rebellious suburb near the capital, brutality meted out by the Shabiha has become a source of fear.

A video shows Shabiha, who are recruited mostly from the president's Alawite sect, standing above bloodied corpses. "Say Bashar al-Assad and the

Alawites will forever rule," said a man in the video, moving the jaw of the corpse with his shoe.

The Shabiha are armed, and paid 2,000 Syrian pounds (£22) a day, with extra for working on Friday, when the largest demonstrations take place.

"They have weapons and a licence to kill," said Omar al Khani, of the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union. "The government brings these gangs to protests. Most are recruited by the intelligence services. They are given a free hand to do what they want. If they kill, no questions are asked.

"It is the policy of the Free Syrian Army to kill the Shabiha."

Faced with a nationwide uprising it has failed to quash, the regime is unrestrained in its attacks on the civilians who seek to cast off its control.

Yesterday it was reported that victims of unrelenting shelling on the Baba Amr district of besieged Homs were being treated by a veterinary surgeon. The only medical professional administering life-saving treatment was relying on his knowledge of sheep anatomy to those brought to his makeshift field hospital.

In the capital the battle lines are not yet drawn in such stark definition. For the most part the Shabiha lounge in the streets, monitoring passers-by and keeping a tally of local movements.

But their patrols frequently take a sinister turn, especially in the capital's hostile suburbs. A group of Moaddemiya women recounted a litany of terrors the Shabiha had inflicted.

"They imprisoned Nasser Serri, a peace activist for six months. Five days

after he was released, a gang broke into his home and shot him in front of his children and his mother. They pushed his body from the balcony of the second floor," said Obeida, a middle-aged woman.

Hala interjected: "Two weeks ago they entered into a family friend's home. They held the men at gunpoint and trampled on them. They punched the handicapped son in the stomach."

Bola, a student, said her 60-year-old father had been arrested. Insisting that he had never been to a protest, she said she could not fathom why he was taken.

"He was leaving the mosque after praying. He is a peaceful man, he is frightened of the security forces," she said. "I cannot go to him. If I did they might take me too."

The Herald (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Syrian police tighten grip as fears of civil war rise

AMMAN

POLICE and militia patrols fanned out in the Syrian capital's Mezze district yesterday to stop a repeat of protests against President Bashar al Assad that have threatened his grip on Damascus.

Police cars and militia jeeps patrolled Mezze while secret police agents spread out on foot, stopping men at random and checking their identification cards, opposition activists said.

Yesterday, China said a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis was still possible but Britain's Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said he feared the country would now slide into civil war.

The United States, Europe, Turkey and Gulf-led Arab states have all demanded Mr Assad quit, but the West has ruled out any Libya-style military intervention.

The Arab League,



BASHAR AL ASSAD: Hold on Damascus threatened.

spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, has indicated some members are prepared to arm the opposition.

Mr Hague said: "We cannot intervene in the way we did in Libya ... we will do many other things.

"I am worried that Syria is going to slide into a civil war and that our powers to do something about it are very constrained because, as everyone has seen, we have not been able to pass a resolution at the UN Security Council because of

Russian and Chinese opposition."

Thousands of Syrians demonstrated in the heart of the capital in one of the biggest anti-government rallies there since a nationwide uprising started nearly a year ago.

Meanwhile, leading Syrian businessman, Faisal al Qudsi, said the Syrian Government was slowly disintegrating and sanctions were ruining the economy.

He said military action could only last six months but Mr Assad's government would fight to the end.

He said: "The Army is getting tired and will go nowhere.

"They will have to sit and talk or at least they have to stop killing.

"And the minute they stop killing, more millions of people will be on the streets.

"So they are in a Catch-22."

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Syria's sectarian war goes international as foreign fighters and arms pour into country

After years of Syrian insurgents and weaponry infiltrating Iraq, now the traffic goes the other way

By **KIM SENGUPTA**
in Antakya, Turkey

The attack at night was sudden and fierce, mortar rounds followed by machine-gun fire. There was panic among some of the inexperienced Syrian rebel fighters. But Saddam al-Husseini had seen it all before.

Mr Husseini got his combat experience in Iraq, fighting first against American forces and then as a member of the "Anbar Awakening", when Sunni nationalists turned their guns against foreign fighters affiliated with al-Qa'ida. His presence inside Syria, where an overwhelmingly Sunni uprising is taking place against Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-dominated establishment, can be interpreted as an example of the country's civil war turning into an international sectarian conflict, a source of great unease in the region. Or it could be, as the 36-year-old engineer from the Iraqi city of Ramadi insisted, an expression of solidarity with oppressed brethren sharing a common heritage.

What it does illustrate is a reversal of roles between two countries. For years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, weapons and fighters slipped in across the border from Syria. Now the roles are being reversed with the flow coming the other way, although the numbers involved remain unclear.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's successor as head of al-Qa'ida, declared this month that it was the duty of all Muslims to take part in jihad in Syria. The organisation's Iraqi arm was, according to some American officials, responsible for recent bombings in Damascus and one in Aleppo. A message on the website of al-Qa'ida in Iraq said: "A lot of people fought side-by-side with the Islamic state of Iraq and it is good



Funerals taking place in Damascus yesterday for demonstrators killed by the Syrian regime AFP

seeing the suffering that is taking place and I am working with a group that is giving support – but it is all peaceful."

Mr Husseini acknowledged some arms may be coming across the Iraqi border. "This is something I have heard," he said. "There are plenty of guns, rocket-propelled grenades, other things one can buy in Iraq. So some businessmen are maybe doing this."

He did not want to reveal details of the group he is working with for "security reasons". But he said: "We are the same family. There may be a lot of refugees coming into Iraq and we must look after them, just as the Syrians looked after us when people from Iraq had to escape there. Yes, I have heard all this talk of al-Qa'ida doing things in Syria. But that does not have the support of true Iraqis... this is propaganda spread inside Iraq by people who want to damage solidarity with Syria."

An Iraqi in Syria says: 'We're the same family. It is the duty of all Muslims to help people in this struggle'

The Shia-dominated Iraqi government has said it is taking urgent steps to stop arms going into Syria. The office of the Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, said he held a meeting at the weekend "to work on closing all the gaps over the border with Syria, which terrorists and criminal gangs are using for all kinds of smuggling, including arms".

Yet the worry of sectarian strife spilling across the region continues to grow. Yesterday, in the southern Turkish city of Antakya, a demonstration took place in support of the Syrian regime by about 3,000 people, the vast majority of them Alawites, chanting: "We shall shed our blood for you, Assad."

Inside Syria, meanwhile, the official news agency, Sana, reported that gunmen killed a state prosecutor and a judge in Idlib province. They blamed "terrorists" – a catch-all phrase the regime uses to describe anyone opposed to President Assad's rule.



Members of the Free Syrian Army on patrol in Idlib, in Syria's north-west AFP

news to hear about the arrival of Iraqi fighters to help their brethren in Syria."

Mr Husseini had already been into Syria through Iraq's Anbar province. He maintained that his visit to the Idlib area, a circuitous route through Turkey, was part of a humanitarian mission. He got caught up in violence, he said, when regime forces attacked a village.

Speaking to *The Independent* inside Syria, he said: "Our Syrian brothers are fighting their own war. I am not involved. But it is the duty of all true Muslims to help people in this struggle. We are just trying to work out what help is needed. People in Iraq and other countries are

The Scotsman (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

The packs of armed thugs who terrorise Syria's streets

OUR CORRESPONDENT
IN DAMASCUS

THE prisoners lay in a row, their cheeks pressed to the concrete and their hands tied behind their backs as the five armed men milled around them on the street. A youth in a military issue bullet proof vest, jeans and trainers beat a screaming captive repeatedly with his cane: "You are a revolutionary rat aren't you? You son of a bitch!" The onlookers laughed.

As president Bashar al-Assad continues his violent struggle to retain power, bands of his paramilitaries are running wild on the streets of Damascus. Carrying out executions, drive-by shootings, theft and sectarian attacks with lawless abandon, it is these men, the Shabiha – the "ghosts" – that residents say they most fear.

"They have weapons and a licence to kill," said Omar al-Khani of the Syrian Revolution Co-ordinators Union. "The government brings these gangs to protests. They give them military uniforms and identity cards calling them riot police."

In March of last year the Syrian regime hired unemployed youths, school drop-outs and former criminals as extra manpower to help deal with the burgeoning anti-government demonstrations across the country. They were armed, and paid a daily rate of 2000 Syrian pounds (£22), explained Mr Khani.

Outside of demonstrations, the men can be seen on the streets of Damascus. Gangs of Shabiha are terrorising the neighbourhood of Moaddemiya in the city, residents told *The Scotsman* this weekend.

"They imprisoned Nasser Serir,

a peace activist, for six months. Five days after he was released, a gang broke into his home and shot him in front of his children and his mother. They pushed his body from the balcony of the second floor apartment," said "Obeida", a middle-aged woman.

The day before, a group had arrested her 60-year-old father, said Bola, a student in the group. Insisting that he had never before been to an anti-government protest, she said she could not fathom why he was taken. "He was leaving the mosque after praying. He is a peaceful man, he is frightened of the security forces," she said. "They do what they want. They arrested a traffic policeman too, just because he is from Idlib, a town that is rebelling now."

After taking her father captive, the group stole the family car said Bola. They drove it fast through the streets, swerving round corners, and firing their guns into the air.

Residents report near random house raids by opportunistic groups of Shabiha, looting with impunity. Whilst Bola and her brothers moved away from home, fearing a follow up to their father's arrest, their mother had decided to remain and keep watch on her home. "Maybe if she is there, she can stop them from trashing and stealing our possessions," said Bola.

Derived from the Arabic for "ghost", the word Shabiha has come to mean "thugs" in modern day Syria. It reportedly first entered the lexicon of the Syrian uprising after a government crackdown was launched in the port city of Latakia, where a notorious mafia-like crime syndicate called Shabiha has existed for decades.

New York Times – International Herald Tribune (USA)

Arms sales underscore Moscow's tie to Damascus

MOSCOW

With their regional clout reduced, Russians show no sign of backing down

BY DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

As the violence in Syria worsened in recent days, amateur video showed the forces of President Bashar al-Assad rolling through the besieged city of Homs in vintage Soviet battle tanks.

Other photographs, including satellite images released by the U.S. State Department, showed deployments of Soviet-designed truck-mounted rocket launchers and two models of a self-propelled howitzer whose sweet-scented names in Russian, Gvozdika and Akatsiya (Carnation and Acacia), are no reflection of their fearsome firepower.

Seemingly undeterred by an international outcry, Moscow has worked frantically in recent weeks to preserve its relationship with the increasingly isolated government of Mr. Assad, even as the Syrian leader turns his guns on his own citizens, and the death toll mounts. Not only has it continued to arm Syria, but its veto with China of a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Mr. Assad to resign provided the political cover for a more severe crackdown on rebel forces.

Russia has praised Mr. Assad's call for a constitutional referendum, a step that the United States and other governments have dismissed as meaningless. Last week, Russia was one of just a dozen countries, among them China, Iran and North Korea, to vote against a General Assembly resolution urging Mr. Assad to step down.

And many analysts say that without Russian backing, including a steady supply of weapons, food, medical supplies and other aid, the Assad government would crumble within a matter of months, if not sooner.

SYRIA, PAGE 4

Arms sales underpin ties to Assad

SYRIA, FROM PAGE 1

It has done all this in the face of stinging international criticism, and so far it has shown no signs of backing down. While Moscow has a number of reasons to guard its relations with Damascus, the most concrete, many analysts say, is the longstanding arms sales to Syria.

The chief spokesman for Rosoboron-export, the state-owned weapons trading company, said last week that absent any new directive from the Kremlin, business with the Assad government would continue as before.

"We understand the situation has become aggravated in Syria," the spokesman, Vyacheslav N. Davidenko, said in an interview. "But since there are no international decisions, and there are no sanctions from the U.N. Security Council, and there are no other decisions, our cooperation with Syria — the military-technical cooperation — remains quite active and dynamic."

Regional political events have played a part. The Arab Spring and the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have dissipated Russia's once-powerful influence in the region, transforming the relationship with Syria into one of critical importance to Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, who is running for president and wants to expand Russia's role as a global power broker.

"Syria is kind of it in the Middle East at this point for Russia," said Dmitry Gorenburg, a Russia specialist with the Center for Naval Analyses, a U.S.-financed research group based in Virginia. "That can go a long way toward explaining why Russia stuck with Assad for the last year."

The Kremlin is also eager to send a stern message to the West about its distaste for interference in any country's internal affairs — a point it reiterated in voting against the General Assembly resolution last week. The Russian ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly I. Churkin, said the resolution "reflects the alarming trend to try to isolate the Syrian leadership, to refuse any contacts with it, to impose a formula for political settlement from outside."

Instead, Russian officials have called for the Assad government and the opposition in Syria to agree to a cease-fire.

But if the talk from Russia is heavy on respecting Syrian autonomy, and avoiding the chaos that has engulfed Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Egypt, arms exports have long anchored the relationship between Moscow and Damascus, including sales over the years of MIG fighter jets, attack helicopters and high-tech air defense systems.

While the demise of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya and the imposition of sanctions on Iran have sharply curtailed other formerly lucrative arms markets for Russia, Syria has increased its weapons purchases, including a deal late last year for Yak-130 light attack planes worth more than \$550 million.

From 2007 to 2010, the value of Russian arms deals with Syria more than doubled — to \$4.7 billion from \$2.1 billion — compared with 2003 to 2006, according to an annual report by Richard F.



U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT, VIA EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

A satellite picture indicating a rocket launcher near Homs, Syria. Russia recently insisted that none of its weapons were being used against the opposition forces in Syria.

Grimmett, a veteran international security specialist at the Congressional Research Service in Washington.

During the same period, the value of Russian weapons deals with Iran fell to \$300 million from \$2.1 billion.

In a sign of the intensifying diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin, Russian officials have visited Syria and called for a truce. And the deputy defense secretary, Anatoly Antonov, recently insisted that no Russian weapons were being used against the opposition forces in Syria — but he offered no basis for the assertion.

Russian officials have forcefully pushed back against any suggestion of an arms embargo against Syria, which they say would handcuff Mr. Assad's government while allowing the opposition to continue acquiring weapons.

While Mr. Davidenko, the spokesman for the Russian weapons company, acknowledged the longstanding ties between Moscow and Damascus, he said that some analysts were exaggerating the importance of Syria as an arms customer, noting that India, now the world's overall largest importer of weapons, had also become Russia's biggest customer these days.

Still, Mr. Davidenko conceded that Russia had lost billions of dollars in potential arms business as a result of sanctions against Iran and the change of power in Libya. In Libya alone, he said, the new government has suspended about \$4 billion in previously agreed-upon contracts.

The Libya experience weighed heavily in Russia's Security Council veto. Mr. Putin, for one, was furious at the NATO-led airstrikes against Colonel Qaddafi after Russia and China agreed not to veto a resolution creating a no-flight zone over the nation.

Russian officials said that they were also led to believe that existing arms agreements would be honored by the

new Libyan government but that so far that had not been the case.

Russian domestic politics is also a concern, especially with the presidential election just two weeks away.

More than two million Russians work for military-related businesses, and they represent a slice of the electorate that officials never want to malign. On Thursday, the government announced plans to spend about \$100 billion through 2020 to modernize its military-industrial complex.

Russian ties to Syria are deep. A Russian naval station at Tartus, in northern Syria, is its only military installation outside of former Soviet territories.

There are numerous other economic and cultural bonds, including the presence of Russian companies working in oil and natural gas in Syria, as well as a proposal for the state-owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom, to build a power plant there. Other Russian companies have interests in agriculture, irrigation and telecommunications in Syria.

Syria, however, has a checkered history when it comes to paying for its weapons.

Mr. Assad arrived in Moscow for his first state visit in 2005, with his country owing Russia about \$13.5 billion. Mr. Putin welcomed him warmly. Their wives met for tea.

At the time, the two leaders signed a "joint declaration on friendship and cooperation," and Russia agreed to write off nearly 75 percent of Syria's bills.

Many Syrian arms purchases are financed by loans, said Ruslan Aliev, an arms-trade specialist at the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Moscow research group.

"They are old customers, but they are very poor," Mr. Aliev said of the Syrians. "They don't have enough money — not like Saudi Arabia or United Arab Emirates."

Syrians take protests to the streets of Damascus

BEIRUT

Unrest reaches capital as march passes near presidential palace

BY NEIL MACFARQUHAR

Hundreds of protesters braved scattered gunfire from Syrian soldiers to march through a middle-class neighborhood in Damascus over the weekend, the biggest demonstration witnessed close to the heart of the capital since the country's uprising started 11 months ago.

The neighborhood where the demonstration took place, Mezzeh, skirts the hill on which the sprawling white presidential palace sits, and as row upon row of demonstrators walked along, wrapped tightly in heavy coats in a snowstorm, more than a few expressed the wish that President Bashar al-Assad could hear.

"I hope President Assad opens the window of his office and sees how Damascenes are shouting against him and his regime," said Usama, 22, a university student from the neighborhood, giving only his first name out of fear of retribution. "The regime thought we were asleep, but it doesn't know that when we wake up, his regime will be gone."

Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, have been relatively calm throughout the uprising, a fact that has been cited repeatedly by the Assad government to buttress its argument that it enjoys wide support. Officials maintain that the unrest in rebellious cities like Homs, Hama and Dara'a, all sites of brutal government crackdowns, are the work of foreign infiltrators.

That argument will be much harder to sustain if mainstream, middle-class districts of the capital like Mezzeh begin rising up to demonstrate, as it did Saturday. The march was prompted by the deaths of three men at a smaller protest a day earlier.

Several marchers said it was one thing to deploy tanks in provincial cities to fight protesters, but it would be impossible to say that foreign armed gangs had penetrated an area close to

the presidential palace in Mezzeh on Friday.

Some activists burned posters of Mr. Assad and chanted for him to step down. The demonstration started small outside the main mosque around 10:30 a.m., but it gradually swelled as more and more men and women from the neighborhood joined in, witnesses and activists said. In other parts of the country, women have all but disappeared from demonstrations as violence has intensified.

The government put on a show of force that included security cars and military trucks filled with soldiers. But it avoided rolling out the tanks as it has in other cities. That would be interpreted as a sign of weakness in the capital, and particularly in Mezzeh, which is heavily populated with Aleppites, the ethnicity that dominates the Syrian elite.

It was hard to independently authenticate the videos on YouTube, and the Syrian government severely restricts access to the country by foreign journalists and independent observers.

The videos showed a dense sea of protesters in central Mezzeh. Some of those participating said they were driven to act by the escalating violence around the country; too many people were dying in places like Homs for Damascenes to sit home and do nothing, they said.

Husaida Saad in Beirut and an employee of The New York Times in Damascus contributed reporting.

Judge and prosecutor shot

Gunmen opened fire Sunday on a car carrying a senior Syrian state prosecutor and a judge, killing both, and Egypt recalled its ambassador, The Associated Press reported from Beirut.

The A.P., citing the Syrian state news agency, said the officials were killed in Idlib Province, which borders Turkey. It has been one of the regions hardest hit by the government crackdown.

Meanwhile, Egypt's Foreign Ministry said it was withdrawing its ambassador to Syria. Many Arab countries have been scaling back diplomatic representation after Syria rejected an Arab League plan to resolve the crisis that calls for Mr. Assad to step aside and transfer power to his vice president.



A Syrian inspecting a body after an assault by security forces in Idlib Province, in the Syrian northwest. The region has been one of the areas hardest hit by the government crackdowns.

Guardians is believed to have trained the Syrian security forces in crowd control, and many Syrians believe that Iranian troops are helping as well.

"We are demonstrating here, very close to Iran's embassy, to say to the Iranians, 'Look, we are peaceful protesters who want democracy, dignity and freedom,'" said Fadi, a 24-year-old protester.

nian Embassy, with its distinctive Persian blue tile exterior, was a focus of demonstrators' ire.

"This is the embassy of the armed gangs," said one voice on camera in a video posted on YouTube, mocking the boisterous accusations the Syrian government has issued against demonstrators. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary

peaceful intent. Dozens were arrested as security forces chased them into alleyways and searched houses, according to witnesses and activists.

The Mezzeh neighborhood houses important government and private offices, including the Ministry of Information and the cellphone company MTN, as well as many foreign missions. The Lib-

the presidential palace. "If the rallies have reached Damascus and are big enough, we will no longer need an armed revolution," said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition group based in Britain.

Some demonstrators carried palm fronds, sprouted on videos of the event posted on YouTube, to indicate their

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

Syrian Forces Clamp Down in Damascus

By Nour Malas

BEIRUT—Syrian government forces clamped down on Sunday on a Damascus district where huge crowds marched the two previous days to face live fire, a move seen as an attempt to quell an eruption of the largest protests yet near the heart of Syria's capital.

Security forces, police, and plainclothes regime militiamen spread out in Mezze, opposition activists said, as the family of a young protester shot and killed in a funeral procession a day earlier buried him.

Samer al-Khatib was shot in the neck on Saturday as he marched in large crowds to commemorate three people who were killed in protests in the same district on Friday.

Saturday's funeral procession penetrated the residential area of Mezze, a district housing several government offices and perched un-

der the hilltop presidential palace. The violence in Damascus, a relative haven from the civil conflict roiling much of the rest of Syria, came as activists said protests were growing again despite a military siege on several cities.

The spillover of violence, which in other Syrian cities has consistently catalyzed larger protests, risks rattling President Bashar al-Assad's large support base in the capital. Damascus and Aleppo, the city often called Syria's industrial capital, are home to the business elite still supportive of Mr. Assad, as well as some minorities who fear an alternative to his secular regime.

On Sunday, gunmen killed a senior state prosecutor and a judge in a roadway ambush in Idlib, Syria's state news agency and an opposition group reported. Idlib governorate's Attorney General Nidal Ghazal, judge Mohammed Ziyadeh and their driver

were killed when an armed terrorist group opened fire on their car as they were heading to the presidential palace. The killings follow the assassination of a local official in Aleppo on Saturday, which Syria's state news agency also said was carried out by armed terrorists. Though they have remained unclaimed, the incidents mark a rise in attacks on government and local officials, raising some concerns among Syria's opposition on a growing insurgency fighting government forces.

Twenty people were killed across Syria by government forces on Sunday, according to local activist network The Local Coordination Committees.

Also Sunday, Egypt firming up diplomatic pressure on President Assad by recalling its ambassador to Damascus, Shukri Ismael. The foreign ministry said the ambassador had been recalled to Cairo until fur-

ther notice. In Jordan, an official said the country is setting up a refugee camp near its northern border with Syria in preparation for what many fear may be a mass exodus of Syrians fleeing the violence in their homeland, the Associated Press reported. Sami Halaseh, who oversees the project for the public works ministry, said the area, about 20 kilometers south of the border, is expected to be ready in two weeks.

In Damascus, a Mezze resident reached by telephone said Friday's large protests, in which three people were killed after marching out of a mosque, were "shocking for the neighborhood."

"I heard chanting and gunshots, and looked out my window. For the first time, what I saw marched what I've watched on TV for months," the resident said. Syria's government has characterized the uprising as an

armed insurgency backed by foreign powers.

The competing narratives have played out for 11 months. State media have aired confessions by armed gangs claiming to attack civilians and state forces, while activists used the Internet to broadcast footage of snipers shooting at protesters and tanks shelling residences in the city of Homs.

Political concessions, including a referendum on a new constitution set for next week, have been ridiculed by Syria's opposition amid the escalating violence.

The Local Coordination Committees said at least 12 people were killed on Saturday, after 31 were killed on Friday, a traditional day of large protests. The group said it documented 613 protests across Syria on Friday, in 540 locations.

—Matt Bradley in Cairo
contributed to this article.

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

Syrians Unleash the Power of Creative Dissent

By DAVID FEITH

The butchery of Bashar Assad is intensifying, and with it the hope that Syria's revolution will succeed in toppling him. From here forward, that will hinge largely on the strength of the Free Syrian Army and the resolve of policy makers in such capitals as Washington, Paris and Ankara. But it wasn't diplomats or even army defectors who sparked this uprising 11 months ago.

It was 15 kids, some as young as 9, in the remote southwestern city of Deraa. Inspired last March by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, they tagged their school building with anti-Assad graffiti: "Down with the corrupt regime," "Bashar is the dog of Iran," "Freedom, freedom" and more. For this, the children were imprisoned and tortured—kicking off protests that spread quickly from Deraa to Damascus, Homs and beyond.

Assad soon faced an unprecedented challenge to his regime, fuelled by anger after decades of dynastic dictatorship. Not only did thousands of street demonstrators brave government snipers and tanks week after week, but activists unleashed a barrage of clever force multipliers. They had discovered what the late

Czech dissident Vaclav Havel called "the power of the powerless."

They dyed the public fountains of Damascus and Hama blood red. They scribbled anti-regime slogans on hundreds of ping-pong balls and rolled them down into the Damascus streets from a tall hill. They created phantom demonstrations by recording rallies in from loudspeakers hidden atop buildings in another. And so they forced Assad's goons to spend time frantically draining fountains, sweeping ping-pong balls from sidewalks, and chasing imaginary street protesters.

Online, activists amplified their message with darkly humorous creations such as "Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator," a weekly YouTube series starring a finger-puppet Assad tormented by his conscience and forced to appear on the game show "Who Wants to Kill a Million?" Other videos lampooned Assad's insistence that foreign "infiltrators"—*mundas*, in Arabic—are leading the uprising. In one, a toddler sported revolutionary garb and boasted of being the "smallest *mundas*" in all Syria.

Activists also created mocking pages on Facebook. One for the

Homs International Tank Wash and Lubrication Centre" pretended to reflect a small-business boom created by the army's occupation of civilian neighborhoods.

Oppressive governments, wrote the playwright-turned-statesman Havel, require their subjects to "live within a lie"—to swallow Orwellian bureaucratic dictates, participate in sham elections, hang adoring portraits of Dear Leader.

Taking on Assad's thugs with dark humor, moxie and trickery.

But individuals "need not accept the lie," Havel noted. Therein resides the people's power: When the system rests on a lie, "Everyone who steps out of line"—everyone brave enough to dissent—"denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety."

God is supposedly on the side of the big battalions, but moxie and creativity are potent tools against police states demanding the total obeisance of their people.

Consider Syria's patron state of Iran, where the 2009 Green Revolution challenged the lie of Tehran's "Islamic democracy" not

only by sending masses into the streets but by launching an enduring wave of creative dissent.

First was the proliferation of the color green—the color of the national soccer team, on mass protests, on the wristbands of the national soccer team, on the scarf of filmmaker Jafar Panahi. In 2010, a champion bodybuilder got himself expelled from a competition for appearing in neck-to-toe green body paint.

Calculated affronts to the regime appeared across Iranian life. Green Revolution activists defaced paper money (all denominations carry the visage of Ayatollah Khomeini) with slogans like "Death to the dictator" and "End executions, stop dictatorship."

When Iranian authorities arrested student activist Majid Tavakoli and published a picture of him wearing a woman's headscarf (either to shame him or because he had attempted to flee in disguise), hundreds of Green activists tweeted and otherwise distributed photos of themselves dressed the same way. In universities still today, Greens honor imprisoned or disappeared classmates by setting aside empty chairs or untouched lunch trays in dining halls.

Last year, just before Valentine's Day, Iranian state media declared that "Symbols of hearts, half-hearts, red roses, and any activities promoting this day are banned." Do you think that made young Iranians more or less likely to invoke Cupid's arrow earlier this week?

"The mullahs have appointed themselves the enemy of fun," wrote Melik Kaylan on these pages last year. "As a result, wherever fun hermaties into view, it is a politicized irruption of defiance." Fun as defiance—which helps explain some Syrians' practice of dancing at the funerals of Assad's victims.

Yet defiance—especially of the nonviolent variety—is nearly never enough. It won't be in Syria, and almost certainly won't be in Iran. And while Havel did help engineer a successful "Velvet Revolution" in his own country, many different internal and external forces combined to bring down the Soviet empire.

So it will eventually be in Syria and Iran—sooner, if the West helps those who have taken the dangerous leap into creative dissent.

Mr. Feith is an assistant editorial features editor at *The Journal*.

The Washington Post (USA)

Ambush in Syria kills senior prosecutor, judge

Jordan prepares camp for refugees near border amid fears of civil war

BY BASSEM MROUE
AND BRIAN MURPHY

BEIRUT — Gunmen in Syria staged a guerrilla-style ambush that killed a senior state prosecutor and a judge Sunday in an attack that suggested armed factions are growing bolder and more coordinated in their uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's government.

The roadway slayings, according to a report by the state news agency, occurred in an opposition-dominated northern region. They came a day after a deadly hit-and-run attack on a political figure in the heart of the pro-Assad city of Aleppo.

The targeted killings have not reached Assad's inner circle, but they indicate a growing shift toward violent tactics by the opposition as it brings aboard more military defectors and seeks to tighten control over the small pieces of territory it holds.

The fears of a civil war have neighboring Jordan racing to finish a refugee camp near the Syrian border to handle a possible exodus of people fleeing for safety. Aid officials estimate that as many as 10,000 Syrian refugees already live in Jordan, mostly in private homes. They said the numbers are growing as the Syrian military escalates attacks on restive cities.

The growing unrest has also prompted some U.S. senators to call for arming the Syrian rebels. But in Washington, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said such a move would be "premature."

"I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this

point," he said on CNN's "Fareed Zakaria GPS" program, aired Sunday. Dempsey said Syria is "an arena right now for all of the various interests to play out," including Turkey, Iran, Russia and possibly al-Qaeda. "Until we're a lot clearer about . . . who they are and what they are, I think it would be premature to talk about arming them," he said of the rebels.

Violence was reported in various parts of Syria on Sunday. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that at least 14 people were killed across the country, half of them by government troops. In Homs, in central Syria, government forces sent in reinforcements and shelled the rebel-held Baba Amr district, which has been under near-constant barrage for nearly two weeks, the group said.

The assassinations of the prosecutor and judge occurred in the northwest province of Idlib. The Syrian Arab News Agency said gunmen opened fire on a car carrying Idlib provincial state prosecutor Nidal Ghazal and Judge Mohammed Ziadeh, who were killed instantly. Their driver also was fatally wounded.

Idlib has been the site of intense clashes between troops loyal to Assad and army defectors who attack and then disappear into the rugged mountains.

In Jordan, the United Nations refugee agency is working with the government on preparations for the refugee camp, which can house 1,000 family-size tents, according to the agency's deputy chief in Amman, Arafat Jamal.

Sami Halaseh, who oversees the project for the Public Works Ministry, said the 323-square-foot area, located about 12 miles south of the border, is expected to be ready in two weeks, after bathrooms and hangars for food distribution are installed. He said the project cost \$1 million.

— *Associated Press*

The Washington Times (USA)

SYRIA

Gunmen kill judge, prosecutor, driver Council member fatally shot

By **BASSEM MROUE**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT | Gunmen opened fire Sunday on a car carrying a senior Syrian state prosecutor and a judge in the restive northwest province of Idlib, killing both of them and their driver, according to the state news agency. Syrian military defectors waging an armed struggle against President Bashar Assad's regime control parts of Idlib province, which borders Turkey. It has been one of the regions hardest hit by the government crackdown on an 11-month-old uprising against Mr. Assad's regime.

State news agency SANA said Idlib provincial state prosecutor Nidal Ghazal and Judge Mohammed Ziadeh were killed instantly in the attack. Activists reported at least 14 other people killed.

On Saturday, SANA said gunmen fatally shot Jamal al-Bish, member of

the city council of the nearby northern city of Aleppo, Syria's largest. It said he was killed outside the city, a center of support for Mr. Assad that has been relatively quiet since the uprising began.

The Syrian government blames armed "terrorists" for the uprising and says they are carrying out a foreign conspiracy to destabilize the country.

Clashes between military rebels and Syrian forces are growing more frequent, and the defectors have managed to take control of small pieces of territory in the north and in central Homs province. The increasing militarization of the conflict is pushing Syria to the brink of a civil war.

The U.N. last gave a death toll for the conflict in January, saying 5,400 had been killed in 2011 alone. But hundreds more have been killed since, according to activist groups. The group Local Coordination Committees says



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mourners carry the coffins of two protesters at Mazzeh district in Damascus. Activists say that they were killed by Syrian security forces during a demonstration.

more than 7,300 have been killed since March of last year.

There is no way to independently verify the numbers, however, as Syrians almost all foreign journalists and human rights organizations.

In other violence, activists reported that security forces shelled rebel-held areas in the besieged city of Homs.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said forces continued to shell the Homs neighborhood of Baba Amr, which has been under government attack since Feb. 4.

The Observatory, which has activists throughout Syria, said 23 buses

full of troops along with military vehicles and ambulances were seen heading from Damascus toward Homs.

The group also said troops stormed the eastern town of Sukhna searching for fugitive members of the opposition, and that one woman was fatally shot during the raids. It said two other people were killed by troops in the eastern province of Deir el-Zour and the northern village of Atareb.

SANA said four people, a student and three civil servants, were fatally shot in the central province of Hama when gunmen opened fire at a bus carrying them.

Chicago Tribune (USA)

Judge, prosecutor, driver are gunned down in Syria

Opposition, regime trade blame in assassination strike on car; 20 insurgents killed nationwide

BY PATRICK J. McDONNELL
AND RIMA MARROUCH
Tribune Newspapers

BEIRUT — Two judicial officials were assassinated Sunday in Syria's northwest Idlib province, and the strife-riven nation faced what could be a crucial week, almost a year after the bloody rebellion erupted against the government of President Bashar Assad.

Authorities said "an armed terrorist group" in Idlib city opened fire on a car carrying a judge, Mohammed Ziadeh, and a prosecutor, Nidal Ghazal. Also killed was the driver, said SANA, the official state news agency.

An opposition activist reached in Idlib contradicted the official version and said Syrian security forces killed the two because they were cooperating with anti-government rebels active in the region, which is near the border with Turkey.

Assassinations by unknown assailants have become a familiar feature of the conflict in Syria,

where armed insurgents are fighting to oust Assad, whose family has ruled Syria for more than 40 years.

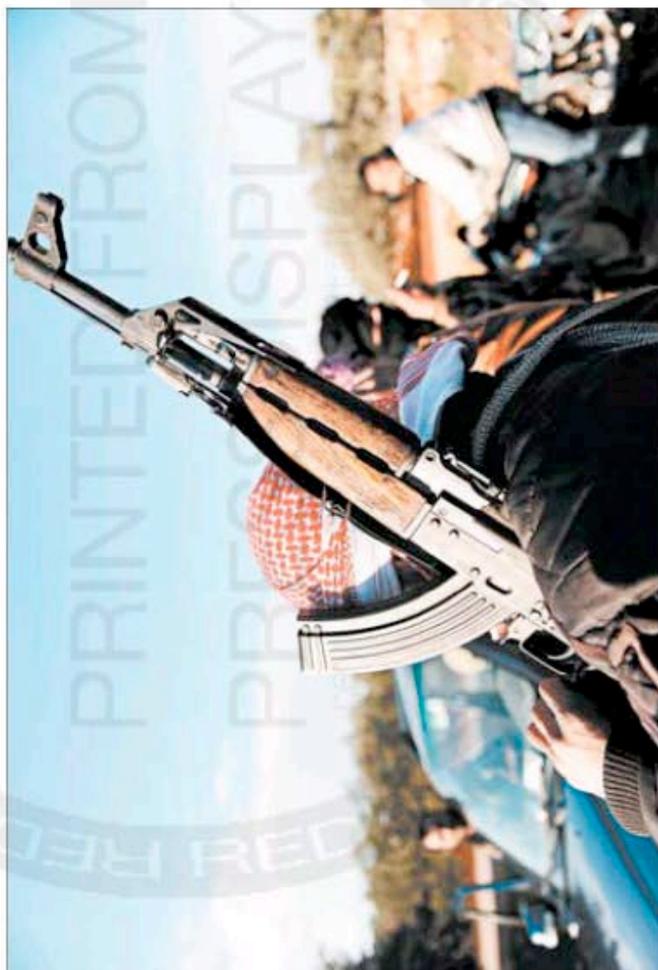
On Saturday, the state news agency reported, gunmen assassinated a member of the city council in the northern city of Aleppo, a business hub that is regarded as staunchly pro-Assad.

In various areas of Syria, the government has been fighting to recapture terrain lost to rebels.

The opposition said insurgent enclaves in the central city of Homs were shelled again Sunday, as reports circulated that ground troops might be preparing an assault on the besieged rebel bastion of Baba Amr.

The Local Coordination Committees, an opposition network, reported at least 20 killed Sunday across the country, including nine in Homs.

Police and militia patrols fanned out in the Syrian capital's Mezzeh district to prevent a repeat of protests against Assad that have threatened his grip on Damascus, opposition activists said.



BULENT KILIC/GETTY-AFP PHOTO
A member of the Free Syrian Army takes position in Idlib province. The United States and other allied nations have pledged to ramp up assistance to Syria's opposition as the first anniversary of the uprising nears.

Early Sunday, the body of Samer al-Khatib, a young protester who was killed when security forces opened fire on the protest, was buried in Mezzeh. Security forces maintained a heavy presence to prevent the funeral from turning into an anti-Assad demonstration, opposition activists contacted by Reuters from Amman, Jordan, said.

Despite the ongoing violence and threat of a full-fledged civil war, Assad has scheduled a

nationwide referendum for Sunday on a new draft constitution that is a centerpiece of his asserted reform agenda. Much of the opposition has rejected the move as a stalling tactic and called for a boycott.

Arab and other nations calling for Assad to cede power are scheduled to meet Friday in Tunis, Tunisia, to discuss new ways to put pressure on the embattled Syrian president. Diplomats from the United States, Turkey, Saudi

Arabia, Qatar and other allied nations have pledged to ramp up assistance to Syria's opposition, which remains deeply divided.

Assad has said he has no intention of resigning and has vowed to restore security and implement wide-ranging political reform leading to a representative democracy.

Reuters contributed.

pmcdonnell@tribune.com

Dallas Morning News (USA)

U.S. senators: Arm Syrian opposition

McCain, Graham lay out ways to help fighters topple Assad

KABUL, Afghanistan — With the Syrian government continuing its deadly crackdown on its residents, two senior U.S. senators who were on their way to the Middle East spoke out strongly Sunday in favor of arming Syrian opposition forces.

The two Republican senators, John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, laid out a series of diplomatic, humanitarian and military aid proposals that would put the United States squarely behind the effort to topple President Bashar Assad of Syria. The senators, both of whom are on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that rebel fighters deserved to be armed and that helping them take on the Syrian government would aid Washington's effort to weaken Iran, which has strong ties to Syria.

"I believe there are ways to get weapons to the opposition without direct United States involvement," McCain said. "The Iranians and the Russians are providing Bashar Assad with weapons. People that are being massacred deserve to have the ability to defend themselves.

UPDATE In the region

Gunmen in Syria staged a guerrilla-style ambush that killed a senior state prosecutor and a judge Sunday in an attack that suggested armed factions are growing bolder and more coordinated in their uprising against President Bashar Assad's regime.

The roadway slayings — reported in an opposition-dominated northern region — came a day after a deadly hit-and-run attack on a political figure in the heart of the pro-Assad city of Aleppo.

Insurgent enclaves in the central city of Homs were shelled again on Sunday and the opposition reported at least 20 people were killed across the country, including nine in Homs.

Meanwhile, Egypt became the latest Arab nation to snub Assad by ordering the withdrawal of its ambassador in Damascus.

The Associated Press

"So I am not only not opposed," he said, "but I am in favor of weapons being obtained by the opposition."

McCain and Graham said the United States would not have to send weapons directly to the opposition but could work through the Arab League.

The New York Times

Syrian opposition sees radicals at work for regime

Colonel says few are from al-Qaeda

By Mona Alami
Special for USA TODAY

BEIRUT — The Free Syrian Army says terrorists are operating in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime as its military forces continue to bombard opposition cities despite United Nations condemnation.

Aref Hamoud, a colonel in the Free Syrian Army, said his units are encountering a growing number of radical elements in some parts of the country. He said the radicals are Syrians and not foreigners from al-Qaeda.

"Up until now, the al-Qaeda insurgency lacks local support of the population, which is an essential element for its guerrilla warfare," he said. "A prolonged crisis would breed a more fertile ground for the organization, which is why we call for Arab and Western countries to provide military and financial support."



By Reuters/Anadolu Agency/Anadolu Agency Images
Fighting the Assad regime: A member of the Free Syrian Army sits in the back of a pickup Saturday during a patrol in Idlib in northwestern Syria.

"It is clear that this regime will only be toppled by force," he said.

On Thursday, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told Congress that al-Qaeda "is extending its reach into Syria." Meanwhile, Iranian warships docked in the Syrian port of Tartus, Iranian news agency Mehr reported Sunday.

during a march against the regime of Bashar Assad. On Sunday, Egypt recalled its ambassador to Syria.

The Syrian regime released more than a dozen members of Fatah al-Islam and al-Qaeda from prison several weeks ago, according to al-Qaeda-linked websites. Fatah al-Islam is a Palestinian terrorist organization.

Hamoud said that a more troubling development is the alleged release of Abu Mussab al-Suri, a Syrian citizen and longtime jihadist captured in Pakistan in 2005. The U.S. State Department had issued a \$5 million reward for his capture and he was turned over to U.S. custody but eventually handed to the Syrians. An al-Qaeda-linked forum said he had been released, according to a translation by the SITE Intelligence Group.

"The Syrian regime is willing to take any risk to stay in power by playing up the West's fears, especially those of the U.S. and Israel," Hamoud said. "They believe such reckless measures will relieve some of the pressure."

The regime blamed recent bomb blasts in Damascus and Aleppo that

resulted in about 100 deaths on al-Qaeda. Assad blames the uprising against him on terrorist groups and U.S. and Israeli interference. The U.N. has said his troops have killed thousands of people, most of whom were civilians protesting peacefully or in rebellious cities hammered by Syrian artillery.

Several demonstrations took place recently in Aleppo, Syria's largest city and its biggest trading and industrial center. Aleppo had been calm during months of uprisings. Home to Syria's merchant class, Aleppo has generally supported the regime.

"The situation in Aleppo was relatively calm due to the strong military presence of Syrian security forces," Hamoud said. "However, this week, they seem to be slowly losing their grip on the city."

Meanwhile, Syrian troops continued their assault on the city of Homs, an operation that has gone on for two weeks. The U.N. General Assembly last week approved a non-binding resolution that condemned Assad's human rights violations in Homs and elsewhere.

USA Today

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By Reuters/Agence AFP/Getty Images
Fighting the Assad regime: A member of the Free Syrian Army sits in the back of a pickup Saturday during a patrol in Idlib in northwestern Syria.

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during a march against the regime of Bashar Assad. On Sunday, Egypt recalled its ambassador to Syria.

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Syrian security forces clamp down on Damascus

China's official news agency: Beijing believes peaceful solution still possible



A SYRIAN WOMAN rallies in support of President Bashar Assad at a demonstration in Antakya, Turkey yesterday. (Gohra Demerwa/Reuters)

AMMAN/BEIRUT (Reuters) - A young pro-opposition activist Mowaz al-Shamrani was killed when security forces opened fire on the Damascus protest in the Mezzeh district on Sunday to prevent a repeat of protests against President Bashar Assad that have threatened his grip on Damascus, opposition activists said.

On the international front, China said it believed a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis was still possible but Britain's foreign minister said he feared the Middle Eastern country will slide into civil war.

China's official Xinhua news agency reflected Beijing's view a day after a Chinese envoy met Assad in Damascus while thousands of Syrians demonstrated in the heart of the capital in one of the biggest anti-government rallies there since a nationwide uprising started nearly a year ago.

On Sunday, the body of opposition rallies there since a nationwide uprising started nearly a year ago. On Sunday, the body of opposition rallies there since a nationwide uprising started nearly a year ago.

empty," activist Mowaz al-Shamrani said, referring to a main street. The Damascus protest, including player in the multiple international efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria and is one of Assad's main defenders.

"China believes, as many others do, there is still hope the Syria crisis can be resolved through peaceful dialogue between the opposition and the government, contrary to some Western countries' argument that time is running out for talks in Syria," the Xinhua commentary said.

It also criticized the West's stance, highlighting differences between foreign powers over how to deal with the conflict.

Western countries were "drawn less by their self-proclaimed lofty goal of liberalizing the Syrian people than by geopolitical considerations," Xinhua said.

The words might bring a measure of comfort to Assad, who is now generally redlined in the West for a crackdown in which his security forces have killed several thousand people. China and Russia infuriated Western and Arab states this month by blocking a draft UN Security Council resolution that backed an Arab plan urging Assad to halt the repression and surrender power. They also voted against a similar, non-binding UN General Assembly resolution that was overwhelmingly passed this week.

The United States, Europe, Turkey and Gulf-led Arab states have all demanded Assad quit power. The West has ruled out any Libya-style military intervention but the Arab League,

opposition movement have dismissed as a sham. China has emerged as a leading player in the multiple international efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria and is one of Assad's main defenders.

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It also criticized the West's stance, highlighting differences between foreign powers over how to deal with the conflict.

Western countries were "drawn less by their self-proclaimed lofty goal of liberalizing the Syrian people than by geopolitical considerations," Xinhua said.

The words might bring a measure of comfort to Assad, who is now generally redlined in the West for a crackdown in which his security forces have killed several thousand people. China and Russia infuriated Western and Arab states this month by blocking a draft UN Security Council resolution that backed an Arab plan urging Assad to halt the repression and surrender power. They also voted against a similar, non-binding UN General Assembly resolution that was overwhelmingly passed this week.

The United States, Europe, Turkey and Gulf-led Arab states have all demanded Assad quit power. The West has ruled out any Libya-style military intervention but the Arab League,

Cairo recalls its envoy from Damascus

CAIRO (Reuters) - Egypt recalled its ambassador from Damascus on Sunday, state media reported, the latest move by an Arab state to isolate President Bashar Assad and pressure him to halt a violent crackdown on protesters.

The Foreign Ministry also said the Syrian government had decided to recall its ambassador from Cairo. There was no immediate official Syrian comment.

Egypt's move follows last week's Arab League call for Arab states to halt diplomatic cooperation with Syria.

Gulf states, leading the drive against Assad, have already withdrawn their ambassadors from Damascus and expelled Syrian envoys in their capitals. Other Arabs have made similar moves.

"The decision is a message that Egypt is

military action could only last six months but Assad's government would fight to the end. "The army is getting tired and will go nowhere," he said. "They will have to sit and talk or at least they have to stop killing. And the minute they stop killing, more millions of people will be on the streets. So they are in a Catch-22."

Qudsi, who was involved in Syria's economic liberalization, said the apparatus of government was almost nonexistent in trouble spots like Homs, Idlib and Daraa.

The Opposition Local Coordination Committees said security forces killed 14 people in Damascus and other parts of the country on Saturday, including five in the opposition stronghold of Homs. None of the figures could be verified independently. He told the BBC in London

Government forces bombarded Homs again on Sunday. The western city, strategically situated on the road between Damascus and commercial hub Aleppo, has been under siege for more than two weeks and a humanitarian crisis is unfolding as food and medical supplies to treat the wounded are running short.

Rockets, artillery and sniper fire have killed several hundred people, according to activists' reports, but security forces have held back from a full invasion of opposition held districts. Residents fear a bloodbath should that take place.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the attorney-general for Idlib province, Nidal Gazal, a judge and their driver were all killed on Sunday morning when unidentified gunmen shot at their car.

Les alaouites se battent jusqu'au bout pour garder le pouvoir

Hantée par des siècles d'humiliations, la minorité alaouite se battra jusqu'au bout pour garder le pouvoir en Syrie, face à une majorité sunnite qui considère ses membres comme des usurpateurs, estiment des experts. Mais si le régime de Bachar el-Assad, lui-même de cette confession, est défait, les alaouites pourraient tenter de constituer un « réduit » dans la montagne et la côte du Nord-Ouest, ou alors il ne leur restera que l'exil ou la mort, ajoutent-ils.

« Les alaouites redoutent une revanche des sunnites », affirme Fabrice Balanche, directeur du Groupe de recherches et d'études sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient (Gremmo), à Lyon. « Nous sommes à un point de non-retour : le régime doit écraser l'opposition, sans quoi c'est lui qui tombera », dit-il, ajoutant que « pour défendre leur peau, les unités militaires d'élite composées ou contrôlées par les alaouites se battent jusqu'au bout car elles n'ont pas envie de subir le sort des harkis », ces supplétifs de l'armée française pendant la guerre d'Algérie dont un grand nombre a été massacré après l'indépendance ou contraint de s'exiler en France. Pour Thomas Pierret, maître de conférences à l'université d'Édimbourg, « il y a une crainte, si Assad tombe, que la communauté alaouite soit pu-

rement anéantie », en réaction à l'extrême brutalité employée par les forces du régime.

Communauté hétérodoxe représentant 12 % de la population, les alaouites ont longtemps été misérables et méprisés. Sous les Ottomans, les seuls alaouites tolérés dans les villes étaient les domestiques. Cette doctrine a été élaborée en Irak au IXe siècle par Mohammad ben Nousseir, un disciple du 10e imam Ali el-Hadi, entré en dissidence. Si les chiites vénèrent Ali, gendre de Mohammad, les alaouites le déifient. Pour eux, le prophète n'est que le voile qui masque « l'essence » incarnée par Ali. Le troisième personnage de leur trinité est Salman Pak, un compagnon de Mohammad considéré comme la « porte » de la connaissance. Signalons que le contenu initiatique de cette religion ne peut être révélé sous peine de mort. Les alaouites croient en la réincarnation, n'ont généralement pas de mosquées, ignorent le jeûne et le pèlerinage à La Mecque, tolèrent l'alcool et leurs femmes ne sont pas voilées. Ils célèbrent des fêtes musulmanes mais aussi chrétiennes.

Pour le penseur sunnite Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), les alaouites « sont les pires ennemis des musulmans et le jihad contre eux est un grand acte de piété ». En 1920, la France, alors puissance mandataire, avait créé un

territoire autonome alaouite. Mais pour les inciter à intégrer le futur État, les nationalistes syriens ont obtenu en 1936 une fatwa de hajj Amin el-Husseini, mufti de Palestine, qui les reconnaît comme musulmans.

Dans les années 1950, beaucoup d'alaouites ont intégré les académies militaires, adhérant à l'idéologie du panarabisme et laïque du Baas. Deux coups d'État (1963, 1966) les ont portés au pouvoir et beaucoup de bourgeois sunnites étaient effarés à l'idée que « les enfants des femmes de ménage » commencent à gouverner, rappelle M. Balanche. Les rudes montagnards sont alors devenus fonctionnaires et ont investi les villes côtières de Tartous, Lattaquié, Baniyas et Jableh, où ils sont majoritaires.

En cas de chute du régime Assad, certains experts évoquent l'hypothèse d'une enclave alaouite. « Vu l'impasse, le régime pourrait être tenté de se replier dans la région côtière pour y créer une entité indépendante », estime Bruno Paoli, directeur des études arabes à l'Institut français du Proche-Orient, basé à Beyrouth. M. Balanche penche aussi pour cette option. « Si le conflit s'envenime, la Syrie évoluera comme la Yougoslavie. Il pourrait y avoir un réduit alaouite » avec Lattaquié comme capitale.

(Source : AFP)

De la Bosnie à la Syrie : intervenir ou pas ?

Tireurs embusqués semant la panique parmi les foules, bombardements aveugles, chirurgiens opérant à la lueur de lampes de poche dans une ville écrasée par la force brutale : le conflit syrien commence à ressembler à la guerre de Bosnie des années 1992-1995. Les tueries commises en Bosnie, où Serbes, musulmans et Croates se sont déchirés pour dépecer l'ancienne république yougoslave, avaient été retransmises en direct sur les écrans de télévision du monde entier. Celles qui se déroulent actuellement à Homs sont retransmises parallèlement sur les chaînes d'information continue grâce aux vidéos des mobinautes et autres vidéastes amateurs. Comme à Sarajevo, la capitale bosniaque assiégée pendant 43 mois par l'artillerie des forces séparatistes serbes, les images de cadavres de nouveau-nés, de manifestants aux membres mutilés, de flaques de sang et de gens rendus fous de chagrin ont suscité des demandes d'intervention étrangère en Syrie. En Bosnie, les puissances européennes ont fini par s'interposer, mais bien tardivement et après beaucoup d'atermoieusement. La guerre au cœur des Balkans a duré près de quatre ans, faisant des dizaines de milliers de morts et un million de sans-abri. Aujourd'hui, les pays occidentaux qui ont mis fin aux massacres en Bosnie ont clairement fait savoir qu'ils n'avaient pas l'intention de s'aventurer dans le chaudron

syrien – une décision qui aurait des conséquences incalculables dans une région aussi volatile. La petite Bosnie représentait une crise en Europe, aux portes de l'OTAN. La Syrie est, elle, une puissance arabe majeure du Proche-Orient, au cœur d'une région stratégique, qui peut se targuer de ses puissants alliés russes et chinois. « La guerre en Bosnie et le conflit syrien sont de natures différentes », estiment ainsi deux analystes du Washington Institute, Soner Cagaptay et Andrew Tabler. Mais, pensent-ils, « tout organisme international favorable à une intervention humanitaire pour protéger les populations civiles des enclaves syriennes comme Homs devrait tirer les leçons de la guerre en Bosnie ».

Semblable intervention demanderait l'envoi d'une force internationale appuyée par l'aviation et ayant l'autorisation d'ouvrir le feu en cas d'agression. Cette force, placée sous commandement de l'OTAN comme ce fut le cas récemment en Libye, devrait avoir à sa tête un général de confession musulmane issu d'un pays de l'Alliance atlantique comme la Turquie. Elle devrait aussi comprendre des contingents venant de pays arabes. Notons qu'Ankara, partisan de « zones de sécurité » en Syrie, travaille à une solution avec la Ligue arabe et la France, qui prône la création, avec l'appui des Nations unies, de couloirs humanitaires. Vendredi, le pré-

sident français Nicolas Sarkozy avait toutefois exclu toute intervention directe, affirmant que la révolution syrienne « (...) doit être menée de l'intérieur ». Pour sa part, le secrétaire général de l'OTAN, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a émis des doutes quant à une implication de l'Alliance même en cas de mandat de l'ONU et d'un soutien de la Ligue arabe.

Mais comme en Bosnie, la situation peut évoluer. En 1991, le secrétaire d'État américain James Baker avait eu ce mot fameux : « We got no dog in this fight ! » (qui peut se traduire librement par « Cette bagarre ne nous concerne en rien ! ») alors que les Bosniaques commençaient à s'entredéchirer. Mais lorsque la Bosnie devient au fil des mois le plus grave conflit armé en Europe depuis 1945, l'OTAN finit par intervenir avec un contingent de 50 soldats au départ, qui seront 100 000 à l'arrivée et imposeront la paix en pilonnant notamment l'artillerie serbe assiégeant Sarajevo. Il aura ainsi fallu près de quatre ans et pas moins d'une centaine de résolutions du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU pour faire taire définitivement les armes en Bosnie.

Pour ces analystes du Washington Institute, une intervention de l'ONU pourrait réussir en Syrie et empêcher une escalade du conflit à condition de savoir tirer les leçons de la Bosnie et d'éviter les pièges.

(Source : Reuters)

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Mazzé, au cœur de Damas, quadrillé par les forces de sécurité

Syrie Au moins 27 morts hier ; les sanctions commencent à se faire sentir.

Les forces de sécurité syriennes ont été déployées hier à Damas pour contrer toute contestation après l'appel à la désobéissance civile lancé aux habitants de la capitale.

À Damas, théâtre vendredi et samedi des plus importantes manifestations depuis le début de la contestation, il y a onze mois, les forces syriennes quadrillaient ainsi le quartier de Mazzé dans le centre-ouest, a affirmé Mohammad Chamî, porte-parole des « comités » de Damas et de sa région, précisant que les magasins étaient fermés notamment à Barzè, Qaboune et Joubar, des quartiers se touchant au nord-est de

la ville, et à Kafar Soussé situé au sud de la capitale, des zones traditionnellement opposées au régime. Selon un membre des comités de coordination, Amer Sadek, la manifestation des habitants de Mazzé est un signe clair : « Damas est effectivement entrée dans la danse. »

En revanche, la vie était normale dans le centre-ville, ont indiqué des témoins. Seules de petites manifestations d'écoliers ont eu lieu dans « quatre quartiers rebelles de la ville », toujours selon M. Chamî, alors que les militants avaient dit s'attendre à des « manifestations monstres ».

Signalons que samedi, entre « 15 000 et 20 000 personnes » selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH) avaient participé aux funérailles de quatre manifestants abattus la veille par les troupes du régime dans le quartier de Mazzé, les premiers tués au cœur de la capitale. Au cours de ces funérailles, un cinquième manifestant a péri lorsque les troupes ont tiré sur les participants à la cérémonie, transformée en une manifestation antirégime. Rappelons que sur leur page Facebook, « Syrian Revolution 2011 », les militants ont placé la journée d'hier sous la bannière de la « désobéissance

civile de Damas ».

En dehors de la capitale, au moins 27 personnes ont été tuées hier, selon la chaîne al-Arabiya, citant les comités locaux de coordination. Ainsi, trois personnes – dont un procureur général et un juge – ont péri à Idlib par « des tireurs non identifiés », une à Chahné dans la province de Homs, une à Alep et une à Deir ez-Zor, a précisé l'OSDH. L'organisation a en outre indiqué que les forces de sécurité ont tué un soldat rebelle à Bab Sebaa dans la ville de Homs, trois soldats de l'armée régulière ont par ailleurs péri à Dael, dans le sud. L'agence officielle SANA a pour sa part mis en cause des « bandes terroristes armées » dans les morts d'Idlib tout comme dans le tir d'une roquette sur un réservoir de carburant de la raffinerie de Homs.

À Homs, cible d'une offensive massive depuis le 4 février, les militants redoutaient l'arrivée de nouveaux renforts du régime. « Les bombardements intenses ont repris en début d'après-midi sur Baba Amro avec quatre roquettes à la minute, mais ce qui nous inquiète ce sont les nouveaux renforts militaires dépêchés en ville », a affirmé Hadi Abdallah, un membre du Conseil général de révolution syrien à Homs.

Parallèlement, l'agence Chine nouvelle a estimé qu'il reste un espoir que la crise syrienne puisse se résoudre pacifiquement par le dialogue. Samedi, un émissaire chinois avait été reçu à Damas par le chef de l'État syrien, à qui il a apporté le soutien de Pékin à son projet de référendum constitutionnel du 26 février.

« Prématuré »
Le plus haut gradé de l'armée américaine, le général Martin Dempsey, a par ailleurs jugé qu'une intervention en Syrie serait « très difficile », lors d'un entretien sur CNN, ajoutant que « le chemin emprunté actuellement, qui consiste à essayer de façonner un consensus international, est le bon chemin, plutôt que de prendre la décision d'intervenir unilatéralement ». Il a en outre estimé qu'il était « prématuré de prendre la décision d'armer l'opposition en Syrie car je mets au défi quiconque d'identifier clairement ce qu'est le mouvement d'opposition actuellement », ajoutant qu'« il y a des informations selon lesquelles des membres d'el-Qaéda sont impliqués et qu'ils cherchent à soutenir l'opposition. Je veux dire qu'il y a plusieurs intervenants et que chacun essaye de jouer sa partition propre pour renforcer sa position ».

Le président du comité de coordination Haytham Manaa a de son côté jugé que « certaines personnes souillent l'image de la révolte en prétendant que c'est une guerre de communautés et de fondamentalistes ».

Signalons finalement qu'un important homme d'affaires syrien, Fayçal el-Qudsi, a déclaré à la BBC que le gouvernement Assad était en voie de désintégration lente et que les sanctions internationales ruinaient l'économie. Pour lui, les affrontements ne dureront pas plus de six mois mais le pouvoir luttera jusqu'au bout. « L'armée est lasse et n'ira nulle part. Il faudra bien se parler ou, tout au moins, cesser de tuer. Dès que les militaires cesseront les tueries, des millions de Syriens descendront dans la rue. C'est une situation sans issue (pour le pouvoir) », a-t-il dit.

(Sources : agences et rédaction)

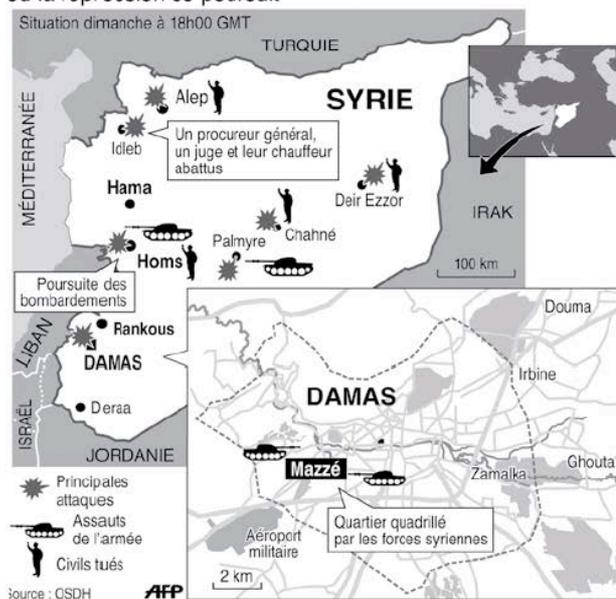


Une manifestation hier dans le quartier Qadam de Damas.

YouTube/AFP

L'armée se déploie à Damas

L'Égypte décide de rappeler son ambassadeur en Syrie où la répression se poursuit



source : GSDH

AFP

The Daily Star (Liban / Lebanon)

CURRENT AFFAIRS BY ANTOINE GHATTAS SAAB

U.S. providing secret aid to Syria opposition: diplomat

The Syrian uprising will eventually succeed in ousting President Bashar Assad, a diplomat told The Daily Star, adding that United States is secretly providing aid to the Syrian opposition. Walid Maalouf, who served as alternate representative for the U.S. to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2003 and maintains close ties with the U.S. administration, voiced his belief that the Syrian people's revolution against the regime would inevitably result in the people's victory.

According to Maalouf, action in the diplomatic arena will gradually wear away at Assad's regime, allowing the Syrian National Council to take power. He cited several factors that are contributing to the momentum that will lead to decisive action against Assad's rule, including the vote of the U.N. General Assembly last week, which condemned the crimes committed against the Syrian people and was passed with 137 votes, as well as the recent hints by the EU that it would recognize the SNC as the representative of the Syrian people and U.S. Senator John McCain's demand to arm the Syria opposition.

Maalouf said the doors of the White House and Congress are open to officials from the Syrian expatriate community, most of whom are supportive of the SNC, adding that the U.S. is secretly providing aid to the opposition, though he did not specify whether this support was financial or military.

Asked how the U.S. views the upheavals of the Arab world, Maalouf said the country viewed the developments with extreme optimism given the new emphasis on democracy and human rights, principles which have long been weak in the region. He added, however, that the period between uprising and democratic transition varies depending on the country, with change being more rapid and decisive in Tunisia and Libya than Egypt, where citizens are now confronting military rule.

According to Maalouf, following decades of dictatorship, the people of the Middle East were able to witness firsthand through social media the openness of Western societies, which gave momentum to the uprisings.

As for American policy toward Lebanon, Maalouf reiterated the country's unwavering support for Lebanon's sovereignty and unity, along with its support for U.N. resolutions 1559, 1680 and 1701 and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Resolution 1559, which was passed in September 2004 and which Maalouf supported at the United Nations, called on foreign forces to leave Lebanese territory.

Asked how Lebanon is different following 1559 and the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory in 2005, he said that the current situation has improved as Syrian intervention in Lebanese affairs is now limited, and the current pro-democracy protests in the region reinforce the security of Lebanon's own democracy. He added that members of the March 14 coalition can now freely express their opinion without the intimidation common under Syrian hegemony.

Separately, Maalouf highlighted the important contributions of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese-Americans in shaping U.S. foreign policy in general and toward Lebanon in particular. He also reiterated the United States' rejection of any dialogue with Hezbollah, saying that the party's arms pose a grave danger to Lebanon's national fabric and state institutions.

Today's Zaman (Turkey / Turquie)

ACTIVIST KENAR: ONLY SYRIAN OPPOSITION CAN DECIDE ON INTERVENTION



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly Thursday in favor of a nonbinding resolution backing an Arab League plan calling for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down and strongly condemning human rights violations by his regime. Russia and China vetoed a similar resolution in the Security Council and voted against the measure in the General Assembly.

In the meantime, Assad's call for a referendum, set for Feb. 26, has raised the question of how a nationwide vote could be held at a time when many areas see daily battles between Syrian troops and the opposition that opposes the referendum.

Answering our questions, Kenar elaborated on the issue of foreign intervention into Syrian affairs, Turkey's position and more.

Would you tell us about Nahda, the network that you are involved in?

It means "awakening." Nahda refers to the movements started in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Egypt. It is regarded as a period of intellectual modernization. Actually, I find the term "Arab Spring" really odd, created by some international broadcasting networks in order to be able to tell the audience in the West what is happening in the Middle East. Arab Spring is not a term that came out of the region's own vocabulary. Most of the activists in the Middle East prefer to call what is happening in the region "Arab Revolutions." We decided to call our organization Nahda because it is recursive of an awakening. The activists involve people from all walks of life: Islamists, socialists, liberals, etc. They gather independent of their ethnic, ideological identities. It is very exciting for us, the Young Civilians.

This is the first international involvement of the Young Civilians, right?

We accompanied President Abdullah Gül when he went to Armenia at the invitation of the Armenian President [Serzh Sargsyan in September 2008] to watch the World Cup qualifying match between the two countries' national teams. We had a statement at the time since the game was a great opportunity to normalize relations between Turkey and Armenia. But our statement mostly concerned the policies of Turkey at that time. In Nahda, we and Arab activists share each others' experiences. The revolution has been realized by the activists and we should bear their voices. It has been our motto to voice "extraordinary stories of ordinary heroes." In other words, we are trying to enable young civilian activists of the Middle East to voice their aspirations.

Do you personally have an extraordinary story? I grew up in a Kemalist environment in Ankara. Until I went to university, I did not have a friend who was a headscarf; my family did not have any friends who wore headscarves. I grew up with horrible stories of Islamists who will take over the country. I was 15 when the Feb. 28 [1997] intervention [dubbed post-modern coup] occurred, and I sensed something wrong in that. I was not happy with the policies of the government at the time but a fight against those policies should be the civilians' job, not the military's. I started reading columnists like Ali Bayramoglu, Giday Göktaş and Feyzi Mahcupyan at the time, but I still was not fully aware of what was happening regarding the Kurdish issue or the headscarf issue. Later, I started coming together with a group of people with similar concerns. We became the Young Civilians. I read a public statement in Ankara calling for an end to military interventions. The *Nahda* daily printed my picture on its front page the next day, and I was afraid that my family or some friends would see that picture. My stance was totally against theirs.

You had your own enlightenment period. Definitely, yes, almost all of my school friends were still Kemalists, and most of the time I was lonely in my journey [to be different]. I was curious who the Islamists were, who the Kurds were. Were they really people who we should be afraid of? Now I have a different circle of friends. And then with Nahda, the Young Civilians established ties with the activists in the Middle East.

'Hezbollah would lose an important supporter, if the Syrian regime falls'

As violence across Syria continues, no doubt the events are being watched closely in neighboring Lebanon where you currently live. How do you think events are unfolding in Syria as you observe it from Lebanon?

Syrian politics have been quite influential in Lebanon especially through Hezbollah [which is the Lebanese Shiite Muslim militant organization supported by Syria and Iran]. Syria never wants to lose the influence it has in Lebanon. If the Syrian regime falls, Hezbollah's political and financial support lines could be seriously hurt. That is a life and death situation for Hezbollah. On the other hand, Syria was an occupational force in Lebanon for 30 years. The occupation finally ended in 2005 in response to domestic and international pressure [after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri]. Syria is



CEREN KENAR

PHOTO TODAY'S ZAMAN, MUSTAFA KIRAZLI

'Remember the Libyan opposition that desperately cried for foreign intervention; it was an elitist approach for somebody in Turkey -- for example, for an Istanbulite who has all the comforts in her/his life -- to say that if the Americans intervened, they would bring imperialism to Libya. It is like asking a woman who calls the police while she is being raped, what if the police try to steal her money after saving her?'

considered to be behind that assassination by the majority of Lebanese people who were out on the streets protesting. There is a great animosity toward Syria in Lebanon because of the occupation, Hariri's assassination and the use of Hezbollah. In a way, we can say that Lebanon is a small Syria without intense fighting. However, when there were protests in support of Arab activists in many small countries in the Middle East, there were none in Lebanon because they were afraid of being watched and targeted by Syrian agents.

There were still some small scale protests in Lebanon in support of the Syrian opposition.

Some people I know from Hezbollah in Lebanon were beaten up by the police since they had protested against the Syrian regime. The Hezbollah administration sometimes use methods similar to those of the Syrian Muhaberat to intimidate opposing voices. Lebanese people often say that there are a lot of members of Muhaberat in Lebanese cafes and other places where people gather.

Could there be a window of opportunity for the Lebanese if the Assad regime falls?

If the Syrian regime falls, Hezbollah would lose important support. In the political structure of Lebanon, ethnic and political backgrounds are important. According to the rules, the president should be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister should be a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the parliament should be a Shiite Muslim. In the parliament, seats are divided equally between Christians and Muslims, proportionately between several denominations.

The matter of religious balance is a sensitive political issue in Lebanon and a national census has not been conducted since 1932, before the founding of the modern Lebanese state. Maronites, largest among the Christian sects and largely in control of the state apparatus, are estimated to be about 30 percent of the total population. The Muslim population is estimated at about 60 percent including about 30 percent Shiite whose political representation is not proportional to population. However, they are militarily strong since they support Hezbollah. Hezbollah will lose military and economic strength with the fall of the Assad regime. This is likely to help Hezbollah to take part in Lebanese politics as a civilian party. This could be a historical window of opportunity for the Lebanese.

'American intervention in Iraq set a bad example but...'

The Syrian opposition has expectations from Turkey. Do you think Turkey can meet their needs?

Turkey has been handling the situation quite well since the Arab Spring started except for some hesitancy in regards to the situation in Libya. Turkey has been with the Arab people, not dictators. Turkey told

[Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak to go long before [US President Barack] Obama did. Turkey tried to convince the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to act in a democratic way to the dismay of the Syrian opposition. As it has become obvious that the Assad regime would not take a step forward, Turkey started to implement policies to sanction the Assad regime. Turkish military interference in Syria should be the last option, in my opinion. However, it is not up to us to say that; we can't make that decision.

Who can do that?

It is up to the Syrian opposition. Remember the Libyan opposition that desperately cried for foreign intervention; it was an elitist approach for somebody in Turkey -- for example, an Istanbulite who has all the comforts in her/his life -- to say that if the Americans intervened, they would bring imperialism to Libya. It is like asking a woman who calls the police while she is being raped that what if the police try to steal her money after saving her. International interventions are delicate matters. There are successes -- the example of Bosnia, and there are lost chances -- the example of Rwanda. The American intervention in Iraq set a bad example. We can say that bad money drives out good, and anti-Americanism has been strengthened in the region since the Iraqi invasion by the United States. However, we should distinguish between apples and pears.

What do you think Turkey can do in that regard?

Turkey has been providing humanitarian aid for the Syrian refugees. In addition, Turkey has always told the world under what circumstances it can interfere in Syrian affairs. First of all, Ankara stated that an intervention should be UN-backed. One exception to that rule would be a massive migration flow from Syria to Turkey, and in that case, Turkey stated that the establishment of a buffer zone along the Turkey-Syria border would be unavoidable. However, hopes for a UN-backed foreign intervention were dashed after a lack of consensus between the West and Arab's Chinese and Russian allies.

What if there is a NATO intervention, can Turkey support that?

It's a difficult question to answer. Perhaps all the bargaining chips should be used before such an intervention comes to the fore. After all has been done, it would be hard for Turkey to avoid joining such an intervention. Secondly, the United States has no will to interfere in Syria, especially in the pre-election period. The Americans are also afraid of making Iran nervous. I think Turkey will use its soft power advantage for as long as possible, but this policy might also mean that Turkey has no influence in the region. Therefore, I expect to see Turkey flexing its muscles at times. And actually, that's what Turkey has been doing.

PROFILE

Holding a master's degree in sociology from Bogazici University in Istanbul and a bachelor's degree in political science and public administration from Middle East Technical University in Ankara, she is currently a research assistant. Kenar has been engaged in civil society activism in Turkey since 2006, becoming one of the founders of the Young Civilians and outspoken activist for the Young Civilians and outspoken youth movement (Genç Yurtlar), a pro-democracy youth movement in Turkey. Kenar has been a member of the Alliance of Youth Movements since 2008, the Alliance of Youth Movements dedicated to fighting the cause of nonviolent change and the promotion of the use of technological tools to advance freedom, human rights and democratic values. She was also part of the International 2010 Visitors Program of the US Department of State. Kenar regularly contributes to the *Taraf* daily, focusing on Middle East politics.

'Turkey's democracy, economy and culture important for Arabs'

We know that Turkey is popular on the Arab street. What do you think makes Turkey attractive for the people of the Middle East?

Three things: its democracy, economy and culture. For Arabs, Turkey has for years been a country with a military guardianship system and strict secularism, and a country that has been allied with the Western world, the Arab dictators and Israel. Now, Turkey has been taking about its Muslim identity and trying to get rid of the guardianship of the military. Arabs are happier with this recent image. They see that people -- headscarved or not, Kurd or Turk, Muslim or not -- generally live in peace in Turkey. They like that picture of Turkey. However, there is some disheartening news for Arabs about some developments in Turkey. This news consistently comes from two sources -- the Israeli and Iranian press. In the Jerusalem Post, Turkey is often called an Islamist state that is close to the United States and that influences the United States and that Turkey has imperialist goals in the region. Another semi-official newspaper *Kayhan* calls Turkey a Sunni state that is very close to the United States, and its presence in the region is quite dangerous. We can see that Israel and Iran do not like Turkey's position, but Turkey's experience is important for the Arab people and Arab liberals.

Can you see Turkey being a model for Arab countries?

It is not wise to present a ready-made model for any country. What Turkey can do is that it can talk about its own mistakes. I would like to mention that Beirut is less than two hours away from Turkey, but except for myself there is not a single Turkish student at the American University of Beirut. There are several American students in Beirut. It is good that the old cliché of the Turkish state, "I don't have any touch with those Muslim Arabs" is gone. But, we still haven't made some necessary connections into the Middle East.

Do the Arab people realize that there are ups and downs in Turkish politics? Can they follow some of the political intricacies of Turkey?

They do not feel that as intensely as we do. They mostly see that Turkey has been making great progress in many areas. There is also the issue of the journalists who are in jail. Are they in jail because of their activities in relation to journalism or something else? Turkey has not been good at telling the whole story about this. In the international English news publications there are few Turkish people who write about this issue; for example, Ece Temelkuran who wrote that her job loss had something to do with Hariri Dink's assassination. Her article in the *Guardian* gave the impression that Hariri Dink [a Turkish journalist of Armenian origin who was assassinated in January 2007 by a young ultranationalist hitman] was killed by the ruling government of Turkey. More Turkish liberals should write about these issues in the international media to present the full picture. At the same time, if Turkey tries to be a voice in the region, Turkey's democracy will always be questioned, especially its approach to the Kurdish issue. Unless Turkey changes the political and sociological environment that gives way to the PKK [outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party], it would be hard to handle the Kurdish issue. But I am hopeful in that regard that the Turkish government could renew its Kurdish initiative in the spring. And the spring time might be the time when we might see Assad's fall according to observers.

We lost valuable time in winter in regards to dealing with the Kurdish issue.

I and I hope we will not have a new PKK insurgency in the spring, which is what usually happens. When it comes to Assad, the Syrian economy is collapsing, and so far there are few signs that Assad will be able to regain control of it. The Syrian opposition hopes that the most populated cities, Damascus and Aleppo, will join the fight against the Syrian regime, and there are signs that they might as those cities look increasingly divided over the uprising.

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)



EPA

Final farewell

Soldiers carrying coffins of their comrades, during a funeral procession, in Damascus yesterday. Funeral processions were held in Damascus and Latakia for 10 army soldiers and security forces members who were allegedly targeted by armed groups.

Egypt, Syria in tit-for-tat recall of ambassadors

Regime forces deploy in tense Damascus neighbourhood and pound Homs for 15th straight day, killing four people

Gulf News Report

Dubai Syria yesterday recalled its envoy in a tit-for-tat move after Egypt withdrew its ambassador to Damascus, following last week's Arab League call to halt diplomatic cooperation with Syria.

Gulf states have already withdrawn their ambassadors from Damascus and expelled Syrian envoys in their capitals. Other Arabs have made similar moves.

"The decision is a message that Egypt is unsatisfied with the situation in Syria as it is," Foreign Ministry spokesman Amr

Rushdy said, the official state news agency said. He added that Egypt's envoy would remain in Cairo until further notice.

"Egypt subsequently learned that the Syrian government had decided to recall its ambassador from Cairo. We have no choice but to respect this Syrian decision," he said.

He said Egypt was responding "step-by-step" to the crisis and said Cairo had been working in public and behind the scenes to support an Arab peace initiative.

Meanwhile, Syrian security forces deployed heavily in a tense Damascus

neighbourhood where a mourner was shot dead in the largest anti-regime rally seen in the capital, blunting calls for a "day of defiance."

Although the security force deployment thwarted attempts by activists to stage new protests in Mazzeh neighbourhood, scene of a funeral Saturday that turned into a huge anti-regime rally, businesses there came to a halt, activists said.

Most shops were shut in Mazzeh as well as in the neighbourhoods of Barzeh, Qaboon, Kfar Sousa and Jubar. Student demonstrations had been expected in

Mazzeh but security forces were deployed around schools.

However, in central Damascus shops were opened as normal, while state television showed live footage from Mazzeh interviewing people who claimed life was proceeding normally.

Baba Amr shelled

Regime forces meanwhile pounded the flashpoint central city of Homs for 15th straight day yesterday, killing at least four people, activists said, while official Sana news agency reported the murder of a prosecutor and a judge in northwest-

ern Idlib province. The Baba Amr neighbourhood of the defiant city of Homs also came under sporadic shelling by army forces yesterday, the Observatory said, adding that there was heavy shooting in the area of Bab Sbaa.

Saturday's funerals in Damascus were for four people, including two teenagers, killed the previous day when security forces fired on protesters in Mazzeh district which houses many government offices and embassies, according to human rights group and activists.

See also Pages 12 & 13

Gulf News (EAU / UAE)

China still hopes for resolution of crisis through negotiations

ARMED INTERVENTION WILL CAUSE REGIONAL TURMOIL — OFFICIAL NEWS AGENCY

Amman/Beirut (Reuters) China said yesterday it believed a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis was still possible as any armed intervention would only spread turmoil through the region, but Britain's foreign minister said he feared Syria will slide into civil war.

The comments were published by the official Xinhua news agency a day after a Chinese envoy met President Bashar Al Assad and thousands demonstrated in the heart of Damascus in one of the biggest anti-government rallies there since the uprising started nearly a year ago.

A leading Syrian businessman, meanwhile, said the Al Assad government was slowly disintegrating and might only last six months more.

Sympathetic to Al Assad, China has emerged as a leading player in the multiple international efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria. "China believes, as many others do, there is still hope

claimed 'lofty goal' of liberalising the Syrian people than by geopolitical considerations", Xinhua said.

"Blood is still being shed in Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, where foreign forces have intervened and come to 'help,'" it added.

The words might bring a measure of comfort to Al Assad, who is now generally reviled in the West for a crackdown in which his security forces have killed several thousand people.

China and Russia infuriated Western and Arab states this month by blocking a draft UN Security Council resolution backing an Arab plan for Al Assad to halt the repression and leave power. They also voted against a similar, non-binding UN General Assembly resolution that was overwhelmingly passed last week.

The US, Europe, Turkey and Gulf-led Arab states have all demanded Al Assad quit power but the West has ruled out any Libya-style military intervention.



EPA

Regional friction

Egyptian security forces sit in front of the Syrian embassy in Cairo as a few Syrian protesters decided to hold a sit-in nearby. Egypt recalled its ambassador to Syria yesterday as pressure mounts on the military-led government to expel the Syrian envoy.

the Syria crisis can be resolved through peaceful dialogue between the opposition and the government, contrary to some Western stance on Syria, highlighting differences between foreign powers over how to deal with the conflict.

The West was "driven less by their self-pro-

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Syria's ancient desert city besieged, say residents

Army shoots at anything that moves from the historic citadel

BEIRUT — The Syrian army has been laying siege to the ancient city of Palmyra, a world heritage site, since early February and shooting at anything that moves from a historic citadel, residents say.

“Palmyra is surrounded by the army from all fronts: the Arab citadel, the olive and palm tree groves, the desert, the city,” one resident told AFP by telephone, adding that the operation began on February 4.

Security forces have set up camp in the citadel which overlooks the Roman ruins and the city of some 60,000 people, said the resident who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals.

“Machinegun fire rains down from the citadel at anything that moves in the ruins because they think it is rebels,” he added.

Palmyra's pristine Roman ruins set off by dramatic desert sunrises and sunsets have earned it the status of a Unesco protected world heritage site.

It was a key tourist attraction in Syria before unrest against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad erupted 11 months ago. Human rights groups say more than 6,000 people have been killed in the country since mid-March last year.

Other Palmyra residents told AFP said that hundreds of people have fled the city for safety after reports emerged that several local figures have been killed by regime forces.

Adnan Al Kabir, whose family owns the Al Waha (Oasis) Hotel in the heart of the city, was among three civilians killed by the army, three different sources said.

A YouTube video shows Kabir with a wound to the head apparently caused by gunfire. Friends who knew him identified Kabir in interviews with AFP.

“The majority of the young men have left or are trying to leave, fearing detention. Only elders and state employees stayed behind,” said another resident who managed to



Picture shows Roman ruins of Palmyra, 220km northeast of the Syrian capital Damascus.— AFP file

sneak out of Palmyra. Women and girls have been spirited off to safer locations for fear they would be raped by “soldiers who hold nothing sacred,” he said, speaking from a neighbouring country.

Although communications with Palmyra were severed at the start of the campaign, those residents who have managed to get out spoke of daily machinegun and tank fire.

Hundreds of people have fled from the desert city that carved its place in the history books as a caravan stop on the ancient Silk Road and as the home of legendary Queen Zenobia who defied Rome in the third century AD.

“People related and unrelated to rebels are fleeing because security forces are detaining people at ran-

dom,” said one resident who fled to neighbouring Jordan.

He said he saw tanks and checkpoints all around the city.

Security forces have also set up checkpoints within Palmyra itself, stopping traffic at gunpoint, checking cars and detaining men between the age of 20 and 40, said another resident who escaped from the city.

“Many people have disappeared, we don't know if they are dead or detained,” said the 31-year-old who was able to get out after five days of siege.

Tanks were also deployed near the Roman ruins at the entrance to Palmyra — a desert city known as Tadmur in Arabic. According to residents, regime forces have de-

stroyed and set ablaze several olive, palm and date groves using tank and machinegun fire.

“All our resources are concentrated in the gardens: our olives, our dates,” said one resident who fled after security forces stormed and destroyed his garden.

“The gardens near the ruins were hit the hardest. People will have to plant again and wait for 10 years before they see a good season again,” another man said.

Anti-regime activists, mostly loosely organised local youths, had been using the gardens as a meeting point, residents said.

Until this month Palmyra had been spared the deadly violence in the Assad regime's crackdown on dissent, according to activists.— AFP

The National (EAU / UAE)

Egypt recalls its ambassador to Syria

Gunmen kill judge and prosecutor in car

Egypt joins ranks of countries that have cut back diplomatic ties with regime on same day bullets rake vehicle carrying legal officials

The National staff

Egypt's foreign ministry said yesterday that it was withdrawing its ambassador to Syria, the latest Arab country to scale back its relations with the embattled regime in Damascus.

The Egyptian state news agency, Mena, said that the foreign minister, Mohammed Amr, decided yesterday to keep the ambassador in Syria, Shaker Ismael, in Cairo until further notice.

The decision, which follows moves by Tunisia, Libya, Qatar and Saudi

Arabia to reduce ties with Damascus, came on a day in which gunmen fired on a car carrying a senior Syrian state prosecutor and a judge in the north-west province of Idlib, killing both of them and their driver, according to the state news agency.

Syrian military defectors warning an armed struggle against President Bashar Al Assad's forces control parts of Idlib province, which borders Turkey. It has been one of the regions hardest hit by the government during the 11-month-old uprising against Mr Al Assad's regime.

The state news agency, Sana, said the Idlib provincial state prosecutor, Nidal Ghazal, and Judge Mohammed Ziaideh were killed in the attack.

The Syrian government blamed armed "terrorists" for the uprising and said they are carrying out a foreign conspiracy to destabilise the country.

Clashes between military rebels and Syrian forces are growing more frequent and the defectors have managed to take control of small pieces of territory in the north and in Homs province.

The increasing militarisation of the conflict is pushing Syria to the brink of a civil war.

The Local Coordination Committees, an anti-Assad group, said more than 7,300 have been killed since March of last year. There is no way to independently verify the numbers, however, as Syria bans almost all foreign journalists and human rights organisations.

In other violence yesterday, activists reported that security forces shelled rebel-held areas in the city of Homs.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said forces continued to shell the Homs neighbourhood of Baba Amir, which has been under government attack since February 4.

The rights group, which has activists throughout Syria, said 23 buses full of troops along with military vehicles and ambulances were seen



A crowd follows mourners carrying coffins of protesters allegedly killed during anti-government protests in Damascus yesterday. The funeral was being held for three people, including two teenagers, who died on Thursday. EPA

heading from Damascus towards Homs.

The group also said troops stormed the eastern town of Sakhna searching for members of the opposition, and that one woman was shot dead during the raids. It said two other people were killed by troops in the eastern province of Deir El Zour and the village of Aareb.

Activist groups called a one-day strike in Damascus to express support for other cities in revolt. But the call did not appear to have been widely heeded.

Residents in the capital said businesses were open as usual and so were schools and universities.

Calls for strikes in the past did not succeed in tightly controlled Damascus, where government forces and informers keep a close eye on all activities.

Earlier yesterday, a funeral was held in Damascus for a man who was killed a day earlier when security forces fired live rounds and tear gas at thousands of people marching in a funeral procession that turned into one of the largest protests in the capital.

The economy is being crippled by foreign sanctions and the government is "slowly disintegrating" under anti-regime protests, a leading Syrian businessman told the BBC yesterday.

Faisal Al Qudsi, the son of a former Syrian president who was heavily involved in the country's economic liberalisation, said sanctions were affecting his entire country, not just Mr Al Assad's regime.

"The apparatus of the government is slowly disintegrating and it's almost non-existent in trouble-spots like Homs, Idlib, Deira," he told the BBC. "Courts are not there. Police are not interested in any sort of crime and it is affecting the government very, very badly, every day it continues."

Also yesterday, the Philippines said it did not take part in a United Nations vote on a resolution calling on Mr Al Assad to step down as it

seeks Syria's help in moving Filipinos from the country.

The US General Assembly voted overwhelmingly on Thursday in favour of a resolution backing an Arab League plan calling on Mr Assad to step down and strongly condemning human-rights violations by his regime.

The foreign secretary, Albert del Rosario, said yesterday that the Philippines' main concern was to repair ties thousands of Filipinos in Syria through the help of its government.

★ With additional reporting by the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse

The apparatus of the government is slowly disintegrating
Faisal Al Qudsi, Son of a former Syrian president

Times of Oman

Syria conflict resembles Bosnia's war-torn past

JERUSALEM: Cold-blooded sniper killings, indiscriminate shelling, surgery by flashlight, death, fear and hunger in a darkened city under the ruthless hammer of a superior force.

In its random cruelty, the conflict in Syria starts to resemble the war in Bosnia 20 years ago, when Serb, Muslim and Croat forces tore the Balkan country apart and the besieged people of Sarajevo buried thousands of dead in sports fields.

Bosnia's carnage was broadcast globally month after month by 24-hour satellite television news then in its early days. The slaughter in the Syrian city of Homs has been playing out to the world almost hourly on mobile phone and amateur video.

Images of dead babies, severed limbs, blood running in the gutters and people driven mad by grief provoke horror, followed by demands for armed foreign intervention.

Intervention did come to Bosnia, but so hesitantly that the agony of its people went on for nearly 4 years, in which tens of thousands were killed and a million lost their homes.

Western powers who finally stopped the slaughter say they have no intention of going into Syria, a move that would have incalculable consequences in a volatile region.

Bosnia was a small republic of Yugoslavia, a European crisis on Nato's doorstep. Syria is a major Arab republic with powerful friends in Russia and Iran, situated on a strategic crossroads.

The most readily recognisable common denominator between them is the Soviet-era T-72 tank. It has smashed its way into cities to crush lightly-armed rebels and civilians alike in 11 months of suppression by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

There is an air of *deja vu* about these scenes and the "humanitarian" remedies now being demanded, aid missions which in Bosnia led inexorably to armed intervention.

"The Bosnian War and the conflict in Syria are different in nature," say Soner Cagaptay and Andrew

Egypt recalls envoy to Syria

CAIRO: Egypt recalled its ambassador to Damascus yesterday, state media reported, the latest move by an Arab state to isolate President Bashar Al Assad and pressure him to halt a violent crackdown on protesters.

The Foreign Ministry also said the Syrian government had decided to recall its ambassador to Cairo. There was no immediate official Syrian comment.

Egypt's move follows last week's Arab League call for Arab states to halt diplomatic

cooperation with Syria.

Gulf states, leading the drive against Assad, have already withdrawn their ambassadors from Damascus and expelled Syrian envoys in their capitals. Other Arabs have made similar moves.

"The decision is a message that Egypt is unsatisfied with the situation in Syria as it is," Foreign Ministry spokesman Amr Rushdy said, the official state news agency reported. He added that Egypt's envoy would remain in Cairo until further notice. - Reuters

Tablet of The Washington Institute. But "any international groups looking to provide humanitarian intervention to protect vulnerable civilians in enclaves 'liberated' by the opposition (in Syria) should draw on lessons from Bosnia in the 1990s".

International force

Those lessons show it would require an international force protected by air power and with a mandate to shoot back.

It would likely be Nato-led, headed by a Muslim general from Nato member Turkey, Syria's northern neighbour, and including Arab units.

Turkey months ago called for safe havens for Syrians, and is now collaborating with the Arab League and France. At least 5,500 Syrians have been killed in 11 months, the UN says.

A "Friends of Syria" meeting to be held with Arab states in Tunisia on Feb. 24 "will produce a very strong message of solidarity with the Syrian people and also a warning for the Syrian regime", says Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

Nato Secretary-General Anders

Fogh Rasmussen says that, even with a UN mandate and Arab backing, he doubts the alliance would get involved. Yet as Bosnia showed, policies can change.

"We got no dog in this fight," US Secretary of State James Baker famously said in 1991 after a failed mission to stop the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia which ignited Bosnia's war.

But when it turned into Europe's worst conflict since World War Two, Nato did get into the fight, starting with a token 50 peacekeepers but ending with 100,000 in the country, after bombing Bosnian Serb heavy weapons to impose a peace settlement.

It took five years and over 100 United Nations Security Council resolutions to extinguish the war the United Nations had hoped would end in the summer of 1992. It ended in the winter of 1995, with more than 100,000 dead and entire cities destroyed. - Reuters

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The Australian (Australie / Australia)



Masses surround the coffins of demonstrators, whom activists said were killed by regime forces, during a mass funeral in Damascus

Funeral turns into a bloody crackdown

SUSAN MIGG
MAZZEH, DAMASCUS

THE first gunshot, the officer's signal to Syrian troops, went almost unheard among the songs and chants of the thousands in the rebel funeral procession.

The funeral — for at least three men killed by security forces a day earlier at an anti-government demonstration in the central Damascus district of Mazzeh — had quickly become one of the largest protests in the capital.

Women, some clutching their babies, followed the three green coffins, sending the Islamic martyrs off to heaven on Saturday night (AEDT). Suddenly the air filled with gunfire and screams from the crowd.

"They are shooting. Oh my God, they are shooting," screamed a woman, grabbing her five-year-old girl from the ground.

Live rounds smacked into shop walls and hissed overhead. A stampede of up to 15,000 people pushed and scrambled over each other, gripped by a blind panic to get off the street.

As we ran down alleyways, the echoes among the apartment blocks around made it impossible to tell the direction of the gunfire. The security forces and the Shabiha, the feared paramilitary supporters of the regime, blocked the exits. Snipers, dotted across the central neighbourhood of Mazzeh, fired from rooftops.

Raja, 23, a university student from Damascus, dived into the open doorway of a four-floor apartment block. Her breath panting, looking wildly up the street, she screamed for her 17-year-old sister, Noor.

Grabbing Noor's hand, they ran up the stairs and found the open front door of an apartment where the elderly woman owner was allowing the rebels to hide.

A crush of men filled the hallway to protect the entrance, while a dozen women sheltered inside. In the kitchen, a young girl wiped a bleeding graze on her cheek from where she had fallen on concrete in the escape, while mothers nursed crying toddlers.

Two teenage girls hugged each other, sobbing uncontrollably. A skinny girl with wide eyes sat on a

chair in the corner, trying to drink from a glass but spilling it everywhere as her hands shook from shock and fear.

They had not expected the protest to become violent, Raja said. "We had an agreement with the security forces that we would not say anything against President Bashar al-Assad, and that they would not shoot."

Producing a revolutionary flag at the procession prompted the crackdown, Noor said. As news of the violence was broadcast on al-Jazeera, the mobile telephone systems crashed as thousands of people called, desperate to know whether loved ones were safe.

Outside, the gunfire had become methodical.

The short bursts sounded targeted, aimed at smaller groups of men as they tried to escape from the street.

"They have killed someone. A young man from Mazzeh," said Raja, after a telephone call from a friend who said she had seen the man hit from the window of a nearby apartment.

"They have arrested hundreds of people. They have blocked the

roads. Any man they find is being taken away."

Suddenly the apartment was plunged into darkness as the city's power cut out. Hearing footsteps on the stairwell, the women fell into deathly silence.

"The Shabiha are in the building," whispered Noor.

Housing a foreign journalist is a crime in Syria. Quickly, they found a place to hide me — covered in children's cuddly toys in a spot behind a babies' cot. "Stay there, don't say a word," said Noor.

Clutching AK 47s, men in khaki military uniform and leather boots patrolled the stairwell in search of protesters. As the footsteps faded away, Raja's friend telephoned to say the security forces were running house raids in a neighbouring street.

It was time to leave. A relative drove his car through the narrow street to the doorway, letting the girls jump in, then quickly drove through back roads to avoid the security checkpoints.

Back on the main road, soldiers filled five parked coaches — watching and waiting should there be any further unrest.

Moscow Times (Russie / Russia)

General Assembly Resolution Overcomes 'No' Vote on Syria

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Russia opposed a draft resolution on Syria at the UN General Assembly on Thursday, joining 11 other countries in voting “no.”

Despite Russian opposition, however, the General Assembly overwhelmingly approved the resolution, which endorses an Arab League plan calling for Syrian President Bashar Assad to step aside.

“Today, the UN General Assembly sent a clear message to the people of Syria: The world is with you,” U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said in a statement.

The resolution, similar to one Russia and China vetoed in the Security Council on Feb. 4, received 137 votes in favor, 12 against and 17 abstentions, although three countries said their votes failed to register on the electronic board.

Unlike in the Security Council, there are no vetoes in the General Assembly, but its decisions lack the legal force of council resolutions.

Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said the new document differs little from the Security Council resolution that Russia and China vetoed.

“We can’t vote for that resolution because it still remains unbalanced,” Gatilov said, Russian news agencies reported. “It directs all the demands at the government and says nothing about the opposition.”

General Assembly resolutions are nonbinding, but they reflect world opinion on major issues. Supporters of the Arab-sponsored resolution hoped for a high “yes” vote to deliver a strong message to Assad’s regime.

Arab countries rejected amendments to the resolution proposed by Russia.

China Daily

LI QINGSI

Saying no to gunboat diplomacy

After Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on Syria on Feb 4, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution condemning the violence in Syria on Feb 16. Though non-binding, the newly passed resolution will put more pressure on the Syrian government and might prove to be the beginning of future outside intervention.

Sectorial conflicts, geopolitical factors, and particularly the West's "divide and conquer" involvement have given rise to the intense and sharp contradictions in the Arab World, and Syria's internal clashes have provided an excuse for the West to get involved.

The current Syrian crisis is not an issue purely concerning human rights protection as the West alleges. The West wants to topple the Syrian government and replace it with a pro-Western one. Syria is considered a problem in the West's Middle East strategy because of its close relations with Iran and Lebanon, which are hostile to the United States.

In order to play a part in the Middle East, the Arab League is willing to charge into the West's Middle East strategy. After solving the Syrian issue in a more successful way, the West's next

step up on the same disastrous road as Libya, which finally ended in a full-scale civil war.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has the responsibility and obligation to defend the UN Charter, international justice and code of conduct, and so must reject any resolutions that are in violation of the UN Charter and purposes.

If China knows that a resolution is likely to endanger state sovereignty and go against justice and it does nothing, it will be serious malpractice.

The West's furious response to the vetoes by China and Russia shows the vetoes have exposed the West's true purpose of trying to dominate the Middle East and monopolize UN affairs, which they had sought to veil behind their lofty claims of protecting human rights in Syria.

The world has witnessed too many invasions of sovereign states and the killing of innocent civilians in the name of humanitarian intervention. The military interventions since the end of the Cold War show that the West, while holding high the banner of human rights protection, is in reality seeking its own global or regional strategic interests.

Whether in the countries involved

"revolutions" have caused domestic stability and humanitarian situation to deteriorate.

Experience shows that, since the Cold War, Western countries, no matter how great their quarrels are, will join hands when in conflict with non-Western countries. Even in this era of globalization, there is still a clear dividing line between the West and non-Western world.

For historical and practical reasons, the balance of power between the West, especially the US, and non-Western world is uneven. As absolute power without supervision and restriction results in corruption inside a state, a power without a counterweight in the international community also will become impetuous and ruthless, which, threatens the stability of the whole world.

After the Cold War, the US managed to "have a firm hold over the UN to oppress the international community" while small and medium-sized countries dared not voice their discontent.

The US' hysterical reaction to China's veto shows it has not adapted to China's change. At a time when gunboat policy has been revived in a new guise, a modest, self-disciplined diplomatic approach seems ill timed.

If China and the EC can more

cooperation for win-win by our own wishful thinking. Struggle without breaking relations should not be the bottom line of the Chinese attitude to the US, only when we are ready to pay the price for splitting will we manage to attain the struggle without splitting.

No matter how difficult the external situation is, China won't stop developing. Not until the diplomats stop appealing for "heart-to-heart" thinking. Not until the 1.3 billion Chinese people's feelings are no longer easy to hurt, and not until China is able to defend the UN charters and norms and the world peace and justice with actions instead of just words.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China should shoulder the great responsibility of safeguarding world peace. In order to maintain unity, China has been restrained in the use of its veto.

As one member of the international community, China is aware that it cannot realize its own interests without cooperation with the outside world. But China will also be alert to those Western countries that push too far. Having been invaded by Western powers, China understands the suffering that results. So a rising China will not repeat the errors of others because the Chinese people believe

Global Times (Chine / China)

► Vice foreign minister pushes for peaceful solution

Syria stance not a 180: experts

By Liu Meng

China's stance that it supports a peaceful solution to the Syria crisis through negotiation within the Arab League framework is not contradictory to the country's former stance on the Syria issue, experts said yesterday.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun finished his two-day visit to Syria on Saturday after he exchanged views with both the Syrian government and opposition groups to push for a peaceful and proper solution to the Syrian crisis.

China is calling on the government and oppositions to halt the violence and begin inclusive political dialogue.

"China favors the efforts from the Arab League to politically solve the Syrian issue and supports a solution within the Arab League framework and

based on the group's proposals," he said during the visit to Damascus.

China voted against a draft resolution calling for a regime change in Syria at the UN General Assembly on Thursday, less than two weeks after China and Russia vetoed a similar draft at the Security Council on February 4.

"The seemingly contradictory stances on the Arab League's proposals appear to reflect Beijing's desire for mediation, but aversion to UN involvement that could lead to authorizing force as happened with Libya," reported the Associated Press, which said the "change" of China's stances is "striking."

But, Chinese experts said China's stances on the Syrian issue are not contradictory but coherent.

"What China opposed was

not the Arab League, but an individual's or a small number of countries' abducting the Arab League's will or imposing their own will onto the Arab League," Dong Manyuan, a senior researcher with the China Institute of International Studies, told the Global Times.

Dong said China's position on the Syrian crisis has much in common with the Arab League and Arab countries, such as the appealing for stopping violence and providing humanitarian aid.

"We fully respect the Syrian people's opinions on their own government, but firmly oppose external intervention to force the change of Syria's government," he said.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad announced his plan on Wednesday for a referendum on a new constitution on Febru-

ary 26 followed by a multi-party election. The Syrian opposition and the West swiftly dismissed it as sham, Reuters reported.

China backs Assad's plans for a referendum leading to parliamentary elections as a way to resolve the Syrian crisis, Syrian TV quoted Zhai as saying on Saturday.

Dong said Zhai's visit helps push talks between Syria's government and its opposition.

"But the effect will not be decisive," said Zhang Xiaodong, a researcher with the Institute of Western Asia and Africa Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Zhang said that a platform containing them all is needed to broaden the diplomatic channel and facilitate their communication with China.

Agencies contributed to this story

Global Times (Chine / China)

West's pressure pushed China, Russia together

Editor's Note:

Turmoil in Syria and the threat of war in Iran are raising tensions throughout the Middle East. What can China do to cope with the uncertain situation? Could a China-Russia collaboration be effective in countering Western hegemony? People's Daily Online (PO) interviewed Luo Yuan (Luo), major general in the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, on these issues.

PO: Is the Marxist-Leninist outlook on war outdated? What role should the UN play in dealing with problems concerning international wars?

Luo: There have been several wars recently in the world, including the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and the war in Libya. They not only caused large-scale humanitarian disasters but also triggered battles between the warlords. We should reflect on that.

In my opinion, the Marxist-Leninist outlook on war is not outdated and there are just and unjust wars. Mao Zedong once said, "There are two kinds of wars in history: just ones and unjust ones. All wars that promote progress are just and those that block progress are unjust. We communists oppose all unjust wars but don't oppose just wars."

Nowadays, it seems that the UN doesn't have a say in the launching of wars. Some hegemonic powers can attack any country they want and in whatever way they like. They can create an excuse even if there is no excuse to launch a war. They can launch a war as they please and no one is there to question if the war is right or wrong. Obviously, unjust wars are not condemned. In today's international relations, the law of the jungle dominates.

The nature of imperialist war hasn't changed either. There are still wars of

robbery and invasion in which capitalists gain profit. We can see this from the recent wars. Had Libya, Syria, and Iran agreed to submit to the West, would the Western countries still have struck them?

The principles stipulated by the UN are also trampled. Some Western powers can easily avoid the UN if a resolution is not in their interest. The UN should reform and rebuild its authority. It should also sanction countries that violate the purpose and principles of the UN Charter.

PO: If a war breaks out in the Middle East, what will China lose? Does it have effective means to protect its interests in the Middle East?

Luo: The Middle East involves much of China's interests. About one fifth of the world's oil is transported through the Strait of Hormuz, and one third of this goes to China.

China is the biggest buyer of Iran's oil. Once the source of China's oil import is troubled, China's peaceful development will be affected. So we should not turn a blind eye to the problems in Iran and Syria.

I once talked to F. William Engdahl, a US writer. He holds that the US war in Iraq and Libya were both targeted at China, citing the evidence that today 55 percent of China's oil is imported and by 2020, it will increase to 70 percent. And most of China's imported oil is from the Middle East and North Africa. So the US actions in the Middle East and North Africa are aimed at checking the rise of China. If even an American can think this far, we should not stay indifferent to the situation.



Luo Yuan (罗元)

PO: Do you think a China-Russia collaboration in countering the West's intervention in the Middle East will cause a bigger world conflict?

Luo: The collaboration of China and Russia is based on common interests, justice and anti-hegemony.

It is different from the West-East confrontation in the Cold War period. The two are equals in the partnership, which is rather loose. They join when they have common interests and will part when there are clashes in their interests. Everything depends on the countries' sovereignty and interests.

At present, China and Russia face the same pressures and US actions are pushing the two closer. But their joint step is not enough to check US

hegemony, because the strategic setting between the West and East has not changed fundamentally.

Nevertheless, it is better to have some challenges than none. As long as China and Russia persist, a just and fair new international politics and economic order will finally be established.

PO: How can China and the US work together to eliminate the nuclear threat from Iran?

Luo: In an era of globalization, China and the US have a lot of interests in common, such as the denuclearization of Iran and clearness of the Strait of Hormuz. The two can negotiate in these aspects.

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Luo Yuan

There are also policy disagreements between the two. China advocates solving problems through negotiation and peaceful means, while the US prefers sanctions and even military threats.

But the latter can only intensify contradictions and will not help solve Iran's problem. All the US sanctions in recent years have caused worse humanitarian disasters and it is ordinary people that eventually fall victim.

DIALOGUE 对话