

Confusion médiatique autour de la réunion de la Ligue arabe

REVUE DE PRESSE SYRIE #33

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La mission d'observation a remis son rapport à la Ligue arabe. A l'issue de cinq heures de débats, le Conseil des ministres ad hoc a prolongé d'un mois la mission des observateurs dans le cadre du premier plan de la Ligue arabe, tout en adoptant un second plan.

Ces événements donnent lieu à des interprétations très différentes.

- Le contenu du rapport des observateurs est généralement passé sous silence, c'est qu'il confirme la version du gouvernement syrien et infirme celle de l'opposition. Notamment, il atteste qu'il n'y a jamais eu de répression létale de manifestations pacifiques et que les engagements pris par Damas ont été scrupuleusement respectés (libération de plus de 7 000 prisonniers, retrait des troupes des grandes agglomérations, etc.). Il valide le fait que le pays est déstabilisé par des groupes armés.

- Le Comité ministériel ad hoc est souvent présenté comme l'instance exécutive de la Ligue alors qu'il s'agit d'un comité de suivi du Plan arabe composé de 5 Etats sur 22 (Algérie, Egypte, Oman, Qatar, Soudan). Il est passé sous silence que le Comité ministériel ad hoc a accepté le rapport des observateurs par 4 voix contre 1 (celle du Qatar) et a décidé de prolonger d'un mois la mission des observateurs en application du Plan arabe. Il est par contre souvent rapporté que l'Arabie saoudite a décidé de se retirer de ce dispositif (et tente de convaincre d'autres Etats de faire de même pour délégitimer les observateurs).

- Surtout, les médias atlantistes entretiennent une certaine confusion autour des propositions du Qatar, qui ont été en partie adoptées (transition sur le modèle yéménite), en partie rejetées (envoi de troupes arabes), par le Comité ad hoc. Ces décisions ont été validées par 3 voix pour (Egypte, Oman, Qatar) 1 contre (Soudan) et 1 abstention (Algérie).

- En outre, les médias atlantistes ne s'étonnent pas que le Qatar ait exigé de nouvelles élections en Syrie alors qu'il n'en a jamais tenu chez lui. Ils ne relèvent pas que la demande faite au président el-Assad de renoncer au pouvoir au profit de son vice-président n'a pas d'autre sens politique que d'affirmer que la présidence ne peut échoir qu'à un sunnite.

- En totale contradiction avec la tendance dominante des médias européens, l'envoyé spécial du *Dagblad De Pers* (Pays-Bas), Arnold Karskens, témoigne qu'il n'y a pas de révolution et de répression en Syrie, mais une déstabilisation du pays par des groupes armés instrumentés de l'étranger. Seul le *Guardian* (Royaume-Uni) défendait jusqu'à présent cette vision des événements).

- Dans le *Washington Times*, Roman Scarborough espère que la chute imminente du président el-Assad permettra de retrouver enfin les armes de destruction massives de Saddam Hussein que le dictateur irakien avait eu le temps de transférer en Syrie avant

l'invasion US de son pays. Ainsi, les néo-cons n'auraient pas jamais menti pour envahir l'Irak et une action contre la Syrie permettrait de terminer la mission définie en son temps par les présidents Clinton et Bush Jr.

Le Figaro (France)

Syrie: les sanctions manquent d'efficacité

Deux mois après leur adoption, elles n'ont pas permis de faire flancher le régime de Damas.

GEORGES MALBRUNOT

PROCHE-ORIENT Fin novembre, la Ligue arabe frappait un grand coup en décidant de suspendre la Syrie et de lui imposer de sévères sanctions économiques, pour contraindre Bachar el-Assad à faire cesser la répression des manifestants, qui aurait fait à ce jour plus de 5 000 morts, selon l'ONU. Parmi les mesures adoptées : un gel des transactions commerciales avec le gouvernement syrien, l'interdiction de voyager pour des responsables, ainsi que la suspension des liaisons aériennes avec les pays arabes.

Dans la foulée, le roi Abdallah II de Jordanie devenait même le premier chef d'État arabe à appeler au départ du rais syrien. Mais quelques jours après, premier rétro-pédalage : Amman demandait une exemption de certaines mesures décidées par la Ligue. D'autres pays emboîteront le pas ensuite. « Oubliez les sanctions arabes ! reconnaît un ambassadeur impliqué dans la crise. Elles ne devaient servir qu'à légitimer les sanctions occidentales, qui elles sont beaucoup plus contraignantes pour le régime syrien, notamment l'embargo pétrolier » adopté en septembre par l'Union européenne. Jeudi dernier, le ministre syrien du Pétrole, Soufiane

Allaou, a reconnu que son pays avait subi « d'importantes pertes » dues aux sanctions européennes et américaines, qui empêchent l'exportation du brut syrien. Il les a évaluées à 2 milliards de dollars environ (1,5 milliard d'euros) en quatre mois et demi.

Circuits parallèles

Mais « le manque à gagner sur le pétrole n'est pas si énorme que ça », fait valoir un expert économique européen au Moyen-Orient. En 2010, les exportations de brut syrien ne se montaient en effet qu'à 4 milliards de dollars seulement. Combien de temps le rais peut-il tenir économiquement ? « Au début de la révolte en mars, poursuivait l'expert, el-Assad disposait d'une vingtaine de milliards de dollars de réserves en devises à la banque centrale. Il doit lui en rester une bonne dizaine, il peut donc tenir encore un peu. »

Pour compenser ces pertes, Damas a réactivé les circuits parallèles de vente de pétrole avec l'Irak et l'Iran, deux pays amis qui veulent apporter un ballon d'oxygène au président syrien. En Irak, les hommes d'affaires chiites sont priés d'aider la Syrie, dirigée depuis quarante ans par des alaouites, une minorité issue du chiisme. À Damas, le réseau des industriels liés au très pro-Bachar patron de la Chambre de com-

merce, Rateb Challah, semble encore tenir. Mais pour combien de temps ? « Le but des sanctions occidentales bien plus qu'arabes, c'est précisément de viser tous les commerçants et hommes d'affaires qui hésitent encore à Damas et à Alep, de faire en sorte qu'ils se rendent compte qu'ils ont tout intérêt à se détacher rapidement du pouvoir », analyse l'ambassadeur précité.

Ces derniers mois, la situation économique n'a cessé de se dégrader. Les touristes ont disparu dans les venelles du souk. Le pouvoir d'achat des Syriens a baissé, et la livre a décroché par rapport au dollar. « El-Assad est engagé dans une course contre la montre, selon l'économiste, il lui faut à tout prix mater la contestation, car plus le temps passe, moins il a les moyens de la financer ». ■

Prix d'Or

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	Achat	Vente
Lingot d'or	€ 40 244	€ 41 476
20 Et. Or	€ 226	€ 253
10 Et. Or	€ 113	€ 134
Souverain	€ 286	€ 308
20 Dollar	€ 1 186	€ 1 436

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La Ligue arabe préconise un

« départ du régime » en douceur

LA LIGUE arabe, réunie en comité ministériel au Caire, a décidé hier soir de prolonger sa mission d'observation en Syrie. En outre, elle a demandé au président Bachar de favoriser l'établissement d'un gouvernement d'union nationale, intégrant les représentants de l'opposition. Selon le ministre des

Affaires étrangères du Qatar, il s'agit à terme d'obtenir « un départ du régime syrien de manière pacifique », à l'exemple de ce qui s'est fait au Yémen. Enfin, la Ligue a exprimé le souhait que ses décisions soient avalisées par le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU.

Ze maken elkaar af in Syrië

#Burgeroorlog Religieus geïnspireerde moorden veroorzaken een groeiend aantal slachtoffers.

REUTERS

Arnold Karstens
Homs/Amsterdam

Enkele weken geleden werd in de stad Homs, epicentrum van de Syrische Burgeroorlog, een 35-jarige man gestopt door gewapende soennitische opstandelingen. Ze zien hem aan voor een alawiet, een sjiitische minderheid waartoe ook president Bashar al-Assad behoort. Gebindoekt voert hij een dag lang geboeid met gestrekte armen tegen een muur moet staan. Onderwijl wordt met een kebabpen in zijn borst gesneden en wordt met stokken op zijn enkels geslagen. Hij overleeft omdat hij tot een andere sjiitische minderheid behoort, de ismaelieten. De getraumatiseerde man wil uit angst voor repressailles voor hem en zijn familie het verhaal zelf niet vertellen. Wel via een betrouwbare bron, die eraan toevoegt dat de man in het huis de stemmen hoorde van vier alawieten. Hij weet zeker dat enkelen van hen in het huis zijn omgebracht.

Christen

En andere inwoners vertelt dat in zijn wijk op één dag drie doden zijn gevonden. Van een christen was het hoofd afgesneden. Dan weet je dat de salafisten (extremistische soennieten) de daaders zijn. De anderen waren twee ontklede en eerder ontvoerde alawitische vrouwen. Daags erna werden twee christenen gedood, een vader en zoon. Ze repareerden de

auto van een politiemann.

Volgens bewoners van Homs, die deze krant bij een zeldzaam omhankelijk bezoek sprak, zijn de moordpartijen tussen de verschillende bevolkingsgroepen al maanden geleden in gang gezet, maar worden ze door de buitenwereld ontkend. Zo noemt de door de Nederlandse media vaak geciteerde mensenrechtenorganisatie Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in Londen deze moorden en ontvoeringen in Syrië 'propaganda van het regime'.

Dr. Mousab Azzawi: 'Op wat kleine conflicten na, zoals ruzie tussen

buurmannen en oververhitte jongeren, is er geen sprake van een sektarisch conflict in Syrië'. De burgerdoden worden volgens hem uitsluitend veroorzaakt door veiligheidsstroepen, militairen en de *shabiha*, criminele bendes gelieerd aan het regime. Ook 's werelds invloedrijkste mensenrechtenorganisatie Amnesty International heeft er 'niks over gerapporteerd', meldt een medewerker in Amsterdam. De organisatie is uiterst voorzichtig met het stempel sektarische strijd. 'Je weet niet altijd de motieven. Eigen onderzoek heeft Amnesty niet kunnen verrichten, omdat

Syrië de organisatie niet toelaat. Uniek zijn sektarische moorden in het Midden-Oosten niet. In buurland Irak kwamen tienduizenden mensen om het leven bij soennitische versus sjiitische vergeldingen na de overwinning van dictator Saddam Hoessein in 2003. De confrontaties duren voort tot de dag van vandaag. In Libanon stierven tijdens de burgeroorlog van 1975-1990 duizenden in een strijd die vooral langs religieuze en etnische lijnen liep.

Gevechten tussen militairen en opstandelingen gaan dag en nacht door in Homs. Maar volgens de goed

ingevoerde Nederlandse pater Frans van der Lugt valt 'naar schatting' de helft van de slachtoffers door religieus geïnspireerde moorden. Ze versterken de haat en daarmee het geweld, meent hij. 'Het zijn namelijk bijna altijd onschuldigen.' Na begravingen van soennieten en alawieten is het inmiddels gewoonte dat familieleden uit wraak de straat opgaan om leden van de tegenpartij te executeren. De pater: 'Een groep soennitische begrafenisgangers stapte een taxi. Omdat de chauffeur christen was, mocht hij blijven leven. De passagier was ook een christen maar ook militair. Daarom wilden ze hem toch doden.' De man overleefde door tussenkomst van omstanders. Waarna ze een ander slachtoffer zochten.

Sluipschutter

Maar ook de regering voedt de tegenstelling door terreur in met name soennitische wijken. Een 33-jarige winkelier vertelt hoe politieagenten vier willekeurige mannen die bij de verdeling van gastessen stonden als repressaille voor het ombrengen van een collega doodschoten. Een paar dagen eerder was hij er getuige van hoe een vriend, die gepantserde voorwerpen zag naderen, uit voorzorg zijn winkel met zoetheiden in een soennitische wijk verliet. 'Een sluipschutter schoot hem op straat door het hoofd. Niemand durfde hem te helpen omdat ze bang waren zelf te worden beschoten. Ik zag het en moest erg huilen.'

Wat is waar?

Feiten checken is erg lastig

De propagandamachine draait overuren in Syrië en de mogelijkheden om feiten te checken zijn gering. Zo zouden in juli regerings-aanhangers de elektriciteit naar een hospitaal in de stad Hama hebben afgesneden waardoor acht baby's in couveuses kwamen te overlijden. Het gerucht dat via Twitter de wereld in kwam, werd als feit gebracht door het Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in Londen. Die noemde CNN als bron, die op zijn beurt de mensenrechtenorganisatie als oorsprong aan-

maanden oude opstand verschildt sterk per organisatie. De VN melden het aantal van 5.000, waaronder ook doden aan regeringszijde. Het Syrian Observatory for Human Rights heeft per half januari het aantal van 6.321 uitsluitend civiele doden genoteerd. Amnesty International komt tot de helft en noemt 'zeker' 3.300 burgerdoden bij de laatste peiling in december. Het aantal gesneuvelde leden van leger en veiligheidsdiensten schommelt volgens regeringsbronnen tussen de 1.000 en 2.000.

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Kämpfe in Außenbezirken von Damaskus

Arabische Liga diskutiert über Beobachtermission in Syrien

DAMASKUS, 22. Januar (AFP). Syrische Deserteure haben am Wochenende nach heftigen Kämpfen die Stadt Duma vorübergehend unter ihre Kontrolle gebracht. Nach wenigen Stunden zogen sie sich in der Nacht zum Sonntag aber laut Angaben der Syrischen Beobachtungsstelle für Menschenrechte wieder aus der Stadt zurück, die zu den Außenbezirken der Hauptstadt Damaskus gehört. Nach Angaben der Regimegegner wurden die Kämpfe in Duma durch einen Angriff der Sicherheitskräfte auf einen Beerdigungszug ausgelöst, bei dem am Samstagnachmittag vier Trauergäste getötet worden waren. Nach Angaben der Beobachtungsstelle wurden am Samstag in der zentralsyrischen Stadt Maaret al-Noaman bei Zusammenstößen mit übergelaufenen Soldaten neun Militärs getötet. Außerdem seien 17 Häftlinge in einem Gefangenentransporter getötet worden, als eine am Straßenrand versteckte Bombe explodierte. Nach UN-Angaben wurden damit seit Beginn der Proteste im März vergangenen Jahres nun mehr als 5400 Menschen getötet, die meisten von ihnen durch die Sicherheitskräfte.

Die Arabische Liga schien unterdessen entschlossen, trotz der Kritik an ihrer Beobachtermission deren Mandat zu erweitern und zu verlängern. Der Generalsekretär des Staatenbunds, Nabil al Arabi, leitete eine Sitzung der Außenminister der Mitgliedstaaten, die am Sonntag in Kairo hinter verschlossenen Türen stattfand. Bei dem Treffen sollte der Leiter der Mission, der sudanesisische General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al Dabi, seinen Bericht vorstellen. Es wurde erwartet, dass er für eine Fortsetzung des Einsatzes und für mehr Beobachter plädieren würde.

Der oppositionelle Syrische Nationalrat (SNC) warf der Beobachtermission abermals vor, aufgrund der Umstände ih-



Protest: Demonstration im Damaszener Stadtteil Irbin

Foto AFP

res Einsatzes und der ihr zur Verfügung stehenden Mittel nicht in der Lage zu sein, einen „objektiven“ Bericht über die „tatsächliche Situation“ in Syrien vorzulegen. SNC-Chef Burhan Ghaliun traf sich am Samstag in Kairo mit al Arabi,

um ihn aufzufordern, den Einsatz abzubauen. Der SNC verlangt, dass die Arabische Liga das Thema Syrien an den UN-Sicherheitsrat überweist. Die Arabische Liga hatte am 26. Dezember die ersten Beobachter nach Syrien entsandt.

Süddeutsche Zeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Endspiel in Syrien

Militärisch ist Syriens Opposition schwach. Trotzdem erringt sie inzwischen erste Erfolge im ungleichen Kampf gegen die syrische Armee, dem unbesiegtbar erscheinenden Goliath. In einem Gebirgsstädtchen zwangen die Einheimischen die Truppen von Präsident Assad, einen Waffenstillstand zu schließen. Andere Kämpfer aus dem Anti-Assad-Lager haben für ein paar Stunden sogar einen Ort am Rand der Metropole Damaskus kontrolliert, sich dann aber ungeschlagen zurückgezogen. Ist das die Wende in Syrien und der Anfang vom Ende des Assad-Regimes?

Die Opposition mag militärisch stärker werden – aber jeder noch so kleine Sieg der schlecht bewaffneten Aufständischen liefert Präsident Assad den Vorwand, noch brutaler gegen die Rebellion vorzugehen. In Teilen bleibt dieser Aufstand bis heute friedlich, während die

auf Waffen setzenden Regimegegner bestenfalls langfristig Boden gewinnen können. Solange Assads eigene Soldaten nicht in Scharen zu den Aufständischen überlaufen, bleibt das militärische Ungleichgewicht überwältigend.

Wichtiger erscheint derzeit, was außerhalb Syriens geschieht. Die Arabische Liga schickt neue Beobachter ins Land und führt ihre fragwürdige Friedensmission kurzfristig fort. Kommt der Sicherheitsrat als Weltkontrollorgan zum Zug? Aber selbst wenn die Liga den Wünschen der Exil-Opposition folgen und das Syrien-Dossier an die UN weiterreichen würde, wäre noch nichts gewonnen: Solange die Veto-Mächte Russland und China den angeschlagenen Präsidenten Assad nicht fallenlassen, bleibt der Sicherheitsrat gespalten. All dies gewährt Assad Zeit. Die Frage bleibt, ob sie für sein Regime oder für seine Gegner arbeitet. ave

Tageszeitung (Allemagne / Germany)

Offenbar weiterhin Beobachter in Syrien

SYRIEN Beobachtermission wird trotz Kritik des oppositionellen Syrischen Nationalrats wohl verlängert

DAMASKUS/BERLIN *afp/taz* | Die Arabische Liga steht offenbar vor einer Verlängerung ihres Beobachterinsatzes in Syrien. Der für den Konflikt in dem Land zuständige Ausschuss in dem Staatenbund empfahl gestern in Kairo den arabischen Außenministern, das Mandat ihrer Mission wie ein Monat zu verlängern, wie ein Vertreter der Liga mitteilte. Über die Verlängerung des Mandats wollten die Außenminister der Arabischen Liga noch am Abend beraten. Syrische Delegationen hatten am Wochenende

die Stadt Duma vorübergehend unter ihre Kontrolle gebracht. In der Nacht zu gestern zogen sie sich aber wieder zurück, wie die Syrische Beobachtungsstelle für Menschenrechte mitteilte.

Rami Abdel Rahman von der Beobachtungsstelle in London hatte unter Berufung auf Aktivisten vor Ort berichtet, die zur Operation übergelaufenen Soldaten kontrollierten sämtliche Bezirke der Stadt. Die Gefechte seien durch einen Angriff der Sicherheitskräfte auf einen Beerdigungszug aufgelöst worden, bei

dem vier Trauergäste starben. Duma liegt rund 20 Kilometer nordöstlich der Hauptstadt Damaskus.

Nach Angaben von Abdel Rahman wurden am Samstag in der zentralsyrischen Stadt Maaret al-Noaman bei Zusammenstößen mit übergelaufenen Soldaten neun Militärs getötet. Außerdem seien 17 Häftlinge in einem Gefangenentransporter getötet worden, als eine am Straßenrand versteckte Bombe explodierte. In Syrien gibt es seit mehr als zehn Monaten gewaltsame Proteste

gegen Staatspräsident Baschar al-Assad.

Der oppositionelle Syrische Nationalrat (SNC) warf der Beobachtermission erneut vor, aufgrund der Umstände ihres Einsatzes nicht in der Lage zu sein, einen „objektiven“ Bericht über die „tatsächliche Situation“ in Syrien vorzulegen. SNC-Chef Burhan Ghaliun traf sich am Samstag mit dem Leiter der Mission, dem sudanesischen General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, um ihn zu drängen, den Einsatz abzubrechen.

Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Suisse / Switzerland)

Die Araber streiten über die Beobachtermission in Syrien

Berichte über Kämpfe zwischen Rebellen und Loyalisten in der Peripherie von Damaskus

Während eine Mehrheit der arabischen Staaten eine Verlängerung der Beobachtermission in Syrien befürwortet, hat Saudi-Arabien sich daraus zurückgezogen. Um Damaskus nehmen die Zusammenstösse zwischen Truppen und Rebellen zu.

Jürg Bischoff, Kairo

Während Berichte aus Syrien auf zunehmende Kämpfe zwischen bewaffneten Aufständischen und Regierungstruppen schliessen lassen, empfiehlt das Syrien-Komitee der Arabischen Liga eine Verlängerung der Beobachtermission im Land. Der Liga-Ministerrat, der am Sonntagabend in Kairo zusammentrat, ist der Empfehlung gefolgt. Zudem forderten die Ausseminister des Staatenbündnisses den syrischen Präsidenten Asad zum teilweisen Machtverzicht auf. Die Verlängerung des Mandats erfolgt hauptsächlich aus Mangel an Alternativen und wegen Meinungsunterschieden zwischen den Mitgliedstaaten.

Kämpfe zwischen regimetreuen Truppen und desertierten Soldaten haben laut Berichten aus Oppositionskreisen in den letzten Tagen in der Nähe der Hauptstadt stattgefunden. Im Städtchen Zabadani, das in den Bergen zwischen Damaskus und der libanesischen Grenze liegt, wurde letzte Woche nach Zusammenstössen erstmals eine Waffenruhe zwischen Rebellen und Regierungskräften vereinbart. Am Samstag konnten ausländische Medienleute und arabische Beobachter den Ort besuchen und unbeaufsichtigt mit den Einwohnern sprechen. Gleichentags besuchten Journalisten die Stadt Daraa im Süden des Landes, die von Regierungstruppen kontrolliert wird.

Anschlag auf Polizeibus

Am Wochenende kam es laut Oppositionsgruppen in Duma und anderen Orten in der Peripherie der Hauptstadt zu Kämpfen. Die Zusammenstösse seien ausgebrochen, nachdem Sicherheitskräfte auf den Trauerzug für einen am Vortag getöteten Aktivisten geschossen hätten. Darauf seien bewaffnete Auf-

ständische gegen die Truppen vorgegangen, die für kurze Zeit die Kontrolle über Duma verloren hätten, hiess es. Auch aus der Provinz Idlib wurden Kämpfe gemeldet; bei einem Anschlag auf einen Polizeibus, den offizielle Medien einer bewaffneten Gruppe zuschrieben, wurden angeblich 17 Gefangene getötet, die im Fahrzeug transportiert wurden.

Da die Arabische Liga dazu nicht bereit scheint, hat der oppositionelle Syrische Nationalrat (SNC) am Sonntag angekündigt, er werde den Sicherheitsrat der Uno selber ersuchen, in Syrien einzugreifen. Einige Länder wie Algerien, der Sudan, der Irak und Ägypten wollen die syrische Krise im arabischen Rahmen lösen und deren Internationalisierung vermeiden. Die arabischen Länder fürchten sich aber ebenso wie die Nato-Staaten davor, im syrischen Westpennest militärisch einzugreifen, wie dies Katar vorgeschlagen hatte.

Saudi-Arabien, dem das Asad-Regime schon lange ein Dorn im Auge ist, zieht seine Mitglieder aus der Beobachtermission allerdings zurück. Ausseminister Prinz Saud al-Faisal begründete den

Schritt damit, dass Syrien seine Versprechen zur Beruhigung der Lage nicht erfüllt habe. Er forderte internationalen Druck auf Syrien, einschliesslich jenen Russlands und Chinas sowie der islamischen Länder.

Gefangene freigelassen

Das Regime in Damaskus fördert die arabische Unentschlossenheit, indem es seine Versprechen tröpfchenweise einlöst und der Liga so Gelegenheit gibt, auf Fortschritte hinzuweisen. Beobachtern und internationalen Medien wurde der Zugang zu einigen aufständischen Orten gewährt, punktuell wurden Truppen abgezogen und Gefangene freigelassen. Laut der amtlichen Nachrichtenagentur Sama sind seit Mitte Januar 5255 Häftlinge auf freien Fuss gesetzt worden. Die zunehmenden Kämpfe und Berichte über abgefangene Waffentransporte stützen zudem die Darstellung. Präsident Asads, das Land sehe sich einem Aufstand von Terrorgruppen gegenüber, die aus dem Ausland gesteuert und mit Waffen versorgt würden.

Syrie: Riyad se retire de la mission arabe

Au Caire, lors de l'examen du premier rapport de la mission des observateurs de la Ligue arabe en Syrie, Riyad a annoncé son retrait

L'Arabie saoudite a créé la surprise en annonçant hier son retrait de la mission controversée des observateurs arabes en Syrie. Riyad a fait connaître ses intentions lors de la réunion attendue de la Ligue arabe qui devait décider la prolongation pour un mois du mandat des observateurs. L'Arabie saoudite justifie ce retrait car «le gouvernement syrien n'a respecté aucune des clauses du plan arabe prévoyant la fin des violences», a précisé le chef de la diplomatie saoudienne Saoud al-Fayçal, lors de la réunion plénière ministérielle de l'organisation au Caire.

Ce retrait saoudien témoigne des vives divergences qui existent depuis des semaines au sein de la Ligue arabe sur l'attitude à avoir vis-à-vis du régime de Bachar el-Assad, engagé dans une sanglante répression. Déployées depuis le

26 décembre, les délégations d'observateurs arabes font l'objet de vives critiques de la part de l'opposition syrienne, qui accuse la mission d'être inefficace. Lors de la réunion d'hier, le premier rapport des 165 observateurs a été présenté. Il fait «porter aux deux parties concernées la responsabilité de la poursuite des violences». Sur le terrain, des soldats déserteurs ont brièvement pris samedi soir la ville de Douma, à seulement 20 km au nord-est de la capitale syrienne, après de violents combats avec les forces de sécurité. Ils auraient ensuite dû quitter la ville.

Par ailleurs, samedi, le quotidien français *Le Figaro*, fait état d'un témoignage indiquant que le reporter de France 2, le Haut-Savoyard Gilles Jacquier, tué à Homs le 11 janvier, pourrait avoir été victime d'un tir des opposants à Bachar el-Assad. Un dirigeant d'une organisation des droits de l'homme de cette ville aurait en effet confié à un responsable de l'opposition syrienne en France qu'il s'agissait «d'une grosse bourde». **O.B.**

El Mundo (Espagne / Spain)



ministros de Exteriores de la Liga Árabe, durante su reunión de ayer en El Cairo. / AMEL PAIN / EFE

Riad retira a sus observadores de Siria

El grupo de contacto sobre Siria de la Liga Árabe pidió ayer que se prolongue la misión de sus observadores durante un mes y que se envíe a un número suficiente de expertos. Una propuesta que chocó ayer con la negativa de Arabia Saudí. El ministro de Exteriores Saud al Faisal aseguró ante sus homólogos en la sede de El Cairo que Riad retirará a sus observadores para protestar contra el régimen de Bashar Asad, que hasta el momento ha hecho oídos sordos al plan de paz árabe,

informa Efe. «La comunidad internacional, incluyendo los países islámicos, China y Rusia, debería ejercer toda la presión posible sobre Damasco para que implemente esa iniciativa», reclamó Al Faisal. A la espera de que los demás países se pronuncien sobre la propuesta del grupo de contacto, el régimen sirio se prepara para hacer frente a nuevas sanciones por parte de la Unión Europea, que hoy añadirá ocho nuevas empresas y 22 individuos a la 'lista negra' comunitaria.

Publico (Portugal)

Sauditas rompem com caminho da Liga Árabe para a Síria

Dulce Furtado

Os países árabes querem que Assad entregue o poder ao vice-presidente e a um governo de unidade nacional nos próximos meses até eleições antecipadas

● A Arábia Saudita apartou-se do caminho escolhido pela Liga Árabe para lidar com a situação de convulsão na Síria anunciando ontem, numa crucial reunião dos ministros dos Negócios Estrangeiros árabes, no Cairo, que retira os seus observadores da missão da organização naquele país, recusando-se a participar numa próxima fase.

Em cima da mesa no Cairo estava uma proposta de declaração, com 15 recomendações, instando o Presidente sírio, Bashar al-Assad, a passar o poder para o número dois do seu regime, ficando este encarregado de formar um governo de unidade nacional dentro de dois meses para gerir o país na transição para a realização de eleições legislativas e presidenciais antecipadas, até Abril.

Este mesmo governo de unidade, segundo uma cópia da proposta obtida pela agência noticiosa Reuters, deverá criar uma comissão independente para investigar violações dos di-

Protesto contra o regime de Assad perto de Idlib, no Noroeste da Síria



ções adoptadas pela organização em Novembro, as primeiras que a Liga jamais aprovou contra um dos seus próprios países-membros (desde logo suspenso) e que incluem o corte das relações comerciais com a Síria e o congelamento dos bens de Damasco nos países árabes.

O chefe da diplomacia saudita insistiu ainda a comunidade internacional a exercer "toda a pressão possível" sobre Damasco para pôr fim à violência, que se solda já em mais de 5400 mortos e pôs o país à beira da guerra civil, conforme cada vez mais soldados se recusaram a cumprir as ordens de disparar contra manifestante, desertaram, e começaram a formar uma frente armada de rebelião a Assad.

Virando-se igualmente para a comunidade internacional, o Conselho Nacional Sírio, maior grupo de oposição do país, exigiu que a Liga Árabe transfira o "dossier Síria" para o Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas e, daí, para o Tribunal Penal Internacional.

O grupo quer ainda que as Nações Unidas "tomem decisões firmes para proteger o povo sírio", aludindo à terminologia que aprovou a zona de exclusão aérea na Líbia, conduziu à queda do regime de Muammar Khadafi e, finalmente, à captura do coronel pela rebelião e à sua morte, a 20 de Outubro.

26 de Dezembro, não tendo conseguido pôr fim à violência. Agora é tempo de "cumprir seriamente as decisões tomadas pelo Conselho da Liga Árabe de impor sanções à Síria de forma a pressionar o país a respeitar os seus compromissos", sublinhou ainda – evocando as severas puni-

plano de pacificação árabe, firmado há um mês com Damasco", disse o ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Saud al-Faisal, justificando assim a decisão tomada por Riad de sair da missão de observadores.

Faisal avaliou que a missão "falhou" desde a sua chegada à Síria a

reiros humanos cometidos contra os civis na Síria durante os dez meses de revolta contra o regime de Assad.

Enquanto era debatida a terminologia a usar na declaração, a Arábia Saudita mostrava sinais de dissensão. "O Governo sírio não respeitou nenhuma das cláusulas do acordo [do

The Daily Telegraph (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Arab League calls on Assad to hand power to coalition government

By Richard Spencer in Cairo and Ruth Sherlock in Beirut

BASHAR AL-ASSAD, the embattled Syrian president, was given an ultimatum last night by his Arab League neighbours to abandon his monopoly on power, create a coalition government with the opposition and oversee a transition to democracy within six months.

After a day of intense argument, League leaders made an unprecedented decision to decide how an Arab nation should constitute its government.

And for the second time in a year after its intervention over Libya, it sought United Nations Security Council approval for its actions, raising the longer term prospect of international action.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jaseem al-Thani, the prime minister of Qatar, reiterated warnings that the League could send in peacekeeping troops to separate the sides in an emerging civil war.

"The new Arab initiative adopted by the foreign ministers envisages the peaceful departure of the Syrian regime," he said, adding that it mirrored a Gulf-led deal to ease President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen from power last year. The

meeting of Arab foreign ministers lasted six hours longer than scheduled.

The leader of the monitoring mission to Syria, Gen Mustafa al-Dabi, had recommended extending the mission for another month, and was backed by Nabil al-Araby, the secretary-general, even though he also accused Mr Assad of exploiting it for his own purposes.

An extension had been fiercely opposed by Syrian opposition groups who claimed it gave licence to Mr Assad to "carry on killing".

Saudi Arabia announced it was pulling its observers out. "It is not a quality of Arab leaders to kill their people," a statement by Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister, said, accusing the Assad regime of using the mission to "hide its crimes".

The offer that emerged was a compromise, but a detailed one. It said Mr Assad should open a dialogue with the opposition within two weeks, form a coalition government in two months, and then allow free elections.

It was not clear whether the League had sought a response in advance from Mr Assad, but he was also facing an ever bleaker situation at home. Activists said they were in control of Douma, a town on

the outskirts of Damascus and just 10 miles from the city centre, after the army was forced to withdraw.

Clashes began on Saturday at the funeral of Mohammed Said Maddah, a protester who had been shot dead, according to Omar al-Khani, of the Syrian Revolutionary Command in Damascus.

"When the martyr's body arrived, along with the funeral procession, the criminal Assad gangs waged a surprise attack and shot at them," he said. Gun battles with the rebel Free Syrian Army led to government troops eventually withdrawing.

"The FSA gathered near Hawwa mosque," said an activist who claimed to have been present at the funeral. "Then they advanced attacking the Syrian troops stationed at the end of the street.

"The FSA managed to kill seven or eight troops and capture one officer".

Douma is the second town near Damascus to have declared itself free of government control, after Zabadani.

Mr Araby said the presence of monitors was softening the regime's stance. The regime may also have been keen to avoid the fighting necessary to reclaim the two towns while the League decided on its next steps.

The Independent (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)

Arab League under fire over Syrian mission

By **ALASTAIR BEACH**
in Cairo

The Arab League's credibility was in jeopardy last night as opposition figures and a senior UN official condemned the bloc's mission to Syria, while Saudi Arabia announced it was withdrawing its monitors from the country, despite the Arab League officially extending its mandate.

Foreign ministers from the 22 member states met in Cairo yesterday and voted to extend the Syria operation for four more weeks, frustrating activists who had been hoping Arab officials would pass the matter to the United Nations Security Council.

"The Syrian street is demanding the League takes its file to the Security Council," said Adib Shishakly, grandson of a former Syrian president and leading member of the opposition Syrian National Council. "All options should be on the table. Whether it is through a no-fly zone or a safe area, we want to leave it up to the Security Council to decide what is the best way for the international community to protect civilians."

The mission received a further blow with the announcement that Saudi Arabia – which has frosty relations with Damascus – was withdrawing from the process. "My country will withdraw its monitors because the Syrian government did not execute any of the elements of the Arab resolution plan," Prince Saud al-Faisal told Arab foreign ministers in Cairo.

Since its launch in December, when President Bashar al-Assad reluctantly agreed to admit some 165 monitors as part of an Arab peace initiative, the operation has been hamstrung. Activists and opposition figures have listed a catalogue of grievances, ranging from inept observers to sabotage by the regime.

In one instance, the Arab League HQ in Cairo was reportedly sent information about mass graves near Homs, but observers failed to visit the areas. There were also reports that Syrian troops received police IDs in certain cities, allowing them to stay in situ. Questions were raised about the suitability of the Arab League



Syrian women protest outside the Arab League building yesterday in Cairo GETTY IMAGES

team. The mission head, Mustafa al-Dabi, has faced allegations of links to human rights abuses in his home country, Sudan. Some League monitors had only a two-hour briefing before reaching Syria. Nadim Houry, from Human Rights Watch, said the operation was characterised by a "complete lack of transparency".

A senior UN source said the League should have deployed at least five people per trouble spot – which should have meant at least 10 times the number of observers than were deployed to cover the hundreds of restive towns and cities across Syria. The UN estimates about 5,000 civilians have been killed in the 10 months of unrest.

"They didn't have any training," said the source. "They weren't told about methodology and how to collect information; how to protect sources and witnesses; how to protect information."

Adib Shishakly says some observers were taking pictures. "I saw one on TV who was borrowing a pen from protesters," he said. "The government were taking them for a ride," Mr Shishakly said.

In response the Syrian government said that it has afforded all observers from the the Arab League mission full access to all parts of the country.

The UN says about 5,000 civilians have been killed in the 10 months of unrest in Syria

La Presse (Canada)



PHOTO KHALED DESOUKI, AFP

Manifestation anti-Assad hier au Caire, à l'extérieur du siège de la Ligue arabe.

Les Arabes veulent un transfert de pouvoirs à Damas

D'APRÈS L'AFP

LE CAIRE — Les chefs de diplomatie arabes ont adopté hier une nouvelle initiative pour un règlement en Syrie prévoyant un transfert de pouvoirs du président Bachar al-Assad à son adjoint et un cabinet d'union, avec l'intention d'obtenir le soutien de l'ONU à leur plan.

Tôt aujourd'hui, le régime syrien a catégoriquement rejeté ce nouveau plan, en le qualifiant d'«ingérence flagrante dans ses affaires intérieures», selon un responsable cité par la télévision officielle syrienne.

«La Syrie rejette les décisions prises à son encontre en dehors du plan du travail arabe et considère que celles-ci portent atteinte à sa souveraineté nationale et (constituent) une ingérence flagrante dans ses affaires intérieures», selon ce responsable.

Les chefs de diplomatie de la Ligue arabe ont décidé de prolonger la mission des observateurs, mais cette question a été éclipsée par les clauses du nouveau plan qui, selon le ministre des Affaires étrangères du Qatar cheikh Hamad ben Jassem ben Jabr al-Thani, vise à «un départ du régime syrien de manière pacifique».

L'appel arabe à un soutien de l'ONU a été favorablement accueilli par le chef du Conseil national syrien (CNS),

plus important groupe de l'opposition, Burhan Ghalioun, qui a cependant affirmé que «toute transition en Syrie devra être précédée d'une annonce de départ de M. Assad».

Les annonces de la Ligue arabe ont été faites lors d'une conférence de presse de cheikh Jassem et du chef de l'organisation Nabil al-Arabi, après une réunion ministérielle au Caire de près de cinq heures sur la Syrie, en proie depuis 10 mois à une révolte populaire réprimée dans le sang par le régime.

Selon un communiqué final lu par cheikh Hamad, la nouvelle initiative appelle M. Assad à déléguer «des prérogatives au vice-président pour traiter avec un gouvernement d'union nationale» appelé à être «formé dans les deux mois».

Ce cabinet devra être «présidé par une personnalité de consensus. Sa mission sera d'appliquer le plan arabe et de préparer des élections législatives et présidentielle pluralistes et libres sous supervision arabe et internationale», ajoute le plan.

Il demande au «gouvernement et à tous les courants de l'opposition d'engager un dialogue sérieux sous l'égide de la Ligue arabe dans un délai ne dépassant pas les deux semaines pour pouvoir réaliser l'objectif de former un gouvernement d'union».

The Globe and Mail (Canada)

As regime falters, who will replace Assad?

Arab League, Syrians see all President's legitimacy gone, but questions remain about who could usher in reform

PATRICK MARTIN BEIRUT

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad may not be in any immediate danger of defeat or collapse, but his regime is finished. That's the message gleaned from interviews with several Syrians and Syria-watchers in Lebanon over the past two weeks, and the surprisingly blunt message delivered Sunday by the Arab League in a chaotic meeting in Cairo.

"There's no doubt Assad has to go," said Selim al-Hoss, a three-time prime minister of Lebanon whose government once was saved by the Syrian military during the country's civil war. "The problem is: Who would take his place?"

The question encapsulates the dilemma facing the Arab League and the outside world as they try to wrest changes in behaviour from Mr. al-Assad, if not a complete change in the regime.

"Until the people know that, the majority will continue to support him," said the ailing Mr. al-Hoss, who received a personal visit from the Syrian ambassador to Lebanon on Friday. "At least he's the devil they know."

In Cairo, the Arab League has now changed gears dramatically. Meeting to decide on an extension of its mission to monitor Syria's adherence to a peace plan, the group ended up urging the Syrian President to "delegate powers to [his] vice-president to liaise with a government of national unity," to be formed in two months.

The urging came in a statement delivered by Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani, who is chairing the Arab League meetings, and whose royal ruler had been at the forefront of Arab leaders opposing the regime of Col. Moammar Gadhafi in Libya and now President al-Assad in Syria.

Earlier, Saudi Arabia, which has maintained a public stance of neutrality toward the al-Assad regime, announced it was withdrawing its monitors from Syria because the regime had not lived up to any of its commitments. "We are not going to accept being used as witnesses to crimes or to hide their crimes," Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said in a statement, referring to the Arab League mission.

Under the peace plan, Syrian authorities were supposed to stop attacking peaceful protests,



A Syrian demonstrator holds a picture of a missing relative as violent crackdowns continue in the country. REUTERS

withdraw troops and tanks from the streets, free detainees and open a political dialogue. It is that "political dialogue" that the League now is emphasizing.

There are some leading Syrians who believe such a process is the only way to satisfactorily resolve the current conflict and usher in change. "The regime can never go back to the way it was before March 15. Those days are history," said a former senior government official, referring to the day popular protests first broke out in Syria.

"The only question now is whether Bashar recognizes this in time and agrees to hand over authority to a truly democratic system," added the former high-ranking official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Those who think the regime can tri-

umph [by its violent crackdown] are talking stupidly."

Stupid or not, the crackdown is continuing and with a vengeance. More than 70 people were reported killed this weekend including some 14 opposition members who had been taken prisoner. They died when the bus in which they were being transported was struck by a series of bombs near the northern city of Idlib. The number of fatalities climbed dramatically when 30 unidentified bodies were reportedly found hidden in a hospital morgue in Homs.

"The current situation [in Syria] can go on for years," said Mohamed Chatah, a foreign policy adviser to Saad Hariri, leader of Lebanon's opposition Future Movement party. "Neither side can win outright as things stand,

but neither will yield."

According to the former Syrian official, options are limited. The only "realistic choices" facing the Syrian President are either to hand over power to a new system or be shot in a ditch, he said. And the longer Mr. al-Assad waits before agreeing to a handover, "the more likely is the violent end."

In the kind of handover envisioned by the ex-official and by the Arab League, there would be a transitional period in which President al-Assad remained in office, albeit with reduced powers, and formation of a government composed of opposition figures and presidential appointees. None of those would come from the currently ruling Baath Party. This proposed transitional leadership would administer the

country until a new constitution is approved and democratic elections are held.

"Syrians don't want to see Assad just replaced by another dictator or some revolutionary group. They want to make sure there's a real change to democracy," the former Syrian official said. "A negotiated exit," he added, "is an incentive to step down."

Of course a skeptical opposition also would have to agree to negotiate such a handover. While some internal opposition elements appear prepared to have negotiations, and while the Arab League initiative calls specifically for them, the Syrian National Council, the major outside opposition group, has insisted on Mr. al-Assad's unconditional surrender.

The Wall Street Journal (USA)

Clashes Rack Syria as Arab League Weighs Mission

Associated Press

A clash between Syrian forces and army defectors erupted Sunday in a suburb of the tightly held capital of Damascus, adding urgency just as the Arab League moved toward extending an observers' mission that so far has failed to end months of deadly violence.

The two events outlined how an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad that started with mass popular protests is moving now toward an armed conflict that could draw international intervention—an outcome the Arab League is trying to avoid.

Arab League foreign ministers, meeting in Cairo, extended the

much-criticized observers mission for another month, officials from the 22-member organization said. The league will add more observers and provide them with additional resources, the officials said.

The officials said the United Nations would train the observers.

The observer mission is supposed to be the first step toward implementing an Arab League plan to end the Syria crisis. The plan also requires Syria to pull heavy weapons out of cities, stop attacks on protesters, open talks with the opposition and allow entry to foreign human-rights workers and journalists.

"There is partial progress in the implementation of the promises," Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby said

in Cairo about Syria's implementation of the plan. Syria "did not carry out all its promises, although there are some implementation pledges."

He added that the use of "extreme force" by Syrian forces have led to a reaction by the opposition "in what could lead to civil war."

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal told reporters that his country will withdraw its observers because "the Syrian government did not implement the Arab plan."

He urged Muslim countries, China, Russia, Europe and the U.S. to put pressure on Mr. Assad's government to stop the violence.

Saudi Arabia has been one of the harshest Arab critics of the crack-

down. It recalled its ambassador from Damascus last year in protest.

So far, the observer mission hasn't gone well. Though some observers credit it with tamping down violence in some places, the Local Coordination Committees activist group said Sunday that 976 people, including 54 children and 28 women, have been killed since the observers began their mission last month.

The U.N. estimates that 5,400 people have been killed since March.

The Arab League faced three options Sunday: ending the mission and giving up its initiative, extending it, or turning the crisis over to the U.N. Security Council, as some opposition groups have urged. There, however, it would face a pos-

sible stalemate because of disagreements among permanent members over how far to go in forcing Mr. Assad's hand.

The mission's one-month mandate technically expired on Thursday.

The pullout of Mr. Assad's security forces from the Damascus suburb of Douma marked the second time in a week that troops have been deployed from an area near the tightly controlled Syrian capital, an indication that Mr. Assad might be losing some control.

Diplomacy has taken on urgency as opponents of Mr. Assad's regime and soldiers who switched sides increasingly take up arms and fight against government forces.

The Washington Post (USA)

Arab bloc urges power transfer in Syria

Plan for Assad to step aside signals frustration in region

BY LIZ SLY

DAMASCUS — The Arab League on Sunday called on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to hand over power to his vice president under the terms of a transition plan similar to that which paved the way for the departure, hours earlier, of Yemen's president for the United States.

The announcement of the plan at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo signaled growing Arab frustration with Assad's failure to implement the terms of a peace plan to which he agreed in November, and it offered the clearest indication yet that Arab states want him to step down.

The plan laid down a timetable under which negotiations with the opposition would begin in two weeks and a national unity government would be formed within two months. Assad would then leave office ahead of elections to be held within three months. It was not immediately clear which of two Syrian vice presidents, Farouk al-Shara or Najah al-Attar, would be expected to take over.

The Syrian National Council, the main Syrian opposition coalition, welcomed the initiative as a step toward Assad's departure, the group's leader, Burhan Ghalioun, told reporters in Cairo. Activists in Syria have repeatedly said, however, that they will not negotiate with Assad.

There was no immediate response from the Syrian government, and a spokesman did not respond to calls seeking comment.

But Assad vowed in a defiant speech this month that he would not step down unless the Syrian people asked him to, and the Arab League's secretary general, Nabil Elaraby told reporters that the bloodshed would have to stop before the negotiations could start, a condition that cast into doubt the likelihood the plan would succeed at a time of rapidly escalating violence.

"The chances of that happening are next to zero, and I also can't imagine Assad will accept this,"



HANI MOHAMMED/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Protesters in Yemen react to news that President Ali Abdullah Saleh had left for Oman. He is expected to continue on to the United States.

said Salman Shaikh, director of the Brookings Doha Center in Qatar. "At best, this is throwing down something that is certainly new but has little chance of success."

The league said it would refer the plan for endorsement to the U.N. Security Council, indicating that Arab states are prepared to seek wider international involvement in the Syria crisis.

Monitoring expanded

Qatari Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jasim al-Thani told reporters in Cairo that the plan is much like the one brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council under which Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to transfer power to his vice president. Saleh left Yemen on Sunday and is expected to travel to the United States for medical care.

The Syria plan appeared to have overwhelming Arab endorsement. Only Lebanon, whose government is closely aligned with Syria's, objected. Algeria expressed "reservations." Iraq, which had previously abstained from sanctioning Syria, seemed to have signed on to the initiative.

But there were no indications as to what steps would be taken if Assad failed to comply. Hours earlier, Saudi Arabia said it was withdrawing its observers from a mission to monitor the violence in Syria, in a hint of underlying divisions within the league over how to proceed should the violence continue to escalate. At the Sunday meeting, league officials agreed to extend the monitoring mission for another month and expand it to include extra observers.

"The goal is to stop the bloodshed," Hamad said, citing Assad's failure to comply with league demands to withdraw troops from residential areas, stop killing protesters and release political prisoners. "We do not wish to prolong this."

22 reported killed Sunday

Activist groups reported that 22 people were killed by security forces Sunday in incidents around the country, nine of them in Douma, a suburb on the northeastern edge of Damascus where fierce clashes have been reported between troops and rebels fighting in the name of the Free Syrian Army.

There were unconfirmed reports that security forces had withdrawn from parts of the town, less than a week after the

army was forced to pull out from the town of Zabadani, 20 miles to the west.

In a video posted on YouTube, a masked, uniformed soldier holding a rifle and flanked by other armed men read a statement claiming that the Free Syrian Army had driven the army from Douma. If government forces attempt to retake the town, the man warned, "We will fire rockets at the presidential palace and execute the five senior officers who are our prisoners."

The official news agency, SANA, on Sunday reported that seven members of the security forces had been killed in attacks, including a brigadier general in charge of "e-warfare" who was assassinated in the town of Rankous, outside Damascus.

slyl@washpost.com

The Washington Times (USA)

Assad's fall could solve Iraqi weapons mystery

BY ROWAN SCARBOROUGH

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

If Syria's regime falls, the U.S. will be in a better position to answer one of the lingering questions from the long Iraq War: Did Baghdad ship weapons of mass destruction components to Syria before the 2003 American-led invasion?

An opposition leader tells The Washington Times that a new, secular democracy in Syria would allow outside inspectors to survey and ensure destruction of what is believed to be one of the largest stockpiles of chemical weapons in the Middle East.

Western and Israeli intelligence suspect that Bashar Assad's regime in Syria also owns weaponized nerve agents.

Spy satellites tracked a large number of truck convoys moving from Iraq to Syria in the weeks before the 2003 invasion, raising suspicions that some carried weapons of mass destruction.

The invading Americans never found stocks of such weapons in Iraq, despite two years of searching by the Iraq Survey Group.

The result spurred the political left to

» see **SYRIA** | **A13**

Syrian exiles send vital aid from Lebanon

BY KARINE G. BARZEGAR

SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

BEIRUT | Syrian dissidents based in Lebanon have stepped up efforts to help the opposition in their country by smuggling medicine, satellite phones, cameras and weapons into Syria — and refugees and injured fighters out.

From their safe houses in Beirut, Tripoli and the border village of Wadi Khaled, the dissidents remain in constant contact with activists inside Syria, as the bloody 10-month-old conflict devolves toward civil war.

“Because of the social media, because of the new ways to make a revolution, borders don't matter

» see **DISSIDENTS** | **A14**

SYRIA

From page A1

attack President Bush with slogans such as "Bush lied, troops died," but nonpartisan national security figures said there was evidence that material may have been moved to Syria. There was just no way to get inside the Iranian-supported dictatorship to take a look.

Zuhdi Jasser, a Syrian-American physician who co-founded the group Save Syria Now, is working to bring an elected secular government to Damascus. He said the Assad regime, which has used brutal repression to remain in power, can fall within a year if the popular uprising comes to the capital.

"As far as making sure there is a public transparent disposal of [weapons of mass destruction], I believe so," Dr. Jasser told *The Times*.

He said an emerging group, the Syrian Democratic Coalition, is preparing a pledge by pro-democracy members.

"Many of us are banking on the fact they will not protect any arsenals there and allow a transparent change so they can be welcomed into the world community and not simply exchange one fascist government for another," he said.

Disposing of Syria's chemical weapons "has to be part of the transition," he said.

Research groups say the Assad regime maintains large stocks of chemical weapons, including mustard gas.

"Over the past three decades, Syria has acquired an arsenal of chemical weapons (CW) and surface-to-surface missiles, reportedly has conducted research and development in biological

weapons (BW), and may be interested in a nuclear weapons capability," said a 2003 report by the Congressional Research Service.

Iraq at one point did possess large stocks of chemical weapons and used them on Iran and the Iraqi Kurdish population.

After the 1991 Persian Gulf War, U.N. inspectors destroyed huge caches. But U.S. intelligence agencies always believed that Saddam Hussein clung to some materials because of his regime's efforts to evade and confuse U.N. inspectors.

Suspicious lingered during the administration of President Clinton, who ordered five days of airstrikes on Iraq in 1998 to destroy what he said were remaining stockpiles that could fall into the hands of terrorists. Mr. Bush offered a similar rationale for war in 2003.

"Their mission is to attack Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs and its military capacity to threaten its neighbors," Mr. Clinton told the American people.

Among those who suspect a Syrian connection is retired Air Force Lt. Gen. James R. Clapper Jr., who is now the most senior U.S. intelligence officer.

He told *The Times* in 2003 that U.S. satellites documented waves of truck traffic out of Iraq and into Syria.

"I think personally that those below the senior leadership saw what was coming, and I think they went to some extraordinary lengths to dispose of the evidence," said Gen. Clapper, who then headed the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and now is director of national intelligence. "I'll call it an educated hunch.

"I think probably in the few

months running up prior to the onset of combat that . . . there was probably an intensive effort to disperse into private homes, move documentation and materials out of the country," he said. "I think there are any number of things that they would have done."

On the activity on the Syrian border, Gen. Clapper said: "There is no question that there was a lot of traffic, increase in traffic up to the immediate onset of combat and certainly during Iraqi Freedom. . . . The obvious conclusion one draws is the sudden upturn, uptick in traffic which may have been people leaving the scene, fleeing Iraq and, unquestionably I'm sure, material as well."

Such suspicion also found its way inside the Iraq Survey Group, the joint Pentagon-CIA organization formed to hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Charles Duelfer, who headed the Iraq Survey Group, filed a final addendum in 2005 to his exhaustive report. He said his investigators found "sufficiently credible" evidence that material for weapons of mass destruction was shifted from Iraq to Syria.

"[The Iraq Survey Group] was unable to complete its investigation and is unable to rule out the possibility that [weapons of mass destruction were] evacuated to Syria before the war," he said.

"Whether Syria received military items from Iraq for safekeeping or other reasons has yet to be determined," Mr. Duelfer said. "There was evidence of a discussion of possible . . . collaboration initiated by a Syrian security officer, and [the Iraq Survey Group] received information about movement of material out of Iraq, in-

cluding the possibility that [weapons of mass destruction were] involved. In the judgment of the working group, these reports were sufficiently credible to merit further investigation."

He said all senior Iraqis then in custody denied knowledge of any weapons of mass destruction moving into Syria.

"Nevertheless," the inspector said, "given the insular and compartmented nature of the regime, [Iraq Survey Group] analysts believed there was enough evidence to merit further investigation."

Libya's new transitional government has set a precedent for allowing Western arms inspectors into the country.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, based at The Hague, is an independent group that monitors compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention.

It filed its most recent report on Libya on Friday, saying all of Libya's newly declared quantities of sulfur mustard and related chemicals are stored at the Ruwagha depot in southwestern Libya and are to be destroyed by April.

The same scenario could play out in a post-Assad Syria, along with detective work to determine, once and for all, whether any weapons components came from Iraq in 2003.

Michael Luhan, a spokesman for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, told *The Times* that inspectors could enter Syria "only if the new regime joins the Chemical Weapons Convention, thereby making Syria an OPCW member state and legally subject to our verification measures."

DISSIDENTS

From page A1

any more. We're always in touch with the opposition inside. It's a live community with an organic connection," said "Mohammed," a Syrian exile whose last name has been withheld to protect his safety.

"I could get myself smuggled back in, but I'm more useful here on this side because I help getting things inside."

In Tripoli, the dissidents receive support from local associations such as Al-Bashaer, a Sunni group that openly opposes Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime.

Al-Bashaer has donated clothes, medicine and money to hundreds of Syrian families in Tripoli, said Wassim Bashir, a spokesman for the group.

"We are as concerned as Syrians by the current situation," Mr. Bashir said. "We have all suffered from this regime."

Al-Bashaer also helps wounded Syrians smuggled across the border into Lebanon, he said, adding that one or two arrive every day.

The Lebanese government is aware of the smuggling activity, but officials refuse to acknowledge it publicly. The Lebanese government has set up a few checkpoints, but the army is too small to patrol effectively the 200-mile border with Syria.

Lebanon has long had a tense relationship with Syria, which occupied the country for nearly 30 years before leaving in 2005. Today, Syria and Iran exert influence through Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist group that dominates the Lebanese government.

One of the most active smuggling areas in Lebanon is the village of Wadi Khaled, nestled in hills about three miles from the Syrian border. Locals have long survived on agriculture and smuggling.

The trafficking usually has revolved around fuel and food, both cheaper on the Syrian side. But since the revolution started, shipments have changed. Now the black market in weapons is booming, and the prices of arms are skyrocketing, villagers say.

Assault rifles, shotguns and other weapons are sold to the Syria revolutionaries and smuggled into Syria on a regular basis. Since the outbreak of vio-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARINE G. BARZEGAR/ SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES



Women who have fled the violence in Syria gather in an unused school in Wadi Khaled near the Lebanese-Syrian border. "We are one family, and we want freedom," said a refuge whose husband remains in Syria.

lence, the price of a Kalashnikov assault rifle has almost doubled to about \$2,000, smugglers say.

Lebanese arms dealers sell their weapons to the highest bidders, and many now are Syrian revolutionaries



THE WASHINGTON TIMES

been an ad hoc enterprise; but as the violence escalates in Syria, the trade is growing larger and more lucrative, locals say.

In the Syrian region around the restive city of Homs, the civil war already has begun, said Imane, a Syrian dissident who arrived in Wadi Khaled a month ago and whose husband is still in Homs. Imane, who declined to give her last name, said Homs is under siege with checkpoints and snipers posted throughout the city.

"They have divided Homs into two areas: Sunnis on one side, Alawites on the other, with tanks pointing at the Sunni side," she said, referring to Syria's Sunni Muslim majority and Alawite Muslim minority.

As she spoke, sirens blared and Red Cross ambulances raced through the village to aid Syrian protesters injured in cross-border fire from Syrian soldiers.

The number of deadly shootings and injuries at the border has risen steadily in the past month as Syrian troops intensify their crackdown on defectors and refugees.

The exact casualty count is unknown, but at least six people were killed in the past four months on the Lebanese side of the border, activists say.

Despite the increasing violence, activists and refugees say they will continue to help those fighting the Syrian regime.

"We are like brothers. We are one family, and we want freedom," Imane said.

Many Syrians fleeing the violence in their country find refuge in Wadi Khaled, Lebanon. It sees a brisk trade in arms back across the border. "Because of the social media, because of the new ways to make a revolution, borders don't matter anymore," said one exile.

who no longer believe in peaceful protests.

"We will prevail, not with the help of the international community but thanks to our own people and with guns," said one Syrian dissident who identified himself only as Abdelhakim. "We will take our [freedom] back."

Syria has reinforced security at the border by planting mines and posting additional troops. However, the Lebanese border remains porous, like Syria's northern border with Turkey and southern border with Jordan.

Syrian opposition sources say they also are getting weapons from Turkey and Jordan.

The arms trafficking generally has

Al -Ahram (Egypte / Egypt)



مظاهرات ضد نظام الأسد في سوريا

بالجيش السوري في هجوم شنته عناصر مسلحة بمنطقة ريف دمشق عندما قامت مجموعة مسلحة باطلاق النار عليهم. وذكرت وكالة الأنباء السورية أن مجموعة مسلحة قامت باطلاق النار على سيارة العميد الركن الميجان حسن عبدالله الإبراهيم من إدارة الحرب الإلكترونية خلال توجهه إلى مكان عمله في منطقة تلقيتا، ريف دمشق مما أدى إلى مصرعه والملازم أول مهندس يامن خضور.

ونقلت الوكالة عن مصدر رسمي قوله إن الاعتداء أدى إلى إصابة كل من ضابط برتبة مقدم وعنصرين أمن برتبة رقيب أول. وعُلي سعيد متصل استقبال وزير الخارجية السعودي الأمير سعود الفيصل أمس بمقر إقامته بالقاهرة وقدأ من المجلس الوطني السوري المعارض برئاسة الدكتور برهان غليون، وذلك لبحث آخر تطورات الأوضاع في سوريا في ضوء تقرير رئيس بعثة المراقبين العرب الفريق محمد أحمد الدابي الذي عرض أمس على اللجنة الوزارية العربية المعنية بالأزمة السورية.

كما استمع الفيصل إلى رؤية المجلس الوطني السوري للافاق المستقبلية للتعاون مع تطورات الأوضاع في سوريا في ضوء استمرار أعمال العنف والقتل هناك.

للنجاح. وأكد الخير أن الهيئة لم تتفق حتى اليوم مع الدول العربية التي سنتوي ارسال قواتها إلى سورية والسبب كما يؤكد يعود إلى عدم وجود وحدة موقف عربي لذا لا بد من العدل علي تثليل المسابح التي تقف في وجه تنفيذ وتطبيق تلك الفكرة والعمل علي تحقيقها. وأشار الخير في الوقت نفسه إلى أن قوات دول الخليج غير قادرة علي لعب هذا الدور وحدها، إذ لا بد من وجود تمثيل لكل الدول العربية في هذه القوات.

وكان المعارض السوري هيثم مناع رئيس هيئة التنسيق الوطنية في الخارج طالب يوم الجمعة بتدخل قوات عربية خفيفة لا تتعدى عشرة آلاف جندي لتسهيل مهمة عمل المراقبين العرب ليتمكنوا من الانتشار في كل موقع في سوريا، ليمسح للجميع علي حد تعبيره بلغاتهم والتحدث معهم بحرية وستقوم تلك القوات بحماية المدنيين وفك الارتباط بين الاطراف المتنازعة خاصة في المناطق الساخنة.

تضم هيئة التنسيق الوطنية الثيارات الأربعة الأيديولوجية في سورية وهي: التيار القومي، واليساري، والإسلامي، والديمقراطي تجسدت في ١٦ حركة وحزبا سياسيا إضافة إلى وجود العديد من الشخصيات والمجموعات المستقلة.

من ناحية أخرى، لقي ضابطان مصرعهما وأصيب ٣ آخرون

■ دمشق. ١.ش.أ: قال الدكتور عبدالعزيز الخير عضو المكتب التنفيذي لهيئة التنسيق الوطنية إن الهيئة ترحب رسميا بوجود قوات عربية في سوريا وهي لا تعدها نوعا أو مقدمة لتدخل عربي أو خارجي فالدول العربية علي حد تعبير الخير دول شقيقة ومن واجبها أن تقف إلى جانب بعضها مؤكدا أن من حق الشعب السوري إيجاد الوسائل اللازمة لوقف لسفك الدماء.

وكشف الخير في تصريحات له أمس نقلها موقع شام برس السوري الإلكتروني عدم إمكان تطبيق فكرة القوات العربية في الوقت الراهن وأرجع ذلك إلى صعوبات سياسية وعملية تقف في طريقها وتمنع من تقدمها تتمثل في أن الجامعة العربية لم تدرس هذا الموضوع إضافة إلى وجود آراء ومواقف متعددة تجاه هذه المسألة كما أن المبادرة العربية مازال موضوعها قيد التطبيق وهي لا تتضمن بندا من هذا النوع لذا لا بد من طرحه علي جدول أعمال الجامعة وصولا إلى اتخاذ قرار في شأنه.

وأوضح الخير أن هناك أطرافاً عربية عدة تعارض الحل العربي وتعمل لتحويل الأزمة السورية كما تحاول ادخال قوات اجنبية الأمر الذي يرفضه الشعب السوري وهيئة التنسيق في أن معا علي حد قوله مضيئا لابد من التغلب علي هذه الصعوبات لجعل فكرة تدخل القوات العربية إلى سورية فكرة واردة عمليا وقابلة

Jerusalem Post (Palestine occupée / Occupied Palestine)

League agrees to 'roadmap' for Assad to delegate powers

Questions remain over plan's implementation • US senators introduce sanctions bill in response to 'atrocities' in Syria

• By OREN KESSLER and Reuters

Arab foreign ministers agreed on Sunday to a new political roadmap for Syria that would see President Bashar Assad delegating power to a deputy and setting up a unity government as a prelude to early parliamentary and presidential elections.

Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani told a news conference after a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo that the Arab League would take its initiative to the UN Security Council and ask for its endorsement.

The meeting followed an announcement by Saudi Arabia that it was withdrawing its observers from the country after an Arab monitoring mission failed to stem 10 months of bloodshed.

Details of the Arab plan were not immediately available Sunday night. Still, a draft agreement leaked during the negotiations called for an independent Syrian commission of inquiry created to look into violations committed during the country's uprising.

Specifics of how the League might enforce the measures remained unclear.

"My country will withdraw its monitors because the Syrian government did not execute any of the elements of the Arab resolution plan," Saudi Prince Saud al-Faisal told Arab foreign ministers at a closed-door meeting in Cairo.



ARAB LEAGUE Secretary-General Nabil Elaraby (left) talks with Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jasim during an Arab foreign ministers meeting in Cairo yesterday. (Suhaib Salem/Reuters)

"We are calling on the international community to bear its responsibility, and that includes our brothers in Islamic states and our friends in Russia, China, Europe and the United States," he said, calling for "all possible pressure" to push Syria to adhere to the Arab peace plan.

Saudi Arabia, the region's political and economic powerhouse, exerts enormous influence over other Gulf countries, which tend to fall in line with its policies.

Also, Sunday, US senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer announced they would be introducing the Syrian Human Rights Accountability Act to impose sanctions against the Assad regime.

The bill, set to be introduced

would close the US embassy in Damascus due to a rapid deterioration of the security situation in Syria.

Schumer said the bill would ensure "no companies that do business with the United States facilitate these atrocities." He and Gillibrand, both Democrats, are the two US senators from New York State.

Mark Dubowitz, executive director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps is providing significant quantities of weapons, technology and assistance to Assad.

"That's expected from the Iranian regime. What is unconscionable are the international companies from Russia, Italy, Germany, France, Sweden, Japan and elsewhere that are intentionally or unwittingly selling tools of oppression to Damascus," he told *The Jerusalem Post* in an e-mail.

"These tools include sophisticated surveillance technologies, as well as police and military weaponry. This new legislation targets those companies which should be sanctioned by the US government unless they immediately take steps to ensure that their products are not aiding and abetting this slaughter. Sellers should beware."

Arab diplomatic sources said in recent weeks that Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman

See ASSAD, Page 10

Hezbollah, Iran preparing for 'day after' Assad, Page 2

this coming week, would require US President Barack Obama to identify people in the Syrian government who have violated the human rights of pro-democracy demonstrators, members of the opposition or organizations calling for reform in the country.

The bill would also prohibit the sale of technology or weapons to Syria that could be used for censorship or human-rights abuses in the country.

The announcement came just days after the Obama administration announced it

ASSAD

Continued from Page 1

are increasingly reluctant to step up pressure on Syria when they are facing protests at home.

Qatar, which has led calls for escalation against Syria, said it was time to review the whole mission and consider dispatching Arab-peacekeeping troops to quell the violence that the UN says has killed more than 5,000 people.

"The reality says that the bloodshed has not stopped and the killing machine is still working and violence is spread everywhere," Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani said in a statement.

"What is needed now is a full review of the work of this mission and a look into what results it achieved, and if those results are convincing enough to continue, or if the realities call for other options. One other option is... to send Arab-peacekeeping forces."

Qatar and Saudi Arabia, regional rivals of Syria and its ally Iran, are impatient for decisive action against Assad, but military action would need unanimous backing and several states prefer a negotiated solution, League sources say.

The UN Security Council is also split on how to address the crisis, with Western powers demanding tougher sanctions and a weapons embargo, and Assad's ally, Russia, preferring to leave the Arabs to negotiate a peaceful outcome.

Suggestions to send in UN experts to support the Arab observers made little headway at the last meeting earlier this month and Damascus has said it would accept an extension of the observer mission but not an expansion in its scope.

The lack of a unified Arab response will frustrate Syria's opposition, which has demanded Arab countries clearly state Assad's failure to adhere to its peace plan, withdraw monitors and hand the file to the Security Council.

Critics say the monitoring mission is handing Assad more time to kill opponents of his rule. But Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia told Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby they would oppose referring the matter to the UN, a League source said on Sunday.

"The three states support solving

the Syrian crisis inside the Arab League," the source said.

Two Syrian army officers, an infantryman, a rebel and two civilians died in clashes on Sunday in Talfita, a village in the Damascus region on Sunday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Intermittent fighting continued in the town of Douma, 14 km. northwest of the capital, which had been encircled by the military, said the UK-based rights group.

An opposition activist and a rebel fighter in Douma said the fighting had eased and the rebels held about two-thirds of its main streets.

Masked fighters had set up checkpoints and a funeral procession for five civilians killed on Saturday was passing through the town, they said. •

It's a rocky road to unity for Syrian opposition

A strategy for the day the battle is won is still a long way off

• BY ZVI MAZEL

In recent months, opposition movements in Syria have vainly tried to find some common ground that could bring together the ethnic and religious communities that make up the country. Their failure to do so goes a long way to explain why they did not get much needed international recognition and help the way Libya rebels did. Assad still feels secure in the knowledge that he represents the only legitimacy in his country, and believes he can still save his regime at the price of some concessions. What happened last week demonstrated how far the opposition is from closing ranks and deciding on a strategy for the day the battle is won.

The National Kurdish Council representing most of the Kurdish minority announced January 18 it was suspending its participation in the other opposition organizations, having been unable to obtain assurances regarding the recognition of the specificity of the Kurdish people as a fundamental part of Syria. Created by the Kurdish National Congress October 26, the Council comprises no less than 10 parties and 150 public figures. It was tasked with opening a dialogue with opposition organizations in order to stress the need for a solution to the Kurdish problem in a democratic way that is based on self-determination within the framework of a united Syria. The Council was given two months to get results, but to no avail: no

opposition organization was ready to tackle the issue. Nevertheless, it does not intend to turn to the regime, since all contacts have been shut down; Assad has yet to release Kurdish militants arrested during the demonstrations, in spite of the amnesty announced according to the demands of the Arab League.

Kurds make up nine percent of the population in Syria, or two million people. At least half a million do not enjoy Syrian citizenship – or any other – and are deprived of social and other rights. The government is waging an all out war to "arabize" them. They are forbidden to speak their own language and cannot register their children under Kurdish names. This had led to a number of flare-ups in the past usually ending in bloody repression. At the beginning of last year, Assad, in an attempt to defuse the situation, promised to look into the problem of the stateless Kurds, but so far has done nothing.

What is worthy of notice is that even opposition organizations fighting dictatorship in order to establish a secular democracy are not willing to pledge their support for a fair solution to the Kurdish problem.

In an unannounced development also, January 18, a hundred Alawite intellectuals posted a declaration on Facebook indicating they supported "the freedom intifada" of the Syrian people and called on all Alawites to take part in toppling the regime and help set up a new

Council's official platform is to establish a secular country that will not discriminate its citizens on the basis of sex, nationality, religion or political beliefs.

This program appears to be a smokescreen, perhaps at the instigation of the Muslim Brothers. The fact that the Council is not prepared to open a dialogue with the Kurds can only reinforce suspicions concerning the way it will deal with minorities. The Council is against setting up militias on a community basis and rejects external intervention – while calling on the international community to protect Syrian citizens against the security apparatus of the regime. An ambiguous position to say the least. Without outside military intervention, how can the citizens be protected? Observers sent by the Arab League were powerless to stop the slaughter.

The National Syrian Coordination body is the umbrella organization of leftist parties, including a communist party, a Kurdish party and some opposition figures. It also declined to open a dialogue with the Kurds.

The Free Syrian Army is made of deserters from the regular army and is headed by Col. Riad al- Assad; according to him there are 20,000 soldiers, though the actual number is not known. Equipped with light weaponry, they try to sabotage military or security installations and teach people how to defend themselves. They are increasingly attracting new members, though they cannot expect to best regular troops in a pitched battle.

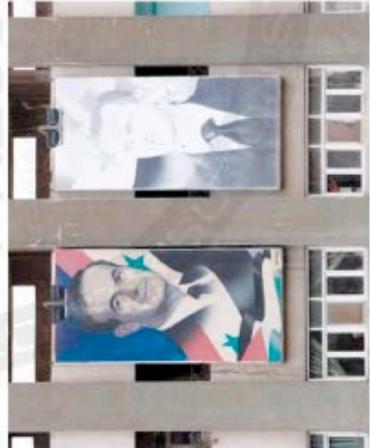
The first two organizations

signed a cooperation agreement on December 31; they are to determine jointly how best to fight, manage the transition period as well as what will be the nature of the new Syria. However it is hard to see how the two – one repressing demonstrations; Hezbollah, who needs Assad in power to keep supply lines from Iran open, also supports the regime.

In spite of bombastic declarations by a number of Western leaders who say Assad's regime is doomed, Syrian opposition has not been able to draft Sunni middle classes in Damascus and Aleppo into the fight; Christian and Druze minorities are still sitting on the fence even the Kurds, not having received suitable answers from opposition organizations, are not ready to enter the fray.

The head of the Syrian National Council went to Cairo last Saturday to urge the Arab League and Arab ministers to take the Syrian crisis to the Security Council; he would like to see neutral zones set up between the army and population centers as well as no-fly zones; perhaps also some form of international protection force.

It is not likely to happen anytime soon. The League will probably abide by the recommendation of the head of the observers delegation, who has said the delegation has contributed to a decrease in violence and in the number of victims. Not all agree with that hopeful statement. What is beyond doubt is that there will be no quick end to the Syrian drama.



PICTURES OF Syria's President Bashar Assad (right) and his late father, Hafez Assad, hang from a government building in Daraa yesterday. (AP/Wide World Photos)

no reaction from opposition organizations.

The main body of the opposition can be divided in three groups. The National Syrian Council, the National Syrian Coordination of forces fighting for democratic change and the Free Syrian Army.

The most important opposition group is the National Syrian Council, established in Istanbul on October 2, which includes a number of mainly Sunni opposition movements: the liberal "Damascus declaration for democratic change", established in 2005; the Muslim Brotherhood, apparently the majority group in the Council; several independent Sunni personalities; representatives from the Kurdish minority, and of the Assyrian Christian minority. At the head of the Council is Riadh al- Ghalion, who lives in France, and is not affiliated with any group. The

the National Syrian Council signed a cooperation agreement on December 31; they are to determine jointly how best to fight, manage the transition period as well as what will be the nature of the new Syria. However it is hard to see how the two – one repressing demonstrations; Hezbollah, who needs Assad in power to keep supply lines from Iran open, also supports the regime.

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National Syrian Council

Mansour, à contre-courant de ses pairs arabes, appelle à « réintégrer la Syrie au sein de la Ligue »

Les propos tenus par le ministre des Affaires étrangères Adnane Mansour lors de la réunion des chefs de diplomatie arabes hier soir au Caire vont, une nouvelle fois, à contre-courant des prises de position exprimées par la majorité. Alors que le communiqué final de la réunion a appelé entre autres le président Bachar el-Assad à déléguer « des prérogatives au vice-président » et la formation d'un gouvernement d'union nationale dans deux mois, M. Mansour a demandé à « réintégrer la Syrie au sein de la Ligue arabe et à lever les sanctions économiques qui lui ont été imposées, quitte à soumettre ces options au vote ». Dans son allocution prononcée lors de la réunion, le ministre libanais a en outre appuyé « les recommandations du chef de la délégation des observateurs arabes en Syrie Mohammad Ahmad Mostapha Dabi en faveur du maintien du travail de la délégation, afin d'« accélérer la relance du dialogue national ». M. Mansour n'a pas manqué de remercier, dès

le début de son intervention, M. Dabi et l'ensemble des observateurs, « pour les efforts concrets qu'ils ont déployés dans la rédaction d'un rapport audacieux, sur les réalités du terrain syrien, retransmettant des faits que beaucoup continuent d'occulter ou de nier ».

Le contraste entre les propos de M. Mansour et ceux convenus par les chefs de diplomatie arabes réunis alimente des questionnements

on ne peut plus pressants sur la partie que représente effectivement notre ministre des Affaires étrangères : le cabinet Mikati, et partant, l'État libanais, ou bien une composante particulière de ce gouvernement qui tend, notamment par la politique étrangère, à outrepasser les prérogatives de tous les membres de l'exécutif en servant des intérêts propres, notamment ceux du Hezbollah et du CPL ?

Le Liban « se tient à l'écart » des résolutions sur la Syrie

Malgré l'intervention favorable à la Syrie de Adnane Mansour lors de la réunion des ministres arabes des AE sur la Syrie au Caire, la position officielle du Liban concernant les résolutions sur la Syrie a été « de se tenir à l'écart ». D'ailleurs le Liban a été le seul pays à ne pas adhérer au plan de paix de la Ligue consistant à un transfert pacifique du pouvoir en Syrie,

la formation d'un gouvernement d'union nationale et la tenue d'élections législatives et présidentielle sous l'égide de l'ONU. Cependant, le ministre qatari cheikh Hamad ben Jassem al-Thani a tenu à remercier le Liban de cette position médiane, « en raison des circonstances spéciales » qui prévalent dans ce pays, a-t-il dit.

L'Orient-Le Jour (Liban / Lebanon)

Les gardes-côtes syriens tuent un jeune pêcheur libanais, blessent son oncle et torturent son frère « par erreur »

Agression Trois pêcheurs libanais ont été interceptés par des gardes-côtes syriens en civil, samedi, dans les eaux territoriales libanaises. L'un d'eux a été tué alors que Beyrouth continue de traiter les violations syriennes répétées de la souveraineté libanaise comme de simples incidents isolés.

La rage des habitants de Arida, à la frontière nord, était à son paroxysme hier lors des funérailles du jeune Maher Hamad (16 ans) abattu de sang-froid par des gardes-côtes syriens, à 500 mètres seulement de la côte, au large de cette localité frontalière au Liban-Nord, samedi. Les soldats syriens en civil ont ensuite intercepté le bateau de pêcheur à bord duquel se trouvaient ses deux oncles, Khaled, qui a été touché par balles aux deux jambes, et Fadi.

Évoquant « une erreur », les autorités syriennes ont fini par rendre hier à l'aube la dépouille de l'adolescent et libéré ses deux oncles, consécutivement à des contacts au plus haut niveau effectués par les autorités libanaises avec les dirigeants syriens.

Entre-temps, des manifestations de protestation étaient organisées à Arida, au cours desquelles des habitants du village ont brûlé des pneus à 200 mètres de la frontière, entraînant la fermeture du point de passage. Des manifestants ont également monté une tente près de la frontière, devant laquelle plusieurs d'entre eux étaient toujours réunis hier afin de protester contre l'incident.

Le corps de Maher Hamad, 14 ans, et les deux autres survivants ont été remis à des responsables libanais via le poste-frontière de Abboudiya.

Les obsèques de l'adolescent ont eu lieu quelques heures plus tard. Une procession funéraire s'est déroulée de la maison de ses parents vers la frontière, où certains participants ont lancé des pierres en direction des troupes syriennes, sans que celles-ci ne ripostent. Cependant, en fin d'après-midi, des tirs syriens ont ciblé le territoire libanais.

Fadi Hamad a raconté que l'adolescent avait été tué par des hommes armés, partisans du régime syrien. « Nous avons jeté nos filets et nos cages le soir précédent, et nous étions sortis les relever tôt samedi », a-t-il raconté aux médias. « Nous avons alors vu un bateau s'approcher et nous lui avons dit de reculer car il s'approchait trop de nos filets.

Ses passagers ont brièvement disparu puis ils sont revenus, et quand ils se sont rapprochés, j'ai pu voir six civils armés à bord. Quatre d'entre eux sont montés sur notre bateau. Nous étions terrifiés. Ils ont ouvert le feu et blessé mon frère et Maher », a-t-il poursuivi, précisant que les hommes armés les ont emmenés de force en Syrie, où Maher est décédé des suites de ses blessures.

M. Hamad a raconté avoir ensuite été conduit dans des locaux des renseignements militaires dans la ville portuaire de Tartous, où il a été battu et interrogé pour savoir s'il faisait de la contrebande d'armes. Son dos d'ailleurs porte toujours les marques des coups reçus.

Après une heure d'interrogatoire, durant lequel il a affirmé avoir repris à son compte tout ce que ses tortionnaires lui disaient de dire pour échapper à leurs coups, il a été informé qu'il s'agissait d'une « erreur ». Les gardes-frontières attendaient, selon lui, l'arrivée d'un autre bateau chargé d'armes.

L'autre oncle, Khaled Hamad, a été soigné pour une blessure par balle à la jambe, dans un hôpital à Tartous. Il devait ensuite être admis dans un hôpital de Tripoli pour subir des opérations chirurgicales.

Anticipant les réactions indignées libanaises, les autorités syriennes avaient annoncé juste après l'enlèvement des trois pêcheurs qu'elles avaient arrêté des « trafiquants d'armes ». L'agence officielle syrienne, SANA, a ainsi indiqué que les trois pêcheurs ont été arrêtés par une patrouille des gardes-côtes de Tartous alors qu'ils tentaient de pénétrer dans les eaux syriennes pour y mener « des activités de contrebande ».

Toujours selon SANA, les soldats les ont ensuite sommés de se rendre et de suivre les ordres, mais ces derniers « ont jeté leur cargaison à la mer et tenté de s'échapper ». Le bateau, a continué l'agence, a alors été la cible de tirs « provenant de cinq autres bateaux libanais, arrivés depuis les eaux libanaises ».

Selon SANA, « ce sont ces tirs qui ont fait un mort et un blessé parmi les pêcheurs ».

Mais un responsable local, Ali Assaad Khaled, a conforté la version de Fadi Khaled, avant même que ce dernier ne soit relâché, en affirmant à l'AFP que « des hommes armés à bord d'une barque ont ouvert le feu sur les trois pêcheurs, avant de les enlever et les emmener en direction de la Syrie ». Il a précisé que « d'autres pêcheurs ont vu l'incident, qui s'est déroulé dans les eaux territoriales libanaises ».

Condamnations mais sans aucune mesure pratique

Au Liban, les autorités se sont gardées d'évoquer les circonstances de cet incident qui a été vivement condamné par le président Michel Sleiman ainsi que par le Premier ministre Najib Mikati. Le chef de l'État a mis l'accent sur « la nécessité d'un respect de la souveraineté de chaque État sur son territoire », jugeant tout aussi nécessaire « une coopération de tous pour empêcher une répétition

de ce genre d'incidents ». Il a réclamé la libération des trois pêcheurs et appelé à l'ouverture d'une enquête.

M. Mikati a invité le comité libano-syrien de coordination sécuritaire à régler l'affaire, affirmant avoir « insisté afin que les mesures nécessaires pour empêcher sa répétition soit prises ». Mais par qui ? Si ce n'est par l'État lui-même, régulièrement invité, en vain, par les députés de la région et plusieurs autres personnalités politiques, à déployer l'armée à la frontière pour assurer la sécurité des habitants des villages frontaliers libanais face aux exactions syriennes continues.

Pas plus tard qu'hier, des habitants de Wadi Khaled ont échappé par miracle aux balles tirées à partir du territoire syrien en direction de leur village, dans l'indifférence officielle générale, pendant que dans les milieux politiques de l'opposition, on s'indignait aussi bien de la léthargie libanaise que des agressions syriennes répétées. Le vice-président de la Chambre, Farid Makari, a considéré

le silence libanais comme étant « inadmissible », l'assimilant à « un abandon volontaire de la souveraineté et de l'intégrité territoriale du Liban ».

Le député Khaled Zahranman a invité l'État à convoquer l'ambassadeur de Syrie et à retirer notre ambassadeur du Liban, alors que son collègue, Mouine Mereebi, a indiqué que si l'armée ne va pas être déployée pour protéger, « qu'on nous donne des armes, nous nous protégerons nous-mêmes ». À l'instar de M. Makari, il a estimé que le Liban peut aussi solliciter l'aide de l'ONU à cette fin. « Il est du devoir du président de la République de protéger la population. S'il ne peut pas le faire, qu'il présente sa démission », a-t-il fulminé à la LBCI, alors que le député Nidal Tohmé, qui s'est rendu à Arida pour présenter ses condoléances aux Hamad, a estimé que « si l'État libanais avait accompli son devoir et défendu sa souveraineté dès le départ, les Libanais ne seraient pas restés la cible des tueurs et des ravisseurs syriens ».



Avant que les trois pêcheurs ne soient ramenés au Liban, les habitants de Arida ont coupé la route menant vers le poste frontalier de Abboudieh à la circulation, avec des pneus brûlés et des barbelés.

Les Arabes adoptent un plan de transfert du pouvoir en Syrie

Révolte Le projet de résolution prévoit notamment la délégation des pouvoirs présidentiels au premier vice-président et la formation d'un gouvernement d'union dans un délai de 2 mois suivis d'élections législatives et présidentielle, puis d'une nouvelle Constitution.

Les ministres des Affaires étrangères de la Ligue arabe ont adopté hier une nouvelle « feuille de route » à propos de la Syrie prévoyant une solution politique à la crise qui secoue le pays depuis le mois de mars. Lors d'une conférence de presse au siège carote de la Ligue, le Premier ministre et chef de la diplomatie qatari Hamad ibn Jassin al-Thani a également annoncé que l'organisation panarabe allait soumettre son initiative au Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU pour qu'il la ratifie. De même, cheikh Hamad a estimé que le nouveau plan arabe préconisait « un départ du régime syrien de manière pacifique », en exprimant l'espoir que le gouvernement syrien l'accepte.

Ainsi, le projet de résolution appelle « à la poursuite de la mission des observateurs en Syrie et de la coopération avec le secrétaire général de l'ONU pour renforcer leur tâche ». Il stipule également que « le président (Bachar el-Assad) délègue ses pouvoirs à son premier vice-président et que le dernier ait toutes les prérogatives pour coopérer avec un gouvernement d'union nationale incluant l'opposition ». Ce gouvernement d'union devra être formé dans un délai de deux mois et sa présidence assurée par une personnalité de consensus. Sa mission sera d'appliquer le plan de sortie de crise de la Ligue arabe et de préparer des élections législatives et présidentielle pluralistes et libres sous supervision arabe et internationale ». Le gouvernement d'union devra aussi préparer l'élection d'une assemblée constituante dans

un délai de trois mois en vue de l'élaboration d'une nouvelle Constitution qui sera soumise à un référendum.

Auparavant, l'Arabie saoudite avait annoncé son retrait de la mission d'observateurs lors de la réunion plénière ministérielle de la Ligue arabe. Riyad « a décidé de retirer ses observateurs de la mission car le gouvernement syrien n'a respecté aucune des clauses » du plan arabe prévoyant la fin des violences, a annoncé le chef de la diplomatie Saoud al-Fayal. Ce retrait témoigne des divergences sur l'opportunité de poursuivre cette mission, déployée depuis le 26 décembre et objet de vives critiques de la part de l'opposition syrienne et d'ONG internationales qui l'accusent d'inefficacité.

Le comité ministériel arabe chargé du dossier syrien, réuni dans la journée, avait recommandé de prolonger d'un mois la mission après la remise d'un rapport du chef des observateurs, le Soudanais Mohammed Ahmad Moustapha al-Dabi, demandant une telle prolongation ainsi que le renforcement en personnels et en logistique de la mission. Le rapport, selon une source diplomatique, fait « porter deux parties concernées (gouvernement et opposition) la responsabilité de la poursuite des violences » dans le pays.

Outre la poursuite de la mission d'observation sur le terrain, le chef de la Ligue arabe Nabil al-Arabi a plaidé pour une solution politique.

Le Conseil national syrien (CNS), le plus important groupe de l'opposition dont

le chef Barhan Ghalioun se trouvait au Caire, a quant à lui annoncé l'envoi prochain d'une délégation au Conseil de sécurité à New York. Ce dernier doit « transmettre le dossier syrien à la CPI et prendre des décisions fermes pour protéger le peuple syrien », informe le CNS, en réclamant l'imposition d'un « embargo aérien » à la Syrie, et la création de « zones sûres en vue de l'acheminement de l'aide humanitaire aux villes sinistrées ». Le CNS appelle encore à imposer des sanctions à l'ensemble des responsables syriens impliqués dans les « crimes contre l'humanité » en Syrie, en premier lieu le président syrien « M. Ghalioun » a également réagi au projet de résolution de la Ligue arabe en déclarant lors d'une conférence de presse au Caire : « Nous applaudissons l'initiative de la Ligue qui prouve que le kiffe du peuple syrien affecte la communauté internationale et nous exhortons minutieusement les articles du plan de paix », ajoutant que ce projet est « la confirmation de la fin du régime de Bachar el-Assad » et insistant sur la participation du Conseil de sécurité. Il a aussi affirmé que le peuple syrien n'aurait de cesse que lorsque le régime chutera pour faire place à la démocratie. Le CNS a également présenté un contre-rapport à celui de la mission de ses observateurs énumérant les violations commises par le régime depuis l'arrivée de ces derniers en Syrie.

(Sources : agences et rédaction)



Le chef de la mission des observateurs arabes Mohammad al-Dabi (à g.) discutant avec Nabil al-Arabi, assis près de cheikh Hamad.

Les rebelles prennent brièvement le contrôle de Douma

Les soldats inconnus se sont retirés hier de la ville syrienne de Douma après en avoir brièvement pris le contrôle samedi soir, a indiqué l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH).

« Les forces de sécurité syriennes sont déployées aux entrées de cette ville », a précisé plus tard le président de l'OSDH, Rami Abdelrahmane, citant des militants sur place. Selon l'OSDH, des affrontements ont éclaté après que des membres des forces de sécurité ont tué quatre civils « groupe terroriste » à Douma.

Toutefois, la commission générale de la révolution ainsi que la chaîne al-Arabiya informaient hier de la mort de 22 personnes, par ailleurs, le cinéaste syrienique Ghassane Abbadih a été arrêté hier à Damas à son retour de Deraa, sa ville natale dans le sud de la Syrie, a rapporté le Centre syrien d'information et du droit d'expression. L'organisation ne donne pas de détails sur les circonstances de l'arrestation du cinéaste qui porte la double nationalité.

Des combats se sont déroulés aussi entre l'armée régulière et des groupes d'insoumis à Taffa dans la province de Damas, toujours selon l'OSDH. Cinq personnes sont mortes à Taffa et un civil à Douma, alors qu'une septième personne a péri à Idlib, a précisé le groupe. L'agence officielle SANA a, elle, parlé de deux officiers tués par un « groupe terroriste » à Douma.

CURRENT AFFAIRS BY HASAN LAKKIS

Assad working multiple contacts to end crisis

Lebanese and Arab visitors to Damascus paint an optimistic picture of developments of the situation in Syria, indicating that Syrian President Bashar Assad is working on multiple levels to end the crisis there. They add that he is on his way to achieving tangible progress in the coming weeks.

These sources confirm that the Baath Party regime's strength will not return pre-uprising levels, adding that Assad is confident of Russian and Chinese support. Assad depends fully on this support to prevent Western states from going to the U.N. Security Council and making decisions that put pressure on Syria and perhaps seek a military option, similar to what was done in Libya.

The sources add that Assad is coordinating with Moscow and Beijing on all steps he is taking to resolve the crisis, including reform measures that facilitate Russia and China's confrontation with Western pressure, which is urging the two countries to accept international resolutions aimed at toppling the regime in Damascus.

On the regional Arab level, some Lebanese observers of Arab-Syrian relations have information, hinted at in one of Assad's recent speeches, that deals with offers by some Arab states that are waging a vicious media and non-media battle against the Syrian regime. These deals are difficult for any ruler to reject – they are financially generous and could solve Syria's economic woes, on the condition that Assad remove himself from power or cuts his alliance with Tehran. But Assad has rejected this conditional aid, as it constrains the freedom of Syrians to make political decisions in the country.

As for the situation in Lebanon, the sources say that Assad and Syria's allies in Beirut have been coordinating since the beginning of the uprising. These sources add that Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah has been to Damascus during the uprising and has met with Assad. Their opinions on the situation in Lebanon and the need to preserve peace in the country matched, because any turbulence in Lebanon could negatively affect the efforts of the Syrian regime to end its own crisis.

These sources say Nasrallah left the meeting satisfied about what Assad told him about developments in Syria, the measures Assad is taking and his determination to reform. The sources add that Nasrallah's comments in his last speech, and his calls for Iran and Turkey to work toward resolving the Syrian crisis rationally, are based on his evaluation of Assad's stance. They are also based on the Syrian president's willingness to cooperate with all who truly want reform, and not with those who are hiding behind demands for change in order to achieve western desires and push Syria and the region toward chaos.

As for the situation inside the Syrian regime, Assad's indication in a speech that measures were taken against some regime officials, indicates that there is a difference of opinion within the leadership. Some in the Baath party perceive the crisis and how to resolve it differently and more rigidly than Assad does. These groups refuse to believe there is a problem that needs to be solved in Syria, and believe Arab and international circumstances remain as they were several years ago.

These sources believe that Assad, and those who support his means of dealing with country's woes, will succeed in resolving the crisis. Those within the regime who oppose him should retreat, if they have not already been removed.

Visitors to Damascus confirm that the Syrian army and security forces support Assad and are still united, despite the fact that military operations by defectors are escalating. They say opposition forces are not comparable to those that toppled Hosni Mubarak and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

Visitors to Damascus confirm that the near future will bring a new Cabinet, possibly headed by someone from the opposition, to supervise a path of reform toward free elections, during which the Syrian people will themselves decide which type of new rule they want.

The Daily Star (Liban / Lebanon)

Syrians struggling hard under weight of 10-month uprising

BEIRUT: As President Bashar Assad fights off a 10-month-old uprising, Syrians have been struggling to cope with shortages of heating oil and other fuel, electricity cuts of up to 16 hours a day and dwindling bank balances.

With no end in sight to the violent conflict, Assad's embattled regime has sought to rally support by blaming the uprising – and the “terrorists” he says are behind it – for the profound economic crisis gripping the country of 22 million. The rhetoric reflects an awareness in the regime that economic pain could erode the support it has succeeded in retaining so far amid the turmoil.

For now, though, many Syrians say their vital needs transcend politics.

“I haven't seen such a crisis in my entire life,” said Majd Amer, a resident and activist in Homs, a city that has been among the hardest-hit by the military crackdown on protesters. “Most of the residents depend on assistance from their neighbors.”

Syria's economy is groaning under the weight of sanctions from the U.S., European Union, the Arab League, and the emerging regional power Turkey. The government's violent crackdown on the uprising has caused vital sources of revenue – like tourism – to dry up, and much of the economic squeeze has affected low-level merchants and businesses.

The value of the Syrian pound has dropped 50 percent from 47 to the dollar to 71 to the dollar on the black market, sparking a rise in prices that is straining Syrian budgets.

Central Bank Governor Adib Mayaleh Friday said Syria will start next week to intervene to “improve the price of the pound,” meaning it would spend reserves to maintain the value. He declined to say how much money Syria has in foreign reserves, despite speculation that Damascus is already burning through its funds to withstand the blistering sanctions.

In a telephone interview with the Associated Press, Mayaleh blamed the economic woes on an “international conspiracy,” echoing the regime's line that foreign terrorists are driving the revolt against Assad, not protesters seeking change.

Earlier this week, Syria's oil minister said Western sanctions on Syrian oil exports have cost the country \$2 billion since September – an unusually blunt assessment of the economic problems the country is facing.

In a speech earlier this month,

Assad blamed his opponents for Syrians' suffering, and mockingly asked if being a revolutionary meant “depriving people of cooking oil they need so they don't starve.”

Analysts say the change in tone is a subtle shift by the regime. In the early days of the uprising, the government stressed it was invulnerable to the sanctions. But now, Assad and others increasingly cite Syrians' suffering – and say the uprising is the cause of it all.

The move signals a keen understanding that if the economy crumbles, it could spell doom for the regime.

“The regime is trying to mobilize against the sanctions, now that the sanctions are affecting their economy,” said Said Hirsh, a Mideast economist with Capital Economics in London.

Assad spent years shifting the country away from the socialism espoused by his father and predecessor. The result was a new and vibrant merchant class that transformed Syria's economic landscape – even as the regime's tight political grip remained unchanged.

So far, the monied classes have stuck beside Assad amid the greatest challenge yet to the 40-year rule of his family. But if the economic squeeze reaches them, it could be a game-changer for Assad since they may begin to pressure for some sort of resolution to the crisis or even turn outright against him.

The violent conflict in Syria has marked the most serious challenge to the Assad dynasty. The U.N. estimates some 5,400 have been killed since March, when the uprising began against Assad. Although the revolt began with mostly peaceful protests, an increasingly strong armed element has developed and many people are now fighting back against the regime.

Army defectors, as well, have turned their weapons on government targets.

Syrians say they are suffering a frigid winter with power cuts and scarce cooking and heating oil. In Homs, queues for gas cylinders, which cost about \$5, can stretch more than 100 people; wealthier residents turn to the black market and pay double the price.

Attacks on fuel pipelines have contributed to the shortages, and because of the chaos the state is slower – or unable – to fix electricity problems, causing cutoffs.

Key revenue sources like tourism – which accounted for 12 percent of the economy, or \$8 billion in 2010 – have dried up. – AP

Damascus frees fishermen and returns boy's body to Lebanon

THREE ARRESTED FOR ALLEGED SMUGGLING WHILE FISHING OFF SEA BORDER

Arida, Lebanon (AFP) Syrian authorities have returned the body of a slain Lebanese boy and freed his two uncles, who said they came under fire in a fishing boat along the sea border with Syria, an AFP correspondent said.

The correspondent said the body of Maher Hamad, 14, who together with his uncles was snatched from their boat off the Lebanese coast on Saturday, was handed over to officials at the northern border crossing of Abdooniyeh.

A funeral procession for Hamad later made its way from his parents' house in the village of Arida towards the border, where mourners pelted Syrian troops on the other side with stones. "There is no God but God," Bashar Al Assad is the enemy of God," they chanted, referring to the Syrian president, who has faced 10 months of anti-regime protests.

Without the troops retreating, the mourners turned around and made their way back to the village mosque. Fadi Hamad, who was handed over to Lebanese authorities overnight with his brother Khalid and the body of their nephew, recounted what he said was the boy's fatal shooting at the hands of Syrian troops.

Boat of armed men

"We had cast our nets the night before and early Saturday morning we headed out to pull them in," Hamad, 36, told AFP. "We then saw a boat pulling up to us and urged it to move back as they were nearing our net. They disappeared briefly and then came back, and when they were near enough I could see about six armed men in the boat. Four of them climbed into our boat. We were terrified. They opened fire and both Maher and my



Senseless act

Relatives mourn the death of 14-year-old Lebanese boy Maher Hamad during his funeral in Arida town in northern Lebanon yesterday. Syrian forces killed the boy and wounded his uncle when they seized a boat suspected of smuggling off the Lebanese-Syrian coast on Saturday.

"I was asked repeatedly whether the arms were coming from Sa'ad Hariri. About an hour later, I was told there had been a mistake and President Al Assad wanted to forgive me."

Fadi Hamad
Lebanese fisherman

brother were injured." The sad opposition in Beirut, he said. "I told them I was a fisherman... but they kept hitting me, and my hands were tied. About an hour later, I was told there had been a mistake and President Al Assad wanted to forgive me. I was also informed my nephew was dead."

Khalid Hamad, 35, was treated for gunshot wounds to the leg. Syria's state-run news agency Sana, meanwhile, reported that a patrol had caught three Lebanese who



Caught in the crossfire

Lebanese fisherman Fadi Hamad shows the marks on his back yesterday after he was arrested with his brother and nephew, and tortured by Syrian forces.

were attempting to enter Syrian waters for smuggling activities, Sana said port officials off Tartous warned the Lebanese to obey orders, but the fishermen instead threw their boats in the sea in an attempt to escape. The boat then came under fire from another Lebanese boat coming from Lebanese waters, leaving one person injured and another dead, according to Sana.

Opposition panel will press for Security Council role

Delegation will travel to the United Nations to submit letter



Looming doubts over credibility

Arab League's Syria mission chief Mustafa Al Dabi (left) and League Secretary-General Nabeeh Al Anabi at a meeting of the committee on Syria, in Cairo, yesterday.

Cairo (AFP) The opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) plans to send a delegation to the United Nations to press the Security Council for intervention in unrest-stricken Syria, an SNC spokesman told AFP yesterday.

"The Council will send a delegation to the United Nations to submit a letter calling for the referral of the Syria file to the Security Council to protect civilians," Mohammad Sermini said in Cairo.

The SNC's executive bureau was meeting in the Egyptian capital to put the finishing touches to a "counter-report" to one that the Arab League was to receive later yesterday from the head of an observer mission to Syria, he said.

"We fear that the Arab League report is not objective," he said.

The SNC document is more than 100 pages long and based on testimony provided by "15 observers" in Syria and activists on the ground, Sermini said, adding the report was expected to be unveiled at a news conference late yesterday.

"It will reveal truths about the crisis in Syria where a government crackdown on dissent has killed thousands since the anti-regime protest movement erupted in mid-March," he said.

Death toll in unrest

The UN estimates that more than 5,400 Syrians have been killed in the crackdown while activists and rights groups say more than 500 died since Arab League observers were deployed in Syria last December to stem the bloodshed.

The Arab League has been trying to organise a congress of Syrian opposition factions and has called for a national dialogue between the regime and President Bashar Al As-

Troops retreat from second hotspot

Move follows clashes with army defectors

Beirut (AFP) Syrian security forces retreated on Saturday.

The Observatory said one of the biggest Damascus suburbs fought between defectors and Syrian forces later in the day. Clashes with anti-government army defectors, activists appeared to be an attempt to be the second heavily populated suburban area abandoned by government troops in less than a week.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights' head Rami Abdul Rahman said government troops had pulled back early yesterday to a provincial headquarters and a security agency building in the Damascus suburb of Douma after hours of clashes, although they still controlled the entrance.

The clashes broke out after Syrian troops broke through the town's perimeter and into its entrances. Council maintains the demands of the revolution and will not engage in a dialogue until after the departure of [Ali] Assad," he said.

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Saudi Arabia to pull observers as Arabs extend Syria mission

CAIRO — Saudi Arabia said on Sunday it is to pull its observers from a widely criticised Arab League mission to Syria, as a panel recommended the body extend its observer mission to the unrest-swept country.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal said in Cairo that the move, which hints at sharp differences of opinion within the League's ranks, was being taken because Damascus had not kept its promises.

Riyadh "is withdrawing from the mission because the Syrian government has not respected any of the clauses" in the Arab plan aimed at ending the crisis, he said according to the text of a statement he made at a ministerial meeting.

Earlier, a League official confirmed after a panel met behind closed doors to hear a report on the mission that its recommendation would be an extension. "Yes, that's what is going to be recommended to the plenary session," the official said ahead of a decisive meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers.

The panel was briefed on the first month of the Syria monitoring mission by its chief, General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa Al Dabi of Sudan.

Dabi wants his mandate to be strengthened, not scrapped, another League official said earlier.

In a statement late on Saturday, the general said the mission's mandate was "to verify that the Syrian government has implemented the terms of an Arab League plan to solve the crisis, not to stop the bloodshed and violence".

But the opposition Syrian National Council, which been lobbying in Cairo for UN intervention,

said it would reveal 'a counter-report' later on Sunday to try to discredit Dabi's account.

The Dabi report blames both sides, the government and opposition, for the bloodshed, according to an Arab diplomatic source. It recommends an extension while cautioning that its observers would not be deployed indefinitely.

Fierce clashes erupted late on Saturday in Douma, just northeast of Damascus, after security forces shot dead four civilians at a funeral there, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "Groups of deserters took control of all districts in the town of Douma... after fierce fighting" with security forces, the Observatory's chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

"Dissident groups withdrew from the town and returned to their bases," the Britain-based group later said in a statement, without giving a toll.

Clashes also erupted on Sunday outside Douma between security forces and defectors in what appeared to be a regime bid to recapture the town, the Observatory said. It said one civilian was shot dead in Douma, and said two officers and a soldier were killed, along with a deserter and a civilian in the Talfita area of Damascus province. A seventh person was killed in Idlib in the northwest, it said.

The Arab League observer mission has come under strong criticism that it has failed to stem 10 months of deadly violence.

Arab League chief Nabil Al Arabi was chairing the broader meeting of foreign ministers from the 22-member bloc to decide the future of the mission launched a month ago. — *AFP*

Today's Zaman (Turquie / Turkey)

Activists say Syrian troops pushed from suburb in capital

▶ Syrian security forces retreated on Sunday from the center of one of the biggest Damascus suburbs after intense clashes with anti-government army defectors, activists said. It was the second area abandoned by government troops in less than a week as the 10-month-old uprising against President Bashar al-Assad becomes increasingly militarized. The violence came as Arab foreign ministers began talks in Cairo to review a report by Sudanese Gen. Mohammed Ahmed al-Dabi, the head of an Arab League observers mission, which technically expired on Thursday.

Arab League officials have said the 22-member organization was likely to extend the mission by a month and increase the number of observers in Syria despite complaints from the Syrian opposition that it has failed to curb the bloodshed in the country.

Members of the Syrian opposition have called for foreign troops to be dispatched to Syria to create safe zones for dissidents.

The opposition has urged the Arab League to refer the Syrian issue to the UN Security Council rather than continue trying to resolve it regionally.

Diplomacy has taken on urgency as opponents of Assad's regime and soldiers who switched sides increasingly take up arms and fight back against government forces, raising fears the conflict is veering toward civil war after beginning with largely peaceful protests in March. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights' head Rami Abdul-Rahman said government troops had pulled back early on Sunday to a provincial headquarters and a security agency building in the Damascus suburb of Douma after hours of clashes, although they still controlled the entrances. The clashes broke out after Syrian troops opened fire at a funeral on Saturday.

Abdul-Rahman had no information on casualties from the clashes but said security forces at an entrance checkpoint shot dead one man who was passing by on Sunday.

The Observatory said more clashes broke out between defectors and Syrian forces later Sunday "in what appeared to be an attempt to storm" Douma, a heavily populated suburb. Syria-based activist Mustafa Osso confirmed that security forces had abandoned Douma, but said he had no information about clashes in the area. Central Damascus has for most of Syria's 10-month uprising been under the tight control of forces loyal to Assad, but its suburbs have witnessed intense anti-regime protests. Abdul-Rahman said it was not clear if the withdrawal was a tactic for the regime forces to regroup and strike back.

Last week, army defectors took control of the mountain town of Zabadani on the western edge of the capital, near the border with Lebanon. Zabadani is still out of government control and army defectors control all its entrances. Osso said it is highly unlikely defectors are trying to take over Douma because it is easy for the regime to retake residential areas unlike Zabadani where defectors can fight from hideouts in the rugged mountains.

The conflict in Syria has marked the most serious challenge to Assad, who took over from his father in 2000. The UN estimates some 5,400 have been killed since it began in March. Also Sunday, state-run news agency, SANA, said an estimated 5,255 Syrian prisoners have been released over the past week under a recent amnesty, raising the total freed since November to more than 9,000.

On Saturday a string of explosions struck a police truck transporting prisoners in a tense area of northwestern Syria killing at least 14 people, state media and an opposition group said. Government troops also battled defectors in the north in fighting that left 10 people dead. **Beirut/AP**