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TURKEY: NEWROZ IS CELEBRATED IN VIOLENCE THIS YEAR

Every year, the degree to which Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, is accepted by the Turkish authorities is a pretty certain indicator of the way the Kurdish question will be treated by the government, which has alternated, since 2000, between periods of openness and repression.

Since 2011 and the beginning of 2012 have seen a worsening of breaches of human rights and of armed violence, as well as police and judicial intimidation directed against Kurdish elected representatives and political activists, intellectuals, journalists and academics, it is not surprising that the 2012 Newroz was more like a

trial of strength between the government and the Kurdish population than a celebration of the arrival of Spring.

Indeed, this year the celebrations were "limited" by the governor of Diyarbakir, to the date of 21 March, which was a Wednesday, whereas the Kurdish municipalities and organisations, had mostly planned to organise concerts and rallies on the 18th, a Sunday, which is not a working day. However, the Turkish authorities, stating that Newroz is just on the 21st, used this date lag to ban any earlier demonstrations.

Yet, since Newroz is specifically set on the day of the spring

equinox, it can, depending on the year, occur on the 20th or the 21st, in all countries where it is an official public holiday, be it in Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Georgia and a number of countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia. As for the Spring holidays and celebrations, they can last a lot longer, stretching from one to three weeks in Iraqi Kurdistan or Iran.

However, the ban was maintained by the local authorities while the BDP party stuck my its programme. Unsurprisingly there were outbreaks of violence. In Diyarbakir, the police used tear gas grenades and water canons against groups of demon-

strators who were waving the Kurdish flag and trying to reach the esplanade near the city walls. They were unable to stop the 5,000 strong march, according to AFP correspondents on the spot. Several clashes took place in the surrounding neighbourhoods and Molotov cocktails were thrown at the police.

In Istanbul, groups of Kurdish activists were stopped by the police as they were trying to reach Kazlıçesm Square, where the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP, the main Kurdish political organisation in Turkey) had planned to organise the celebrations. In response, many set up barricades and threw stones at the police. A group of BDP Members of Parliament were dispersed by tear gas and water cannons. The Governor of Istanbul, Huseyin Avni Mutlu reported 7 injured, including 2 police and 106 arrests.

Clashes continued throughout Newroz week. On 20 March, in Batman, violent clashes between police and demonstrators caused 15 injured, one of them seriously. At Cizre (Sirnak Province) and at Yuksekova, several police came under fire from assault rifles and one of them, seriously wounded, died in hospital.

However, these acts of violence were not limited to street fighting as on 21 March other police forces were confronted by PKK fighters near Mount Cudî (Sirnak Province): 6 of them were killed and 5 others wounded. This was during mountain mopping up operations carried out jointly by the army and the police, with air and helicopter support. Political commentators stressed, in this connection, the

increasing use of police in this kind of military operation, hitherto undertaken by troops and the gendarmerie.

A few days later, 15 women, all PKK fighters, were killed during clashes with "village guardians" (pro-government militia) at Bitlis.

The outcome of this Spring celebration thus marks the end of the AKP governments moderate "opening" to the Kurdish question and rather would announce the renewal of military strategies and police repression in Turkish Kurdistan.

In any case, the year 2011 was a very black one for human rights in Turkey. On 2 March, the Diyarbakir office of the Human Rights Association (IHD) published a report on Human Rights violations committed at local level. In the course of 2011, 29,366 such violations occurred as against 23,520 in 2010. The report notes the market increase in the use of firearms against civilians and a spectacular increase in the number of arrests and of the use of torture and inhuman treatment.

The Secretary of the Diyarbakir IHD, Raci Bilici, described the year 2011 as one of "intensified war" instead of a search for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem. The present climate reminds him of the 1990s, in which the Kurdish regions had become "a concentration camp" for the politicians, journalists, lawyers, students, trade unionists and human rights defenders, nearly all of whom ended up behind bars if they were not simply assassinated.

Raci Bilici also pointed out the increase recourse to torture and ill treatment in the prisons. The State is also accused of having provided insufficient aid to the homeless people and other victims of the Van earthquake, whereas the inhabitants had received considerable assistance from the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The figures of the IHD report for 2011 are as follows:

- 149 members of the security forces killed and 295 wounded by bullets
- 189 PKK fighters are said to have been killed and 6 wounded.
- regarding civilian victims, 129 people were killed and 259 wounded in attacks by "persons unknown", extrajudicial executions and violence with firearms. Mines and bomb attacks caused another 6 deaths and 49 injured.
- 45 people died of wounds through neglect or faults by the State by the organs.
- 1917 people were jailed and 6306 taken into detention.
- 1555 cases of torture or inhuman treatment have been recorded
- 1421 cases of breaches of the human rights of prisoners have been recorded, 932 people were wounded by the police during demonstrations.
- 4496 asylum seekers and immigrants have been detained
- 4 villages have been burnt down and forcibly evacuated
- inally complaints have been registered regarding 1699 people who have "disappeared" or been found in 111 mass graves.



IRAQI KURDISTAN: TENSION IS RISING BETWEEN IRBIL AND BAGHDAD

The interminable conflict between Iraq and the Kurdish Region over oil operations is continuing and following the lines of the overall political and diplomatic relations between Irbil and Baghdad — which have also tended to become more acrimonious.

Last autumn a major US company, Exxon Mobile, had triggered off a sharp controversy by announcing it had signed a contract with Iraqi Kurdistan covering exploratory drilling of six oil fields, without sought prior agreement from the Baghdad, which the central government always demands. The latter had threatened the to cancel a contract between Exxon and Iraq regarding the West Qurna oilfield in Southern Iraq.

The Americans had adopted a cautious and indecisive attitude, saying that the Iraqi demands would be examined. At the end of February, an ExxonMobil representative had a meeting with Hussein Sharristani, now Deputy Prime Minister while still remaining the Energy Minister, whose intransigent attitude on this question has not varied by a jot. The American company had assured the Minister that it would make its decision public *“in the coming days”*.

At the beginning of March, it was the turn of the French company, Total, to announce it had contacted with the Kurds regarding oil contracts. However, Christophe de Margerie, the Chairman of the company, asserted that nothing had yet been signed, in a press statement as he was visiting Kuwait for the 13th International Energy Forum, on 13 March:

“Kurdistan is part of Iraq and many firms are investing in Iraqi Kurdistan, so I do not see why Total cannot do the same. We are thus looking at opportunities, we are discussing, but we have not yet finalised anything”.

He also, moreover, indicated that he was considering making agreements with companies already having permits to explore for hydrocarbons in Kurdistan so as to take part in their prospecting projects but *“in all cases, the agreement of the Kurdistan government is needed”*.

On 15 March, the President of the Kurdish Region, Massud Barzani, accused Iraq, in a communiqué on his official web site, of minimising oil exports from Iraqi Kurdistan.

“Kurdistan has been exporting 90,000 to 100,000 barrels a day since the start of the year, but Baghdad states that exports are only 65,000 barrels a day and that this has caused “daily financial losses” (...) If the Oil Ministry’s statements are correct, this means that 25 to 35,000 barrels a day are being lost on the way to the market (...) Kurdistan considers that this discrepancy must immediately be the subject of an enquiry, in case someone is allocating the difference to themselves”.

The Kurdish Presidency also complains that, since May 2011, the Central government has been blocking payment to oil companies and points out that Baghdad owes the Kurdish Region over a billion dollars for 2011 and that in 2012, *“not a single dollar has been paid for exports”*.

On the same day, in a speech made in Irbil, Massud Barzani condemned in scathing terms the

Iraqi governments attitude to the Kurds’ successes:

“The leaders in the central government who refuse to accept these contracts are failures who have been unable to give Iraq what we are giving in Kurdistan. They want us down to their level. The problem is not these contracts nor is it the Constitution but just that they do not want the region to develop”.

Two days later, an Iraqi government spokesman announced that Exxon, in a letter to the Iraqi Oil Ministry, was giving up the contract signed with the Kurds. However, this news was straight away denied by the Kurdish Presidency, through its General Secretary Fuad Hussein, who pointed out, to AFP, that *“the ExxonMibile oil company is still working in Kurdistan and has made not statement to the Kurdish government regarding any freezing of its activity in Kurdistan. Meetings are constantly taking place between the parties concerned in the region and those of the American Group”*.

On 20 March, on the occasion of Newroz, the national Festival of the Kurdish New Year, Massud Barzani sharpened his criticisms of the Iraqi government, this time directing them more specifically at the Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki. He was accused of wanting to concentrate all State power in his own hands and of, in particular, taking control of the Army. Thus the President considered that the Irbil agreements between the Sunni and Shiite parties that followed the general elections of 2010 had *“lost any meaning”* and that the partnership between the two Arab political blocks under Kurdish mediation, was now *“totally inexistent”*.

“We are witnessing an attempt to set up an army of 1 million men devoted to a single person. Where in the world can you see person who is at once Prime Minister, Head of the Armed Forces, Minister of Defence, Minister of the Interior, Head of the Secret Services and head of the National Security Council?

Indeed, the Ministries of Defence and of the Interior, assumed as an “interim measure” by Nuri al-Maliki to allow time for agreement on nominations, are still vacant and the Prime Minister’s opponents accuse him of thus seeking to concentrate the powers of security and national defence as had the former Raïs Saddam Hussein.

The Kurdish President also recalled that the question of Kirkuk and the other regions that were due to chose their status by referendum was still in suspense and that the funds that should have been allocated to

the Kurdish Region for maintaining an army of Peshmergas had not yet been paid.

Returning to the issue of the oil contracts, Massud Barzani declared that none of the agreements signed by the Region with foreign companies was against the Constitution and repeated that the only reason for Baghdad’s opposition was its refusal to see Kurdistan “go forward”.

“It is time to say enough! The present situation is, in our view, unacceptable and I call on all Iraqi political leaders to try to find a solution as a matter of urgency. Failing that, we will turn to our people to take all the decisions it many judge appropriate”, concluded the Kurdish leader in terms that have been widely interpreted as a barely veiled threat to declare the independence of Kurdistan.

A week later, on 26 March, the Kurdish government, returning

to the oil issue, threatened to suspend its exports of crude oil if Baghdad did not settle its indebtedness to the Region. Another object of contention: the Central government seems on the point of reaching an agreement with BP. The latter hopes to increase the production of oil from Kirkuk — but since this region is being claimed by the Kurds, the latter judges any such agreement “illegal”.

A sign that al-Maliki’s popularity is at its lowest ebb — even if the Iraqi man in the street moderately disapproves the separatist tenor of the remarks and considers them unrealistic, it considers Barzani’s criticisms of the present government quite justified. The inhabitants of Baghdad also complain about the dilapidation of infrastructures, the water and electricity distribution services and the generalised corruption that puts a brake on any development.

SYRIA:

A KURDISH NEWROZ AND A SYRIAN SPRING

Since Kofi Annan’s visit to Syria has produced no concrete results on the spot, demonstrations and violent repression are continuing in Syria, specially as the “Syria Spring” will, this month, be celebrating its first anniversary.

At Qamichlo, according to the Syrian Observer of Human Rights (SOHR) tens of thousands of Kurds marched to celebrate another anniversary — that of 12 March 2004, when clashes took place between the Kurds and Arab militia, armed by the Baath and the Security forces, that caused 40 deaths.

According to SOHR, the processions, that waved Kurdish flags

came under fire from the security forces, using real bullets and at least 30 people were wounded..

Videos, put on line, show demonstrators in another Kurdish town, Amoude, climbing onto the roofs of a Security service building, waving the Kurdish flag and the former Syrian flag prior to the Baath seizing power. A statue of Hafez al-Assad, the father and predecessor of the current President, being thrown from the top of the building to be smashed and trampled on by the crowd.

Despite all this, the President of SOHR, Rami AbdelRahman, points out that the Syrian regime “still treats the Kurds with caution, and tries, as much as possible to

avoid clashes with them, fearing really violent confrontation”.

Since Newroz day is traditionally an opportunity for political demonstrations against the regime in office, it was especially celebrated this year by the Syrian Kurds, as is testified by the many videos put on line.

In Aleppo, which has a very large Kurdish population, a very big rally took place, accompanied by shouts of “Azadi” (freedom in Kurdish) and “Religion for God — the Nation for everyone”, “Our Syrian Revolution is for Justice, dignity and freedom”. The demonstrators also shouted “Clear off” to President Bashar al-Assad and “No more studying no more school till the President falls”.

At Qamichlo, pictures of the Kurdish leader Machaal Temo, assassinated last October were brandished, accompanied by songs calling for the overthrow of the regime, and the same occurred at Hassaké. The order town of Ras al-Ain also saw the old pre-Baath Syrian flag brought out.

While the Syrian authorities have not yet massively repressed the Kurdish demonstrations, the assassination of individuals by

“persons unknown” have not, however, ceased as well as the arresting and torturing of opponents. On 25 March, the body of a Kurdish activist from Derbassiyeh (Hassaké) Ciwan Khalaf Mohammad al-Qatna, 22 years of age, was found a few hours after he had been kidnapped by 4 masked men, who are suspected of being members of the secret services. Ciwan Khalef, who was a literature student at Aleppo University, was

Machal Temmo’s nephew, and the Kurdish opposition and his family accuse the State of being behind both murders. A member of the family stated to AKNews that Ciwan Khalef was an active member of the Youth Organisation of the Syrian Revolution as well as of the Derbassiyeh Free Youth and that his kidnapping and execution were the work of the security forces. He pointed out that the body had been found mutilated.

TURKEY:

THE ACAT REPORT ON TORTURE

The Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture (CAAT) has published “A World of Torturers: a report on the continued practice of torture in several countries in the course of 2011”. Amongst the countries recorded was Turkey.

In a chapter devoted to this country, it was stated outright that “a substantial part of the attacks on human rights committed in the country by the Turkish authorities is linked with the political conflict between them and the Kurdish people”, since the foundation of the Republic

Based on data provided by IHD for Turkey, CAAT’s report shows that, after having dropped between 2004 and 2007, “recourse to torture and ill treatment has considerably increased since 2008” and that “the principal victims of torture and ill treatment are Kurds”.

Kurdish victims of torture are, or are suspected of being, members of organisations the authorities accuse of being affiliated to the PKK, such as the BDP party and the Union of Communists of Kurdistan. They can also be people arrested in the course of demonstrations. Most of them

are tried and sentenced by virtue of articles of the anti-terrorist laws, such as Article 220 and 314 of the Penal code, against “groups intending to commit crimes against State security or against constitutional order or its smooth operation or against the law governing demonstrations and public assemblies”.

It also stresses that many minors accused of having thrown stones at policemen or of having taken part in demonstrations suffer the same ill treatment as adults, even though, on 22 July 2010 Parliament amended the anti-terrorist laws so that youths under the age of 15 years of age could no longer be sued and sentenced like adults for offences related to terrorism.

An amend to the law on the powers and obligations of the police, dated June 2007, allows police to resort to firearms while capturing a suspect or when they meet “resistance that can only be overcome by physical force”. In fact, these circumstances are often quoted cited “in an extensive manner against Kurds”. Acts of brutality are now frequently carried out by the police in their vehicles or in the streets since cameras have been installed in detention centres. Those police

stations in Turkey where they resort to torture the most are those attached to the anti-terrorist units in the Kurdish regions like those at Diyarbakir or Adana.

In the detention centres, much of the torture and ill treatment is carried out by the gendarmes and prison warders, mainly against political prisoners, be they children or adults. The prisons at Kürkcüler, of Ceyhanm (in Adana), of Diyarbakir, Erzurum, and Konya are the ones where this is most frequent.

Torture methods have altered with a reduction of the methods that leave the most visible after effects (falaka, electric shocks, Palestinian hanging) in favour of less visible ones like “frequently repeated slaps, stripping naked, sleep and food deprivation, spraying with cold water, threats of rape, pretended executions, isolation, exposure to extreme cold as well as loud music or screaming. The same methods are used on the children”. Regarding the Kurds, the purpose is principally to extort confessions that would enable their being sentenced for terrorism.

Finally, Kurdish women who have been subjected to rape while in detention often choose

to be silent about this for fear of reprisals from their families, who might resort to "honour crimes".

CAAT recalls that "Article 90 of the Constitution gives legal force to the international conventions, in particular the convention against torture, ratified in 1988" and that "as a member of the Council of Europe, Turkey is bound by the European Convention for protecting fundamental human rights and freedoms. Consequently it is liable to being brought before the European Court for Human Rights, where it has, indeed, already been found guilty several times under article 3 of the Convention that forbids torture".

In its own constitution, the Turkish State condemns torture and ill treatment. Thus article 94 states: "Any public official who carries out any act to any person that is incompatible with human

dignity and who causes that person any physical or mental suffering, affects that person's perception or his capacity to act according to his will or who insults him, shall be imprisoned for a period of 3 to 12 years".

In principle the sentence incurred is eight to fifteen years if the victim is "a child, a person physically or mentally incapable of defending themselves or a pregnant woman" or else "a civil servant or a lawyer [targeted] because of duties". If sexual violence is committed, the sentence is a minimum of ten years. In Article 95, there is a provision that if the victim should die, the sentence could be one of life imprisonment".

However, a report of the Turkish Parliamentary Enquiry Committee on Human Rights, showed that, between 2003 and 2008, "none of the 35 trials against

431 police officers in Istanbul for torture or ill treatment resulted in any sentencing". More often, the officers were charged under Article 256 of the Penal Code for "using excessive force" or for "intentional assault and battery" (Art 86), for which the penalties provided are between one and a half and four more often for often and a half years jail. Furthermore, the officers tried are more often charged under Article 51 of the Penal Code: "any prison sentence of under two years can be commuted to a suspended sentence".

Moreover, the majority of enquiries into cases of torture are entrusted to the police themselves and not to a public prosecutor. The police, instead of carrying out such enquiries, retaliate by filing complaints against their victims for "resisting the security forces" (Art 265) or for "defaming the police" (Art. 125).

CULTURE:

"I WILL NOT STAND ALONE" A NEW CD ALBUM BY KAYHAN KALHOR

The Kurdish singer, Keyhan Kalhor, originally from Kermanshah, and a master player of the kemence (a kind of hurdy-gurdy) has introduced an innovation in his new album, "I will not stand alone" (Harmonia Mundi), recorded by in February 2011 in Teheran. This time he plays

the shah-kaman, a kemence altered to his specifications, with five strings instead of four and with seven resonating cords that vibrate when the main strings are touched. The creation of this instrument was done jointly with the Austrian lute-maker Peter Biffin. He is accompanied in this album by Ali Bahrami Fard on the santour.

Regarding the album itself, Kahn Kahlo pointed out that it conjured up "*one of the hardest moments in my life, when the shadows of darkness seemed to have the upper hand*", alluding to the political upheavals Iran has been experiencing since 2008, when Kahn Kahlo himself was arrested on at least two occasions.

Comment la tranquille ville mosaïque est devenue la place forte des révolutionnaires

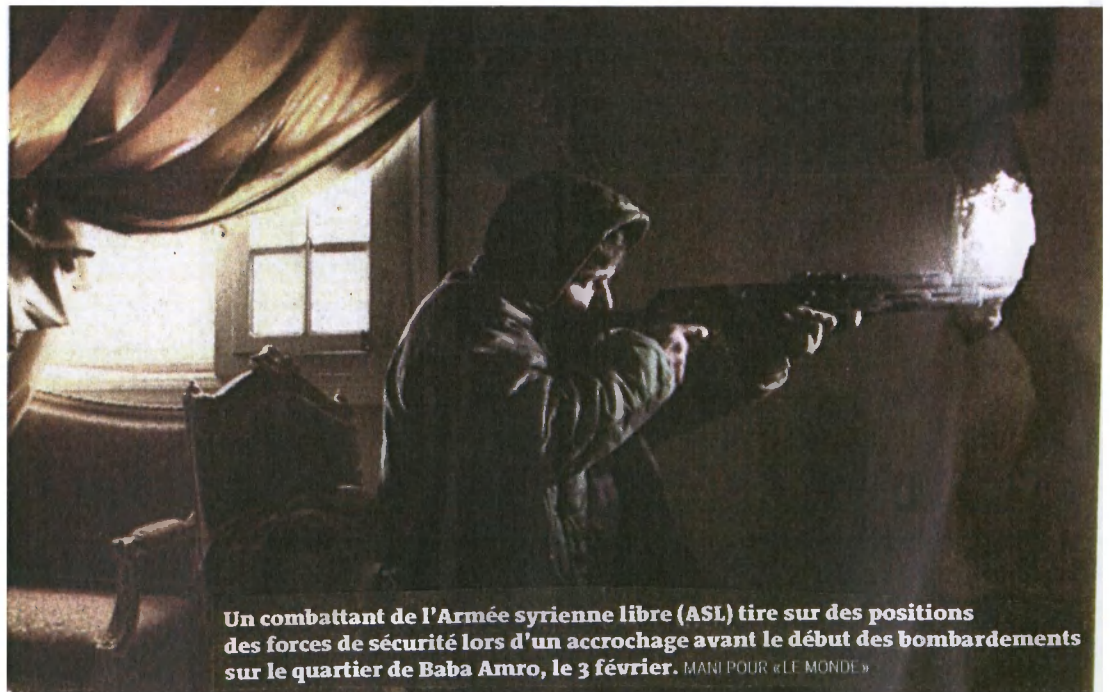
L'incapacité du tissu industriel à absorber l'exode rural et la politique de favoritisme de la communauté alaouite ont déstabilisé Homs

Si l'on avait dit aux Damas-cènes ou aux Aleppins, aux premières heures de la contestation, en mars 2011, que Homs serait, douze mois plus tard, la capitale du soulèvement anti-Assad, beaucoup auraient pensé à une bonne blague. Car dans la culture populaire syrienne, Homs n'est pas tant la ville des fiers à bras ou des fortes têtes que celle des simples d'esprit. Comme Hébron dans les territoires palestiniens, elle est raillée depuis des siècles pour la naïveté supposée de ses habitants.

« Pourquoi les Homsis superposent-ils deux postes de télévision, quand ils veulent regarder le journal télévisé ? demande l'une de ces plaisanteries. Pour voir les jambes de la présentatrice. » Les stéréotypes ont à ce point la vie dure, que selon le site Internet du magazine américain *Foreign Policy*, un partisan du régime demandait récemment sur son compte Twitter : « Pourquoi les Homsis se soulèvent-ils ? Parce que les blagues sur Homs leur tapent sur le système. »

Aujourd'hui, la troisième ville de Syrie, 1,5 million d'habitants, n'a plus le cœur à rire. De toutes les provinces du pays, c'est elle qui a payé le plus lourd tribut à la révolte. En novembre, les activistes locaux déplorait plus de 1100 morts. Compte tenu de l'intensification de la répression, avec un bombardement des quartiers rebelles comme Baba Amro quasiment ininterrompu depuis le début du mois de février, il est probable que ce bilan ait doublé voire triplé. Les vidéos et les photos envoyées par les militants montrent des morceaux de ville fantômes, grêlés par la mitraille et les explosions. Comment en est-on arrivé là ? Pourquoi Homs est-elle devenue un champ de bataille alors que Damas et Alep hésitent encore à basculer dans la contestation ?

Pour les bons connaisseurs de la Syrie, la réponse est d'abord démographique. Dans la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle, la ville de Homs, située au carrefour des principaux axes de circulation du pays (la route de la Turquie au nord, celle de



Un combattant de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) tire sur des positions des forces de sécurité lors d'un accrochage avant le début des bombardements sur le quartier de Baba Amro, le 3 février. MANI POUR « LE MONDE »

Damas à 160 km au sud, le couloir vers le port de Tartous à l'ouest et le chemin du Liban, à 35 km) a aspiré des milliers de jeunes paysans chassés de leurs terres par l'échec de la réforme agraire. Un afflux que le tissu industriel local, notamment les raffineries et l'usine d'automobiles de l'Iran Khodro Company, n'a pas pu absorber. « L'exode rural a paupérisé la ville, analyse un diplomate en poste à Damas. Une ceinture de misère

s'est formée autour du noyau historique. La bourgeoisie n'a rien vu venir. C'est pour cela que la révolte a pris si vite. »

Parmi les quartiers informels, qui émergent dans les années 1960-1970, figurent Baba Amro, l'actuel camp retranché de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), peuplé principalement de sunnites. A l'époque, c'est une zone de petits trafics, un repaire de contrebandiers, connecté sur Tripoli, la gran-

de ville libanaise voisine, sunnite elle aussi. « Les enfants de la bonne société homsise avaient interdiction d'aller dans ce secteur que l'on disait mal famé, se rappelle un natif de la ville. C'était comme le 9-3 pour Paris, aujourd'hui. »

La frustration des nouveaux arrivés, condamnés au système D, est d'autant plus grande que l'immigration alaouite trouve à s'employer sans peine. Les adeptes de cette branche du chiisme, à laquel-

le appartient le clan Assad, sont facilement recrutés par l'Académie militaire, fondée sous le mandat français, à l'instar de Hafez, le père de l'actuel chef de l'Etat, qui en sort diplômé en 1955. La plupart des postes de l'appareil administratif qui se met en place à cette époque leur sont par ailleurs réservés. « *Les natifs de Homs, essentiel-*

Ecœurés par les bains de sang, des dizaines de soldats jettent leur uniforme. L'Armée syrienne libre est née

lement chrétiens et sunnites, ont eu le sentiment que le parti Baas et les alaouites leur confisquaient leur ville, explique le politologue Salam Kawakibi. Le même phénomène s'est déroulé à Damas. Mais comme c'est une ville immense, il y a eu un effet de dilution. La prise en main par le régime a paru plus supportable. »

Les choix de Bachar Al-Assad avivent la tension. Comme le para-

chutage d'un de ses intimes, Iyad Ghazal, au poste de gouverneur de Homs, en 2005. Cet ex-directeur des chemins de fer de Syrie échauffe un projet de développement pharaonique, baptisé « Homs Dream ». Le chantier, qui prévoit la construction de tours de bureaux gigantesques, est mené à coups de trique et de pots de vin. « *Il y a eu des saisies de terre et des expulsions arbitraires, dit M. Kawakibi. Ghazal s'est comporté comme le parrain de la mafia. Il a dressé la population contre lui.* »

Quand Deraa lance le mouvement de contestation, à la mi-mars 2011, Homs lui emboîte le pas au bout de quelques jours. Des centaines de milliers d'habitants s'en vont manifester sur la place de l'horloge, le cœur de la cité. La mobilisation se veut pacifique et unitaire, dans l'esprit de cette ville mosaïque, sorte de Syrie miniature, où les communautés ont toujours vécu en bonne intelligence.

Mais Bachar Al-Assad sait le danger que constitue la propagation de la révolte dans une agglomération de la taille de Homs. Après avoir tenté d'apaiser ses opposants en limogeant Iyad Ghazal, il lance ses sol-

dats et ses miliciens contre les cortèges. Objectif : faire dévier Homs l'entêtée de sa ligne non-violente. Durant l'été, assassinats et kidnappings se multiplient dans des conditions mystérieuses. Les cadavres de quatre alaouites sont retrouvés mi-juillet avec les yeux crevés. Des magasins situés dans des quartiers contrôlés par les insurgés sont dévastés. Le spectre du sectarisme plane sur le laboratoire de la révolution. En réaction, la communauté alaouite évacue la ville.

En septembre, écœurés par les bains de sang, des dizaines de soldats jettent leur uniforme et se réfugient dans la ville de Rastan, au nord de Homs. L'ASL est née. Pilonnés par les forces régulières, les déserteurs se replient ensuite sur Baba Amro, dont ils font leur citadelle. « *Homs est devenue la capitale de la révolution malgré elle, dit M. Kawakibi. C'est la répression tournante du régime, ville par ville, qui désigne celle qui fait l'actualité.* »

Si Baba Amro tombe, le flambeau de la révolte sera repris par Idlib. Un bastion de l'ASL, à la frontière avec la Turquie, déjà encerclé par les snipers du régime. ■

BENJAMIN BARTHE

Onze mois d'insurrection

18 mars. Trois manifestants tués par les forces de sécurité à Deraa. Début du soulèvement syrien.

10 au 23 mai. Premier train de sanctions de l'Union européenne (UE) contre les hauts responsables du régime.

31 juillet. Les chars syriens entrent dans Hama. 80 morts en moins d'une semaine.

2 septembre. L'UE impose un embargo sur les importations de pétrole syrien.

15 septembre. Création du Conseil national syrien, principale plateforme de l'opposition.

4 octobre. Premier veto sino-russe à un projet de résolution à l'ONU condamnant la répression.

13 décembre. Bilan de 5 000 morts en Syrie selon l'ONU.

22 décembre. Les observateurs de la Ligue arabe arrivent à Damas.

10 janvier. Bachar Al-Assad promet de frapper les terroristes « d'une main de fer ».

22 janvier. Plan de la Ligue arabe qui prévoit une mise à l'écart progressive de M. Assad.

3 février. Début du pilonnage du quartier de Baba Amro, contrôlé par l'Armée syrienne libre.

4 février. Second veto sino-russe à un projet de résolution endossant le plan de la Ligue arabe.

Maher, le frère jusqu'au-boutiste de Bachar Al-Assad

Profil

Cette fois-ci, Maher a enlevé son pyjama. Jusqu'à la fin du mois de janvier, les Syriens utilisaient cette expression (« *Maher est encore en pyjama* ») pour expliquer que le régime n'avait pas encore donné toute la mesure de sa capacité de répression. Mais depuis le début de l'offensive lancée sur Homs, le 3 février, le frère cadet du président a revêtu son treillis. Il serait même venu personnellement superviser l'assaut final sur les derniers quartiers insurgés d'Homs, mardi 28 février.

Comme un hoquet de l'histoire, Maher Al-Assad est à son grand frère Bachar ce qu'était Rifaat au père fondateur de la dynastie,

Hafez : tout à la fois l'exécuteur des basses œuvres, le chef militaire et le jusqu'au-boutiste. Malgré ses dénégations régulières, c'est en effet Rifaat Al-Assad qui, à la

tête de ses brigades de défense, avait contrôlé l'écrasement de la révolte des Frères musulmans à Hama, en février 1982, qui avait causé 10 000 à 30 000 morts en trois semaines selon les sources. A l'époque, le massacre s'était déroulé quasiment à huis clos.



Maher Al-Assad, au côté de son frère Bachar, en 2000. REUTERS

Les brigades de défense, qui ont compté jusqu'à 50 000 hommes, ont été démantelées après la tentative de coup d'Etat de Rifaat contre son frère, le président Hafez Al-Assad. La 4^e division, dirigée aujourd'hui par Maher – qui commande aussi la garde républicaine –, est l'héritière de cette véritable armée dans l'armée : suréquipée, bien entraînée, elle compte 15 000 soldats, tous alaouites – la communauté du clan prési-

dentiel – ou presque. Autre analogie, fabriquée par le régime : les Frères musulmans étaient les fauteurs de troubles en 1982 ; aujourd'hui, c'est au nom de la lutte contre des « *groupes islamistes armés* » que le régime prétend « libérer » Homs.

Ligne dure

Agé de 44 ans, Maher Al-Assad s'est très tôt consacré au métier des armées, contrairement à son frère Bachar, ophtalmologue de formation. On le voit peu en public, où il se montre toujours aux côtés du président. Il ne s'exprime jamais. Selon les rares connaissances du très fermé cercle familial au pouvoir à Damas, il incarne la ligne dure dans la

famille. C'est lui qui aurait fait pression sur Bachar pour ne pas annoncer de réformes au tout début de la révolte, de peur d'apparaître faible. Réputé pour ses accès de colère incontrôlable, il aurait tiré une balle sur son beau-frère Assef Chawkat, lors d'une dispute familiale en 1999. Il aurait personnellement supervisé l'écrasement d'une mutinerie à la prison de Sednaya, en 2008.

Depuis le début de la révolu-

tion en Syrie, sa 4^e division est le fer de lance de la répression. Des activistes syriens disent l'avoir identifié sur une vidéo amateur en train de tirer sur des manifestants dans la banlieue de Damas, en mai 2011. ■

C. A.

Le lieutenant Tlass, figure de la résistance armée de Baba Amro

Appartenant au clan familial de l'ancien ministre de la défense, le jeune homme est un ex-officier des troupes fidèles au régime de Damas

Portrait

A Baba Amro, il est le visage de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL). Un jeune homme de 26 ans aux épaules larges, cheveux en arrière et sourcils sombres. Son ton assuré, sur les vidéos postées par les opposants sur Internet, tranche avec ses traits encore juvéniles. Abderrazzak Tlass commande la *katiba* (brigade) Al-Farouk, de l'ASL, à Baba Amro. Ses hommes défendent le quartier, bombardé sans relâche à l'arme lourde depuis le 3 février par l'armée régulière. Ce sont eux aussi qui ont organisé l'exfiltration vers le Liban du photographe britannique Paul Conroy, mardi 28 février, et du reporter espagnol d'*El Mundo*, Javier Espinosa, mercredi.

La défection d'Abderrazzak Tlass, dès les premiers mois du soulèvement syrien, en juin 2011, avait fait grand bruit. Pas tant à cause de son grade, que de son nom, le même que celui de l'indéfectible ministre de la défense de Hafez Al-Assad puis de son fils Bachar, le maréchal Moustapha Tlass, en fonction de 1972 à 2006.

En fait, le jeune lieutenant n'est pas un proche parent du vieux maréchal mais il appartient à son clan familial, originaire de la ville de Rastan, près de Hama. En trente-cinq ans à la tête du ministère de la défense, Moustapha Tlass a recruté nombre d'officiers dans sa tribu. C'est pourquoi une bonne partie des officiers sunnites de l'armée syrienne, où l'encadrement est plutôt alaouite, sont originaires de Rastan, au centre de la Syrie.

A cause de ses racines sunnites, le maréchal Tlass n'a jamais joué de rôle militaire de premier plan. Il a notamment été écarté de la répression de Hama en 1982. Il était plus réputé pour son goût de l'argent et des femmes, ainsi que ses prétentions littéraires et ses penchants

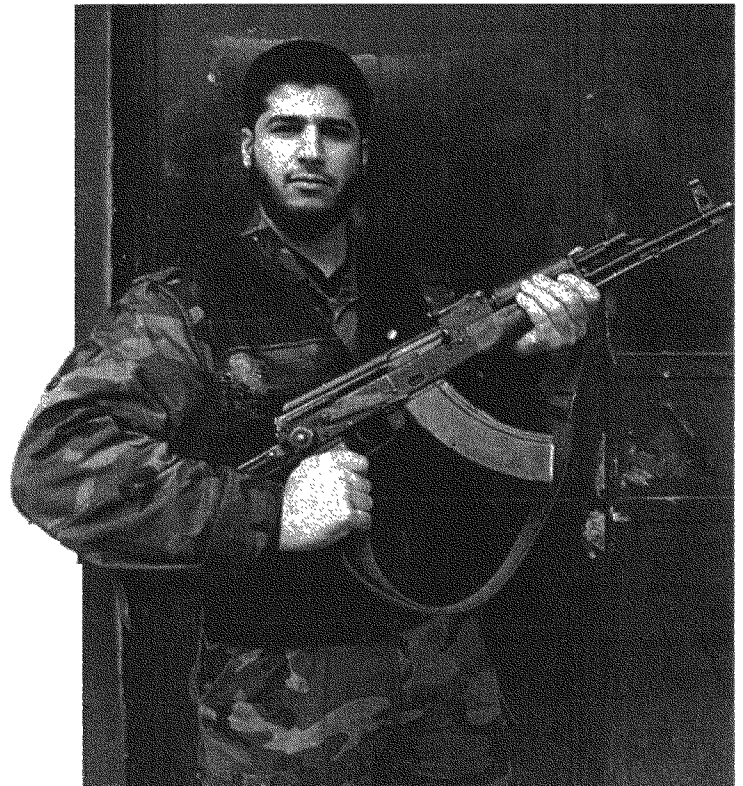
antisémites. Sa fille, mariée un temps au marchand d'armes saoudien Akram Ojeh, a eu une liaison avec Roland Dumas puis avec Franz-Olivier Giesbert. Son fils cadet Manaf est un officier de la garde républicaine, réputé proche de Bachar Al-Assad. L'aîné, Firas, est un riche homme d'affaires bien introduit auprès du régime.

Le lieutenant Abderrazzak Tlass, lui, est l'un des tout premiers officiers à avoir fait défection de l'armée syrienne. Officier de la 5^e division d'infanterie, basée près de Deraa, dans l'extrême sud du pays,

il a été aux premières loges de la révolution. C'est là que le soulèvement a éclaté, mi-mars, lorsqu'une douzaine de gamins ont été arrêtés et torturés pour avoir inscrit des graffitis contre le régime. Lorsque la population est descendue dans les rues, les forces de sécurité ont tiré sans sommation. Pour tuer.

«L'armée devrait être neutre, elle devrait protéger le peuple, expliquait-il aux envoyés spéciaux du Monde à Homs en janvier dernier. Là-bas, on a vu le contraire. Les barages tiraient sur les gens. Deraa était sinistrée. Les gens essayent de convaincre l'armée de se joindre à eux, contre les moukhabarrat [services de renseignements]. Mais ça n'a pas marché parce que les officiers ont donné l'ordre d'attaquer. Ce sont des alliés d'Assad et du régime. La majorité sont alaouites. Quant aux sunnites, ils obéissent ou ils vont en prison.»

**« Si le monde nous abandonne, on va devenir comme Al-Qaida »
Abderrazzak Tlass
commandant de l'ASL
à Baba Amro**



Le lieutenant Abderrazzak Tlass, commandant de la *Katiba*

Al-Farouk de l'ASL, dans les rues de Baba Amro, à Homs. MANI POUR « LE MONDE »

Après sa désertion, il rentre chez lui, à Rastan, où il fonde la brigade Khaled ibn Walid, du nom d'un compagnon du Prophète. Dès le début, il est convaincu que seule la lutte armée viendra à bout du régime. Rastan est attaquée violemment par l'armée à l'automne 2011.

Le jeune lieutenant réapparaît à Homs, « capitale de la révolution », à la tête de la brigade Al-Farouk. Elle compterait 2 000 à 4 000 hommes, en majorité des civils ayant pris les armes. La chaîne de commandement et la coordination avec le commandement de l'ASL à l'étranger ne sont pas claires, comme c'est le cas de la plupart des groupes rebelles armés syriens, dont l'ancrage est avant tout local. La cohabitation entre gradés n'est

pas aisée non plus, les premiers à avoir déserté estimant être plus légitimes que les plus récents, même si leur grade est inférieur.

Fin janvier, Abderrazzak Tlass mettait en garde ses interlocuteurs étrangers : *« Si ça continue, on va devenir comme Al-Qaida. Si le monde nous abandonne et soutient Al-Assad, on va attaquer Israël et d'autres pays, internationaliser le conflit, pour forcer la communauté internationale à intervenir. On va déclarer le djihad. »*

La chaîne de télévision Al-Dounia, proche du régime, a annoncé la mort d'Abderrazzak Tlass le 9 février, sans qu'elle soit jamais confirmée. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

Ali Khamenei, arbitre de l'affrontement entre ultraconservateurs en Iran

Les législatives du 2 mars sont le premier scrutin organisé depuis l'élection contestée de 2009

Les Iraniens ont eu la surprise, mercredi, de voir de drôles de textos au ton menaçant arriver sur leur téléphone portable : « *Les Etats-Unis ne pourront envisager d'attaquer l'Iran qu'à condition que la participation [aux élections législatives] soit inférieure à 50 %.* » Le même genre de message inquiétant est apparu sur des affiches, liant explicitement les menaces pesant sur le pays et le scrutin du vendredi 2 mars. Panique d'un régime en manque de légitimité face à l'abstention massive qui s'annonce, ou manipulation de l'opinion ? Difficile de savoir, comme c'est souvent le cas en République islamique : c'est, en tout cas, la première fois que les autorités font référence de manière aussi explicite à la tempête qui s'annonce autour de l'Iran et de son programme nucléaire, quitte à affoler l'opinion.

Les législatives du 2 mars sont le premier scrutin national en Iran depuis la réélection contestée, en juin 2009, du président Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Les manifestations massives contre la fraude présumée avaient débouché sur la plus grave crise de régime de la République islamique depuis la révolution de 1979.

Trois ans plus tard, le « mouvement vert » a été complètement neutralisé. Ses deux dirigeants, Mir Hossein Moussavi et Mehdi

Karoubi, sont maintenus au secret sous bonne garde à leur domicile. Les cadres de ce mouvement aux contours flous ont été emprisonnés, intimidés ou contraints à l'exil. Les rares réformateurs encore en activité, comme l'ancien président Khatami, font profil bas.

Mais les millions d'électeurs ayant voté pour Moussavi et Karoubi seront-ils au rendez-vous vendredi ? Depuis les appels au boycottage des leaders « verts », le taux de participation est devenu un enjeu majeur du scrutin et un test pour la légitimité du régime.

C'est tout particulièrement le cas pour le personnage le plus puissant du système, le Guide suprême Ali Khamenei, dont les pouvoirs procèdent pourtant du divin et non des urnes. Seulement, Ali Khamenei a dû descendre dans l'arène lorsque le régime a été menacé dans ses fondements durant les terribles journées de juin-juillet 2009. « *Il a été obligé de cautionner une répression qui est allée trop loin, notamment avec les viols en prison* », rappelle un ancien responsable politique iranien qui a travaillé par le passé à son côté.

Piégé par son soutien à Ahmadinejad, Ali Khamenei a dû affronter les critiques d'une partie du clergé chiite de Qom, qui plaide pour une implication moins directe des religieux dans la vie politique. Sans

compter les provocations du président iranien qui n'a eu de cesse, lors de son second mandat – qui s'achève en 2013 –, de s'émanciper de celui qu'il appelle son « père » en public. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a tenté, en 2011, de mettre la main sur les deux piliers du pouvoir que sont le ministère du pétrole et celui des renseignements. A chaque fois, le Guide l'a brutalement rappelé à l'ordre.

Depuis, la guerre est déclarée. Le conseiller de presse de M. Ahmadinejad, Ali-Akbar Javanfekr, a été

Les électeurs ayant voté pour Moussavi et Karoubi seront-ils au rendez-vous ?

condamné à un an de prison en janvier. Son dauphin présumé, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, est visé par des accusations de déviationnisme religieux et une enquête pour détournements de fonds. Depuis un an, l'essentiel de la vie politique tourne autour de cet affrontement – d'une âpreté rarement vue – entre factions ultra conservatrices, qui met aussi aux prises plusieurs groupes du corps d'élite des Gardiens de la révolution (*pasdaran*), devenus prépondérants tant dans la défense que l'économie iraniennes.

A l'extrême droite de ce spectre figure notamment le général Qassem Suleimani, de la force Al-Qods, chargée du soutien aux groupes chiites radicaux en Irak et au Liban. Allié à l'hodjatoleslam Taeb, ancien chef des bassij (miliciens du régime) et actuel responsable des renseignements des pasdaran, il a joué un rôle essentiel dans la répression de 2009. Les tensions avec Israël et les Etats-Unis le renforcent.

Tout l'enjeu pour Ali Khamenei, contesté dans la rue et bousculé dans ses prérogatives, est donc de constituer une majorité qui lui sera fidèle pour affronter les périls du moment, qui n'ont jamais été aussi graves. L'économie iranienne com-

mence à être sérieusement affectée par les sanctions économiques adoptées par les pays occidentaux pour forcer Téhéran à faire toute la lumière sur son programme nucléaire, qu'ils soupçonnent d'avoir des visées militaires. Le rial a chuté de plus de 40 % ces six derniers mois, l'inflation dépasse 20 %.

Pour Bernard Hourcade, directeur de recherche émérite au CNRS et spécialiste de l'Iran, tout dépendra de la nouvelle génération d'élus locaux qui pourraient arriver au Parlement à la faveur du scrutin de vendredi : « *Ce sont des technocrates peu au fait des enjeux internationaux et soucieux de bonne gestion. Vont-ils se rallier à Ahmadinejad, qui leur ressemble ou vont-ils faire allégeance au Guide ?* » Ali Khamenei a laissé entendre qu'à l'avenir le président de la République pourrait ne plus être élu au suffrage universel direct, source d'une fâcheuse incertitude et d'une légitimité potentiellement gênante.

Sur les cinq grandes coalitions en lice, trois sont clairement affiliées à Khamenei et hostiles à Ahmadinejad. Les fidèles du président, regroupés dans le Front du monothéisme et de la justice, ne se sont découverts que deux jours avant la fin de la campagne électorale, probablement par peur d'être réprimés. Ce qui en dit long sur le niveau de suspicion qui règne au sommet de l'Etat iranien.

La question nucléaire, devenue le symbole indélébile du nationalisme iranien, est instrumentalisée par les différentes factions, qui se livrent à une dangereuse surenchère. A laquelle viennent s'ajouter, enfin, les menaces pesant sur le régime syrien, principal allié régional de l'Iran avec le Hezbollah libanais. Ce faisceau de tensions intérieures, régionales et internationales forme un cocktail qui ne laisse pas d'inquiéter. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD
AVEC ASSAL REZA

48 millions d'Iraniens appelés à élire 290 députés du Majles

Une compétition tronquée
3500 des 5400 candidats à la députation ont été validés par le Conseil des gardiens de la Constitution, une assemblée de 12 juristes religieux ; auparavant, 750 candidats avaient déjà été écartés par le ministère de l'Intérieur.

Les principales listes
Front uni des conservateurs (Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, allié à Ali Larijani, Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, Manoûchehr Motaki et l'ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi) ; proche du Guide suprême

Ali Khamenei
Front de l'Endurance (Mohsen Rezaï) : pro-Khamenei.
Voix de la Nation (Ali Motahari et Hamid-Reza Katouzian) : anti-Ahmadinejad.
Front de la Persistance (ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi) : proche d'Ahmadinejad et du Guide, critique de Mashaei.
Front de monothéisme et de justice : pro-Ahmadinejad.

Le vote Le mode de scrutin est un scrutin plurinominal à deux tours par grandes circonscriptions.

Iranian Opposition Demands Federalism for Kurdistan



Secretary General of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) Mustafa Hijri in London for meetings with British MPs. Photo courtesy of Loghman H. Ahmedi.

By SAKAR ABUBAKIR
rudaw.net

COLOGNE, Germany – For four days in January and February, Iranian opposition groups held two meetings in Germany and Sweden to discuss the future of minorities in Iran.

Kurdish opposition leaders focused on achieving federalism for the Kurdish areas of Iran, but Persian opposition groups strongly opposed the idea for Kurds and other minorities.

Their proposed solution was the creation of a free and democratic state.

After nearly a year of planning and lengthy debates, the Iranian opposition groups could not agree on an alternative for the current Islamic regime that has been ruling Iran since 1979.

Kawa Ahangari, a representative of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) at the meeting, told Rudaw, "The meeting was to gain knowledge about the demands of various groups; it was a meeting to discuss various topics."

Ahangari said the meeting led to the creation of an 18-member committee of opposition figures.

Muhammad Misri, head of the Worker's Revolutionary Group of Kurdistan based in Germany, believes that the meeting was not held in order to

talk about the rights of Kurds or other minorities in Iran.

"The aim of these meetings is for opposition groups to get to know each other, to get closer to each other for a common fight against the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said.

Political groups of Iranian Kurdistan were divided over whether the Kurds should attend the meeting or not.

Tahir Mahmudi, the public relations spokesperson of the KDPI in Erbil, talked to Rudaw about the importance of the meeting.

"Any meeting that benefits the cause of minority rights in Iran, and helps the process of the democratization of Iran, has a positive effect for all of us," he said.

Some Kurdish opposition leaders said the meeting in Germany was a chance for other Iranian dissidents to meet with Kurds and listen to their aspirations after nearly three decades of repression and indifference.

However, Arif Bawajani, the head of the Kurdistan Freedom Party, disagrees.

"A meeting with the Persian general opposition would not benefit the Kurds in anyway," he said. "The meeting in Stockholm was a good chance for the Kurds to show their demands. We should not be afraid in such meetings to ask boldly for our independence; just talking about freedom and democracy

in Iran is a waste of time."

Iranian Kurdish dissident groups have often been criticized for their disunity and lack of a common agenda.

But Ahangari believes that, at the recent meetings in Europe, the Kurds were united.

"Kurds are a strong and active part of the Iranian opposition," he said. "During the two meetings, most of the time the Kurds spoke with one voice due to the fact that most of the Kurdish groups demanded establishing a democratic federalist state as an alternative to the Islamic Republic of Iran."

At the meetings, some Iranian dissidents rejected the Kurdish identity as a separate ethnicity. This, Mahmudi said, shows a lack of understanding by those groups.

"The Kurds' right to self-determination is not in need of approval from other nationalities," he said. "All the principles exist for the right of the Kurds to self-determination, and those who oppose it must be living on some other planet. Such thinking doesn't exist nowadays."

For his part, Bawajani also believes that Persian opposition groups show little regard for minority groups in Iran.

"Unfortunately, Persian opposition groups do not hide the fact that they oppose the rights of Kurds and other oppressed minorities in Iran, more than the current government does," he said. "They think of every Kurdish demand as one for separation and reject it violently in their media outlets."

In the end, Misri believes, every plan and agenda for the Kurds has to be made clear now.

"We believe that at this time we should talk about the essential issues and not waste time on wording statements," he said. "When we talk about federalism in Iran, we talk about having a Kurdistan Federalist Government, running our own affairs according to the power we have with the central government. If they approve that, then let them call it whatever way they want it to be called." □

Syria: The geopolitical dimensions

by Robert Olson*

todayzaman.com

The next several months will determine whether the authoritarian Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria will be able to withstand the growing number of countries arrayed against it. On Feb. 24, some 50 countries, notably minus Russia and China, calling themselves the "Friends of Syria," gathered in Tunis calling for more forceful intervention in response to the bloodshed occurring.

Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, the main advocate of Assad's overthrow and the main ally of the US in the Middle East, along with Israel and Turkey, called for armed intervention. Qatar Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani lobbied for an Arab force to be created to impose peace and open humanitarian corridors to the resisting forces and population.

But two days later on Feb. 26, in a rebuff to the "Friends," the Assad government went ahead with a referendum for a new constitution, one supposed to redress many of the grievances of the regime's opponents and other Syrians as well. Indeed, the referendum for a new constitution was passed with a favorable vote although it will probably never be known how many people actually voted in the referendum. But new parliamentary elections are to be held within 90 days. The Assad regime's electoral maneuvers mean that if the "Friends of Syria," armed principally by the US, EU, Gulf Arabs and Turkey, decide to strike before parliamentary elections, the invasion will take on a preemptive character. If this were to occur, certainly, Russia and China, two of most powerful countries with stakes in the Middle East, will be unhappy and may well make other challenges to the US and Europe in other places in the Middle East and elsewhere, i.e. Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There is no question that the momentum for stronger intervention in Syria occurred at the same time as the unfolding of the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen. The main reason for this is that if the US, Israel, EU and Gulf Arab states, mainly Saudi Arabia, determi-



Tunisia's Foreign Affairs Minister Rafik Abdesslem (c) prepares to address the Friends of Syria conference in Tunis on Feb. 24, 2012. (PHOTO reuters, JASON REED)

ned that if military action against Iran were to be necessary, either before or after the US presidential election, it would be desirable if the Assad regime were no longer in power and replaced by a Sunni-led government. This scenario could take place whether or not Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency came to an agreement regarding the then determined status of Iran's nuclear programs.

Facilitating a regime change in Iran

It seems established that the escalation of activities, both overt and covert, against Syria became more forceful after March 2011 along with the unfolding of other Arab revolutions and resistance. But, unlike the other Arab revolutions, the actions, both overt and covert, against Syria, especially those by the US, EU and Turkey after June 2011, were meant to facilitate regime change in Iran. For one thing, all of the Republican presidential candidates, with the exception of Ron Paul, repeatedly call for the overthrow of the Iran regime and even the destruction of much of Iran's infrastructure.

The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are also eager to get rid of the Assad regime before any Israel/US attack on Iran's nuclear sites and infrastructure. There are several reasons for this: one, the Shiite, Alawite Assad regime in Syria is a strong ally of Iran's and has been

since 1975; two, by getting rid of the Assad regime and bringing a predominantly Sunni (70 to 75 percent of the population in Syria is Sunni) regime to power in Syria, the Gulf Arabs and Turkey, also a predominantly Sunni country (80 per cent), would be able to better manage any political challenges from the Shiite populations of the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis and Gulf Arabs hope that by toppling the Assad regime they will be better able to overthrow the Shiite dominated government of Lebanon, whose current prime minister, Najib Mikati, although a Sunni, is, however, tolerant toward Hezbollah and Shiite parliamentarians, while the Saudis favor his Sunni opposition. Mikati is disliked by Israel, the US and the Gulf for this reason, but must take into consideration that 38-40 percent of Lebanon's population is Shiite.

Of course, Israel, as well as some groups in Lebanon and Jordan would also like a weakened Syria as well as the supporters of Israel in the US; a weakened Syria, like a fragmented Iraq, would serve Israel and many of its neo-conservative supporters in the US. Turkey would also benefit as a weakened, but not decentralized Syria with a Sunni dominated government would enable Ankara to better manage the growing Kurdish nationalist movements in Syria. In order to manage the growing challenges of the Kurdish nationalist movements in

► Turkey, Ankara will likely determine that it is necessary to extend its political and economic zone of expansion to the Kurds of Syria as well. Turkey undoubtedly thinks that it will be able to elicit the help of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in this endeavor.

In mid-February, Khaled Meshal,

the long-time leader of Hamas in exile in Damascus, announced that the headquarters of Hamas in Damascus would be closed and be moved to Qatar. This was yet another indication that Palestinian leaders in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Gaza, are also concerned that the "Friends of Syria" would be staging increasing attacks in

Syria. The Palestinians already were aware that the "Friends of Syria" were the enemies of Iran. ♦

**Robert Olson is a Middle East analyst based in Lexington, Kentucky.*

TheNational MARCH 4, 2012

A crisis in Ankara's backyard that does not involve Assad

Gonul Tol
thenational.ae

WHEN leading politicians from around the world met in Tunis late last month to discuss what to do next to help Syrians under siege, many of the "Friends of Syria" focused on the pivotal role that Turkey, Syria's large and influential northern neighbour, can play in shaping the outcome.

But Turks themselves are equally focused on another neighbour just as troublesome: Iraq, with its rising sectarian tensions and semi-autonomous Kurdish region. The potential for the Iraqi political standoff to deteriorate into a full sectarian conflict, with all that might portend for Kurdish irredentism both in northern Iraq and in Turkey proper, fills Ankara's strategists with almost as much angst as the Syrian nightmare.

Thus, in a bid to defuse tensions, both between Turkey and Iraq and among the Iraqi factions, Turkey recently announced that it was planning to invite leading figures from Iraq's divided Sunni and Shia communities to Istanbul in the coming weeks to build confidence and discuss possible steps towards resolving the political crisis in Iraq.

The invitation comes at a pivotal time, with domestic and regional dynamics making Iraq a sensitive issue not only for Turkey but also for the United States, and the region. The political deadlock on Turkey's Kurdish question, the violent instability in Syria, and the persistent threats of a strike on Iran, together with the US withdrawal from Iraq, have served only to add fuel to the recent spat between Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The heated rhetoric between Mr Al

Maliki and Mr Erdogan flared up in January after the Maliki government issued an arrest warrant for Sunni Vice President Tarek Al Hashemi on charges of supporting terrorist acts.

The Turkish and Iraqi leaders accused each other of stoking sectarian tensions, with Mr Erdogan warning that Ankara would not remain silent if it felt Baghdad was pushing Iraq into a sectarian conflict. Later in the month, rockets were fired at the Turkish embassy in Baghdad, which Turkey took as a warning by Mr Al Maliki's forces.

The diplomatic row between the two countries stems from differences over several issues.

First, Mr Al Maliki didn't much appreciate Turkey's relatively open support for his rival, Ayad Allawi, in the 2010 Iraqi elections.

Second, Baghdad's rapprochement with Iran makes Turkey nervous, as it does Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbours to the south.

Third, the two governments differ starkly in their reaction to the Syrian crisis, with Turkey voicing sharp criticism of the Bashar Al Assad regime and hosting opposition elements, whereas Iraq has tacitly backed Mr Al Assad, fearing a civil war in Syria would have a violent spillover effect.

Finally, the Turks perceive that Mr Al Maliki has been trying to push influential Sunnis out of positions of power, thereby increasing the likelihood of a reversion to the kind of sectarian war witnessed in 2006 and 2007. Such a scenario, in Ankara's view, could even lead to the break-up of Iraq into three regions, with the Kurds in the north finally gaining their independence, a development with important implications for the status of Turkey's own Kurdish minority.

Evidently, Turkey fears any even-

tual Iraqi Kurdish autonomy might lead to similar territorial claims among Kurds within its borders.

This fear is driving Turkey to urge Baghdad to adopt a more inclusive approach in its domestic political arrangements, allowing Sunnis and Kurds to feel they have a real share of power. In recent months, though, Mr Al Maliki appears to have acted with the opposite impulse, appointing Shia loyalists to key positions in the army and arresting Sunni politicians on terrorism charges.

Mr Erdogan has not lost hope, however, that he can repair the rift and improve ties, given the importance Turkey plays in Iraq's regional integration. While Iraq's stability and unity remain of primary importance to Ankara, Baghdad has no interest in losing Turkey as a friend and partner. With high unemployment, poor infrastructure and ongoing terror attacks in Iraq, Mr Al Maliki desperately needs foreign investment to be able to deliver on his promises of an improving economy.

Turkey currently runs neck-and-neck with Iran as Iraq's biggest trading partner, but with Iran's increasing isolation and economic fragility under the pressure of severe sanctions, the Turks are betting Iraq will realise they can ill afford to alienate their giant northern neighbour.

It should be a very interesting meeting in Istanbul indeed. ■

Gonul Tol is the Executive Director of the Middle East Institute's Centre for Turkish Studies in Washington

Syria : For minorities, now is the time to report

By Michael Young
The Daily Star

It is unfortunate that among those most anxiously observing the uprising in Syria (and not only Syria) have been members of the Middle East's religious and ethnic minorities. Indeed, Syria's Alawite leadership is perpetrating a butchery partly because it expects its community to be marginalized if Bashar Assad falls.

Minority solidarity is a dangerous impulse. It has led many of Syria's Kurds and Druze to watch from the sidelines as their countrymen have been slaughtered – when they have not actively participated in the repression. In Lebanon, it has pushed leading figures in the Christian community, among them Maronite Patriarch Beshara Rai, to defend the Assad regime. And the vile Sister Agnes Mariam of the Cross, of the Catholic Media Center, has been a useful idiot on behalf of Syria's intelligence services, echoing regime propaganda.

The foolishness and inhumanity of these reactions does not mean minority questions will be any less important once the current consignment of autocrats disappears. Minorities will gain in significance, because in many countries the breakdown of authoritarian rule also represents a breakdown of the ideological and intimidatory underpinnings that once kept minorities in line.

The edifice began collapsing in 2003, when the United

States invaded Iraq, removing the minority Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein. The Americans, for a moment, naively aspired to sponsor an equitable Iraqi social contract, with federalism at its core. In reality, they ushered in a Shiite-dominated regime, while federalism permitted the Kurds to consolidate their autonomy in the north. The Sunni Arabs, despite combating Al-Qaeda, have since then grown alienated from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, generating worries that Iraq's centrifugal forces may become unmanageable.

Fear of what might happen in Syria if the majority Sunnis regain power has colored the behavior of the country's minorities. Their fixation has been deformed by the expectation that if the Sunnis return, they will do so as resentful Islamists.

So much in that expectation is left unsaid. First, that minority apprehensions, including those of the Alawites, are based on an impression that the brutality and absoluteness of Alawite conduct will necessarily bring an equally brutal and absolute reckoning from Sunnis; that, just as the Alawites favored those from their community, at least those integrated into the political and military elite, and calculated on the basis of communal interests, so too will their foes; and that at the heart of the Arab world's political arrangements there must be antagonism between minorities and majorities, because that was always the nature of things, even before independence.

Arab nationalism has played a critical role in shaping so stark an outlook. In Syria and Iraq, ruling minorities drew on Baathism to detract from their status by positing a larger Arab identity to which all had to bend. The uniformity this tenet enforced was as much designed to stifle alternative identities as to justify crushing dissent. Where majorities have governed, they have been no gentler with minorities, while non-Arab states such as Turkey and Iran have similarly deployed a muscular nationalism against their minorities.

In Lebanon, where minorities coexist, the story is somewhat different. Christians by and large rejected Arab nationalism during the first three decades after independence, extending this to include wariness with the Palestinian cause when Beirut hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization starting in 1970. Shiites, too, remained mistrustful of Arab nationalism, which they regarded as a surrogate for Sunni pre-eminence. And yet ironically, Hezbollah, created and sustained by Iran, later sought to hijack the symbols of Arab nationalism and the Palestinian struggle to legitimize itself among Sunnis while drawing attention away from its Shiite personality.

As the old political structures disintegrate in Syria, many are panicking. Turkey's leaders, for instance, worry about what might happen to their own Kurdish population, or to

Arab Alawites in the province of Iskenderun, were Syria to break up. If Syria's Alawites decide they can no longer hold on in Damascus, they may seriously contemplate falling back on an Alawite mini-state in the northwest. For much of my youth I was told how Israel and Henry Kissinger intended to fragment the Middle East into weak sectarian entities. Now that purported scheme threatens to be carried out by Syria's Alawites, with a sympathetic partner in Lebanon's Shiites under Hezbollah's authority. Iran must be confused. A Syria in pieces would compel Tehran to guarantee that Alawites and Shiites cooperate. But if one of those pieces is a self-ruling Kurdish entity in Syria's northeast, alongside Iraqi Kurdistan, then the Iranians, like the Turks, could face a major headache with their own Kurds.

Some Lebanese minority leaders are looking afar for new friendships. Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea visited Iraqi Kurdistan in recent months. Both men are astute enough to sense that the Kurds will be big players during the coming decade, and are unlikely to fall under the thumb of Islamists. Jumblatt and Geagea support the Syrian uprising, but are also aware that the policies pursued by the Assad regime, as well as the aid Syria's opposition is receiving from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, may cede the initiative to Islamists and Salafists, who are as hostile toward the Druze as toward the Maronites. In such circumstances, novel minority alignments may prove useful in the event communal self-preservation becomes the name of the game.

Christians have used the fate of their coreligionists in Iraq as a cautionary tale for what awaits minorities in

the Middle East. That's a shallow way of looking at things. Minorities – Kurds, Shiites, Druze, Alawites and Christians in general – will

be vital in defining what occurs next in the region. Be that good or bad, to assume that an iron curtain of Sunni Islamism will neces-

sarily descend on us all is to underestimate the influence of those, secular Sunnis and Islamist Shiites included, who reject such an out-

come. ♦

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INTERNATIONAL
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Israel's deadline for striking Iran

Without ironclad security assurances from the U.S., Israel may well decide to attack Iran on its own.

Amos Yadlin

TEL AVIV On June 7, 1981, I was one of eight Israeli fighter pilots who bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak. As we sat in the briefing room listening to the army chief of staff, Rafael Eitan, before starting our planes' engines, I recalled a conversation a week earlier when he'd asked us to voice any concerns about our mission.

We told him about the risks we foresaw: running out of fuel, Iraqi retaliation, how a strike could harm our relationship with America, and the limited impact a successful mission might have — perhaps delaying Iraq's nuclear quest by only a few years. Listening to today's debates about Iran, we hear the same arguments and face the same difficulties, even though we understand it is not 1981.

Shortly after we destroyed Osirak, the Israeli defense attaché in Washington was called in to the Pentagon. He was expecting a rebuke. Instead, he was asked a single question: How did you do it? The U.S. military had assumed that the F-16 aircraft they had provided to Israel had neither the range nor the ordinance to attack Iraq successfully. The mistake then, as now, was to underestimate Israel's military ingenuity.

We had simply maximized fuel efficiency and used experienced pilots, trained specifically for this mission. We ejected our external fuel tanks en route to Iraq and then attacked the reactor with pinpoint accuracy from so close and such a low altitude that our unguided bombs were as accurate and effective as precision-guided munitions.

Today, Israel sees the prospect of a nuclear Iran that calls for our annihilation as an existential threat. An Israeli strike against Iran would be a last resort, if all else failed to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program.

That moment of decision will occur when Iran is on the verge of shielding its

On June 7, 1981, I was one of eight Israeli fighter pilots who bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak.

nuclear facilities from a successful attack — what Israel's leaders have called the “zone of immunity.”

Some experts oppose an attack because they claim that even a successful strike would, at best, delay Iran's nuclear program for only a short time. But today

almost any industrialized country can produce a nuclear weapon in four to five years — hence any successful strike would achieve a delay of only a few years. What matters more is the campaign after the attack.

When we were briefed before the Osirak raid, we were told that a successful mission would delay the Iraqi nuclear program for only three to five years. But history told a different story. After the Osirak attack and the destruction of the Syrian reactor in 2007, the Iraqi and Syrian nuclear programs were never fully resumed. This could be the outcome in Iran, too, if military action is followed by tough sanctions, stricter international inspections and an embargo on the sale of nuclear components to Tehran. Iran, like Iraq and Syria before it, will have to recognize that the precedent for military action has been set, and can be repeated.

Others claim that an attack on the Iranian nuclear program would destabilize the region. But a nuclear Iran could lead to far worse: a regional nuclear arms race without a red phone to defuse an escalating crisis, Iranian aggression in the Gulf, more confident Iranian surrogates like Hezbollah and the threat of nuclear materials' being transferred to terrorist organizations.

Ensuring that Iran does not go nuclear is the best guarantee for long-term regional stability. A nonnuclear Iran would be infinitely easier to contain than an Iran with nuclear weapons.

President Obama has said America will “use all elements of American

power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.” Israel takes him at his word. The problem, however, is one of time. Israel doesn't have the safety of distance, nor do we have the U.S. Air Force's advanced fleet of bombers and fighters. America could carry out an extensive air campaign using stealth technology and huge amounts of ammunition, dropping enormous payloads that are capable of hitting targets and penetrating to depths far beyond what Israel's arsenal can achieve.

This gives America more time than Israel in determining when the moment of decision has finally been reached. And as that moment draws closer, differing timetables are becoming a source of tension.

On Monday, Mr. Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel are to meet in Washington. Of all their encounters, this could be the most critical. Asking Israel's leaders to abide by America's timetable, and hence allowing Israel's window of opportunity to be closed, is to make Washington a de facto proxy for Israel's security — a tremendous leap of faith for Israelis faced with a looming Iranian bomb. It doesn't help when American officials warn Israel against acting without clarifying what America intends to do once its own red lines are crossed.

Mr. Obama will therefore have to shift the Israeli defense establishment's thinking from a focus on the “zone of immunity” to a “zone of trust.” What is needed is an ironclad American assurance that if Israel refrains from acting in its own window of opportunity — and all other options have failed to halt Tehran's nuclear quest — Washington will act to prevent a nuclear Iran while it is still within its power to do so.

I hope Mr. Obama will make this clear. If he does not, Israeli leaders may well choose to act while they still can.

AMOS YADLIN, a former chief of Israeli military intelligence, is the director of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies.

Fear of Sunni takeover in Syria

NAJAF, IRAQ

Uprising raises concerns for Shiites and other groups of a sectarian war

BY TIM ARANGO

Abu Ali fled his life as a Shiite cleric and student in Homs, the besieged Syrian city at the center of an increasingly bloody uprising, but it was not the government he feared.

It was the rebels, who he said killed three of his cousins in December and dumped a body in the family garbage bin.

"I can't be in Homs because I will get killed there," he said from this religious city in Iraq where he has taken refuge. "Not just me, but all Shiites."

Like his fellow Shiites in Iraq, Abu Ali, who used his nickname to protect his family back in Syria, said he regarded the Syrian rebels as terrorists, not freedom fighters, underscoring one of the complexities of a bloody civil conflict that has persisted as diplomatic efforts have failed. In spite of President Bashar al-Assad's willingness to unleash a professional military on a civilian population, with lethal results, Mr. Assad retains some support at home and abroad from allies, including religious and ethnic minorities who for decades relied on the police state for protection from sectarian aggression.

"What the government is doing is trying to protect the people," Abu Ali said, echoing the Assad government's propaganda. "They are targeting terrorist groups in the area."

The insurrection in Syria, led by the country's Sunni majority in opposition to a government dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Shiism, is increasingly unpredictable and dangerous because it is aggravating sectarian tensions beyond its borders in a region already shaken by religious and ethnic divisions.

For many in the region, the fight in Syria is less about liberating a people under dictatorship than it is about power and self-interest. Syria is drawing in sectarian forces from its neighbors, and threatening to spill its conflict into a wider conflagration. There have already been sparks in Lebanon, where Sunnis and Alawites have skirmished.

And here in Iraq, where Shiites are a majority, the events across the border have put the nation on edge while hardening a sectarian schism. As Abu Ali discovered, Iraq's Shiites are now lined up on the side of a Baathist dictatorship in Syria, less than a decade after

the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein and his own Baath Party, which for decades had repressed and brutalized the Shiites.

"This is difficult," Sheik Ali Nujafi, the son of one of Najaf's top clerics and his chief spokesman, said of the Shiite support for Mr. Assad. "But what is worse is what would come next."

The paradox, of Shiites supporting a Baathist dictator next door, has laid bare a tenet of the old power structure that for so long helped preserve the Middle East's strongmen. Minorities often remained loyal and pliant and in exchange were given room to carve out communities, even if they were more broadly discriminated against.

As dictators have fallen in neighboring countries, religious and ethnic identities and alliances have only hardened, while notions of citizenship remain slow to take hold. The fighting in Syria has exacerbated that, as Shiites worry that a takeover of Syria by its Sunni majority would herald not only a new sectarian war but actually the apocalypse.

People here say that is not hyperbole, but a perception based in faith. Some

Shiites here see the burgeoning civil war in Syria as the ominous start to the fulfillment of a Shiite prophecy that presages the end of time. According to Shiite lore, Sufyani — a devil-like, apocryphal figure in Islam — gathers an army in Syria and after conquering that land turns his wrath on Iraq's Shiites.

"Among these stories we get from the Prophet and his family is that Sufyani will come out and will start to kill the believers in Syria, and then come to Iraq, where there will be many killings and massacres," Mr. Nujafi said.

He said events in Syria were "similar but not completely the same" as the story of Sufyani. With an easy grasp of history, he recalled the siege of Najaf and the sacking of Karbala, another holy city to the north, in the early 1800s by radically orthodox Sunni Muslims, an

"What the government is doing is trying to protect the people. They are targeting terrorist groups in the area."

invasion that raised the same apocalyptic fears Shiites have now.

In Hilla, another Shiite town north of here, Mohammed Tawfiq al-Rubaie, the representative for Ayatollah Ali al-Sist-

ani, the most widely followed Shiite religious leader in Iraq, said, "We wish for the survival of Bashar al-Assad, but the prophecies of the Shiite books expect him to be killed."

As Western and Arab governments consider actions to stop the bloodshed — options that have been explored include more aggressive diplomacy, arming the rebels or military intervention — those discussions have been encumbered by three problems: a lack of cohesion among the Syrian opposition, evidence that some of the rebels may be affiliated with Al Qaeda and credible reports of sectarian killings.

At the core of the unity problem is an issue of sectarian identification. Sunni radicals with the Islamic State of Iraq, an umbrella group that includes the local branch of Al Qaeda, have urged fighters to go to Syria, which makes it harder for the West to embrace the opposition. Recently the group released a statement on its Web site calling for new violence against Shiites here in Iraq, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors the communications of jihadist groups.

Syria's minorities have the example of Iraq in considering their own future, should the Assad government fall: Assyrian Christians, Yazidis and others were brutally persecuted by insurgents. In Egypt, where a similar paradigm was toppled with the long-serving dictator Hosni Mubarak, Christians have experienced more sectarian violence, increasing political marginalization and a growing link between Islamic identity and citizenship.

"Christians are all saying that Syria risks becoming the new Iraq, a country divided among ethnic and religious lines where there is no place for Christians," said the Rev. Bernardo Cervellera, editor in chief of AsiaNews, a Roman Catholic news agency. Syria, while not a democracy, "at least protects them," he said.

Abu Ali recalled hearing anti-Shiite slogans chanted in Homs by rebels in opposition to Syria's alliance with Iran, which, like Iraq, is a majority-Shiite state in a region that is predominantly Sunni. He heard calls for "Christians to go to Beirut," and "Alawites to the grave."

Elisabetta Povoledo in Rome, Duraid Adnan and Iraqi employees of The New York Times in Hilla and Najaf, Iraq, and Yasir Ghazi in Baghdad contributed reporting.



Alon Ben-Meir
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Syrian Kurds: Time to Assert Their Rights

Regardless of what may come out of Kofi Annan's peace plan to end the internal conflict in Syria, and whatever may emerge from the Arab League meeting this week in Baghdad, the prospect of Assad's fall offers the Kurdish minority in Syria a historic opportunity to gain equal political and civil rights. Given the totalitarian nature of Baathist rule under Assad, the regime's fall in Syria will take the entire system of government down with it, much like Saddam's Iraq in 2003. But unlike Iraq's Kurds who have enjoyed virtual autonomy since 1991 when the United States enforced a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, Syria's Kurds are less organized and more divided. Syrian Kurds need to close ranks, fully join the Syrian people in pursuit of freedom, and not allow this historic window of opportunity to slip away.

Unless it wishes to preside over a divided Syria where the Kurds could contribute to prolonged instability, any elected government emerging in the post-Assad Syria must commit itself to the equality of all Syrian citizens, regardless of their ethnic background. The Kurdish nation constitutes a population of more than 40 million people, the majority of whom live on a contiguous landmass that includes Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. The Kurds are the world's largest minority group that remains stateless. The nearly century-old denial of equal political and civil rights for Kurds in these four countries has been a contentious issue with all Kurdish minorities ever since the Kurdish territory was divided after World War I between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, with the sole exception of the short-lived Kingdom of Kurdistan from September 1922 to July 1924 when the Kurds enjoyed political independence. Although in all host countries the Kurds are discriminated against in varying degrees, their living conditions in Syria are even worse as many are denied citizenship, land ownership and even the freedom of movement within the country.

To fully gain from the popular revolt and achieve equal rights with the rest of the Syrian people, Syria's Kurds need to take five central steps and remain consistent and unwavering, regardless of how treacherous the road to freedom may be.

First, they must organize themselves and develop a coherent agenda, which they can use to advance from the early stages of the revolution, until President Assad is deposed and the country moves toward a clear reform. The Syrian Kurds need to assert themselves as an integral part of the Syrian population and identify with the Syrian people's just and non-violent struggle to remove the regime and elect a government committed to the universal values of freedom, human rights and democracy. The Syrian Kurds should not, at this juncture, seek either the establishment of a federal system or strive for an autonomous region. Instead, they should commit themselves to Syria's unity and its constitutional laws, which will be collectively enacted by a new parliament.

Second, rival Kurdish groups must end their deep divisions and present a unified approach if they want to be recognized and dealt with seriously. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) supports the removal of the Assad regime while the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has close ties to Turkey's PKK, is concerned that Assad's removal will lead to the dominance of the Turkish-supported Muslim Brotherhood which would maintain the same anti-Kurd pol-

icy. The Assad regime is currently exploiting the Kurdish division by allowing the PYD leadership to return from exile while permitting it to open Kurdish language schools, cultural centers, and party offices in Syrian cities. The success of the Syrian Kurds in achieving true equality will ultimately depend on their ability to unite, and remain united, throughout the revolutionary process. PYD leadership must be reminded that its pro-Assad approach is a losing strategy in either case: if the regime survives, albeit unlikely, it will not hesitate to revoke all of the concessions it has made in time of crisis, and if the regime falls, which is more likely, the new government will probably settle the account (for supporting Assad) with the PYD and the Kurds.

Third, the leadership of the Kurds must demand and insist on proportional representation within the Syrian National Council (SNC). Currently there is only one delegate, which is hardly representative of the size of the Kurdish community in Syria, a community that constitutes 10-12 percent of Syria's total population (or almost two million people). While KDPS, the SNC's main Kurdish component, should work harder to convince other reluctant parties, particularly the PYD, to join forces, the SNC should be aware that it could also significantly benefit from a broader Kurdish representation if it wants to be seriously representative of the Syrian people and its political, ethnic, and religious mosaic.

Shortchanging the Kurds will undoubtedly raise serious concerns among other minorities within the country such as the Armenians, the Druze, and other groups, that will fear similar marginalization within the new Syria.

Fourth, the Kurdish leadership should approach their relationship with Turkey with caution. Since the SNC is headquartered in Istanbul, it is certainly influenced by the Erdogan government, which does not want, for obvious reasons, to encourage federal or autonomous solutions for the Kurds. Syria's Kurds have every reason to question Turkey's intentions because Ankara clearly wants to see the Muslim Brotherhood, with which it has a close affinity, in power in Damascus. Moreover, the Kurds do not rule out a possible Turkish military intervention in Syria to ensure stability. Such an intervention will still be used to solidify the dominance of the MB. Nevertheless, the Syrian Kurdish leadership should cooperate and enhance its relations with Turkey not only because it is premature for Syria's divided Kurds to challenge Turkey's plan but also because the Kurds' sole other option is anathema: an Assad regime that is closer than ever to Iran.

Finally, the Syrian Kurds should learn from, and ask for the support of, their brethren, the Iraqi Kurds, who benefited greatly from the fall of Saddam Hussein and are currently running the Kurdistan region as a prosperous island of stability within a conflict-torn Iraq. Since affinity between the Kurds (regardless of their country of residence) is stronger than the affinity to their separate host states, Iraq's Kurdistan Region is a natural ally and is freer to help the Kurds' cause in Syria in contrast to the Iraqi government, which tacitly supports Assad. Syria's Kurds can benefit from their Iraqi brethren in experience, ranging from the reconciliation between the rivaling Talabani-faction Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party and Barzani-faction Kurdistan Democratic Party, to the gradual, peaceful approach to achieving autonomy within a nation state should the effort to attain full integration fail.

In conclusion, it is time for Syria's Kurds to close ranks and join the Syrian people's march for freedom and demand their own basic rights from a future Syrian government, which they themselves must help shape. The Arab revolutions are as historically exceptional and unparalleled as the victory of the Kurd-turned-Arab Saladin over the European Crusaders in the twelfth century, and this time, too, Arabs and the Kurds can join forces to defeat injustice that has plagued them from within. □

Ancient Kurdistan meets modernity

April Yee

thenational.ae

The chapel - a damp cave carved into the rock on the riverside - welcomed worshippers from both sides of the water for 1,300 years. Catholic families gathered for Mass every Sunday and afterwards in each others' homes, just a short walk from the church or across the shallow waterway. But some 25 years ago, modern politics sliced the parish in two along the river's path.

"It's a political issue, you see. They are Syria and we are Iraq," says Yousif Gebow, the priest in Fishkabour, a village in the northern Iraqi region of Kurdistan.

Today, residents of Fishkabour, Iraq, communicate with their relatives in Khanik, Syria, only by telephone.

Kurdistan - the semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq - is an amalgamation of identities and allegiances that sometimes come into conflict.



Turkey and Iran have built up billions of dollars of trade with resource-rich Kurdistan, even as Kurdish rebels skirmish with the Turkish and Iranian militaries.

The Kurdish capital of Erbil is locked in a dispute with the Iraqi federal government in Baghdad over borders

and oil. Resources including minerals and fertile land are drawing investors to the region from Norway, France and the UAE and creating more reasons to venture into the stunning countryside and small villages outside the capital.

The development can be seen during the three-hour drive from Erbil to Fishkabour. Rolling green hills are dotted by oil rigs. A small town hosts a Chinese art centre. The rare stretches of newly smoothed asphalt were provided by foreign companies seeking goodwill. The drive will inevitably involve a local tea house - a welcome chance to sip sugary black tea from small cups.

In Fishkabour, visitors are fewer, and all the more welcome to Father Gebow.

Some 200 families still gather here on Sundays.

Their numbers are too large for the ancient cave chapel, so they worship at a pristine white church just above. It was built in 1861, but locals who view history over a 1,300-year trajectory still call it new.

The Quote: "In a flat country a hillock thinks itself a mountain." Kurdish proverb ■

Q&A: A land of opportunity

Business opportunities are growing in Iraqi Kurdistan

Where exactly is Kurdistan?

Picture the place where Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq meet. This semi-autonomous region of northern Iraq technically operates under laws made in Baghdad, but it also administers its own budget and ministries. The capital, Erbil, maintains an often contentious dialogue with Baghdad over matters including oil contracts and the disputed border.

Is it safe in Kurdistan?

We stayed in the Erbil Rotana, which puts all visitors through a security check before they can even enter the parking lot. Beyond Erbil, we travelled with the oil company DNO's security consultant, a former member of the British military. Since five-star hotels are few and far between outside the capital, DNO grants visitors use of dormitory-style accommodations at its Tawke field work camp.

What companies are active in the region?

Oil companies from Norway, the US, Canada, South Korea, Turkey, Austria and the UAE are active in Kurdistan's biggest industry. Agricultural companies from as far away as France are also establishing a presence in the under-farmed region. Barham Salih, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, projected 12 per cent GDP growth this year and characterised the northern region as a gateway to the Iraqi market.

Poussée de fièvre antiarménienne en Turquie

Les nationalistes accusent l'Arménie de génocide vingt ans après la guerre du Karabakh

Istanbul
Correspondance

Les critiques se multiplient contre les autorités turques, après la tenue d'une manifestation antiarménienne, dimanche 26 février, à Istanbul. Les slogans racistes, ont soulevé l'indignation d'une partie de l'opinion. « *Mort à la diaspora arménienne* », « *Vous êtes tous Arméniens, vous êtes tous des bâtards* », scandaient en effet de jeunes militants, réunis sur la place Taksim, dans le centre d'Istanbul, en formant de la main une tête de loup, signe de ralliement des ultranationalistes turcs.

Environ 20 000 manifestants turcs et azéris, étaient réunis pour commémorer les massacres de Khojaly, le 26 février 1992: l'un des épisodes les plus sanglants de la guerre pour le contrôle du Haut-Karabakh, une province séparatiste d'Azer-

baïdjan, contrôlée par l'Arménie. A l'époque; environ 600 civils, avaient été tués par des miliciens arméniens, selon le régime de Bakou, qui réclame la reconnaissance du « *génocide de Khojaly* ».

Mais le recueillement pour les victimes a très vite laissé la place à un déferlement de haine antiarménienne, comme le souligne le journaliste Cengiz Candar, dans le quotidien *Radikal*. Sur la vaste place Taksim, de jeunes militants distribuaient des rouleaux de papier toilette, produits depuis janvier sous la marque « *Sarkozy* », en Turquie, pour marquer leur hostilité au président français. D'autres, membres d'un petit parti nationaliste, brandissaient une banderole inquiétante: « *Aujourd'hui Taksim, demain Erevan, nous pouvons vous tomber dessus dans la nuit.* »

Ces commémorations ont pris une tournure politique cette

année, un mois après le vote, en France, de la loi Boyer, pénalisant la négation du génocide arménien de 1915. Ce texte, qui a finalement été censuré, mardi, par le Conseil constitutionnel, avait soulevé les protestations de la Turquie. Le président de la République, Abdullah Gül, a estimé mercredi que le Conseil constitutionnel avait « *sauvé la France de la disgrâce* ».

Eruption de violence

Rassemblant des organisations nationalistes turques et azéries, ou des ONG islamistes tels que l'IHH, la manifestation de dimanche a bénéficié d'une mobilisation sans précédent. Toute la semaine, la mairie d'Istanbul avait fait placar-

Génocide arménien : pas de nouvelle loi en France

Le gouvernement a repoussé à la prochaine législature, mercredi 29 février, un éventuel réexamen par le Parlement de la question de la négation du génocide arménien, malgré le souhait de Nicolas Sarkozy de travailler sur un nouveau texte, formulé après l'annonce de la censure par le Conseil constitutionnel de la loi punissant la négation du génocide arménien. La porte-parole du gouvernement, Valérie Pécresse, a admis que le Parlement cessant de siéger le 6 ou le 7 mars, il ne serait « *vraisemblablement pas possible d'adopter une loi avant la fin de la législature* ».

der sur ses panneaux d'affichages, dans le métro et aux arrêts de bus, des appels à manifester, tandis que dans les quotidiens stambouliotes, une pleine page de publicité exhortait les Turcs à donner de la voix: « *Ne restez pas silencieux face aux mensonges arméniens.* »

Le gouverneur d'Istanbul et le ministre de l'intérieur, Idris Naim Sahin, étaient aux premières loges, dimanche, parmi les manifestants, le ministre s'en prenant vigoureusement « *aux buveurs de sang arméniens* ». Les jours précédents, M. Sahin s'était rendu à Bakou, où il avait rencontré le président İlham Aliev, pour préparer ces cérémonies. Il avait estimé que Khojaly constituait « *un point noir dans l'histoire de l'humanité* ».

Quelques éditorialistes et activistes ont réagi à cette éruption de violence, encouragée par le gouvernement. L'Association des droits de l'homme d'Istanbul (IHD) et l'organisation antiraciste DurDe ont déposé une plainte, mardi, à Istanbul, pour incitation à la haine, contre les organisateurs et contre le ministre de l'intérieur.

Des appels à la démission ont été lancés contre M. Sahin. Le premier ministre Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a lui, préféré minimiser l'ampleur de la manifestation et a parlé de « *slogans isolés* », ce qui était loin d'être le cas. La justice a été contrainte d'ouvrir une enquête. ■

GUILLAUME PERRIER



Une bombe télécommandée explose à Istanbul, 15 blessés

ISTANBUL - 1 mars 2012- (Reuters)

UNE BOMBE télécommandée a explosé au passage d'un véhicule de police jeudi à Istanbul, blessant quinze policiers, ont annoncé les forces de l'ordre.

La bombe était placée sur une moto à proximité du siège du parti islamiste AKP, au pouvoir en Turquie, a précisé le chef de la police d'Istanbul.

"Une bombe télécommandée placée sur une moto a explosé au passage d'un véhicule de police transportant 21 policiers. Nos équipes enquêtent", a déclaré Huseyin Capkin.

L'attentat n'a pas été revendiqué pour le moment.

De nombreux mouvements terroristes ont commis des attentats à la bombe par le passé en Turquie, dont les séparatistes kurdes, des groupes d'extrême-gauche et des groupuscules islamistes liés à Al Qaïda.



Le Premier ministre, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a vivement condamné l'attentat, commis dans le quartier pauvre de Sutluce, au bord de la Corne d'or.

"Notre combat contre le terrorisme se poursuivra avec la plus grande détermination", a-t-il dit lors d'une conférence de presse à Ankara.

éditorial

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Syrie : Poutine, dernier recours



Un an après le début du soulèvement anti-Assad, la Syrie n'en finit pas de s'enfoncer dans la violence, sans que personne ne propose une alternative viable.

De plus en plus isolé et replié autour de la famille du tyran, le régime est convaincu qu'il peut tenir, grâce à l'effet dissuasif d'une brutalité extrême. Peu lui importe l'état dans lequel il plonge son propre peuple.

Il est encouragé par le soutien diplomatique et sécuritaire d'une Russie motivée par son aversion à ce qu'elle perçoit comme un activisme occidental dans le monde arabe.

L'opposition syrienne est divisée, minée par les rivalités de personnes et les antagonismes ethniques, incapable d'adopter une plate-forme politique, ou bien de coordonner ses actions sur le terrain.

Et puisqu'elle n'est pas parvenue, en douze mois, à fragiliser le système sécuritaire de la dictature, son seul recours est de s'en remettre à une intervention étrangère, comme si celle-ci pouvait suffire à sauver le pays du chaos.

Aucune solution n'est satisfaisante : qu'il s'agisse de corridors humanitaires, de zones d'exclusion ou même de bombardements aériens des positions de l'armée, comme vient de le proposer le sénateur républicain John McCain.

Les chancelleries débattent de l'opportunité d'armer les rebelles, au risque d'alimenter la guerre civile, de favoriser les extrémistes et de faire le jeu des djihadistes. Certains pays n'ont pas ces scrupules : l'Arabie saoudite et le Qatar ont décidé d'en finir avec un régime qui s'est allié avec l'ennemi iranien.

Même si l'on a un peu vite clamé en Occident que le régime de Bachar el-Assad était condamné, la logique voudrait que l'on épuise les voies diplomatiques. L'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU, Kofi Annan, cherche à négocier une transition. Son seul espoir est de faire changer d'avis la Russie pour accroître la pression sur Bachar el-Assad.

L'impuissance occidentale est telle que Vladimir Poutine est devenu un dernier recours. À peine revenu au tout premier plan, le maître du Kremlin a peut-être là une carte à jouer.

Le Monde

Dimanche 11 - Lundi 12 mars 2012

Kofi Annan à Damas pour l'opération de la « dernière chance »

New York (Nations unies)
Correspondante

LES DIPLOMATES sont nombreux à en parler comme de « la tentative diplomatique de la dernière chance ». Quelques heures avant que l'émissaire spécial de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe pour la Syrie, Kofi Annan, n'entame sa mission, samedi 10 mars à Damas, l'humeur au siège des Nations unies était à l'optimisme prudent. L'initiative de paix de la Ligue arabe n'ayant pas recueilli le consensus de la communauté internationale – les vetos russe et chinois l'ont démontré –, « la médiation de Kofi Annan est aujourd'hui la seule carte que nous pouvons jouer, nous n'avons pas le choix », fait remarquer une source proche du dossier.

Lors de sa visite de quarante-

huit heures à Damas, l'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU devait rencontrer le président syrien, Bachar Al-Assad, des responsables gouvernementaux et de la société civile locale. Ses entretiens avec des dirigeants de l'opposition sont prévus en dehors de la Syrie. Selon son successeur, Ban Ki-moon, les « trois priorités » de sa mission sont : un « cessez-le-feu immédiat », « une solution politique globale », et « l'accès et l'aide humanitaires ».

Le diplomate ghanéen de 73 ans dispose de « deux atouts majeurs », estime Bruce Jones, spécialiste de l'ONU et de la sécurité internationale à la Brookings Institution : il entretient depuis ses deux mandats à la tête des Nations unies (1997-2006), des « liens étroits » avec le ministre des affaires étran-

gères russe, Sergueï Lavrov, avec lequel il devait d'ailleurs s'entretenir au Caire avant son arrivée à Damas, et il est « *fortement soutenu par les Etats-Unis* ». A New York, les discussions sur un projet américain de résolution à portée humanitaire ont tourné court, la Russie le jugeant « *déséquilibré* ».

Assauts

La Syrie sera au centre des discussions du Conseil de sécurité, lundi, qui doit tenir une réunion ministérielle sur « *les défis et les opportunités* » du « printemps arabe ». Ces tractations interviennent alors que les forces de sécurité syriennes ont lancé, vendredi, plusieurs assauts contre des régions rebelles, tuant près de 50 civils, en majorité à Idlib. A la frontière turco-syrienne, les réfugiés

affluent. Environ 1 000 Syriens sont arrivés par les montagnes cette semaine, faisant passer le nombre de réfugiés en Turquie à environ 12 000. Parmi eux figurent des éléments de l'Armée syrienne libre. Dans le camp d'Apaydin, tenu au secret par l'armée turque, se trouvent des déserteurs et leurs familles. Le nombre de militaires de haut rang présents varie selon les sources. On parle de 4 à 6 généraux et d'une quinzaine d'officiers. Après sa mission en Syrie, Kofi Annan doit se rendre dans d'autres pays de la région et notamment en Turquie, où il visitera les camps de réfugiés. Selon l'ONU, plus de 25 000 Syriens ont été recensés dans les pays voisins de la Syrie. ■

ALEXANDRA GENESTE
(AVEC GUILLAUME PERRIER
À ISTANBUL)

L'opposition syrienne minée par les divisions

Partisan d'une intervention militaire internationale, le conseiller militaire du CNS claque la porte.

PIERRE PRIER

PROCHE-ORIENT Le général Akil Hachem est en colère. La semaine dernière, ce conseiller militaire de l'opposition a claqué la porte. Motif : le refus du Conseil national syrien (CNS) d'appeler à une intervention militaire internationale en Syrie. « *Je ne quitte pas le CNS. Je reviendrai dès qu'il adoptera clairement une position demandant une intervention internationale* », dit cet ancien des guerres contre Israël, ex-professeur de stratégie à l'Académie militaire syrienne et auteur de nombreux ouvrages spécialisés, mis à la retraite à sa demande en 1989. Pour lui, les réticences de la communauté internationale sont dépassées : « *C'est déjà une guerre internationale, la Russie et l'Iran aidant ouvertement le régime.* »

Sa décision illustre les graves dissensions qui minent l'opposition syrienne dès que l'on évoque le volet militaire de

Akil Hachem prône une stratégie offensive, avec l'établissement d'un état-major

la rébellion. L'affrontement a eu lieu en public, la semaine dernière à Paris, lors d'une conférence de presse destinée à annoncer la création d'un « *Bureau militaire consultatif* » rassemblant les différents groupes armés. Une étiquette posée sur la table annonçait la présence du général, dont le nom venait en tête des six membres de la direction collégiale de ce « Bureau ». Mais, au dernier moment, une vive discussion éclatée entre Akil Hachem et le président du CNS, le professeur Burhan Ghalioun. « *J'avais donné mon accord à la création de ce bureau à condition qu'il appelle clairement à une intervention militaire extérieure* », explique dans un bon anglais le général, qui a gardé une présence d'officier. Burhan Ghalioun a refusé. *J'ai préféré quitter la salle.* Le

général Hachem explique qu'il avait au dernier moment tenté de négocier une formule plus vague, demandant en substance « *une intervention de la communauté internationale laissant ouvertes toutes les options* ». Mais le CNS s'est borné à décider de « *superviser l'approvisionnement en armes de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL)* », appellation désignant les différents groupes de militaires déserteurs et les civils armés qui mènent la guérilla contre le régime.

Fin d'une ambiguïté

C'est l'autre point de dissension avec le général Hachem : l'ancien professeur plaide pour l'établissement d'une véritable chaîne de commandement qui structure tous les groupes dans une hiérarchie claire. Akil Hachem prône également une stratégie offensive, avec l'établissement d'un état-major sur le terrain à la première occasion. « *On ne peut pas diriger une guerre de l'extérieur* », insiste-t-il.

La rupture provisoire entre le CNS et son conseiller militaire marque la fin



Akil Hachem.

d'une ambiguïté. Depuis plusieurs mois, le général Hachem multipliait les rapports – certains internes, d'autres publiés sur le site du Conseil national – examinant les diverses options militaires, les possibilités diplomatiques et les conséquences d'un engagement de l'étranger. Le CNS l'écoutait sans valider officiellement ses propositions, tout en sachant qu'elles reflétaient celles des manifestants, ceux qui meurent sous les balles et qui réclament à cor et à cri une intervention étrangère.

Le retrait temporaire d'Akil Hachem donne aussi un coup d'arrêt à la tentative d'unifier l'opposition militaire. Celle-ci compte déjà deux chefs, tous deux installés à l'extérieur de la Syrie :

le colonel Riad al-Asaad, qui se désigne comme chef de l'ASL, et le général Ahmed al-Cheikh, qui a fait défection en janvier et annoncé unilatéralement le 6 février la création d'un « *Haut Conseil militaire révolutionnaire de la Syrie* ». Tous deux figurent dans la direction collégiale du Bureau militaire consultatif. Un organisme « *mort-né* », selon le général Akil Hachem. Son retrait pourrait également accélérer une recomposition du CNS, dont de nombreux membres souhaitent une aide militaire internationale. Le président Burhan Ghalioun pourrait en faire les frais le premier. ■

Iran : Obama critique les propos va-t-en-guerre des républicains

BARACK OBAMA a mis en garde mardi contre des frappes militaires en Iran comme en Syrie, accusant ses adversaires républicains de parler à la légère lorsqu'ils exigent des interventions contre ces deux pays. Lors de sa première conférence de presse depuis le début de l'année, M. Obama a plaidé une nouvelle fois pour la prudence et pour laisser aux sanctions internationales le temps de faire leur effet sur le régime de Téhéran, au lendemain d'une rencontre à la Maison-Blanche avec le premier ministre israélien Benyamin Nétanyahou. « *L'Iran est en train de ressentir profondément l'effet de ces sanctions. Le monde est uni, l'Iran est*

politiquement isolé. Et ce que j'ai dit, c'est que nous empêcherons l'Iran de se doter de l'arme nucléaire », a déclaré M. Obama. Visant ses adversaires républicains qui l'accusent de mollesse, Barack Obama a critiqué « *la légèreté avec laquelle certains parlent de guerre, (...) j'en vois qui fanfaronnent et parlent beaucoup mais quand on leur demande vraiment ce qu'ils feraient, ils reprennent à leur compte les décisions que nous avons prises au cours des trois dernières années* ».

Sur la Syrie, le président américain s'est dit « *bouleversé* » par la violence, tout en disant que les États-Unis ne lanceront aucune action militaire unilatérale contre Damas. (AFP)

Syrie

L'Iran et la Russie aident Damas, les Occidentaux tergiversent

Face au soutien logistique accordé par Moscou au régime, la rébellion a besoin de renforts. Mais Washington hésite toujours, regrette un quotidien libanais.

The Daily Star (extraits) *Beyrouth*

Le gouvernement de Barack Obama a souvent été raillé pour ce qu'il appelle sa stratégie du "leading from behind" (leadership en coulisses). Le plus souvent, c'est une excuse pour éviter de prendre une direction quelconque, et ce flottement n'a jamais été aussi manifeste qu'en Syrie.

Ce sont les Etats-Unis, par exemple, qui ont accredité les accusations du régime syrien selon lesquelles Al-Qaïda prêterait main-forte à l'opposition syrienne. Le 16 février, le patron du renseignement américain, James Clapper, a déclaré qu'il pensait que la branche irakienne d'Al-Qaïda avait infiltré les forces de l'opposition syrienne et commis les attentats de Damas et d'Alep [du 6 janvier à Damas, faisant 26 morts, et du 10 février à Alep, faisant 28 morts, revendiqués par le Front Al-Nusra, un groupe islamiste qui s'est récemment manifesté]. Clapper n'avait pas à faire cette déclaration en public. Comme il fallait s'y attendre, l'opposition syrienne y a vu le signe d'une hostilité américaine envers ses aspirations. Mais le problème de Washington est que les Etats-Unis n'ont pas de stratégie pour le pays.

C'est d'autant plus préjudiciable que les Russes et les Iraniens en ont une : soutenir activement la répression exercée par l'armée et les forces de sécurité syriennes ; amener l'opposition, ou tout au moins une partie de l'opposition, à la table des négociations ; introduire des réformes, ne serait-ce que de façade, pour redonner l'initiative politique à Bachar El-Assad ; intégrer des personnalités marquantes de l'opposition dans un gouvernement d'union nationale pour neutraliser le mécontentement sur le terrain ; et donner au régime la possibilité de gouverner à nouveau, afin d'éliminer les poches de contestataires.

Moscou et Téhéran ont déployé des soldats et des agents de renseignements



↑ Dessin de Haddad paru dans *Al-Hayat*, Londres.

en Syrie pour imposer leur volonté. Selon certains rapports, les Etats-Unis ont eux aussi envoyé des effectifs dans le pays pour organiser l'opposition syrienne, mais en nombre si réduit qu'ils ne servent pratiquement à rien.

Washington est pris entre le désir de voir partir Bachar El-Assad et la peur d'une guerre civile en Syrie. C'est sans doute le cas de presque tous les pays, mais la plupart des gouvernements ont hiérarchisé leurs objectifs. Pour la Russie et l'Iran, la ligne rouge est la défense de leurs intérêts, et cela passe par le maintien d'Assad au pouvoir. Si les estimations russes des chances du régime de Damas de perdurer sont incorrectes, ce qui est fort possible, la diplomatie américaine peut travailler sur cette ligne. Les Russes défendront le dirigeant syrien, mais le jour où ils le jugeront gênant et qu'ils considéreront que ses jours au pouvoir sont comptés, ils envisageront d'autres options. De leur côté, de nombreux régimes arabes sont déjà arrivés à la conclusion que le seul moyen de fragiliser le régime d'Assad était de fournir des armes à l'Armée syrienne libre. Une guerre civile syrienne est une perspective effrayante, mais l'indécision américaine ne permettra pas de l'éviter. Si les Etats-Unis et l'Europe

continuent à tergiverser, les Etats du Golfe, eux, agiront et des armes entreront de toute façon en Syrie, d'ailleurs c'est déjà le cas. Mieux vaut que le gouvernement Obama adopte une politique qui comporte une dimension militaire – sous contrôle –, de façon à pousser Bachar El-Assad à reconsidérer ses options. Le point de départ de toute résolution en Syrie doit être la chute du régime actuel. Le plan de transition de la Ligue arabe peut servir de base, avec des garanties aux minorités syriennes : La Russie doit être partie prenante de cette initiative, peut-être avec l'assurance que ses intérêts seront préservés dans la Syrie de l'après-Assad.

Washington doit se ressaisir. Sa politique syrienne est étrangement coupée de son autre priorité dans la région, à savoir contenir l'Iran. Il a fallu des mois au gouvernement pour qu'il reconnaisse la gravité de la crise syrienne. A force de soutenir, officiellement et en privé, qu'ils ne pouvaient rien faire en Syrie, les dirigeants américains sont effectivement arrivés à ne rien faire. Leur conduite est lâche et superficielle – en un mot, pitoyable. **Michael Young**

Syrians have right to self-defense, Saudi official says

BEIRUT

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

As concerns mounted over the humanitarian crisis in Syria, Saudi Arabia said Sunday that Syrians had a right to take up arms to defend themselves against their government, which it accused of "imposing itself by force."

In a rare televised news conference, the Saudi foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, said that his kingdom welcomed international efforts to broker a cease-fire in Syria but added that they had "failed to stop the massacres."

"Is there something greater than the right to defend oneself and to defend human rights?" he said, adding that the Syrian people wanted to defend themselves. "The regime is not wanted by the people."

"The regime," he said, "is insisting on imposing itself by force on the Syrian people."

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been discussing military aid to the Syrian opposition. But the United States and others have not advocated arming the rebels, in part out of fear that it would create an even deadlier and more prolonged conflict. Saudi Arabia's Sunni dynasty is wary of the wave of Arab Spring uprisings, particularly in Bahrain, where a Shiite majority is demanding greater rights from its Sunni rulers. The kingdom, however, strongly backs the largely Sunni uprising in Syria.

On Sunday, Red Cross teams handed out food, blankets and medical kits in the central Syrian province of Homs, but the government blocked access to Baba Amr,

the worst-hit district of the city of Homs.

The Red Cross is trying to help families who fled Baba Amr after a monthlong siege and took shelter in nearby villages, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross said in Geneva.

"The needs are, so far, mainly in the forms of food and also blankets because of the cold," said the spokesman, Hichan Hassan.

Government forces have blocked humanitarian access to Baba Amr since Friday, the day after troops seized it from rebels. Opposition fighters had been in control of the neighborhood for several months, and a government offensive on Homs that began in early February aimed to retake rebel-held neighborhoods inside the city.

Syrian troops managed to take control of Baba Amr after nearly a month of intense and relentless shelling, and activists say hundreds were killed in the daily bombardments that led up to the final battle on Thursday. Some Baba Amr residents were killed when, in desperation, they dared to venture out of their homes to forage for food.

Activists have said residents face a humanitarian catastrophe in Baba Amr and other parts of Homs, Syria's third-largest city, with a population of one million. Electricity, water and communications have been cut off, and recent days have seen frigid temperatures and snowfall. Food was running low, and many are too scared to venture out.

The government had said it would allow the Red Cross into Baba Amr on Friday but then blocked access, citing security concerns. In the meantime, activists accused Syrian forces of killing

tens of residents execution-style and burning homes in revenge attacks against those believed to be supporting the rebels.

As the brutal siege of Homs dragged on, Western pressure on President Bashar al-Assad intensified. The United States has called for Mr. Assad to step down, and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said he could be considered a war criminal. The European Union committed itself to documenting war crimes in Syria to set the stage for a "day of reckoning" for the country's leadership, in the way that former Yugoslav leaders were tried for war crimes in the 1990s by a special United Nations tribunal.

While they continued to appeal for unfettered access to Homs, Red Cross workers were focusing on distributing aid in the village Abel, about three kilometers, or two miles, from Homs. They hope to distribute aid in the Inshaat and Tawzii neighborhoods on Monday.

Homs has emerged as a central battleground in the conflict, which started last March with protests calling for the ouster of Mr. Assad in some of the country's impoverished hinterlands.

The protests spread as the government waged a violent crackdown on dissent, and many in the opposition have taken up arms to defend themselves and attack government troops. The United Nations says that more than 7,500 people have been killed in the uprising.

Syrian activists said more than a dozen artillery shells struck the town Rastan, near Homs, killing at least three people Sunday and wounding others.

Iranian elections give more power to supreme leader

TEHRAN

FROM NEWS REPORTS

Iran's supreme leader has tightened his grip on Iran's factional politics after loyalists won more than 75 percent of seats in parliamentary elections at the expense of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a near-complete count showed on Sunday.

The widespread defeat of Ahmadinejad supporters — including his sister, Parvin Ahmadinejad — is expected to

reduce the president to a lame duck after he sowed divisions by challenging the authority of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in the governing hierarchy.

With 90 percent of ballot boxes counted, Khamenei loyalists are expected to occupy more than three-quarters of the 290 seats in the Majlis, or Parliament, according to a list published on Sunday by the Interior Ministry.

Over the weekend, the Iranian government declared an enormous turnout for the elections, calling them another

"epic" sign of support for Iranian theocracy and a thumb in the eye of the West.

It was the first national vote since a disputed presidential election in 2009, and scenes of crowded polling places and voters with ink-stained fingers dominated state television and online news sites, alongside none-too-subtle editorials declaring that the vote defied Western perceptions of domestic discontent in Iran. Iran's opposition movement, whose leaders have been jailed or placed under house arrest, had called for a boycott of the vote.

Ayatollah Khamenei and other top officials had urged a high voter turnout as a way to show defiance toward the West at a time of extraordinary tension. Iran's economy is staggering under the latest round of trade sanctions and there is rising speculation that Israel

will bomb Iran's nuclear facilities.

The elections are not likely to have any bearing over issues most relevant to the West, like the efforts to reach a diplomatic compromise on Iran's nuclear program.

Interior Ministry officials reported an increase of 8 to 9 percent over the turnout in the last parliamentary elections, in 2008, according to the Mehr News Agency. The Islamic Republic News Agency declared the elections another "recurrence of epic incidents in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran that blinded the enemies."

The reported turnout seemed at odds with the short lines and relatively empty voting booths described by a number of Iranians in Tehran and a few other major cities over the course of the day. Many analysts and government critics had

asserted that the government, which has long held up voter turnout as a sign of its democratic legitimacy, was likely to declare high numbers no matter what.

But others cautioned that the official numbers could be accurate, especially in light of a recent campaign by senior Iranian officials and clerics declaring voting a national and religious duty at a time of danger. The appeals to patriotism and piety are especially effective in Iran's hinterland, away from the more worldly precincts of northern Tehran.

Results of the vote have been dismissed as meaningless by many of the opposition supporters who filled the streets during the anti-government protests set off by the 2009 presidential election. That was followed by a harsh crackdown that effectively destroyed the reformist movement and any allied

opposition.

Lying below the surface of the latest election is a fierce struggle between partisans and rivals of Mr. Ahmadinejad, whose second and final term ends next year. He hopes to maintain influence by electing lawmakers who are loyal to him. That has angered Ayatollah Khamenei, who has empowered lawmaker allies to trim the president's power.

Parliament is weak and, if the election yields an even more compliant body, it could become easier for the supreme leader to abolish the office of the president in a further consolidation of his power, something he hinted at last year.

(REUTERS, IHT)

Le Monde

Mercredi 7 mars 2012

Sévère défaite pour M. Ahmadinejad lors du scrutin législatif iranien

De nombreuses irrégularités remettent en cause le taux de participation annoncé de 64 %

C'est un lapsus pesant 30 % d'électeurs qu'a commis samedi 3 mars en direct à la télévision nationale le directeur de la commission électorale, Solat Mortazavi, lorsqu'il a estimé le taux de participation aux élections législatives iraniennes du 2 mars à 34 %, avant de s'excuser et de rectifier : « 64,4 % ». Ce taux officiel de 64 %, a claironné le ministre de l'intérieur, Mostafa Najjar, est un « coup de poing dans la bouche et une véritable claque au visage des puissances arrogantes [les pays occidentaux] qui vont rester sonner longtemps ». Mais le même ministre s'est emmêlé les pinceaux dans ses calculs. Evoquant, le même jour, le chiffre de 26 millions de votants, il avait conclu à une participation de 64 % ; or le corps électoral étant de 48 millions, la participa-

tion aurait donc dû être de 54 %.

La question de la participation était essentielle aux yeux du régime. Soumis à une forte pression extérieure en raison de son programme nucléaire, il a été, en outre, contesté dans la rue en juin 2009 à la suite de la réélection controversée du président Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ce premier scrutin depuis la grande vague de répression du « mouvement vert » avait donc été érigé en test de légitimité et d'adhésion par le régime, alors que les leaders réformateurs Mir Hossein Moussavi et Mehdi Karoubi, tous deux en résidence surveillée, avaient appelé au boycottage.

Bonne surprise pour le régime, l'ancien président réformateur Mohammad Khatami s'est rendu aux urnes, alors qu'il avait implicitement appelé à l'abstention : son

geste a suscité des interrogations dans le camp réformateur, partagé entre ceux qui pensent qu'il a voulu ainsi éviter un durcissement de la répression et ceux qui y voient le présage d'une négociation, voire d'un assouplissement à venir.

Difficile, en tout cas, de croire au taux officiel de participation, en progrès de 9 % par rapport aux législatives de 2008. Plusieurs sources en Iran rapportent des irrégularités ou bizarreries propres à remettre en cause la validité des chiffres annoncés : ainsi, la circonscription de Téhéran et Alborz aurait perdu 2 millions d'inscrits en deux ans ; dans celle d'Ilam, le nombre de votants est supérieur à celui des inscrits...

Au-delà des polémiques sur le taux de participation, impossible à vérifier en l'absence d'observateurs indépendants (*Le Monde* ne s'est pas vu accorder de visa), le principal enseignement de ce scrutin est la déroute des partisans de Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Ligne dure

Le grand nombre de nouveaux élus – une centaine –, l'élection de nombreux candidats indépendants (89 élus) et la possibilité d'appartenir à deux listes concurrentes ne facilitent pas la lecture des résultats. Mais il semble bien que les partisans du Guide suprême Ali Khamenei, ultra-conservateur lui-aussi, ont raflé la majorité des 225 sièges attribués au premier tour, 65 sièges devant faire l'objet d'un second tour, fin avril début mai.

Symbole de cette défaite de M. Ahmadinejad : sa sœur Parvin, qui se présentait à Garmsar (nord), sa ville d'origine, a été battue. La dernière année du mandat présidentiel s'annonce difficile. M. Ahmadinejad va devoir venir s'expliquer dès le 9 mars devant les députés sur sa politique économique.

Avec la défaite des réformateurs, qui passent de 60 à 20 députés, ainsi que celle des partisans de M. Ahmadinejad comme de ses détracteurs les plus acharnés, Ali Khamenei se replace au centre de la vie politique iranienne. Mais il n'y a pas d'assouplissement à attendre de cette reprise en main dans le dossier nucléaire de la part d'un homme qui incarne la ligne dure de la République islamique. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD
AVEC ASSAL REZA

Israël veut « rester maître de son destin »

Le premier ministre israélien, Benyamin Nétanyahou, reçu lundi 5 mars à la Maison Blanche, à Washington, a assuré au président Barack Obama qu'Israël n'avait pas encore pris la décision de s'attaquer aux installations nucléaires iraniennes, a-t-on appris de sources proches de leurs discussions. M. Obama a quant à lui invité le premier ministre à laisser les sanctions faire leur effet. En répétant que l'Etat juif entendait rester « maître de son destin », M. Nétanyahou a clairement refusé d'exclure un recours à la force. – (Reuters.)

POWERS AGREE ON IRAN TALKS

BRUSSELS

Nuclear negotiations to resume despite deep reservations in Europe

BY JAMES KANTER
AND NICHOLAS KULISH

The global powers dealing with Iran's disputed nuclear program said Tuesday that they had accepted its offer to resume negotiations that broke off in stalemate more than a year ago — a move that could help relieve mounting pressure from Israel to use military force against Tehran.

"I have offered to resume talks with Iran on the nuclear issue," said Catherine Ashton, E.U.'s foreign affairs chief, who represents the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany in dealings with Iran. "We hope that Iran will now enter into a sustained process of constructive dialogue which will deliver real progress."

The announcement of a new round of face-to-face negotiations — which E.U. officials said would probably take the form of a series of meetings with no fixed deadline — came as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, which regards Iran as its most dangerous enemy, was in the midst of a two-day visit to the United States to press his view that diplomatic and economic pressures on Iran to persuade it not to develop a nuclear weapon were not working. President Barack Obama, who has said a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable, urged Mr. Netanyahu to give diplomacy and sanctions more time.

At a news conference in Washington after the announcement, Mr. Obama largely repeated his recent comments on Iran. But he coupled them with an un-

usually blunt warning to his Republican rivals against irresponsible "bluster" or any incautious rush to war.

"Those folks don't have a lot of responsibilities," he said, referring to the Republicans. "They're not commander in chief."

"This is not a game and there's nothing casual about it," he said.

Hanging over the resumption of talks is deep concern about a rerun of previous discussions in Istanbul that broke off in January 2011 when the Iranians resisted discussing the nuclear issue. Failed talks like those in Istanbul could increase the risk of military action, said Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, a Washington-based advocacy group.

"If you have talks going, it will make it much harder for the Netanyahu government to take military action," Mr. Parsi said. "It is critical that the talks end up becoming a real negotiation, a real process, and not just another exchange of ultimatums. If the two sides fail to establish a process rather than just another meeting, the risk of war will rise significantly."

Fears of an attack on Iran have driven up oil prices and represent a threat to the fragile state of a global economy reeling from a sovereign debt crisis in Europe. At the same time, Iran has felt the squeeze from a round of sanctions aimed at getting Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment program, which Western leaders suspect is designed to give Tehran a nuclear weapons capability. Iran says the program is for peaceful purposes.

"Our approach to sanctions has been proven to be the right one — not targeted against population but meant to change the Iranian approach to the nuclear file," a senior E.U. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity told reporters in Brussels.

"We don't want to have talks for talks," the E.U. official said. "We want concrete results. They are very, very important talks and we do not want them to fail."

Henning Riecke, expert on European security at the German Council on Foreign Relations, said Europeans in general had "a distrust of military means to solve complex problems" and favor diplomacy for practical reasons as well.

"It is clear that a military strike would maybe impede a nuclear weapons program technically, but it is also likely that it would speed up a nuclear weapons program politically," Mr. Riecke said.

Preparations for the resumption of talks had been going on for several weeks, and the decision to go ahead was a result of a show of good faith by Iran.

"We hope that this time Iran is ready," said the E.U. official, who emphasized the importance of "a clear written commitment by Iran to be willing to address the nuclear issue in talks."

The official would not comment on whether the European Union was prepared to ease sanctions once negotiations got under way, but he said, "We have made it clear that sanctions are not an end in themselves."

In a letter sent Monday to Saeed Jalili, Iran's chief negotiator, Ms. Ashton said, "dialogue will have to focus on this key

issue" of the nuclear program. Now that Mr. Jalili has made that pledge, the talks can resume "as soon as possible," Ms. Ashton wrote.

But that will first require a period of preliminary discussions between E.U. and Iranian diplomats, possibility including a top aide to Mr. Jalili, that are expected to take place over the next two weeks to decide important details like a site for the talks, according to the E.U. official.

No formal negotiations would take place until after New Year holiday in Iran later this month, the official said. Senior French officials said talks could formally get under way in early April, but they also noted the pressure to show rapid progress, saying a military strike by Israel could otherwise be the result.

One French official said Mr. Jalili could still try to divert the talks from the core matter of Iran's intentions with its nuclear enrichment program. "We don't want to waste our time talking to

"We don't want to have talks for talks. We want concrete results. They are very, very important talks."

the Iranians about the international cost of pistachios," the official said.

The E.U. official said pressure had been brought to bear on Tehran by the "unity" shown by the United States, Russia, China and the Europeans.

The British foreign secretary, William Hague, issued a statement reflecting that vision.

"We all agree that the international community should demonstrate its commitment to a diplomatic solution by acknowledging Iran's agreement to meet, by testing its desire to talk and by offering it the opportunity to respond to our legitimate concerns about its nuclear intentions," Mr. Hague said.

In France, Bernard Valero, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, warned against a repeat of "the experience of the fruitless discussions in Istanbul" and underlined that Iran faced a "united" front from global powers.

Guido Westerwelle, Germany's foreign minister, warned Iranian officials



JAMAL NASRALLAH/EPA

Catherine Ashton, the E.U. foreign affairs chief, sought "constructive dialogue."

against stalling. Iran only damages its own interests through "tactical maneuvering and playing for time," Mr. West-erwelle said.

The prospect of new talks emerged against a background of mounting tensions, with Iran facing a European oil embargo in July and other sanctions that have deepened its economic gloom. At the same time, Israel signaled increasing readiness to attack Iran's nuclear facilities to set back the enrichment program, while the United States wants more time for economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to press Tehran toward a settlement.

There were conflicting reports on Tuesday about Iran's readiness to permit inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear supervisory body, to visit a secret military complex to which they have been denied access. An Iranian news agency, ISNA, said that Iran had reversed its refusal to permit I.A.E.A. inspectors to visit the complex at Parchin, southeast of Tehran.

But a news release from Iran's representatives at the I.A.E.A. headquarters in Vienna suggested that the offer was conditional, preliminary and limited to only two of the five areas that the agency's experts wished to investigate. It also accused the agency of ignoring an agreement to postpone its request to visit the secret site at Parchin until after a meeting this week of the agency's board of governors.

The ISNA report was apparently based on the same news release, which the Iranian mission at the I.A.E.A. said it had issued on Monday.

The I.A.E.A. believes that secret military work may have been carried out at Parchin and has been pressing for access. Last month, a senior delegation from the atomic agency held its second round of talks in a month with Iranian officials in Tehran.

"During both the first and second round of discussions, the agency team requested access to the military site at Parchin. Iran did not grant permission for this visit to take place," the I.A.E.A. said at the time.

"Intensive efforts were made to reach agreement on a document facilitating the clarification of unresolved issues in connection with Iran's nuclear program, particularly those relating to possible military dimensions. Unfortunately, agreement was not reached on this document," its statement said.

Nicholas Kulish reported from Berlin. Alan Cowell in London, Brian Knowlton in Washington and Steven Erlanger and Alison Smale in Paris contributed reporting.

IRAN AND ISRAEL

Obama is right that an attack should be the last resort, but Israel shouldn't doubt his mettle. Neither should Iran.

President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu share responsibility for the strains in their relationship. But there should be no doubt about Mr. Obama's commitment to Israel's security. When he warns that an Israeli attack on Iran could backfire, and that "there is still a window" for diplomacy, he is speaking for American and Israeli interests.

Iran's nuclear appetites are undeniable, as is its malign intent toward Israel, America, its Arab neighbors and its own people. Israel's threats of unilateral action have finally focused the world's attention on the danger. Still, there must be no illusions about what it would take to seriously damage Iran's nuclear complex, the high costs and the limited returns.

This would not be a "surgical" strike like the Israeli attack in 1981 that destroyed Iraq's Osirak reactor, or the 2007 Israeli strike on an unfinished reactor in Syria. Iran has multiple facilities, and the crucial ones are buried or "hardened." Pentagon analysts estimate that even a sustained Israeli air campaign would set back the program by only a few years, drive it further underground and possibly unleash a wider war. It would also cast the Iranian government as the victim in the eyes of an otherwise alienated Iranian public. It would tear apart the international coalition and undermine a tough sanctions regime, making it even easier for Iran to rebuild its program.

Israelis have every right to be fearful and frustrated. For too long the world ignored Iran's misdeeds and shrugged off Israel's alarms. But while President George W. Bush blustered and made no progress, Mr. Obama — with a sharp nudge from Israel and Congress — has had increasing success rallying the international community to isolate and punish Tehran.

Mitt Romney's claim that "if Barack Obama gets re-elected, Iran will have a nuclear weapon" is purely cynical; his own prescription for "crippling sanctions" and "military options" barely differs from Mr. Obama's policy. The president's offer to negotiate with Tehran has made it easier to persuade others to ratchet up the pressure.

We don't know if there is any mix of sanctions and diplomacy that can persuade the mullahs to abandon their nuclear ambitions. U.S. officials are right not to overpromise. Iran is feeling the bite from restrictions on its banking system, and the pressure and pain should rise in coming months as the European Union imposes an embargo on Iranian oil imports.

Tehran's recent offer to return to the negotiations is almost certainly another feint, but must be tested.

What if sanctions and diplomacy are not enough? Mr. Obama has long said that all options are on the table. In recent days his language has become more pointed — urged on, undoubtedly, by Israel's threats to act alone. Last week he told *The Atlantic*, "when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say." In a speech on Sunday to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, he declared that his policy is not to contain Iran, it is "to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon."

The U.S. military is far more capable of doing serious damage to Iran's facilities than the Israeli military, but the cost would still be high. Mr. Obama is right that military action should only be the last resort, but Israel should not doubt this president's mettle. Neither should Iran.

Russia resisting new U.S. efforts on Syria

FROM NEWS REPORTS

Foreshadowing a potential diplomatic standoff, Russia was reported on Tuesday to have signaled opposition to new efforts by the United States to frame a U.N. Security Council resolution seeking humanitarian access to shattered neighborhoods in the central Syrian city Homs.

The Syrian Arab News Agency, meanwhile, showed a photograph of a bulldozer said to be removing debris from the Baba Amr district of Homs, where a monthlong siege by the government forces ended late last week as rebels melted away in what they called a tactical withdrawal.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has been refused permission to enter Baba Amr, and activists have said that the government forces who overran the area conducted summary executions. Women fleeing the district told a BBC television reporter in footage aired Monday night that the government forces had rounded up and killed men from the area, where armed rebels and army defectors had resisted days of government artillery, sniper and tank fire.

But the government blamed "armed terrorist groups" — the official term for opponents of President Bashar al-Assad — for the destruction in Baba Amr and another neighboring area, accusing them of setting up roadblocks and "other caches and dens which the armed terrorist gangs resorted to in their operations against civilian residents."

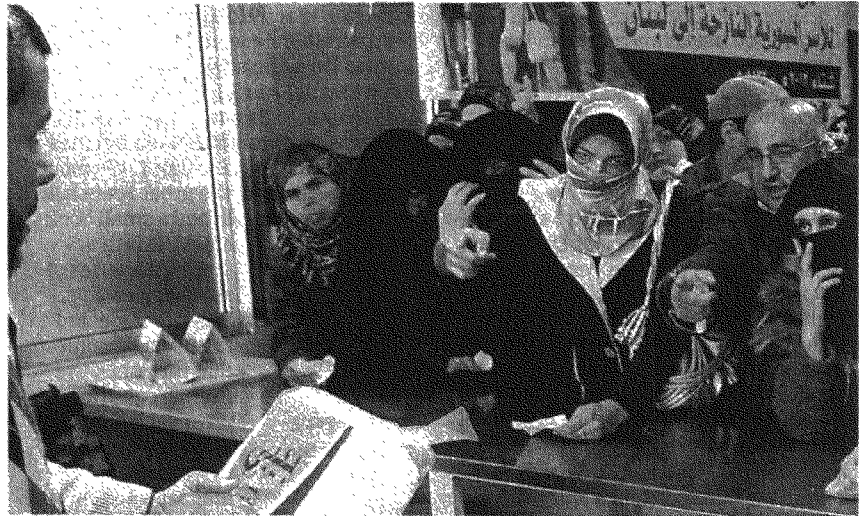
The official account from the Syrian Arab News Agency and other state news media outlets bears no resemblance to activists' accounts and video showing widespread destruction from sustained bombardment by the government.

In the international diplomacy surrounding the crisis, the Syrian government made diplomatic gestures Monday toward seeking an end to the uprising that has convulsed the country, agreeing for the first time to allow visits by the top U.N. relief official and by the newly designated envoy who represents the United Nations and the Arab League.

But there was little indication of a rapprochement between Washington and Moscow over international efforts to halt the bloody confrontation. In a comment on his Twitter account, Gennadi Gatilov, the Russian deputy foreign minister, said a new U.S. draft of a Security Council resolution on Syria was "a slightly modified version of the last vetoed document — it should be substantially balanced."

The remark came a day after Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin claimed victory in the Russian presidential election.

Last month, Russia and China vetoed



Refugees from the conflict in Syria received humanitarian aid from an Islamic group on Tuesday in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli.

a resolution urging Mr. Assad to step aside.

The developments came as the tone turned increasingly hawkish in Washington. Senator John McCain, a leader among Republicans on military matters, called on the United States on Monday to conduct an extensive air bombardment of Syrian targets, with Arab League permission, to protect anti-government fighters and civilians there.

On Tuesday, the White House said that President Barack Obama remained committed to diplomatic efforts to end the violence in Syria.

"The president has repeatedly called for an immediate halt to the violence in Syria," said Tommy Vietor, a White House spokesman. "Currently the administration is focused on diplomatic and political approaches rather than a military intervention. Our best chance to do that and to usher in a political transition is to continue to isolate the regime, cut off key revenue streams, and push the opposition to unite itself under a clear transition plan that makes space for Syrians of all creeds and ethnicities."

In contrast to Mr. McCain's comments, other lawmakers, including the speaker of the House, Representative John A. Boehner, are urging a more cautious approach.

"The situation in Syria is pretty complicated," Mr. Boehner told reporters when asked about Mr. McCain's comments. "Until there's a clear direction as to what is happening there, involving ourselves at this point in time would be premature."

On Tuesday, a French Foreign Ministry spokesman said that European governments were discussing whether

to expel Syrian ambassadors from their respective countries in response to the Assad government's intensifying crackdown.

France's ambassador to Damascus was returning to Paris on Tuesday after closing the embassy following President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to cut its diplomatic presence in Syria.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bernard Valero, said that Syria's ambassador to France had not been asked to leave yet, but that talks were taking place to remove Syrian envoys from other European capitals.

"We are discussing it with the Europeans. At this stage we're not there yet," he said, adding that the decision could be taken on an individual country basis.

The Spanish foreign minister, José Manuel Garcia-Margallo, said that in response to savage killings and human rights abuses the country would cease activities at its embassy in the capital, Damascus, but would not formally close the Spanish mission.

Spain would maintain an active diplomatic presence through the European Union's delegation in Syria "to monitor the situation of Spaniards in the zone, maintain contacts with the opposition and send a political message that what is happening in Syria is not acceptable," Mr. Margallo said.

The United States, Britain, Switzerland and Canada have closed their embassies in the Syrian capital as violence intensifies across the country.

"It is no longer a regime," said Mr. Valero, the French spokesman. "It is a clan that is plunging itself deeper into a repressive policy that is leading the country to collapse." (HT, REUTERS)

U.N. relief chief visits battered Syrian city

Opposition says arrests are continuing in Homs after monthlong assault

BY RICK GLADSTONE

The United Nations' top relief official visited the ravaged Syrian city of Homs on Wednesday as part of her assessment of emergency needs in swathes of the country devastated by a yearlong uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, international aid officials said.

The visit by the official, Valerie Amos, the under secretary general and emergency relief coordinator, represented the first inspection of Homs by an independent outside observer since Syrian armed forces first besieged it more than a month ago in a ferocious campaign to crush an epicenter of armed resistance to Mr. Assad's rule.

Officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross said Ms. Amos had toured the devastated Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs, accompanied by officials of the Syrian Red Crescent, the country's Red Cross affiliate organization, which had been waiting for nearly a week to enter that sector of Homs because the Syrian military was allowing no outsiders.

It was unclear precisely what she saw and she made no statement. But the Red Cross said in a Twitter message that Red Crescent teams stayed about 45 minutes in Baba Amr and that "the vast majority of inhabitants have fled the neighborhood."

Ms. Amos's two-day visit to Syria came as a wave of new arrests were reported in Homs by the Local Coordinating Committees, an activist group, and new signs emerged that even Mr. Assad's closest foreign supporters were losing faith in his government's longevity.

Accounts of torture and deprivation in Homs, conveyed by fleeing civilians, have been denounced as enemy propaganda by the government of Mr. Assad, who has belittled the mass demonstrations against him and insisted that his forces have been battling terrorism for the past year. While China and Russia, his biggest foreign supporters, have defeated attempts by the United Nations Security Council to condemn Mr. Assad and hold him accountable, fractures have surfaced in that support.

On Monday, Russia's prime minister and president-elect, Vladimir V. Putin, reaffirmed his support for Mr. Assad but said he did not know how much longer Mr. Assad's government would last. On Wednesday, China announced it was withdrawing workers from Syria, leaving only about 100 to guard Chinese properties there. While it was unclear

how many Chinese workers were in Syria, the announcement reflected what appeared to be lost confidence in Mr. Assad's powers of governance.

"The Chinese government and ministries must seriously undertake the protection of Chinese firms' production and projects overseas, and the protection of the lives of Chinese citizens overseas, especially engineering teams," China's commerce minister, Chen Deming, was quoted as saying by Xinhua, the state-run news agency.

Other signs of Syria's deepening isolation emerged Wednesday, including Spain's announcement that it was following other European nations and the United States in closing its Damascus embassy, and Air France's suspension of commercial flights to the Syrian capital.

Anti-Assad activists reported that government forces had begun to turn their attention away from Homs and were moving north toward Idlib adjoining the Turkish border, a bastion of armed resistance. The Syrian National Council, an expatriate opposition group, said in a statement on its Web site that armored columns and troop carriers were observed heading to the area. The



WAEI HAMZEH/EPA

A Syrian girl in Aarsal, Lebanon, on Wednesday after fleeing her home near Homs.

group condemned what it called "the international silence toward continued crimes by Assad's forces that aim to crush the people's demands for freedom."

Security officers also swept through the Damascus suburb of Qalamoun, one of several places around the capital where there were demonstrations Tuesday night, making arrests on Wednesday, said a local activist reached via Skype.

Telephone services were interrupted so it was difficult to gauge how widespread the arrests were, the activist said, and the electricity only functioned for about nine hours per day.

Neil MacFarquhar, Hwaida Saad and an employee of *The New York Times* contributed reporting from Beirut, Michael Schwartz from Moscow, Edward Wong from Beijing and Alan Cowell from London.

Obama asks for military options against Syria

WASHINGTON

Pentagon leaders assert diplomacy and sanctions remain the best solution

BY ELISABETH BUMILLER

President Barack Obama has asked the Pentagon for military options on Syria, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, told the Senate on Wednesday, even as the general fended off questions about why the administration was not considering U.S. military strikes there.

General Dempsey and Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said the administration still believed that diplomatic and economic pressure were the best solution for protecting Syrians from the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mr. Panetta and General Dempsey fended off sharp questions from Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, about why the administration was not preparing a more muscular approach. On Monday, Mr. McCain called for a series of U.S.-led airstrikes in Syria, becoming the first senator to call publicly for that approach. He described airstrikes as "the only realistic way" to stop the slaughter.

But Mr. Panetta said intervention could expedite a civil war in the country and make an explosive situation worse. He said bluntly that the Obama administration recognized "that there are limitations of military force, especially with U.S. boots on the ground."

Mr. Obama said during a televised news conference Tuesday that "what is happening in Syria is heartbreaking and outrageous." He repeated previous statements that the question of Mr. Assad's leaving was only a matter of time, but again dispelled the notion that there would be any quick military solution, calling Syria a "much more complicated situation" than Libya. There, the West intervened militarily and contributed to the downfall of its autocratic ruler, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, in October.

"For us to take military action unilaterally or to think there is some simple solution, I think, is a mistake," Mr. Obama said, noting that military intervention must both be effective and address problems that are essential for U.S. security.

On Wednesday, both Mr. Panetta and

General Dempsey also said repeatedly that Syria was far different from Libya. General Dempsey told the committee that although "we can do anything," Syria had five times the air defenses that Libya did and that establishing a no-flight zone would take "an extended period of time and a great number of aircraft." He said an air campaign would be "almost unquestionably" be led by the United States because of American electronic-warfare capabilities.

Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, pressed further to draw General Dempsey out on what he saw as a potentially protracted operation.

"So from a perceptual view alone," he said, "the opening stages in any military operation would be an extended, almost exclusive air campaign by the United States against Syria, presumably supported politically by the Arab League, NATO, the E.U. and everyone else. But the kinetic part of the operation would be ours for several weeks before we actually decided even going in



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Leon E. Panetta said intervention could make an explosive situation worse.

and effectively protecting Syrians. Is that a fair judgment?"

"It is a fair judgment," General Dempsey replied.

Both also predicted civilian casualties in an air campaign because forces loyal to Mr. Assad are intermingled in dense urban areas with the general popula-

tion. In addition, both said the opposition was so splintered that it was difficult to know whom the United States should potentially supply with arms.

"In Libya, there were leaders who came to the front," Mr. Panetta told the committee. But in Syria, "it's very difficult to be able to know who we deal with in terms of an opposition."

General Dempsey said the opposition was composed of as many as 100 different groups.

In the meantime, General Dempsey said, the Pentagon is preparing options that had been requested by Mr. Obama for review, ranging from humanitarian airlifts, naval monitoring, aerial surveillance of the Syrian military and the establishment of a no-flight zone.

A further complication, General Dempsey said, is that both Iran and Russia are supplying Syria with weapons.

HAARETZ.com

8 MARCH 2012

When it comes to Kurdish rebels, Turkey doesn't have a problem invading Syria

In order to protect itself against the infiltration of PKK members, Turkey has threatened to deploy troops to Syria and establish a security zone between the countries.

By Zvi Bar'el

"The government of Turkey is prepared to seek the approval of its parliament in order to deploy its forces in Syrian territory should the violence escalate and pose a threat to Turkey's national security," warned Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu on Thursday. This is the first time that Turkey has threatened the use of force and military deployment in Syria months after Turkish rhetoric has harshened toward the Assad regime, despite its previous opposition to foreign military intervention. Turkey, which demanded on Wednesday to establish a security zone in Syria for the purpose of protecting Syrian refugees fleeing cities which are being bombarded by the Syrian military, something it had previously been opposed to as well.

Davutoglu's warning comes after an investigation by Turkish intelligence revealed that members of the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), which is classified as a terrorist organization, infiltrated Turkey from the Syrian border. "Turkey will not allow Syria to use Kurdish terror against Turkey," Davutoglu threatened. During the 90s, Turkey and Syria were on the brink of war once it became clear that Syria was provi-



Assad, left, shaking Erdogan's hand during a meeting in 2009. Photo by: AP

ding shelter to Abdullah Öcalan, who currently sits in a Turkish prison.

turkey syria

There is no doubt that if the Turkish government asks the parliament for approval to deploy its forces in Syria, it will receive it, as the parliament is controlled by Erdogan's Justice and Development Party. However, alongside Turkey's willingness to use force to protect its national interests, it opposes arming the opposition or non-Arab military intervention. Turkey distinguishes between using force in order to prevent the trickling of terror from Syria into its territory and using force against the Syrian regime. If Turkey should use its force in Syria territory – for any reason –

it will allow other countries to follow suit.

Special envoy to Syria Kofi Annan also joined Turkey in his opposition to arming the Syrian opposition. According to Annan, "arming the Syrian opposition may greatly complicate the situation in the country." Annan, who is staying in Cairo in the leadup to his visit to Syria heard similar things from Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Amr, who clarified that Egypt is against arming the opposition, as it may "increase the chances of a civil war." On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have demanded to arm the opposition, as they believe that due to the West unwillingness to attack Syria, there is no other choice but to arm the opposition.

Foreign Ministers to the Arab League are set to meet in Cairo on Saturday in order to discuss the situation in Syria. Furthermore, they will meet with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who, as it seems, will clarify that Russia has no intention of changing its supportive stance toward the regime. Another conference is set to take place later on this month in Istanbul, in which countries friendly to Syria will come up with a plan to aid its citizens and assist the thousands of refugees which fled the country to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. □

Syrie: Moscou et Pékin ne se laissent pas fléchir à l'ONU

La principale composante de l'opposition appelle à une intervention militaire.

ADÈLE SMITH
NEW YORK

DIPLOMATIE La réunion, lundi, du Conseil de sécurité, au niveau ministériel, a une nouvelle fois mis en évidence les profondes divergences entre Occidentaux et Russes sur le bilan du printemps arabe et en particulier la Syrie, tout en laissant planer l'espoir d'une possible avancée sur ce dossier. Les chefs de la diplomatie américaine, française, britannique, russe et d'autres pays se sont retrouvés au quartier général des Nations unies pour un débat en présence du secrétaire général, Ban Ki-moon. Les Occidentaux ont condamné la répression « cynique » du régime Assad, rendue possible par le soutien de la Russie et de la Chine ; ils ont appelé, sans trop y croire, Moscou et Pékin à renoncer au blocage d'une troisième résolution, humanitaire, proposée par les États-Unis, alors que la Russie et la Chine ont déjà opposé leur veto à deux résolutions précédentes.

Ban Ki-moon a dénoncé l'usage « disproportionné et honteux » de la force par l'État syrien. Alain Juppé, qui a appelé récemment à la saisine de la Cour pénale internationale (CPI) de La Haye, a affirmé que « les crimes du régime syrien ne sauraient rester impunis ». S'exprimant devant la presse après son discours, le ministre français a rappelé l'urgence d'un accord au Conseil de sécurité, en soutien à l'initiative de Kofi Annan, sur « un arrêt immédiat des violences » et « un accès humanitaire », soulignant qu'il était exclu de mettre « oppresseur » et « victimes » sur le même plan et de « geler la situation politique par un statu quo de fait ». De source diplomatique française, Hillary Clinton serait sur la même longueur d'onde. Sergueï Lavrov avait suggéré ce week-end au Caire que le plan de sortie de crise pourrait abandonner tout transfert de pouvoir de Bachar al-Assad. Le plan en cinq points conclu avec la Ligue arabe ne parle plus clairement de « transition » mais seulement de « dialogue politique ».

La secrétaire d'État américaine Hillary Clinton a rejeté les arguments russo-chinois de souveraineté nationale, faux prétextes à ses yeux pour ne

47
corps de femmes
et d'enfants massacrés
à Homs ont
été découverts



À Idlib, dans le nord-ouest du pays, les résistants tentent de répondre aux attaques de l'armée gouvernementale. RODRIGO ABD/AP

pas intervenir. « Nous ne croyons pas que le respect de la souveraineté demande que le Conseil de sécurité reste silencieux lorsque les gouvernements massacrent leur propre population », a-t-elle dit.

Une bataille morale

Tout en exprimant la « grave préoccupation » de son pays, le chef de la diplomatie russe n'a rien cédé aux pressions occidentales, déclarant que le Conseil de sécurité était « manipulé » sur la crise syrienne « comme auparavant sur la Libye ». La Russie, qui arme le gouvernement syrien et redoute de perdre son dernier allié dans la région avec l'Iran, soutient à quelques nuances près la thèse de Bachar el-Assad, selon laquelle l'opposition est aux mains d'extrémistes et d'al-Qaïda. Russes et Chinois, conscients qu'ils sont en train de perdre la bataille morale sur la Syrie, notamment auprès des Arabes dont ils n'ont pas soutenu les mouvements populaires, mènent leur propre contre-offensive diplomatique dans la région.

La paralysie de la communauté internationale devient de plus en plus intenable alors que les forces gouvernementales bombardent Idlib depuis trois jours et que

de nouveaux massacres de civils ont été perpétrés à Homs. Au moins 47 corps de femmes et d'enfants, dont certains carbonisés, ont été découverts dans la ville rebelle. Les images insoutenables d'enfants mutilés, dont certains égorgés, poignardés, et de femmes violées puis tuées à leur tour, ont été diffusées par les militants.

L'opposition syrienne a pour la première fois appelé lundi à une intervention militaire étrangère « urgente » pour mettre fin à la répression menée par le régime. La principale composante de l'opposition, le Conseil national syrien (CNS), demande « une intervention militaire internationale et arabe urgente », la mise en place « d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne » et des « frappes » contre l'appareil militaire du régime, dans un communiqué lu lors d'une conférence de presse à Istanbul par l'un de ses dirigeants, George Sabra. Burhan Ghalioun, le président du CNS, s'est rallié à cette position, estimant que « la communauté internationale ne pouvait continuer à faire des promesses vides et la Ligue arabe à publier des communiqués de presse si elles veulent mettre fin à la violence meurtrière ». À New York, les diplomates n'ont guère montré d'enthousiasme pour armer la rébellion. ■

LE FIGARO

lundi 12 mars 2012

Syrie : les Occidentaux craignent « une paix des cimetières »

À la veille d'une réunion cruciale de l'ONU, Juppé redoute le piège d'un cessez-le-feu sans changement de régime à Damas.

JEAN-JACQUES MÉVEL
ENVOYÉ SPÉCIAL À COPENHAGUE

DIPLOMATIE Le pessimisme gagne les Européens, les Américains et les capitales arabes : ils ne peuvent plus compter que sur un improbable assouplissement de Moscou pour isoler le régime de Bachar el-Assad et faire stopper une répression féroce qui a déjà fait plus de 7 500 victimes. À l'approche d'une réunion cruciale au Conseil de sécurité, lundi, le pronostic est plutôt sombre : « Nous pensions qu'une fois l'élection de Poutine passée, la

« Il est impératif que la transition politique soit mise en œuvre »

ALAIN JUPPÉ

discussion serait plus consensuelle, dit Alain Juppé. Mais cet espoir ne s'est pas concrétisé. » La Russie persiste à bloquer et « la Syrie m'empêche de dormir »,

confesse le chef de la diplomatie. À New York, le ministre retrouvera l'Américaine Hillary Clinton, le Russe Sergueï Lavrov, le Britannique William Hague et l'Allemand Guido Westerwelle. Le pourrissement pourrait déborder d'autres dossiers, comme le conflit israélo-palestinien ou l'arsenal nucléaire de l'Iran.

Sur la Syrie, la même impression de paralysie a baigné un rendez-vous européen à Copenhague. Le blocage russe sape l'objectif affiché de la mission de Kofi Annan : contraindre le régime de Damas à discuter de bonne foi. L'Europe « sera bientôt au bout de ce qu'elle peut faire » sur le plan des sanctions, reconnaît un ministre en privé. L'intervention militaire internationale, enfin, est barrée à l'ONU. Même à but humanitaire, elle risquerait de rallumer la zizanie.

Bachar el-Assad, lui, profite de cette impuissance pour pousser son avantage, comme en témoigne un bombardement provocant de la ville rebelle d'Idlib au moment même où il recevait l'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU qui se voulait

pourtant « optimiste » après son entretien. « Le régime est visiblement décidé à en finir une bonne fois pour toutes avec l'opposition, avance un haut responsable européen. Son objectif pourrait être d'offrir ensuite un cessez-le-feu, sur les positions les plus avantageuses. Et il nous serait bien sûr très difficile de dire non... »

Droit à la démocratie

Cette « paix des cimetières » ferait aussi le jeu de Moscou, laisse entendre un responsable français. La Russie pousse officiellement l'idée d'un cessez-le-feu et d'une aide humanitaire aux villes assiégées. Mais elle rejette catégoriquement le « changement de régime » qui est l'objectif politique numéro un des Occidentaux et de la Ligue arabe. Les Européens l'ont martelé à Copenhague : les Syriens ont le droit de manifester, comme les Tunisiens, les Égyptiens ou les Libyens. « Nous n'accepterons pas que le régime el-Assad et l'opposition soient renvoyés dos à dos, dit Alain Juppé. Le régime el-Assad est condamné à disparaître. Il est impératif que la transition politique soit mise en œuvre. » Pour l'Europe, c'est un critère essentiel dans la réussite de la mission Annan. Mais cela reste une incantation.

À l'inverse, geler la situation par un simple cessez-le-feu ne ferait qu'accroître les tensions sur le terrain, au risque de plonger la Syrie dans une vraie guerre civile, dit-on à Paris. Les voisins directs s'alarment déjà de retombées humanitaires.



Kofi Annan, lors de sa rencontre avec le grand mufti de Syrie et le patriarche orthodoxe Hazim, hier à Damas. K. AL-HARIRI/REUTERS

res et politiques à leurs frontières. Le Liban est en première ligne. Les vieux adversaires de la dynastie el-Assad, comme l'Arabie saoudite et les monarchies du Golfe, appellent à armer les rebelles. D'autres poussent discrètement l'idée d'une zone d'interdiction aérienne, qui permettrait à

l'opposition de rebondir à partir de poches sûres, comme en Libye. Sur cet horizon obscurci, les récentes défections du vice-ministre du Pétrole et de quatre généraux de l'armée syrienne offrent un rayon de soleil apprécié : elles permettent au moins d'espérer une décomposition du régime.

Le ministre néerlandais Uri Rosenthal suggère à l'UE d'offrir « une meilleure protection » à tous ceux qui voudraient suivre l'exemple. Mais cette couverture ne s'appliquerait qu'à ceux qui ont déjà réussi à prendre la fuite. ■

LE FIGARO lundi 12 mars 2012

Ankara tergiverse face à l'offensive d'el-Assad contre Idlib

LAURE MARCHAND
ISTANBUL

LE CASSE-TÊTE syrien tourmente la Turquie, écartelée entre la tentation de jouer un rôle chez son voisin et sa crainte d'être prise au piège d'un conflit qui pourrait déborder les frontières. L'offensive depuis vendredi des chars de Damas contre la province d'Idlib, qui borde le territoire turc, place plus que jamais Ankara aux avant-postes. La semaine dernière, plus d'un millier de Syriens, fuyant les prémices d'un deuxième Homs, sont arrivés dans la province turque de Hatay, dans le Sud, selon le ministère des Affaires étrangères. Les camps accueillent désormais près de 13 000 réfugiés. Les autorités turques redoutent un afflux massif. Au moins quatre généraux ont également rejoint le commandement de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) dans un centre réservé aux déserteurs, sous protection et surveillance turques.

Après avoir appelé, ces derniers mois, leur ancien allié Bachar el-Assad à quitter le pouvoir, les Turcs musclent leur rhétorique depuis quelques jours. En déplacement en Tunisie, jeudi, le président de la République, Abdullah Gül, a déclaré que son pays était hostile à une intervention en Syrie qui serait conduite par des pays extérieurs au Moyen-Orient, mais il ne s'est pas dit contre une participation à une force régionale. Deux jours auparavant, le premier ministre, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, réclamait l'ouverture « immédiate » de

couloirs humanitaires pour porter assistance aux civils, sans fournir plus de détails sur le rôle dévolu à la Turquie dans un tel dispositif : l'établissement de corridors pose inévitablement la question de l'utilisation du territoire et de la participation de l'armée turcs.

Base arrière pour l'opposition

Mais « comment convaincre la Syrie d'ouvrir des couloirs sans pression militaire ? s'interroge un diplomate européen. Ankara ne veut pas y aller seul. La question est de savoir avec qui et comment intervenir. » Tant que Moscou bloque, une intervention sous l'égide des Nations unies n'est pas d'actualité. Pas plus qu'un engagement au nom de l'Otan : « Les Turcs passeraient dans la région pour des supôts impérialistes », ajoute-t-il. Le gouvernement islamo-conservateur a sorti l'artillerie verbale, mais il sait que le terrain des actes est dangereusement miné. De plus, « l'idée que les pays occidentaux qui ne veulent pas brûler dans le feu syrien y poussent Ankara est largement répandue », analyse Semih Idiz, éditorialiste spécialiste de politique étrangère.

Le retard pris dans la programmation de la deuxième réunion des « Amis de la Syrie », après celle qui s'est tenue à Tunis en février, est révélateur de cette somme de paramètres. La conférence avait préalablement été annoncée à Istanbul pour la mi-mars. Elle se tiendra désormais au mieux à la fin du mois, après la visite de M. Erdogan à Téhéran, prévue le 27 mars, voire en avril. « La question de son contenu n'est pas résolue, souligne une source française. Si c'est pour répéter la même chose qu'à Tunis,

une nouvelle réunion ne vaut pas la peine et n'est pas non plus intéressante pour les organisateurs turcs. »

Les hésitations de la communauté internationale dans le dossier syrien, autrement compliqué que le libyen, s'ajoutent aux intérêts propres à la Turquie. Si elle prend ouvertement la main, elle court le risque de se mettre à dos la Russie, son premier fournisseur d'énergie. Ankara veut également éviter que la carte de la rébellion du PKK, le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, dont la branche syrienne joue actuellement le statu quo avec Damas, ne soit actionnée par les autorités syriennes. Qui ont déjà commencé à la manier, selon Ankara : le ministre des Affaires étrangères, Ahmet Davutoglu, a déclaré que nombre de rebelles kurdes pénétraient « actuellement en Turquie depuis la Syrie » et qu'aucun pays ne serait « autorisé à saper » la sécurité de son territoire.

Malgré sa prudence, la Turquie est bel et bien engagée. Elle accueille dans ses hôpitaux les rebelles syriens blessés, sert de base arrière à l'opposition militaire et politique. « Nous sommes totalement libres de mener nos activités, se félicite Khaled Khoja, le représentant en Turquie du Conseil national syrien, qui chapeaute des partis de l'opposition. Les autorités n'ont pas réagi publiquement lorsque nous avons annoncé qu'un bureau de liaison militaire pourrait être établi sur le territoire turc, cela signifie qu'il n'y a pas d'opposition de leur part. » Les dissidents syriens demandent désormais une aide plus concrète. « Nous voulons une zone tampon et un soutien armé pour l'ASL, ajoute-t-il. Mais Ahmet Davutoglu a réservé sa réponse. » ■

ABDULLAH GÜL
PRÉSIDENT
DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE
TURQUE

« La répression, l'injustice et la dictature ne peuvent pas continuer »



Syrie: des dizaines de milliers de Kurdes manifestent contre le régime

AFP

Plusieurs dizaines de milliers de Kurdes ont manifesté lundi dans le nord de la Syrie contre le régime du président Bachar al-Assad et à l'occasion du 8e anniversaire d'affrontements meurtriers avec les forces de sécurité, selon une ONG.

"Des dizaines de milliers de personnes ont manifesté dans la ville pour le huitième anniversaire du soulèvement de Qamichli", a affirmé l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'Homme (OSDH), ajoutant que des "drapeaux kurdes étaient brandis par des manifestants".

Les forces de sécurité ont ouvert le feu pour disperser les manifestants, blessant trois personnes, a indiqué l'OSDH.

Dans une vidéo mise en ligne par des militants, des images montrent des personnes sur le toit d'un immeuble appartenant, selon eux, à la Sécurité militaire dans la ville proche de Amouda, agitant le drapeau kurde et celui de la Syrie d'avant le parti Baas.

Une statue de Hafez al-Assad, ancien président et père de Bachar, est jetée du haut du bâtiment, se casse puis est piétinée par des gens, selon ces images.

Selon le président de l'OSDH, Rami Abdel Rahmane, "le régime syrien est prudent vis-à-vis des Kurdes et tente d'éviter tant que possible des heurts avec eux, craignant un affrontement violent".

Le 12 mars 2004, des affrontements avaient opposé les Kurdes d'une part à des tribus arabes et les forces de sécurité de l'autre à Qamichli faisant 40 morts en six jours, selon des sources kurdes, 25 selon Damas.

Les Kurdes représentent environ 9% de la population et sont installés essentiellement dans le Nord-Est et à

Damas, où ils forment une importante minorité.

Affirmant faire l'objet d'une politique discriminatoire depuis plusieurs décennies, ils réclament la reconnaissance de leur langue et de leur culture et veulent être traités comme des citoyens à part entière. Ils disent aussi revendiquer des droits politiques et administratifs.

La communauté kurde de Syrie compte une douzaine de partis politiques, tous interdits par les autorités. Elle a participé aux nombreuses manifestations contre le régime de Bachar al-Assad depuis la mi-mars 2011. □



12 mars 2012

Ils ont jeûné pour leur chef

Plus de 4 000 kurdes en grève de la faim en Europe

Christophe Castieau

Soutien Le leader du PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, est emprisonné en Turquie

Leur action a pris fin dimanche soir mais pourrait être rapidement réactivée. Quinze Kurdes de Montpellier se sont joints, le temps d'un week-end, au combat des grévistes de la faim de Strasbourg. Ces derniers jeûnent depuis presque un mois devant le Conseil de l'Europe afin que ce dernier obtienne des nouvelles du leader du PKK (le parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan), Abdullah Öcalan, emprisonné et placé à l'isolement en Turquie. « Cela fait huit mois qu'on ne sait rien », explique Mehmet, le porte-parole des quinze Kurdes – dont deux femmes – qui ont passé le week-end sans s'alimenter au local de l'association montpelliéraine Mala Kurda.

« Prêts à mourir »

Couverts de draps blancs, sur lesquels est inscrit « Liberté



Quinze Kurdes de Montpellier ont cessé de s'alimenter durant le week-end.

pour Öcalan » ou « Vive le peuple kurde », les grévistes de Montpellier espèrent que cette pression sur l'Europe permettra que le prisonnier puisse recevoir la visite de son avocat et de médecins. Ils aimeraient également qu'une mission du Comité pour la prévention de la torture (CPT) soit diligentée par le Conseil de l'Europe. « Si on n'a pas de nouvelles, on poursuivra ou on recommencera », assure une jeune femme en grève. « A Strasbourg, reprend Mehmet, ils sont prêts à mourir et nous, on prendra le relais », insiste-t-il. ■

SYRIAN KURDS SEEN AS REVOLT'S WILD

BY ERNESTO LONDOÑO

IRBIL, Iraq — Syria's long-oppressed Kurdish minority is emerging as a key wild card with the potential to boost the momentum of a scattered and beleaguered opposition movement as a year-old revolt appears poised to become more violent.

So far, the Kurds have not been enthusiastic supporters of the wider revolution, which is primarily led by Syria's Sunni Arab majority and has increasingly taken on sectarian overtones. They remain fearful that a new government dominated by Sunni Arabs could deepen their marginalization.

But largely unnoticed, the Kurds in the northeast of the country have been engaging in daily peaceful protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The government has concentrated most of its efforts to suppress revolt on Sunni Arab cities such as Homs and Hama, and it has, for the most part, refrained from using force against the Kurds.

Sunni Arabs make up a majority in the nation of 22 million, which for decades has been ruled by members of the Shiite Alawite sect. Kurds are estimated to make up between 8 and 15 percent. Syria's deep ethnic and religious divides make its revolt far more complex and potentially divisive than those in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia.

Syrian Kurds appear divided over what kind of role they want to carve out for themselves if the opposition movement succeeds in toppling the Assad government. But U.S. and allied Western nations are increasingly trying to find ways to bring the Kurds into the mainstream opposition, an effort that remains elusive.

A Western diplomat involved in Syria policy said the United States and European allies have worked behind the scenes to encourage the mainstream opposition to make commitments about Kurdish rights in a post-Assad era.

"If and when the Kurds decide to get involved in a big way, it could cost the regime physical control over an entire region and could also be key to getting Aleppo and Damascus to rise up," said the Western diplomat, who insisted on

anonymity.

The predominantly Kurdish region, strategically important because it shares borders with Iraq and Turkey and has substantial oil reserves, remains essentially up for grabs.

Officials in Turkey, whose own oppressed Kurdish minority includes an insurgent wing, and in Iraq, where Kurds have attained a great degree of sovereignty, are watching the conflict closely, worried about cross-border ripple effects. The Kurds, an ethnic group spread out in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, have long aspired to have their own state, an ambition that has often led to their persecution.

The story of the uprising of Syrian Kurds, based on interviews with experts and with Kurdish leaders in Syria and neighboring Iraq, is key to understanding why the revolt in Syria has been slow to gather decisive momentum and just how messy the post-Assad era could become.

When Syrians first took to the streets in March, buoyed by successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Kurdish political leaders were reluctant to rise up, according to those who were interviewed. As a long disenfranchised segment of society with an extensive history of revolt, Kurds had every incentive to join the protest movement. But political leaders decided that they shouldn't play a visible role early on.

"The Baath regime has always tried to teach that the Kurds are trying to divide Syria," said Abdul Baki Youssef, a Syrian Kurdish politician, said in an interview in Irbil, referring to Assad's Baath political party. "If we had started, the regime would have just said we were starting to partition."

As the revolt gathered steam in the southern Syrian city of Daraa, Kurds began holding large protests in the northeastern town of Qamishli and other predominantly Kurdish areas, at times drawing tens of thousands, Kurdish leaders say. Protesters tore down once-ubiquitous posters and portraits of Assad and toppled a statue of his late father, longtime Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Youssef said.

Kurdish antipathy toward the regime soared in October, after the assassination

of Mashaal Tammo, a prominent Kurdish activist. As he was buried, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in the northeast, marking one of the relatively rare instances in which security forces were accused of firing live ammunition into crowds in the area, Kurdish activists said.

In addition to chants against Assad, demonstrations in Kurdish areas featured calls for greater sovereignty and self-determination. Protesters waved the red, white and green Kurdish flag. Security forces kept close tabs on activists and demonstrations, Kurdish activists said, and sought to disperse some with tear gas. But security forces have shown a notable degree of restraint in Kurdish cities, a stark contrast from its recent bombardment of Homs.

"The regime doesn't want to start clashes with the Kurds," Saleh Kado, a leader in the Kurdish Leftist Party in Qamishli said in a phone interview. "Until now, we stress that the revolution must be peaceful. Our belief is that change will come through peaceful means."

Denise Natali, an expert on Kurdish politics at the National Defense University, said the Assad regime has sought to woo certain Kurdish factions, making concessions such as offering full citizenship to Kurds who have for years been denied official documents.

"To repress the Kurds violently would be another nail in the coffin," she said. "It is one of the communities the regime is trying to co-opt."

Although Kurdish leaders say most Syrian Kurds remain staunchly opposed to Assad, the Kurds have become increasingly alarmed by the leading role that Turkey has played in organizing the opposition. Turkey has become a haven for Syrian refugees and members of the opposition's armed faction, known as the Free Syrian Army.

As Turkish leaders have devised their Syria policy, they have probably been mindful of the Kurdish angle at every turn. Members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has for years fought the Turkish government in a bid for independence, have used remote Syrian areas as staging grounds for attacks in the past and could more easily do so with the complicity of the Assad regime.

Kurdish groups boycotted a summit of Syrian opposition parties in May because it was held in Turkey. Few attended a conference in Istanbul in August during which the Syrian National

• Council was formed.

"The regime has sought to divide the opposition through divide-and-conquer tactics," Shelal Gado, a Kurdish political leader, said in an interview in Sulaymaniyah, an Iraqi city where he is now based. "We regret that the majority in the opposition think the same way as the regime: They don't

want to recognize the rights of the Kurdish people."

Seeking to bridge the divisions among Syrian Kurdish groups, Massoud Barzani, the president of the semiautonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, hosted a gathering of Kurdish politicians from the neighboring country last month. He pledged the

support of the prosperous region as long as Syrian Kurds found a way to band together. The Kurdish elder also emphasized that they should not join the armed resistance.

"The era of armed struggle is over," he said.■

Rudaw

8 March 2012

Kurdish Parties Consider United Front in Kirkuk Elections

By NAWZAD MAHMOUD
rudaw.net

KIRKUK, Iraqi – Kurdish political parties from the Kurdistan Region appear to have reached a consensus to run in a united bloc in the future elections in Kirkuk.

Factional divisions among Kurdish parties in the past has rendered thousands of Kurdish votes ineffective.

Rebwar Sayid Gul, the head of the Kirkuk branch of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) says the idea of the joint bloc was first proposed by his party.

The KIU is Kurdistan's largest Islamic party and the second biggest opposition group in the Kurdistan parliament.

Thirteen Kurdish parties are holding talks to study the possibility of entering the elections as a united front.

Islamic and secular parties seem to be on board for a joint plan thanks to their concern about the loss of a considerable number of votes among Kurdish residents of the multiethnic province. A multi-party meeting was held on the topic this week.

Abdulqadir Muhammad, the head of the Kirkuk office of the Change Movement (Gorran), Kurdistan's largest opposition group, said there has been no agreement yet on the creation of a joint list but talks continue toward that end.

During Iraq's Parliamentary elections in 2006, Kurdish parties gained only half of the votes with the other half going to Arab and Turcoman groups.

Rawand Mala Mahmoud, the deputy head of the local branch of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) rejected claims that the idea of a joint bloc is the brainchild of the Islamic Union.

The PUK under Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq, is one of the two ruling parties in Kurdistan.

"All parties want that and let no one party take credit for the idea," said Mahmoud. "We will have one slate and



Supporters of Kurdish candidates drive on the streets of Kirkuk during Parliamentary elections.

will later devise a mechanism to determine the results and names of winners."

Kurds consider Kirkuk part of their historical homeland and seek to annex it to the autonomous Kurdistan Region.

Political and security tension is often the main feature of the province as Kurdish, Arab and Turcoman parties hold different views on the future of the province.

Iraq's constitution stipulates that a referendum is held whereby Kirkuk's residents can determine whether they want to join the Kurdistan or stay with Iraq.

This move by Kurdish parties to create a joint electoral slate has been received positively by the province's Kurds.

Ali Shwani, 34, a Kurdish resident of Kirkuk says, "Kirkuk is not like Erbil and Sulaimani so they can fight as they like and then let the Arab parties win."

Erbil and Sulaimani are the two major cities of Iraqi Kurdistan and the power centers of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK respectively. The KDP is the major ruling party in Kurdistan.

During the 2010 parliamentary elec-

tions, Kurdistan Region's opposition groups ran separately, but failed to win any seats in Iraq's Parliament.

The PUK and KDP won the province's six seats.

"We have received the message of Kirkuk's resident and we will follow it for sure," said Rebwar Tofiq a senior KDP official in the province, referring to the demand for one Kurdish bloc in elections.

"We as the KDP prefer (all Kurdish parties) to be together in all of Kirkuk's elections and not only the provincial one," he added.

Tofiq said that nearly 70,000 Kurdish votes were lost in the 2010 elections due to lack of unity among Kurdish groups.

"We should not let that happen again," he maintained.

Kurdish parties won more than 270,000 votes in Kirkuk and the rival al-Iraqiya bloc of former Prime Minister Ayad Alawi won 206,000 votes.

Ibrahim Saeed, 45, a Kurdish resident of Kirkuk urged Kurds to stand united in the elections. If Kurds are not united, Saeed believes, "Kirkuk will get out of Kurdish hands."◆

Not fond of Assad, Syrian Kurds are wary of what might come next

QAMISHLI, IRAQ

As their leaders face tough options, refugees trickle across Iraq border

BY JACK HEALY

Inside a muddy village named for a failed revolt against the Syrian authorities, a history of flight and exile is repeating itself.

Over the past few months, scores of Kurds have begun streaming into Iraqi Kurdistan, fleeing security forces and the violence that is threatening to sweep Kurds from the sidelines of Syria's uprising into its main currents.

Though the numbers have been small, the new arrivals speak to a possible change in thinking among Syria's largest ethnic minority that could potentially shift the momentum against President Bashar al-Assad just as his military forces have gained an upper hand. The Kurds, a group that has long complained of repression and discrimination by the Assad regime, have failed to unify and declined to join the Sunni-dominated opposition, with some concerned that a post-Assad government led by the uprising's leaders may be no better — or perhaps even worse.

Thousands of Kurds, who make up an estimated 10 percent of Syria's 23 million people, have been willing and eager to protest decades of discrimination. They say they are prevented from speaking

Kurdish in schools, denied a political voice and subject to intimidation and arrest if they speak up for their rights.

With young activists as their backbone, Kurds in Syria have formed their own opposition groups and confronted the security forces in the streets. Last October, five protesters were reportedly shot and killed at the funeral of Mashaal Tammo, a Kurdish opposition leader who many Kurds believe was assassinated by the government.

But the Kurdish activists remain divided, and so are not a full force in the drive to oust Mr. Assad. Like Syria's Christians, many are deeply suspicious and fear that a new Sunni government will marginalize them even further. In meetings of Syrian opposition leaders, Kurdish representatives have quarreled over which rights, freedoms and powers Kurds would have — or would be denied — in a new Syria.

"The Kurds in Syria have their own problems," said Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish Iraqi member of Parliament.



ADAM FERGUSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

From left, Radwan Madhan al-Ali, Mohammed Jafu and Rosif Mohammed Sharif Suleiman are among the Syrian Kurds who have taken refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan.

"They are against the Assad regime. They have been for years. They have no rights. But they are not sure about which people will come after."

Mr. Assad has in part been able to retain support throughout the popular uprising by courting Syria's minority groups that looked to the police state for protection. Recognizing the potential danger of a unified Kurdish opposition and a chance to exploit their divisions, Mr. Assad offered long-sought citizenship rights to tens of thousands of Kurds and invited Kurdish leaders to the negotiating table.

But Abdul Basit Sida, a Kurdish opposition leader, said that the government's brutal response to dissent was gradually unifying Kurds against Mr. Assad, and that they were ironing out differences with Arab leaders of the opposition.

Still, mainstream Kurd opposition leaders have pledged not to fight the Assad government or join rebel fighters, for fear of drawing a lethal response from the security forces. That reluctance could blunt their role given how the government has deployed tanks, soldiers and pounding force to crush centers of dissent.

"We support the Free Syrian Army,"

said Kawa Azeri, a Kurdish exile in Iraq and an opposition member, referring to the main armed opposition group. "We have a deal with them and we are coordinating with them, but we are not fighting with them."

But their presence here highlights another potential ramification of the upheaval and violence in Syria, because as the refugees arrive in northern Iraq,

they are discovering they are not the first.

In 2004, a riot erupted at a soccer match in the heavily Kurdish city of Qamishli, in northeast Syria, setting off clashes with security officers and days of demonstrations as Kurds vented their rage. Thousands fled the ensuing crackdown and wound up here, in a refugee camp they named Qamishli, to memorialize the violence.

Nearly eight years later, their seemingly permanent exile may offer a glimpse of the future for thousands of Syrians who have crossed into Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, a distressing omen that the emergency along Syria's borders could persist for months, if not years.

"When I first came to Kurdistan, I thought I would stay for a few weeks," said Barzan Bahram, a leader in the Qamishli camp. "I didn't expect to live in exile."

The recent influx of Kurdish refugees represents the first real movement of Syrians into Iraq since the uprising against Mr. Assad erupted a year ago. The newest arrivals are young men

evading conscription, soldiers deserting the army and civilians and protesters fleeing the spreading instability.

Their numbers — 100 to 500 — are a trickle compared with the thousands who have poured into other countries. The United Nations refugee agency said that there was no pressing humanitarian emergency inside Kurdistan, and that the people crossing the border had been finding shelter with families, acquaintances and other refugees.

But they are living as a people apart. In Iraq, the Kurdish refugees are strangers, welcomed into refugee

Kurdish officials are allowing the Syrian Kurds to stay, even as the officials refuse to take sides in a Syrian civil war.

camp and the homes of family friends and distant relatives, but still living in limbo.

They say they hope to return should Mr. Assad's government fall. They want to begin working to carve out guarantees so that they, like Iraq's Kurds, could have greater rights and control over their lives. But as opposition fighters retreated from their stronghold of Homs last week, any hopes of a quick return crumbled as the state forces moved aggressively to regain control with heavy weapons, including tanks.

Kurdish officials are allowing the Syrian Kurds to stay, welcoming them on humanitarian grounds even as the officials refuse to take sides in a Syrian civil war that has turned into a global power struggle.

Iraq's Kurdish leaders are trying to thread the needle in a bewilderingly complicated clash of political, sectarian and ethnic interests. Iraq's Sunni Arab minority has channeled money, aid and

weapons to the Syrian opposition, but many Shiites worry about new waves of violence if Mr. Assad's Alawite-dominated government falls to a largely Sunni uprising.

Iran, Kurdistan's powerful and increasingly besieged neighbor, is the Syrian government's staunchest regional supporter. Turkey, a crucial economic partner for Kurdistan, is rallying behind the opposition. Yet the governments of both nations are wary that greater Kurdish autonomy in a post-Assad Syria could stoke separatist movements among their own large Kurdish populations.

Syrian Kurds say more control is precisely what they want. To some, self-rule inside Syria could be a critical step toward creating a single independent Kurdistan, a long-term dream that itself complicates the regional calculus.

"We are definitely seeking to obtain what Iraqi Kurds have gained," said Mr. Azeri, the exiled opposition member. "I think what they have got so far is because of their long-term struggle, mass graves and chemical bombs. This is our minimum right."

Kurdistan's president, Massoud Barzani, has made several overtures to Syrian Kurdish opposition groups. He invited them to Erbil, the Kurdish capital, and urged them to demand their rights as Kurds. But he has not called for Mr. Assad to step down, despite the rising

death toll and broad international condemnation of the Syrian government's brutal tactics.

The patchwork tents and cinder-block homes of Qamishli feel far removed from those questions. The new arrivals huddle in shadowy living rooms, texting their friends and checking their Facebook pages for updates from inside Syria. They worry about reprisals against their families, and wonder about the shape of their future.

Mohammed Jafo, 26, a Kurdish student at Damascus University, said he fled Syria rather than be conscripted into the army. After paying smuggler and then walking across the border, he eventually ended in Qamishli.

"I need to find a job, I need to find a house," he said. "I don't know anyone. This is the problem."

He is staying in the spare bedroom of a long-term exile named Adnan Yousef, who still speaks bitterly of how Syrian officials made him change his true Kurdish name — Shiro — for an Arab one. Mr. Yousef said he had a duty to take in the Kurds now fleeing Syria.

"When I came here," he said, "someone else took care of me."

Omar al-Jawoshy and Yasir Ghazi contributed reporting.

REUTERS

Turkish spy chiefs under pressure on Kurd rebels

MARCH 9, 2012 By Daren Butler | Istanbul | Reuters

TURKISH state prosecutors have sought permission from Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to question spy chiefs over their secret contacts with Kurdish militants, media reports said on Friday, challenging government moves to curb the investigation.

Nationalists in the conservative establishment are deeply suspicious of making concessions to separatists or negotiating with the rebel Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and European Union.

Erdogan appears likely to turn down the request, given the way the government rushed through legislation three weeks ago to protect the National Intelligence Agency (MIT) from the courts.

Media reports say the prime minister has 60 days to decide. What is surprising is that the prosecutors, armed by the government with special powers to tackle terrorism and investigate alleged coup plots, have refused to give up their pursuit of an agency that answers directly to the prime minister.

The prosecutor's office declined comment on the reports. In recent years, these special prosecutors had earned reputations targeting military officers, journalists, lawyers and academics, over alleged anti-government conspiracies, as well as Kurdish politicians and activists suspected of links with separatist militants.

Prosecutors want to question MIT chief Hakan Fidan and four other MIT officials about secret talks held with representatives of the PKK in Oslo in 2010 and about MIT infiltration of a PKK-linked group. In tapes of the 2010 PKK talks leaked on the internet last year, Fidan, then the prime minister's special envoy, said Erdogan was prepared to take a great political risk to pursue peace talks.

The investigation has fuelled speculation of a power struggle between the police, judiciary and the MIT, though Erdogan has denied any rift within the state apparatus. In an interview with Reuters last week, President Abdullah Gul asserted the state's right to hold secret as well as open talks to seek a solution to the Kurdish conflict, and said within that framework initiatives "are still being realised." Erdogan says he is determined to solve the Kurdish problem and bring an end to a separatist conflict that began in the mid-1980s and has resulted in over 40,000 deaths. "Whatever the price, with God's permission and the nation's support and prayers this problem will be solved. We will continue to struggle with this aim until our last breath," he told members of the ruling AK Party earlier this week.

Erdogan's government has in recent years pushed through reforms, such as allowing Kurdish language broadcasting, in a bid to address Kurdish minority grievances and end the conflict. He had also given his blessing for talks between MIT and representatives of the PKK, who took up arms in 1984 with the aim of creating a separate state in the mainly Kurdish southeast of the country. The Istanbul prosecutor who initially summoned Fidan for questioning has been taken off the case, while several high ranking police officers in the city, where the investigations of Kurdish militants is focused, have been reassigned.

The Turkish-Iranian Struggle for Syria

Sami Moubayed.

One of the aftershocks of the Syrian uprising is an abrupt end to a Turkish-Iranian honeymoon, which started shortly after the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey almost 10 years ago. For many years Turkey and Iran - heirs to two strong empires - found plenty in common thanks to Syria. They now have a million reasons to disagree, also because of Syria.

The countries cooperated on post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, worked side-by-side to crush Kurdish separatists, and united efforts on Lebanon and Gaza after the wars of 2006 and 2008 respectively.

That marriage of convenience began to fall apart - rather rapidly - when the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan took a radically anti-Damascus stance, calling for the regime's downfall, whereas Iran stood firmly behind its Syrian ally, with whom it has held strategic relations since 1979. It all boils down now to a Persian-Turkish struggle for Syria.

Historical background

According to Daphne McCurdy, a senior researcher associate with the Project on Middle East Democracy: "Turkey has traditionally viewed Iran, unlike how it has viewed other Middle East countries, as a large and important nation-state that must be managed, rather than confronted."

Back in 1979, for example, the Turks were among the very few regional heavyweights who did not panic when the Islamic Revolution took place in Tehran. It also became one of the first countries in the world to recognize the Khomeini government, and to refuse to impose sanctions upon it, after the 1979-1981 US hostage crisis at the American Embassy in Tehran.

Turkey did this, it must be noted, despite a systematic Iranian campaign to tarnish the image of the Turkish Republic's founder, president Kamal

Ataturk, and his strong brand of secularism. In the 1990s, the two countries signed a US\$24 billion gas deal, despite mutual accusations of backing the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

After the Israeli war of 2006, Prime Minister Erdogan saw to it that \$50 million worth of aid was provided for the reconstruction of south Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold, which was music to the ears of Iranian officialdom.

In June 2010, Turkey voted against a US-backed UN Security Council resolution imposing further sanctions on Iran. Despite the slump in political relations since mid-2011, Turkey still relies on Iran for one-third of its oil supply.

Differences surface

One view says that Tehran and Ankara soon realized that apart from short-term political issues, the two countries had very little in common, thanks to Syria. Another view, of course, speaks the exact opposite, claiming that economic interests overshadow political differences between Ankara and Tehran.

The truth, of course, lies somewhere in-between. Turkey's AKP was indeed a religious party that marketed a strong brand of moderate Sunni Islam, whereas Iran was a Shi'ite theocracy bent on marketing radical political Shi'ite Islam to the world, automatically challenging countries like Turkey.

Last November, Turkey agreed to host an early warning radar as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's missile defense system, infuriating the Iranians, who saw it as a direct threat to their security. The Europe Missile Shield, after all, was originally created to intercept Iranian missiles.

Turkey of course only agreed to host the defense shield in September 2011 after tensions had begun to mount between the two countries over Syria. The head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's aerospace division, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, snapped that, "should we be threatened, we

will target NATO's missile defense shield in Turkey and then hit the next targets."

Then came a statement by Ali Akbar, senior advisor to Iran's Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who said that Turkey's model of "secular Islam" was actually a "version of Western liberal democracy that is unacceptable for countries going through an Islamic awakening". In response, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc said: "I am addressing the Islamic Republic of Iran: I do not know if you are worthy of being called Islamic; have you said a single thing about what is happening in Syria?"

Iran realizes that although it has the ear of top Syrian officials, its popularity on the Syrian street is very thin when compared with that of Turkey.

It has tried non-stop since 1979 to boost people-to-people relations through tourism, cultural exchange, and investment projects in Syria. Religious tourism did indeed flourish, for example, but it was one-sided, from Iran to Syria and not vice-versa. Few Syrian tourists went to Tehran for sightseeing.

However, in Turkey's case, where Syrian tourists visiting Turkey jumped from 332,847 in 2007, for example, into almost 900,000 in 2010. In Iran's case, 800,000 Iranians came to Syria in 2010, for example, but the Iranian Ministry of Tourism refrained from mentioning how many Syrian tourists visit Iran per year.

Turkish soap operas have been translated into Arabic and are very popular in Syria, but the same cannot be said for the numerous Iranian works translated into Arabic - and an entire Iranian channel dedicated to broadcasting Iranian works dubbed from Persian into Arabic. This of course is namely due to joint Syrian-Turkish history, inter-marriage, and the fact that Turks are Muslim Sunnis while Iranians are Muslim Shi'ites, creating an invisible religious barrier that is very difficult to transcend.

Iran feels outsmarted by Turkey at a grassroots level,

although Tehran has been trying to win affection of the Syrian people for over 30-years, while the Turks have been doing it only since 2003.

The Turks managed to win affection of ordinary Syrians - regardless of politics - despite 80 years of indoctrination in Syrian media against the Ottoman Empire and its legacy in the Arab world. There was no such indoctrination ever against Iran - and yet, Syrians prefer to do business with Ankara and to go sightseeing in Turkey rather than Iran. This is noteworthy, although Iran is a breathtaking country with magnificent history, breathtaking tourist attractions and plenty of wealth.

The crux of the struggle today, therefore, is Syria. Relations will continue cooperating on bilateral trade, regardless of how much politics divides them, but Syria remains a sticking point in Iranian-Turkish relations.

Iran is worried that regime change in Syria would give the Turks unlimited access to Syria, excluding Tehran from all political, military, cultural, and economic influence. The Turks after all, are strongly allied to the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), which was established in Istanbul last summer, and currently host the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

All talk about a no-fly zone on the Syrian-Turkish border raises red sirens in Tehran, but at the end of the day, the Iranians are unable to go to war for Syria. If the Syrian Army ventures into the northern Syrian city of Idlib, as it did in Homs, then this would place it dangerously near the Turkish border, and the Turks are ready to act, invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, being "self-defense".

In fact, Erdogan might even see it as a blessing in disguise, giving him the pretext to put his loud words into action. That explains why Iran is very worried. They realize that contrary to what they believed, there is an entire street in Syria, being the majority, that doesn't like

them, and has little affection anymore, for Hezbollah.

That doesn't mean the Syrian street likes Erdogan any better. On the contrary, ordinary Syrians are beginning to view him also with plenty of suspicion and scrutiny for saying nothing but loud words since the Syrian upri-

sing began in mid-2011.

Supporting the resistance in Lebanon, however, is no longer enough for Iran to win the minds and hearts of the Syrian people. Also, loud words in favor of the Syrian rebels are also no longer enough for Erdogan to score points with ordinary Syrians.

The two countries - and both Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Recep Tayyip Erdogan - will have to do things differently from now on to win over ordinary Syrians. Otherwise, both will be viewed as nothing but hot air balloons. Turkey may have the upper hand at a grassroots level, but politi-

cally speaking, both countries are losing ground within Syria, both with ordinary Syrians, and against each other, rather rapidly. □

Sami Moubayed is a university professor, historian, and editor-in-chief of Forward Magazine in Damascus.

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Iraq: Fearful Kurds Want Increased Peshmerga Protection

Sunday: 7 Iraqis Killed, 11 Wounded

March 04, 2012 — by Margaret Griffis,

FEAR continues to drive Kurdish Iraqis in multi-ethnic Diyala province to demand extra protection, preferably from Kurdish forces. Meanwhile, at least seven Iraqis were killed and 11 more were wounded in attacks across the country.

Over 500 Kurds have been killed since about the end of 2010, prompting Kurdish families to demand protection by Peshmerga forces. Since Feb. 23 alone, when attacks left almost 100 people dead across the country, about 170 Kurdish families were forced to flee Jalawla for safer areas. They claim that Iraqi police are not as diligent in looking out Kurdish families, as they are when guarding targeted Arab officials friendly to their Kurdish coun-

terparts. The problem is that Peshmerga troops are only in Diyala with hesitant permission from Baghdad, and the central government may not want more Kurdish forces in contested areas. Unfortunately, attempts to protect themselves have been effectively thwarted.

Although no violence was reported in Diyala province today, at least seven Iraqis were killed elsewhere. Another 11 were wounded.

In Mosul, a grenade killed one woman and wounded four other civilians. Clashes left two dead and one person wounded.

In Baghdad, gunmen killed an employee of the Interior Ministry. Two civilians were wounded in the Khadraa neighborhood when a sticky bomb exploded on their car.

An official was killed and three others were wounded in Wasit province.

Gunmen killed a policeman's brother in Balad.

An attack on a bus in Kut left one person dead.

A sticky bomb in Tikrit wounded an employee of the provincial council.

A grenade tossed at a preacher's home in Diwaniya caused material damage only. □

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL March 6, 2012

Iraq Says Exxon Seeks More Time on Kurd Decision

By HASSAN HAFIDH

Exxon Mobil Corp. XOM +0.26% has asked the Iraqi central government to give it "few more days" to decide whether or not it will cancel an exploration deal with Iraqi Kurdistan, a deal which Baghdad strongly opposes, a spokesman for Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Hussein al-Shahristani said Tuesday.

Iraq has asked the U.S. energy giant to choose between its deal with the semiautonomous northern Iraqi region and its central-government contract to develop the 370,000 barrel-a-day West Qurna Phase 1. The impasse means Exxon has also been barred from Iraq's fourth oil-and-gas licensing auction, scheduled for May.

The Iraqi government considers as invalid any deals signed with the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, which in turn insists that such deals comply with the country's constitution. The KRG has signed nearly 50 oil and gas deals with international oil companies, mostly second-tier or wildcat explorers, and was hopeful that Exxon's presence would entice other majors.

"[Exxon] has asked the Deputy Prime Minister to give it some

more days in order to decide its stance on the contract it signed with Kurdistan," Faisal Abdullah, a spokesman for the Iraqi oil ministry, said. Mr. Abdullah said Exxon's request was submitted last week by a company representative who met with Mr. Shahristani in Baghdad.

An Exxon spokesman declined to comment.

The Iraqi government has sent Exxon Mobil three letters asking it to choose between its deal to explore six areas in Kurdistan and its contract to develop West Qurna Phase 1, which has proven reserves of 8.7 billion barrels.

Mr. Abdullah said the central government is waiting for Exxon's response to its letters, after which Baghdad will make a decision on the matter.

Last month, Iraq barred Exxon from bidding in its May auction, in which 12 promising exploration blocks are up for grabs. Exxon has also been excluded from a contract worth up to \$10 billion to build a joint water-injection project in southern Iraq.

In December, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met with senior Exxon executives during a visit to the U.S. and said afterward that the Irving, Texas-based company had promised to reconsider its dealings with the KRG.

Some of the blocks in the Exxon-KRG deal are in a hotly contested oil-rich territory claimed by both the central government and the KRG, stretching from the Iranian border in the east to the Syrian border in the northwest.

Baghdad has already blacklisted companies that maintain deals with the Kurds, excluding them from working elsewhere in Iraq. Among those is New York-based Hess Corp. ♦

Recep Erdogan affaibli par la rumeur

L'incertitude sur l'état de santé du premier ministre turc, beaucoup moins présent sur la scène intérieure et internationale, réveille les ambitions et fait craindre une implosion de l'AKP.

LAURE MARCHAND
ISTANBUL

TURQUIE Le premier ministre turc s'en est remis à l'autorité divine, évitant de répondre à la question qui taraude la Turquie depuis qu'il a subi une opération de l'intestin fin novembre. « *Seul Dieu et uniquement Dieu sait combien de temps il reste à vivre à chacun de nous*, a proclamé Recep Tayyip Erdogan. *Ceux qui propagent des rumeurs (...) sont des impudents.* » Ses considérations sur le destin font suite à une correspondance de Stratfor, agence américaine de renseignements, dévoilée par WikiLeaks et publiée dans le quotidien *Taraf*, la semaine dernière. L'auteur du mail rapporte que 20 centimètres de côlon auraient été retirés à M. Erdogan, âgé de 58 ans, au cours d'une première intervention : « *Le pronostic n'est cependant pas bon* » et n'excéderait pas « *deux ans* », selon une estimation attribuée à un des chirurgiens. Les services du premier ministre ont beau assurer qu'il jouit « *d'une très bonne santé* » et ne souffre pas d'un cancer, sa longue éclipse de la scène politique fait ressortir les problèmes issus de son exercice autoritaire du pouvoir et a déclenché des luttes intestines au sein de l'AKP pour sa succession.



« **On ne parle même plus de concurrence avec Abdullah Gül, mais de haine** »

MEHMET ALTAN,
INTELLECTUEL LIBÉRAL

Après une deuxième opération le 10 février, celui qui dirige la Turquie d'une main d'airain depuis 2003 a repris du service la semaine dernière. Plusieurs voyages à l'étranger sont programmés ce mois-ci. Devant les caméras, il est aussi apparu facétieux, buvant un thé chez ses voisins et répondant au téléphone de son hôtessé. Cet exercice de proximité, dans lequel il excelle, ne suffit pas à faire oublier sa mise en retrait de la vie publique. Alors qu'il monopolisait l'espace médiatique, Recep Tayyip Erdogan s'exprime désormais avec parcimonie, limite ses déplacements à Ankara. Il se murmure que sa villa à Istanbul a été transformée en hôpital. Plusieurs conseils des ministres ont été annulés. Et en décembre, le vice-président américain Joe Biden avait dû se rendre à son chevet à son domicile. Une photo avec son invité le montrait fatigué, les traits émaciés. Mais seuls de rares journalistes osaient briser la loi du silence, dénonçant « *un syndrome Bre-*



Le premier ministre turc lors d'une cérémonie militaire à Ankara. ADEM ALTAN/AFP

jev », en référence à la maladie cachée du dirigeant soviétique.

« *L'incertitude sur son état a modifié l'atmosphère, décrypte un diplomate européen. Après une troisième victoire d'affilée aux législatives (en 2011, NDLR), tout le monde croyait être dans une période de "poutinisation" du pouvoir. Désormais, même ceux qui voyaient en lui un dictateur en devenir disent : "pourvu qu'il ne parte pas trop vite".* » Le vide politique fait peur. L'AKP est une coalition composée de nationalistes, d'islamistes et de libéraux. Tenu par Erdogan, cet attelage apporte une stabilité à la Turquie qui a tant souffert par le passé de coalitions stériles. L'AKP évitera-t-il l'implosion sans l'autorité de son chef ? En tout cas, depuis trois mois, la discorde règne au sein du gouvernement et de l'État.

Concurrence et haine

« *Erdogan est toujours le patron, assure Mehmet Altan, intellectuel libéral qui a ses entrées dans les hautes sphères. Mais il y a un chaos, des conseillers veulent diriger, des rivalités éclatent.* » Le président du groupe AKP à l'Assemblée nationale a, par exemple, concocté une réforme de l'éducation, jugée catastrophique pour les filles, sans consulter le premier ministre et en passant par-dessus la tête du ministre de l'Éducation. Dans le premier cercle, « *la concurrence est incroyable, explique un fin connaisseur de l'AKP. Même Ahmet Davutoglu (ministre des Affaires étrangères) convoite la place d'Erdogan et a perdu sa confiance. Dans le parti, il se dit qu'il cherche à se placer auprès des Américains.* »

La compétition la plus sérieuse est celle qui l'oppose à Abdullah Gül, président de la République. Les deux hommes, fondateurs du parti, ont longtemps fonctionné en tandem. « *On ne parle même plus de concurrence entre eux mais*

de haine », précise Mehmet Altan. La prochaine élection présidentielle est programmée en 2014. Gül ne veut pas céder son fauteuil à Erdogan. Il serait tenté de créer son propre parti avec des députés frondeurs. Pendant la convalescence du premier ministre, il a fait savoir qu'il ne souffrait d'aucune maladie, bulletin de santé à l'appui. Surtout, il a mis son veto à une loi qui abaissait les peines de prison encourues par des dirigeants de clubs de football corrompus. De son lit, Recep Tayyip Erdogan a ordonné aux députés de revoter le texte. Ils se sont exécutés.

L'étendue réelle du pouvoir d'un acteur de l'ombre complique encore le décryptage de cette guerre larvée. La confrérie religieuse de Fethullah Gülen, imam exilé aux États-Unis, est suspectée d'avoir noyauté la police et la justice. Le mois dernier, un procureur a voulu convoquer des agents du MIT, les services secrets turcs, dont Hakan Fidan, son actuel directeur et protégé d'Erdogan, à cause de contacts noués avec la rébellion kurde du PKK. De nombreux analystes y ont vu une tentative de déstabilisation du premier ministre orchestrée par la puissante communauté. S'agit-il d'une théorie du complot dont les Turcs sont friands ? « *Cette affaire montre en tout cas que le gouvernement a des ennemis à l'intérieur et ne contrôle pas entièrement les institutions* », juge le diplomate. Il est notoire que la confrérie n'apprécie guère Recep Tayyip Erdogan, jugé trop rigoriste, et lui préfère Abdullah Gül. « *Il est encore trop tôt pour dire qui nous soutiendrons* », se contente de lâcher un güleniste influent. ■

Turquie : la cause kurde est raflée

Malgré les promesses d'ouverture, le gouvernement multiplie les arrestations et accentue la répression par crainte d'un «printemps kurde».

Par MARC SEMO
Envoyé spécial à Ankara

Chaque mois ou presque, il y a un nouveau coup de filet, avec des policiers surarmés qui débarquent à l'heure du laitier. A Istanbul, c'est en général le mardi ; dans le sud-est du pays à majorité kurde, c'est le plus souvent le jeudi. Les arrestations visent élus locaux, cadres des organisations de jeunesse ou de femmes, dirigeants d'associations professionnelles... Ils sont tous accusés d'être membres du KCK (Union des communautés du Kurdistan) que les autorités turques accusent d'être l'organisation urbaine de la rébellion kurde du PKK (Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan) qui mène la lutte armée depuis 1984 contre Ankara.

«L'ouverture kurde» promise il y a deux ans par le Premier ministre, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, le leader de l'AKP, parti islamo-conservateur qui dirige le pays depuis 2002, semble bien enterrée. Et ce, même s'il y a désormais des télévisions diffusant en kurde, ou des panneaux indicateurs avec le nom des villages en turc et en kurde dans le sud-est où vivent la majorité des 15 millions de Kurdes du pays (sur 75 millions d'habitants).

«Le pouvoir montre son vrai visage nationaliste et répressif et veut mettre à terre toutes les structures du mou-

vement kurde qu'il voit comme une menace pour son hégémonie», martèle Sebahat Tüncel, députée du BDP, le principal parti kurde de Turquie, dont les cadres et les militants sont les premières victimes des rafles.

antiterrorisme. Celles-ci ne font même plus les gros titres, sauf quand elles visent des personnalités de l'intelligentsia, comme en octobre, avec les incarcérations de la constitutionnaliste Bûsra Ersanli et de l'éditeur Ragip Zarakolu. «C'est une campagne pour intimider les intellectuels démocrates et priver les Kurdes de leur appui», a écrit depuis sa prison celui qui fut aussi le premier à publier en Turquie, il y a déjà quinze ans, des livres sur le génocide arménien. L'un et l'autre sont accusés d'avoir participé à des universités du BDP évoquant des actions non-violentes comme celles pratiquées à Tunis ou au Caire. Le gouvernement de l'AKP craint un «printemps kurde» et la répression se durcit.

Actuellement, 6 400 personnes - un record parmi les pays démocratiques - sont emprisonnées au titre d'une loi antiterrorisme durement critiquée par les organisations de défense des droits de l'homme et par l'Union européenne. Cette loi considère comme membre à part entière d'une organisation terroriste toute personne dont les écrits ou les propos s'insèrent dans la stratégie supposée de celle-ci. Une

définition très large qui permet tous les abus de la part des cours spéciales.

L'écrasante majorité des détenus tombés sous le coup de cette loi est liée à la cause kurde et au KCK. Parmi eux, plus de 70 journalistes, 67 avocats, mais aussi de simples manifestants, des dizaines de maires, de conseillers municipaux... Dans certaines provinces, comme celle de Sirnak dans l'extrême sud-est, la quasi-totalité des élus est derrière les barreaux. «Il n'a pas été trouvé une seule arme, même pas un couteau, et on ne leur reproche aucun acte de violence : les dossiers sont vides et les accusations sont purement politiques», s'insurge Hasip Kaplan, député du BDP et ancien avocat, qui dénonce les procédures des cours spéciales avec leurs témoins anonymes, et les restrictions dans l'accès au dossier pour les avocats. Les enquêtes sur le KCK ont commencé en 2009 quand, lors des élections municipales, le BDP avait triomphé dans la plupart des villes du sud-est.

Engrenage. Deux ans plus tard, les consignes de boycott lancées par le BDP contre un référendum constitutionnel ont été suivies à 70%, voire 90%, dans les régions kurdes. Inquiète, l'AKP a alors entamé des négociations clandestines avec le PKK. Elles ont capoté l'été dernier, après la mise en ligne d'images de rencontres entre les émissaires de la guérilla

kurde et le chef des services secrets Hakan Fidan, un proche d'Erdogan. L'opinion est stupéfaite, le gouvernement embarrassé. Ce sabotage des négociations a été apparemment organisé par la puissante confrérie islamiste de Fethullah Gülen, proche de l'AKP, qui a massivement infiltré l'appareil policier et judiciaire. Depuis, le pouvoir est intransigeant. «Il n'y a pas de question kurde, juste un problème de Kurdes», martèle le Premier ministre.

Dans le sud-est, les heurts, ralentis par la neige, risquent de reprendre dès le printemps avec encore plus d'intensité. Craignant les arrestations, de plus en plus de jeunes partent dans la montagne. L'engrenage est en marche, même si l'AKP sait qu'une intensification des affrontements mettrait à mal l'image du «modèle turc» censé inspirer les transitions démocratiques arabes. Sebahat Tüncel, la députée kurde, ne cache pas son inquiétude : «Je sens monter une immense colère. Si les gens, les jeunes notamment, n'ont plus d'espoir, la situation deviendra incontrôlable.»●



Un rebelle syrien s'est installé dans une salle de classe et pointe son arme à l'extérieur, le 22 février à Deir Baalbeh, dans la région de Homs.

AP

Armer les insurgés syriens : un pari dangereux



GEORGES MALBRUNOT
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Faut-il armer les révolutionnaires pour faire tomber Bachar el-Assad ? Si oui, comment ? Et ne risque-t-on pas de précipiter une guerre civile encore plus sanglante, qui ferait le jeu du régime ? Après la défaite des rebelles à Homs, qui ne disposaient que de kalachnikovs, de RPG et de vieux obus soviétiques de 71 mm, ces questions alimentent le débat entre partisans et opposants d'une militarisation de la révolte. L'Arabie saoudite et le Qatar y sont favorables. « Face à un régime qui tue son peuple, quelle est l'alternative ? », se demande un diplomate saoudien, après un an d'une féroce répression qui a tué plus de 7 000 civils. En face, les principales réticences viennent des responsables américains, relayées par Israël et d'autres pays arabes, inquiets de ce « jeu dangereux ». Entre les deux, la France et la Turquie hésiteraient.

« Soutenons-nous al-Qaïda en Syrie ? », s'est récemment interrogée la secrétaire d'État, Hillary Clinton. Le Pentagone et la CIA redoutent que les armes fournies aux opposants d'el-Assad finissent entre les mains de djihadistes, qui ont gagné le champ de bataille syrien. Grâce à sa collaboration avec les services de renseignements irakiens, la



Souvent, les insurgés syriens ne sont pas au courant qu'il y a des djihadistes parmi eux

JAMES CLAPPER,
PATRON DU RENSEIGNEMENT AMÉRICAIN

CIA a réussi à infiltrer les groupes de combattants, qui ont franchi la frontière entre l'Irak et la Syrie. « Sur des photos, les Américains ont reconnu des moudjahidins qu'ils recherchaient en Irak », relève depuis Bagdad un proche du premier ministre Nouri al-Maliki. La douzaine d'observateurs irakiens, déployés en janvier à Homs, a également pris de nombreux clichés, utiles aux services de sécurité. « Dans de nombreux cas, souligne James Clapper, le patron du renseignement américain, les insurgés syriens ne sont même pas au courant de la présence de djihadistes » parmi eux.

Le réservoir irakien

Sans être encore très forte, la marque djihadiste commence pourtant à se faire sentir, comme l'ont prouvé les deux attentats revendiqués par l'Émirat islamique d'Irak - la succursale locale d'al-Qaïda - contre des bâtiments des services de renseignements à Damas. « En visionnant les vidéos des groupes rebelles, confie un expert israélien, je suis troublé par des références salafistes de plus en plus marquées, notamment près de Lattaquié et d'Idlib », où l'armée mène l'assaut depuis quelques jours. Des dizaines de moudjahidins sont arrivés en Syrie pendant les 26 jours de pilonnage de Homs, le mois dernier. Selon un médecin militaire joint par un responsable de l'opposition en exil, une soixantaine de corps de combattants étrangers ont été relevés après la chute de Homs, parmi lesquels une vingtaine de Libyens et des Libanais venus de Tripoli. Depuis, les miliciens à la solde du régime chercheraient à monnayer la restitution des cadavres à leurs familles, notamment celles du Golfe.

À l'automne, l'Irak est devenu l'une des principales voies d'infiltration de djihadistes. « Des Ira-

kiens mais aussi des Saoudiens et des Koweïtiens qui se sont fait établir de fausses pièces d'identité irakienne dans la province d'al-Anbar (limitrophe de la Syrie, NDLR), observe le professeur Adel al-Kayar à Bagdad. Dans les mosquées, de fausses collectes d'argent pour la famine en Somalie ont été organisées pour aider ces moudjahidins, qui sont partis en groupes de trois ou quatre, après avoir acheté des armes. Ils ne partent pas forcément au nom d'al-Qaïda, mais du djihad contre el-Assad. Chez les sunnites irakiens, souligne l'analyste politique, tout le monde espère que le régime syrien tombera pour qu'on en finisse ici avec l'influence de son allié iranien. » D'ici là, les Américains redoutent l'apparition d'un « arc djihadiste », reliant, via la Syrie, al-Anbar en Irak à Tripoli au Liban. Un axe radical sunnite qui s'ajouterait au « croissant chiite » (Téhéran-Bagdad-Damas et Hezbollah à Beyrouth) que les Occidentaux peinent à affaiblir.

Ces dernières années, de nombreux allers et retours de djihadistes ont été observés entre le Liban, la Syrie et l'Irak. Tandis que Damas poussait les Arabes à aller combattre les soldats américains à Bagdad, d'autres insurgés empruntaient le chemin inverse pour échapper aux troupes américaines et se réfugier côté syrien de la frontière, où ils allaient être instrumentalisés. Mais depuis un an, la tragédie syrienne a donné lieu à de spectaculaires retournements de situation. Abdallah al-Janabi, cet imam radical irakien de Faloudja abrité en Syrie et recherché par les Américains, a lâché ses anciens protecteurs baasistes pour rallier l'insurrection à Hama. Est-on prêt à armer celui qui tirait les ficelles contre les Occidentaux en Irak ? Insultés par les échecs du passé, en Afghanistan notamment, les responsables américains s'alarment. « Gardez votre révolution pacifiste, sinon vous finirez par le payer très cher », a mis en garde un ambassadeur américain à un groupe d'opposants. Sous-entendu, le régime en profitera pour massacrer encore plus de civils. Mais à Washington, tout le monde n'est pas hostile à une militarisation de la rébellion. Jeffrey Feltman, le sous-secrétaire d'État en charge du Moyen-Orient, estime que le risque mérite d'être pris. « Mais il réclame une unification des groupes rebelles et l'établissement d'un canal unique d'acheminement des armes », fait valoir un opposant en exil en contact avec l'Administration Obama. Vaste programme !

Jusqu'à maintenant, des Saoudiens et des Qataris sont soupçonnés d'avoir financé l'achat d'armes légères. Mais aux frontières turque, irakienne ou libanaise du territoire syrien, la logistique est ensuite laissée entre les mains de passeurs à la fiabilité douteuse. « C'est l'anarchie la plus complète », regrette Abou Hillal, un activiste de la région de Deraa, joint par Skype. Jusqu'à la prise de Homs, la principale voie de pénétration des armes passait par la plaine de la Bekaa au Liban, distante d'une trentaine de kilomètres seulement de l'ex-capitale de la révolution.

Deux clans de trafiquants y jouent les intermédiaires. « Ces passeurs chiïtes ont reçu de l'argent de différents canaux, notamment de responsables politiques libanais hostiles à la Syrie », dévoile un dirigeant de l'opposition, qui a utilisé l'un de ces clans pour acheminer de l'aide humanitaire à Homs. « Ils ont fait passer des armes légères, type kalachnikov, et des munitions, mais l'argent pollue ces trafics. Aujourd'hui, un convoi de 50 ou 60 ka-

lachnikovs vaut 100 000 dollars. Le problème, c'est que début décembre, le Hezbollah (maître de la Bekaa, NDLR) a découvert le pot aux roses. OK, vous continuez, mais vous nous renseignez », a fait savoir le Hezbollah aux passeurs. Même si les trafiquants ne disent pas tout au Parti de Dieu, ce dernier alerte ensuite ses alliés au pouvoir à Damas. « Le régime laisse entrer des armes qu'il confisque ensuite grâce à ses mouchards parmi les passeurs, constate Haytham Manna, un cadre de l'opposition en exil. Et chaque soir ou presque, la télévision officielle expose ces armes saisies à nos yeux », ajoute ce responsable, hostile à l'armement des insurgés. Depuis la reprise de Homs, le renforcement de la présence militaire libanaise et syrienne de part et d'autre de la frontière a réduit les trafics à partir de la Bekaa. Côté irakien, les forces gouvernementales ont également resserré la surveillance de la frontière. C'est donc par la Turquie que transite aujourd'hui le gros des armes destinées aux rebelles. Mais le trafic y est étroitement surveillé par les « anges gardiens » turcs du colonel Riad el-Assad, qui dirige les déserteurs de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL). Après avoir désarmé ces derniers, Ankara rejette toute présence d'opposants armés sur son sol. « Pour que la militarisation des rebelles soit un succès, prévient Abou Hillal, nous devons disposer d'une zone libérée et d'une protection aérienne, qui permettraient à une direction militaire dissidente d'organiser notre lutte armée. Sinon, chaque groupe va continuer de faire ce qu'il voudra, avec le risque que certains finissent en milices. Si on leur livre des armes lourdes, cela va devenir dangereux avec tous les extrémistes du monde entier qui viendront chez nous. Or nous n'en voulons pas. »

Un bureau militaire avec l'ASL

La fragmentation de l'insurrection est l'un des principaux obstacles à cette militarisation. Pour la seule région d'Idlib que lè Qatar et l'Arabie saoudite voient comme une tête de pont pour muscler la rébellion, « nous avons repéré une vingtaine de factions armées », note l'expert israélien. Riad el-Assad ne contrôlerait en fait qu'une poignée d'hommes en armes sur le territoire syrien. Pour combler cette lacune, le CNS a annoncé la création en Turquie d'un bureau militaire, en coordination avec l'ASL. Mais le colonel el-Assad s'est aussitôt désolidarisé de cette initiative. « Regardez ce qui se passe dans la région de Deraa au Sud », insiste Abou Hillal. « La majorité des déserteurs ne sont que de simples volontaires. Nous avons dans les montagnes de Lahja un conseil militaire de la révolution composé de gradés. Mais ses membres refusent d'entrer en contact avec Riad el-Assad parce qu'ils ne font pas confiance aux Turcs. Nous avons également des gradés qui sont réfugiés, de l'autre côté de la frontière en Jordanie. Logiquement, ce sont eux qui devraient former nos bataillons et organiser la distribution d'armes que nous parvenons à faire entrer. Hélas, les Jordaniens refusent qu'ils travaillent avec nous. » Dans ces conditions, Abou Hillal préfère encore attendre : « Si on nous arme, le nombre de tués augmentera encore, et le régime finira par tous nous écraser. » ■

Turkey struggles in the role of Mideast power during Syria crisis

Turkey, once friendly to Syria, Iran and Iraq, has seen its relations with all three tested as it has tried to stop the violence in Syria.

By J. Michael Kennedy
Reporting from Istanbul, Turkey

Turkey envisions itself as a Middle East power, a dynamic Islamic democracy with a thriving economy that can help guide the region through the turmoil of the "Arab Spring." But it has stumbled in its efforts to stop the violence and repression in its neighbor and onetime ally Syria.

Although Turkish officials have harshly criticized President Bashar Assad's response to a yearlong uprising that is increasingly taking on the character of a civil war, they have not budged the Syrian leader. And they are aware that a tougher stance could backfire.

The harder they squeeze Syria, the more likely they are to anger the other non-Arab power with regional ambitions, Iran, which remains loyal to Assad. And Assad could retaliate by fomenting unrest within Turkey's borders.

The result has been a diplomatic and public relations nightmare for Turkey.

"I think in a way Turkey has become a victim of its own self-image," said Soli Ozel, an international relations expert at Istanbul's Kadir Has University. "For six or seven months, Turkey tried its best to get Assad to change, and the allies waited for Turkey to deliver."

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week renewed his criticism of Syria and those countries that stand by as the bloodshed continues.

"I am addressing the entire world, and countries that remain silent and indifferent and ignore or tolerate the massacre in Syria," he told deputies of his Justice and Development Party in parliament. "I am also addressing international organizations, which cannot produce solutions to this crisis and which encourage its continuation."

Erdogan suggested that humanitarian corridors be opened immediately to provide assistance to Syrians suffering



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip, shown at a meeting in parliament in Ankara, has called on Syria to end its violent crackdown on the opposition. (Adem Altan, AFP/Getty Images / March 6, 2012)

because of the fighting. Turkey harbors an estimated 11,000 refugees who have fled Syria.

That is a huge change from just a year ago, when Syria was one of Turkey's best friends and trading partners.

Turkey, proud of its growing status in the region and the world, was in the enviable position of having good relations with not just one but three difficult neighbors: Syria, Iran and Iraq. But those good relations came at a price, as does changing them.

Gokhan Bacik, director of the Middle East Strategic Research Center at Zirve University in Gaziantep, Turkey, near the Syrian border, said Turkey didn't really understand the complicated dynamics of the Arab world. The government had turned a blind eye toward Syria's iron-fisted regime in exchange for peace along the 500-mile border, lucrative trade and a safe transit corridor to deliver millions of dollars' worth of goods to the prosperous Persian Gulf.

"The strategy was successful as long as they did not look into the problems," Bacik said. "Many people believed the agenda was very easy. Now it's not like that."

He said Turkey's hardening policy against Syria came too early, in effect shutting down any room for diplomatic maneuvering.

"Turkey was very quick to finalize its position on Syria," he said. "It was a mis-

take."

Although Erdogan talks tough, Turkey has been neutralized, at least for now.

Turkey has one of the world's largest standing armies and is experienced in peacekeeping missions, but there is little appetite for intervention. U.S. officials have said they are unlikely to take military action. And vetoes by Russia and China of U.N. Security Council resolutions critical of Syria indicate that the United Nations is not likely to provide an umbrella for an international military mission.

Assad is playing a tactical game in which he calculates how far he can go each day without incurring the collective wrath of the international community, said Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think tank. More than 7,500 people have been killed in the uprising.

Turkey also must weigh other issues, including the fact that a major intervention in Syria could cause Assad to arm the insurgent Kurdish population on both sides of the border, intensifying Turkey's long-standing struggle with that ethnic group.

Kurds make up about 10% of the Syrian population, with most of them living in the northern part of the country next to Turkey. During his long rule, Assad's father rallied Syrian Kurds behind him by arming the Kurdish rebellion movement in Turkey. But that assistance subsided with warming relations between

► Ankara and Damascus in recent years.

In the meantime, the region is looking much less hospitable to Turkey than it did two years ago. The Kurdish issue also comes into play in relations with Iraq. Turkey is currying favor with Kurds in northern Iraq, who control vast oil reserves, and it has sided with a mostly Sunni Muslim political coalition that is at odds with the Shiite prime minister, Nouri Maliki.

Iran has sided with the Assad regime and the Maliki government, setting the stage

for an Iran-Turkey influence contest, including the threat of proxy wars in the region.

Turkey and Iran have a long history of vying for influence. Iran is particularly keen on maintaining its sway in Syria because of that country's strategic location neighboring Lebanon and Israel. And although Turkey and Iran are major trading partners, they keep a wary eye on each other.

"They dance together with poison daggers in their hands," said Ozel of Kadir

Has University.

Political analyst Saban Kardas said it was up to Turkey to thread the diplomatic needle on Syria. Sometimes, such challenges provide an opportunity, he said, but it is far from clear whether things will fall its way. ♦

Kennedy is a special correspondent.

THE JERUSALEM POST

March 13, 2012

The Kurdish Quiet Spring

The big question mark is if Kurds will be able to enhance their national cause for self-determination.

By Ofra Bengio

With the tectonic changes taking place in the heart of the Middle East little attention is given to developments in the periphery, one of the most important of which is the quiet revolution taking place in Greater Kurdistan, namely among the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria.

The best illustration of the new Kurdish dynamism was the congress held on February 19, 2012, in Irbil, Iraq, to commemorate the 66th anniversary of Kurdistan Republic, better known as the Mahabad Republic. This short-lived Republic was established in northwest Iran on January, 22, 1946, with Soviet support but it crumbled 11 months later on December 10, 1946, and its president, Qazi Muhammad, was hanged on March 30, 1947.

Kurdistan Republic was unique because it was the first time in Kurdish history that the Kurds had established a republic of their own; because it was an attempt to change the territorial map of the region at the end of World War II; and because there was a certain level of cooperation and unity of purpose between the Kurds of Iran and Iraq.

Thus, Qazi Muhammad, the president of the republic and the Iranian Kurds, provided the territorial and political basis for the republic, while Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the 10,000 people (3,000 of whom were fighters) who came with him from Iraq provided the military backbone.

The commemoration of the event this



February in Irbil reflected the changes that have been taking place in the past decade, especially in Iraq and Turkey. The event which brought together Kurdish representatives from the four parts of Kurdistan under the watchful eyes of the governments of these states was unimaginable only five years ago.

Among the many Kurdish personalities participating in the commemoration were Mas'ud Barzani (son of Mulla Mustafa), president of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, Selahattin Demirtas, co-chair of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy party (BDP) in Turkey, 'Abd al-Hakim Bashar, head of Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria and Hussein Yazdanpana of Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) in Iran. There were also many Kurdish representatives from the diaspora who have been active in disseminating the idea of Kurdish nationalism in the world at large.

The speakers sought to send a few assertive messages to the world and especially to their governments. Barzani stressed that the Kurds, like any other nation, had the natural right of self-determination, that the governments were required to acknowledge this right but were not in a position to accord it to the Kurds, that the Kurds were striving to act in unity even though they had been separated into four parts, and that they were bent on achieving their goal through peaceful and democratic means.

Most of the speakers highlighted the quick and sweeping changes taking place in the Middle East as a result of "the Arab spring" and the Kurds' need to take advantage of this window of opportunity to achieve their own goals. Signaling a desire to resurrect the Mahabad experience, the speakers sought to impress upon the world the idea of continuity between 1946 and the present. A symbol of this continuity, it was emphasized, was

the fact that after the collapse of the Republic, Qazi Muhammad handed over the Kurdish flag to Mulla Mustafa Barzani, stating that the flag was in "safe hands, and a day will come when the flag would be raised [again]."

Indeed, Mulla Mustafa continued the struggle until 1975, bequeathing later the flag to his two sons Idris and Mas'ud. It was further emphasized that even though The Mahabad republic was short-lived the Kurds have to look at it as a model to attain in present time.

Not only the speeches but the terminology, the symbols, and the general ambiance attested all to the changing dynamics in Kurdistan. Anyone who watched the ceremony, which was aired in its entirety time and again on Kurdistan TV, would have been impressed by the Kurdish nationalist atmosphere and the new-found sense of pride which surrounded it.

Thus for example the Kurdish anthem of Mahabad, "Ey Reqip," which became also the current anthem of the KRG and all the other Kurds, was played many times during the ceremony. Similarly, only Kurdish flags were to be seen in the hall, reflecting the general situation in the KRG where Kurdish flags, but not Iraqi ones, are raised in buildings, being etched on mountain slopes and curiously enough also configuring as badges on the uniforms of the Kurdish men of arms, the Peshmerga.

NO LESS intriguing is the conception and terminology used while referring to

Kurdistan. The Kurds present a map of Greater Kurdistan constituting one unit. Portraying it as such they refer to Kurdistan of Turkey as bakur, (north), that of Iraq, bashur (south), Iran roshalat (south east) and Syria rojava (west). Curiously enough, I am told that children were selling ornaments carrying this map of Greater Kurdistan in the streets of Irbil.

Another no less important development is the process of legitimizing the Kurdish language, which is one of the important pillars of Kurdish nationalism. Noticeably, all the speakers made a point of speaking in Kurdish even though in their countries it had been suppressed for long time.

Kurdish is now the official language in Kurdistan of Iraq. The Kurdish language, which was prohibited for many years there, is also being revived in Turkey. Furthermore, in early March 2012, a conference of Kurdish linguists was held in Diyarbakir in Turkey with the aim of unifying the language and its alphabet.

Politically speaking, the short-lived Kurdistan Republic in Iran gave way to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, which is 20 years old now. The distinctive status of the KRG is most conspicuous. Thus Kurdistan region has all the trappings of a state, with all its practical and symbolical characteristics, including constitution, parliament, government, president, army, flag and anthem.

The KRG has a vibrant economy, a capital,

Irbil, and two airports which connect the landlocked region to the world. Moreover, the KRG has managed to turn itself into the epicenter of Pan-Kurdish activity. Kurds from all the other parts as well as from the diaspora frequent the region on a regular basis to exchange ideas, learn from the experience and take advice. Indeed, all the other three parts are looking at the KRG as a model to follow.

The cooperation and coordination between the Kurdish leaders in the KRG and others found expression among others in the many all-Kurdish conferences held in Irbil. An ambitious meeting of Kurdish leaders from all parts of Kurdistan is expected to be held in Irbil this year, with the aim of unifying Kurdish parties and discussing Kurdish questions in such revolutionary times.

All in all, at the turn of the 21st century the whole region is in turmoil and so are some of the states in which the Kurds reside. Accordingly, the Kurds are now at an important crossroads. The big question mark is if they will be able to use this window of opportunity to reverse the outcome of the 20th century and enhance their national cause for self-determination. □

*The writer is senior research associate at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University. She is the author of the forthcoming *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* and editor of the monthly newsletter *Tzomet Hamizrah Hatichon*.*

FRANCE
24

13 MARCH 2012

French Total seeks business in Iraqi Kurdistan: chief

AFP

FRENCH oil giant Total is in talks to tap opportunities to invest in autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, its chief said Tuesday as Baghdad insists contracts should go through the central government.

"Kurdistan is part of Iraq. A lot of companies are investing in Kurdistan-Iraq and we don't see why Total couldn't do it," Total chief executive officer Christophe de Margerie told reporters in Kuwait.

"We are looking at opportunities. We are discussing, but there is nothing done yet," he said on the sidelines of the

International Energy Forum.

He said Total was seeking entry into the sector through companies that already has permits to explore in the oil-rich region.

"Definitely we will go through discussions with owners of existing blocks", but "in any case you need the approval of the Kurdish government," he said.

Baghdad regards any contracts not signed with the central government as invalid.

On October 18, Kurdistan signed a deal with US giant ExxonMobil for it to explore six areas, a deal Baghdad stron-



French oil giant Total is in talks to tap opportunities to invest in autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, CEO Christophe de Margerie said Tuesday as Baghdad insists contracts should go through the central government.

gly opposed.

In December, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said ExxonMobile has promised to reconsider the deal. ♦

Le Monde
Mercredi 14 mars 2012

L'opposition syrienne divisée sur la place de la lutte armée

Face aux hésitations du Conseil national syrien, d'autres groupes, plus radicaux, cherchent à s'allier à l'Armée syrienne libre

Sans espoir immédiat d'intervention extérieure, la protection des manifestants syriens repose désormais sur la seule Armée syrienne libre (ASL). Cette « armée » anti-Assad, créée pendant l'été 2011 à l'initiative de quelques officiers déserteurs et exilés en Turquie, est pour l'instant plus un label qu'une véritable structure, mais elle est appelée à jouer un rôle de plus en plus important, en l'absence d'une action internationale dans le cadre du Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, paralysé par les divisions de la communauté internationale.

Après le veto brandi à deux reprises par la Russie et la Chine, les pays les plus en pointe dans leur volonté de venir en aide aux révolutionnaires syriens et de renverser le régime de Bachar Al-Assad – en particulier les pétromonarchies de l'Arabie saoudite et du Qatar – n'ont pas caché leur intention de fournir des armes aux groupes armés combattant les troupes régulières en Syrie. L'ASL est ainsi devenue l'objet de toutes les convoitises et se trouve aujourd'hui courtisée par plusieurs groupes de l'opposition.

L'Arabie saoudite et le Qatar n'ont pas caché leur intention de fournir des armes aux groupes armés anti-Assad en Syrie

Face aux hésitations du Conseil national syrien (CNS), la principale plate-forme d'opposition, face à la lutte armée, d'autres groupes, plus radicaux, cherchent à s'allier à l'ASL, devenue l'acteur central des forces anti-Assad. En sommeil depuis plusieurs mois, la plate-forme d'opposition regroupée autour de Nofal Al-Dawalibi, intitulée le Conseil national syrien unifié (CNSU), entend bien jouer un rôle de premier plan.

M. Dawalibi est un homme d'affaires saoudien d'origine syrienne. Installé à Riyad, il a participé durant l'été aux différentes réunions qui ont mené à la constitution, début octobre 2011 à Istanbul, du Conseil national syrien (CNS), dont il dit avoir été écarté. « Nous étions tenus à l'écart, explique Nofal Al-Dawalibi



Idlib, le 11 mars. Des rebelles syriens déposent à la morgue le corps d'un combattant. RODRIGO ABD/AP

au Monde. Les Frères musulmans étaient à la manœuvre. On ne nous a proposé que cinq sièges sur 240. Finalement, nous nous sommes retirés et avons préféré laisser le CNS faire ses preuves.»

Cinq mois plus tard, il tire un bilan sévère de l'action du CNS. « Ils n'ont pas obtenu de reconnaissance internationale et n'ont pas pu faire parvenir d'aide humanitaire ou militaire en Syrie. Il est clair que ce régime ne peut tomber que par la force. A l'intérieur du pays, la rue nous donne raison. » M. Dawalibi dit avoir le soutien de grandes tribus syriennes arabes sunnites – les Haddidin, les Jbour, les Al-Naïm, les Baggara et les Shammar – ainsi que de plusieurs personnalités chrétiennes et alaouites. Mais le soutien qui compte le plus est celui de l'Arabie saoudite, aux capacités financières quasi illimitées.

Le passé de M. Dawalibi est à cet égard intéressant. Son père, Maarouf, a été le dernier premier ministre de la Syrie avant le coup d'Etat du parti Baas en 1963. A la tête du Parti du peuple syrien, ce dernier était particulièrement bien implanté dans la région d'Alep. Après la prise de pouvoir

baasiste, Maarouf Al-Dawalibi a fait quelques mois de prison avant de quitter le pays pour le Liban, puis l'Arabie saoudite, où il s'est installé définitivement. Conseiller du roi Fayçal (1964-1975), Maarouf Al-Dawalibi est devenu un missi dominici de la monarchie saoudienne, notamment au Pakistan et en Afghanistan au temps du djihad contre les Soviétiques.

Les contacts avancés entre le colonel Riyad Al-Assaad, le chef autoproclamé de l'ASL, et Nofal Al-Dawalibi, qui a aussi l'intention de mettre sur pied un gouvernement provisoire, sont donc à prendre au sérieux depuis la volonté affichée par les dirigeants saou-

Le Conseil national syrien unifié (CNSU), regroupé autour de Nofal Al-Dawalibi, entend jouer un rôle de premier plan

diens de fournir des armes aux insurgés syriens. A la première conférence des Amis du peuple syrien, le 24 février à Tunis, le prin-

ce Saoud Al-Fayçal, ministre des affaires étrangères saoudien, n'avait pas caché son mécontentement face aux pudeurs de la communauté internationale sur la question du soutien à la lutte armée. Le risque sous-jacent à une telle démarche est que chaque pays impliqué finisse par pousser son « poulain » sur la scène syrienne.

Conscient qu'il risque d'être débordé par des groupes politiques plus radicaux, le président du CNS, Burhan Ghalioun, qui a longtemps milité pour une révolution pacifique, a annoncé, le 1^{er} mars, la création d'un bureau militaire consultatif, chargé de coordonner l'aide à l'ASL et son action. Une avancée jugée insuffisante par le général en retraite Akil Hachem, conseiller militaire du CNS, qui milite pour une « intervention militaire extérieure ». Ce dernier a suspendu sa participation au bureau exécutif du CNS. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

The Debate over Syria

A rising death toll raises the question: To intervene or not?

Why We Must Fight Alongside the Rebels By Shadi Hamid

THE SYRIAN UPRISING began nearly a year ago, and despite renewed international efforts, the regime has intensified the killing. The death toll—approaching 8,000—is now five times what it was in Libya on the eve of the NATO intervention there. These are “crimes against humanity,” a U.N. panel concluded recently.

Those of us who supported military action in Libya hoped that it might set a precedent, so that the next time, the U.S. and Europe would act quickly and decisively to protect civilian populations in the event of mass slaughter during the Arab Spring. The Syrian opposition has issued unambiguous calls for foreign military intervention. This is no Western imposition. It is Syrians—like Libyans before them—who are pleading that the West do more, not less.

Already, military intervention enjoys considerable Arab and Muslim legitimacy. The Turks, Qataris, Tunisians and Saudis have all called for various degrees of intervention, whether through safe zones, peacekeeping forces or arms for the Syrian rebels. But these countries cannot do it on their own. They are waiting for the U.S. to lead efforts to assemble a coalition that can intervene effectively and then help stabilize Syria after hostilities cease. No doubt the risks of intervention are considerable. But so too

are the risks of not intervening. Opponents of intervention have warned of militarization, civil war, Iranian meddling and an exodus of refugees. Well, all these things have already come to pass. Syria today is in danger of becoming a failed state. The regime has lost control over large swaths of territory. Al-Qaeda and other extremists are hoping to take advantage of the growing power vacuum. Can the world afford a failing state and protracted civil war in such a vital region?

If the objective of intervention is to protect civilian populations, then the first step is for the U.S. to help other countries provide Syrian rebel forces with both light arms and more-advanced antitank and anti-aircraft weaponry. The right to self-defense is a right guaranteed by international law. The second step would be the designation of liberated zones—particularly those along the border with Turkey—as safe havens, as was done in Bosnia during the 1990s. To protect these areas, airpower and some special forces, preferably soldiers from Arab nations or Turkey, would be needed. The goal would not necessarily be to change the regime but rather to demonstrate international resolve, encourage regime defections and compel the Syrian government to alter its calculations about the use of force.

Currently, President Bashar Assad believes he can outlast the opposition and ultimately obliterate it through sheer force and brutality. Helping the rebels peel off large pieces of territory would demonstrate to Assad that he cannot win militarily,



which would breathe new life into diplomatic efforts or—at the very least—secure cease-fire agreements around key population centers. Such efforts could be accompanied by a naval blockade and an air campaign against key government and military positions and installations—as in Bosnia, Kosovo and, more recently, Libya. In Bosnia, NATO power forced the Serbs to the negotiating table, eventually leading to the Dayton Accords and the introduction of multinational peacekeeping forces. The Gaddafi regime in Libya showed more interest in negotiating with the opposition after, rather than before, military intervention. Within a few weeks of the start of the NATO operation, Gaddafi envoys were engaging in

cease-fire talks. In late May, an increasingly desperate Libyan regime went further, offering to negotiate with rebels and institute constitutional reforms. Intervention and diplomatic efforts need not be mutually exclusive. They should proceed in parallel.

None of this, though, will be possible without U.S. support and leadership. Despite budgetary constraints, this is not the time for the Obama Administration to shrink from the challenge at hand. Even if the U.S. insists on leading from behind, it still needs to lead. ■

Hamid is director of research at the Brookings Doha Center and a fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution

Thrown out A portrait of Assad sticks up amid the refuse and litter in al-Qsair



Intervening Will Only Help Assad By Marc Lynch

THE ESCALATING BLOODshed in Syria has shocked the world and prompted calls for military intervention. Dozens of Syrians are being killed every day by the forces of President Bashar Assad, spiraling violence threatens to drag the country into a regional proxy war, and increasing numbers of Syrians are begging for help.

The Obama Administration clearly wants, as it should, to help protect the Syrian people. But it also should understand that military intervention is not the way to help civilians or hasten a political

transition in Syria. Arming the opposition or using Western airpower against Syrian territory will likely only play into Assad's hands.

The only hope for avoiding an escalation of the slaughter in Syria is to persuade the undecided middle ground of Syrians, many of whom continue to support Assad out of fear for the future, to abandon the regime. That means helping the divided opposition unify and develop a convincing transition plan to reassure minorities and other uncommitted communities of their place in a post-Assad Syria. And it means rebutting the regime's narrative that the uprising is the work of foreign powers and armed gangs.

The appeal of intervention is clear. Why should Western bombers not come to the rescue of the Syrian people? Who could in good conscience deny opposition forces the means to defend themselves?

But establishing safe areas would require massive bombing to destroy Syria's anti-aircraft capability and ensure the safety of allied planes. Declaring a safe area is meaningless if there is no military means or will to defend it, as we discovered to our horror in Bosnia. And by funneling arms to the rebels in the absence of any unified leadership, we could not hope to even the military balance of power.

These measures would also likely fuel the fighting while foreclosing any chance of a political solution. The crisis would not end the first day the bombs fell—it would only shift to a more extreme

level, challenging the U.S. and its allies to escalate their commitment. Is the West willing to engage in another Iraq-style occupation if that is what it takes?

Fortunately, military intervention is not the only way for the U.S. and its allies to help the Syrians. Instead, those who hope to help the Syrian people should focus on helping unify the opposition, increasing pressure on the Assad regime from the outside and accelerating the process of defections.

The necessity of unifying the opposition is obvious. Even those who back military intervention or the arming of opposition forces like the Free Syrian Army acknowledge that doing so is impossible with the current divided and ineffective independence groups. The Syrian rebels may think they most need weapons, but what they really need is a political strategy. All factions of the opposition should focus less on asking for guns and more on laying out a clear, compelling political vision—which should in turn be backed by international guarantees of economic and political assistance.

THE GOAL SHOULD NOT BE SIMPLY OVERTHROWING ASSAD BUT RATHER CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR A RELATIVELY SMOOTH TRANSITION AFTER HE FALLS

The U.S. and its allies can also do more to increase pressure on Assad and his regime. There is already an impressive coalition, supported by a broad international consensus manifested in the 137-to-22 vote in the U.N. General Assembly in support of a transition plan. The E.U., Turkey, the Arabs and the U.S. have all imposed meaningful sanctions, which have isolated regime figures and contributed to the collapse of the Syrian economy. More should be done to bring Syrian officials to international justice and to shame the regime's remaining backers like Russia. China, in particular, should be targeted by the oil-producing Gulf states on which its economy so heavily depends.

The goal should not be simply overthrowing Assad but rather creating the conditions for a relatively smooth transition after he falls. The U.S. and its allies must continue to pursue a prudent, tough strategy of mobilizing international consensus while helping unify the Syrian opposition and carve out the space for a real political transition. That may not be as morally satisfying a battle cry as a demand for military action, but it is far more likely to help Syrian civilians in the long run. ■

Lynch is the director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University and the author of The Arab Uprising: The Incomplete Revolutions of the New Middle East, to be published by PublicAffairs

A Christian exodus from Iraq



DAILY STRUGGLES A laborer guiding a donkey at the Rabban Hormizd Monastery in Qosh. By some estimates, more than half of Iraqi Christians have fled the country since 2003. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM FERGUSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TENNA, IRAQ

Kurdish north offered refuge, but little else, so many look abroad

BY JACK HEALY

Iraq's dwindling Christians, driven from their homes by attacks and intimidation, are beginning to abandon the havens they had found in the country's north, discouraged by unemployment and a creeping fear that the violence they had fled was catching up to them.

Their quiet exodus to Turkey, Jordan, Europe and the United States is the latest chapter of a seemingly inexorable decline that many religious leaders say tolls the twilight of Christianity in a land where city skylines have long been marked by both minarets and church steeples. Recent assessments say that the Christian population in Iraq has now fallen by more than half since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, and with the military's departure, some Christians say they lost a protector of last resort.

Their flight is felt in places like the wind-scoured village of Tenna, which has sheltered dozens of Christian migrants over the past nine years. The families fleeing Baghdad's death squads and bombings found safety here

beneath the hulking mountains, but little else besides poverty, boredom and cold. Villagers estimate that half of the 50 or so Christian homes are now empty, their families abroad.

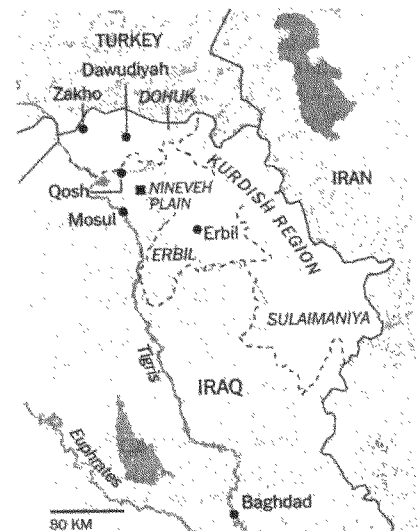
Walid Shamoon, 42, wants to be the next to leave. He said he left the Iraqi capital in January 2011 after a confrontation with Shiite militia members set off a nightmare of escalating death threats and an attempt on his life. A brother had already been killed in a mortar attack six years earlier, so he said he quit his contract job with the Australian Embassy, giving up a monthly salary equivalent to \$1,500, and came here.

These days, all he can think about is his application to emigrate to Arizona.

"This is not a life," he said one recent afternoon, as a blizzard raced down from the mountains. "There is no improvement. There is no work."

Many of the people now struggling in the Kurdish north of Iraq came in the wake of a suicide attack in Baghdad at Our Lady of Salvation Church in October 2010. It was the single worst assault on Iraqi Christians since the war began, one that left nearly 60 worshipers and two priests dead and that turned the church into a charnel house of scorched pews and shattered stained glass.

Christian families in Baghdad grabbed clothing, cash and a few other provisions and headed north for the Christian communities along the Nineveh plain and the three provinces of Kur-



distan. They joined tens of thousands of other Christians from Baghdad, Mosul and other cities who traced similar arcs after earlier attacks and assassination campaigns.

"They traded everything for security," said the Rev. Gabriel Tooma, who leads the Monastery of the Virgin Mary in the Christian town of Qosh, which took in dozens of families.

The Christians in northern Iraq make up a tiny fraction of Iraq's legions of displaced people. In all, there are 1.3 million of them across the country, accord-

ing to the most recent estimates by the United Nations. Many live in garbage dumps, shantytowns and squalor far worse than anything facing the Christian families in Kurdistan.

Still, Christians and other minorities were singled out in the years of sectarian cleansing that bifurcated a once-diverse Baghdad into pockets of Sunnis and Shiites. Estimates by the United States and international organizations say that the Iraqi Christian population of 800,000 to 1.4 million before the war now stands at less than 500,000.

"The consequence of this flight may be the end of Christianity in Iraq," the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote in its most recent

annual report, summarizing the concerns of church leaders.

In January, the International Organization for Migration found that 850 of 1,350 displaced Christian families it was tracking in northern Iraq had left in the past year. Many cited fears about security as well as the strains of finding work, housing and schools in an unfamiliar place where they had few connections and spoke only Arabic, not Kurdish.

"No one has done anything for us," said Salim Yono Auffee, a member of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, a Christian group in northern Iraq. "These people are trying to figure out how to build their futures, to find homes, to get married. And they are leaving Iraq."

Even in the relative safety of Kurdistan, some Christians say they still live in apprehension. A kidnapping of a Christian businessman in Erbil, the Kurdish capital, and a recent outbreak of riots and arson attacks against Christian-owned liquor stores in Dohuk Province — the northernmost in Iraq, along the Turkish border — have deeply unsettled Christian migrants to the area.

Seven years ago, after retrieving his son from kidnappers, Salam Meti Abdul

Karim moved his family from Mosul to the small Christian community of Shioz, a half-hour drive from the center of Dohuk Province. The years passed quietly, until one night in December, when a pickup truck full of men pulled up at the edge of town and set fire to a liquor warehouse.

"I felt like history was repeating itself," Mr. Abdul Karim said. "We worry the situation is just going to devolve into violence. I was thinking to just take my family and go up to the mountains."

The village hired armed guards after the attack, Mr. Abdul Karim said.

No Christians were killed in the rioting against Christian store owners. Local officials say they were not specifically targeted because of their religion, but because the mobs who burned their stores — and the conservative clerics who had incited them — viewed the alcohol sales as un-Islamic.

Still, Kurdish officials, who have welcomed Christians to the region, rushed to defuse fears conjured by the clash. Massoud Barzani, the Kurdish president, visited Christians in Zakho, the



EMPTY PEWS A service in Qosh. The Monastery of the Virgin Mary there took in dozens of families, who had "traded everything for security," according to the Rev. Gabriel Tooma.



UPROOTED Berkho Odeesho, center, the mayor of Dawudiya, with fellow Christians. "We found safety in Kurdistan, but things are getting unstable," he said. "We don't know where to go."

city where the riots were centered, and a parade of government officials and religious leaders have emphasized Kurdistan's historical tolerance, and its deep ties to Assyrians, Chaldeans and other branches of Christianity.

"They are part of us," said Fadhil Omar, the head of the provincial council in Dohuk.

The Kurdish government has offered land, free fuel and other assistance to Christians as they have arrived from Baghdad, and it has opened its universities to students from Mosul, officials say. And Christians do not lack a political voice. They sit on local and provincial councils throughout the north and hold seats in Parliament in Kurdistan and Baghdad.

Despite the help, many families say they are straining to stay afloat. Those close to cities have found jobs, but those in villages are largely unemployed, and they subsist on government pensions or relief payments amounting to about \$200 per month. They skip meals and share heating fuel. They are often some distance from schools that teach in Arabic, and some parents say their chil-

dren have dropped out.

The mountain village of Dawudiya is a study in trade-offs, a place whose residents share similar stories of fear and flight from their homes in Baghdad. One man was threatened with death if he did not hand over his daughter to militants. A couple's son was killed on his way home from work. Another family's son was gunned down with three friends. They gave little thought to the consequences of leaving. They just had to get out.

"It was unbearable," said Berkho Odeesho, the village's mayor. "We found safety in Kurdistan, but things are getting unstable. We don't know where to go."

But like others here, Mr. Odeesho has a plan. He has applied for an immigration visa, and he is now busy preparing for his consular interview. Uprooting his family from Iraq may be difficult, he said, but it would be in service of a new future, away from Iraq, in a distant place called Illinois.

Omar al-Jawoshy contributed reporting.

Les raisons de l'impasse diplomatique en Syrie

La Syrie, ou l'intervention qui n'aura pas eu lieu... Un an après le début du soulèvement contre le président syrien Bachar Al-Assad, et alors qu'approche l'anniversaire du déclenchement de l'opération armée en Libye, la communauté internationale continue d'étaler le spectacle de son impuissance à faire cesser les massacres.

La spirale de violences, dont le bilan est selon l'ONU bien supérieur à 7 500 morts, ne cesse pourtant de s'amplifier à en juger par les récits de tortures et exécutions sommaires, y compris de femmes et d'enfants, provenant d'Homs, ville « reprise » par la soldatesque.

L'impasse diplomatique à l'ONU et l'absence d'ingérence humanitaire créent une impression d'inaction que camouflent mal les déclarations emphatiques condamnant les crimes syriens et critiquant ceux qui, côté russe, s'emploient de facto à les « couvrir ». Et cette image de paralysie risque encore de s'aggraver.

En effet, selon nos informations, la mission de l'émissaire Kofi Annan chargé par l'ONU et la Ligue arabe d'obtenir un arrêt de violences et un début de négociations politiques en Syrie a essuyé un refus radical de Bachar Al-Assad. Après deux jours d'entretiens à Damas, la réponse du dirigeant syrien est arrivée mardi 13 mars. Elle est « totalement négative », indiquait-on dans la soirée, de source occidentale. En ajoutant avec consternation : « *Le pouvoir syrien a choisi l'option militaire. Il va écraser. L'opposition ne peut pas grand-chose, si ce n'est harceler [les forces gouvernementales]. Le vrai risque est que ça pourrisse, et que des armées soient fournies [aux rebelles] par l'Arabie saoudite et le Qatar.* » Le scénario de la guerre civile qui se prolonge...

Kofi Annan, en voyant la réponse de Bachar Al-Assad a aussitôt téléphoné à Sergueï Lavrov, le chef de la diplomatie russe, lui donnant vingt-quatre heures pour tenter de faire atténuer le vocabulaire

syrien. Faute de quoi, Kofi Annan a prévenu qu'il annoncerait mercredi 14 mars, à Genève, où il est basé, le refus total syrien de coopérer.

Le souci de légalisme est invoqué en premier lieu pour expliquer l'absence d'intervention en Syrie : sans mandat du Conseil de sécurité, rien ne peut se faire. « *Une intervention sans mandat pour la bonne cause servirait de justification à toute intervention sans mandat pour la mauvaise cause* », explique-t-on côté français. Le tir de barrage russe à l'ONU a été puissant, pour à la fois protéger l'allié stratégique syrien au Moyen-Orient et ménager la relation avec l'Iran, tout en prétendant lutter contre l'extrémisme islamiste et faire payer les Occidentaux pour l'épisode libyen.

Depuis les déclarations concomitantes de Barack Obama, David Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy et Angela Merkel, appelant en août 2011 au départ du pouvoir de M. Assad aucun dirigeant occidental n'a pris la tête de manière ostentatoire d'une mobilisation pour venir à bout du régime syrien. Dans le

contexte électoral en France et aux Etats-Unis, l'attention est accaparée par d'autres thèmes. Nicolas Sarkozy n'a pas dit un mot de la Syrie dans son discours de Villepinette, où il a été question de l'Europe et du Proche-Orient. Le 2 mars, à Bruxelles, il avait insisté : « *Il n'est pas question d'agir, directement ou indirectement, tant que le Conseil de sécurité n'aura pas établi la stabilité juridique.* » Lors de la prochaine rencontre Obama-Cameron à Washington, le thème de la Syrie devrait être largement éclipsé par la situation dégradée en Afghanistan, qui d'ailleurs ne fait que conforter ce sentiment qu'il est décidé à risquer de s'aventurer en terre musulmane pour faire du changement de régime.

Les manœuvres dilatoires de Moscou ont fait gagner du temps à Bachar Al-Assad pour écraser la contestation

Les Occidentaux mesurant l'obstacle russe à l'ONU avaient voulu le contourner en sous-traitant d'une certaine manière le dossier syrien aux organisations régionales, Ligue arabe en tête. Mais le dernier épisode de cette implication – les entretiens de Sergueï Lavrov au Caire, le 10 mars – en a dit long sur les limites de l'exercice : c'était la confusion totale ! Les responsables arabes assurant que le Russe avait dit « oui » à leur plan du 22 janvier prévoyant une mise à l'écart politique de Bachar Al-Assad. Le Russe prétendant tranquillement qu'il n'en était rien...

Les manœuvres dilatoires de Moscou qui cherche à faire croire par des opérations de communication que sa politique ne se résume pas à un soutien systématique au dictateur syrien, auront eu cette efficacité : faire gagner du temps à M. Assad pour écraser la contestation, tout en le mettant à l'abri d'une transition politique briguée de l'extérieur.

Un « permis de tuer », comme l'ont écrit les auteurs d'une récente tribune publiée dans la presse internationale. Signe des temps, les intellectuels qui s'étaient forte-

L'ambiguïté de la demande de « transition »

New York (Nations unies) Correspondante

Les Nations unies échouent-elles en Syrie ? « *Nous serons tous tenus pour responsables, y compris moi-même* », a prévenu, mardi 13 mars, le secrétaire général de l'ONU, Ban Ki-moon. Aux grandes puissances qui siègent au Conseil de sécurité, le diplomate coréen avait déclaré la veille que cette « *part de responsabilité* » dans l'incapacité à stopper les violences leur serait reprochée s'ils n'agissaient pas au plus vite. « *Plus longtemps vous discutez, ou reportez le moment d'agir, et plus il y aura de personnes (...), qui se feront tuer. Il n'y a pas de temps à perdre* », a-t-il martelé aux chefs de la diplomatie russe, américaine, britannique, allemande et française, venus débattre à New York des « défis et chances » du printemps arabe.

« *Le Conseil de sécurité devrait adopter une résolution immédiate* », a insisté M. Ban, expliquant qu'il avait exhorté les 15 pays mem-

bres à mettre de côté leurs différences. Selon le chef de l'ONU, une résolution courte, dont les trois priorités seraient « *l'arrêt immédiat de toutes les violences, l'accès de l'aide humanitaire et l'ouverture de négociations politiques* » sous la houlette de l'émissaire spécial de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe, Kofi Annan, pourrait faire l'unanimité.

Avec la Russie et la Chine « *à bord* », cette résolution aurait, assure-t-il, « *un impact sur la psychologie politique* » de Bachar Al-Assad. Moscou, qui par deux fois a opposé son veto à des résolutions condamnant Damas, de concert avec la Chine, refuse toute référence à un changement de régime. Le scénario yéménite, où le chef d'Etat a quitté le pouvoir en vertu d'un accord de transition lui accordant l'immunité, est cité en « modèle ». « *On s'achemine doucement vers un traitement purement symptomatique de la crise* », admet une source diplomatique, le règlement du volet politique risquant d'être remis à plus tard. La référen-

ce au plan de la Ligue arabe prévoyant un transfert des pouvoirs de M. Assad à son vice-président pourrait ne plus être qu'implicite. Ce que les optimistes assimilent à une « *ambiguïté constructive* ».

Reste la question-clé de la « séquence temporelle », sur laquelle ont jusqu'ici acheminé les discussions, Moscou refusant d'exiger des militaires syriens qu'ils déposent les armes tant que les groupes d'opposition n'en feront pas autant. La proposition russe de déployer des observateurs internationaux pour contrôler l'arrêt simultané des violences est à l'étude, dit-on à l'ONU. Pas question toutefois de demander à l'opposition de baisser ses armes légères, tant que le régime « *n'aura pas cessé d'utiliser tanks et artillerie lourde* », fait savoir M. Ban. Quant au président syrien, « *s'il pense qu'il peut surmonter la crise* » sans procéder à des réformes substantielles, « *il se berce d'illusions* », fait remarquer le secrétaire général. ■

ALEXANDRA GENESTE

ment mobilisés pour l'ingérence armée en Libye adoptent un profil bien plus discret. Ce n'est pas la signature de Bernard-Henri Levy mais celle de Rony Braumann, critique de l'opération en Libye, que l'on retrouve en bas de ce récent appel « Tous unis pour la Syrie », qui se concentre sur la nécessité d'un arrêt des violences et non pas

à d'un renversement de régime.

Au-delà des défis militaires lourds que présenterait le terrain syrien, la gêne des Occidentaux est accentuée par le fait que les partenaires arabes, qui avaient appuyé l'expédition anti-Kadhafi de 2011 sont animés, face au régime syrien, de motivations qui relèvent bien plus de la guerre de religieux sunni-

tes contre chiïtes, et d'une volonté d'endiguer l'Iran, que de la lutte pour les aspirations démocratiques. « *Intervenir, ce serait ajouter la guerre à la guerre* », dit-on à Paris. L'accent est mis sur l'idée que les criminels devront un jour rendre des comptes. Pour encourager, semble-t-il, les défections. ■

NATALIE NOUGAYRÈDE

Le Monde

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UN AN DE RÉVOLTE EN SYRIE

Le débat sur une intervention agite Washington

Washington
Correspondante

John McCain en a fait une question d'honneur. Le 5 mars, il a été le premier responsable américain à réclamer des frappes aériennes contre les forces syriennes. Deux jours plus tard, le sénateur républicain de l'Arizona, qui a lui-même combattu au Vietnam, a bousculé le secrétaire à la défense Leon Panetta lors d'une audition au Congrès : « *Combien de civils doivent encore mourir ? Vous pouvez nous dire ? 10 000 ? 20 000 ? Combien ?* », a-t-il demandé.

Tassé sur son fauteuil, Leon Panetta a répété la ligne officielle. L'option militaire est « *à l'étude* », a-t-il dit, mais l'administration préfère s'en tenir à « *une approche politique et diplomatique* », et elle travaille à forger « *un consensus sur la marche à suivre* ». John McCain l'a morigéné. « *L'Amérique devrait être en tête. L'Amérique devrait forger des coalitions au lieu de déclarer que nous n'interviendrons pas quelle que soit la situation.* »

Sévèrement, le ministre a souligné les risques d'une intervention, qui serait beaucoup plus ambitieuse que l'opération en Libye. Contre Mouammar Kadhafi, il a fallu sept mois à l'OTAN et 7700 bombes et missiles. « *Nous dépensons presque 1 000 milliards par an pour la défense nationale. Si nous sommes incapables de détruire l'aviation syrienne, alors c'est un gaspillage total de l'argent des contribuables !* », a bondi le sénateur.

L'échange résume le débat qui s'est intensifié ces dernières semaines sur une éventuelle intervention. Débat qui a été tranché par la décision de Barack Obama de ne pas intervenir de manière unilatérale – ce serait « *une erreur* », a-t-il dit dans sa dernière conférence de presse – mais que John McCain et ses amis « *faucons humanitaires* » s'efforcent d'entretenir.

Le lendemain de l'appel du sénateur, le président a eu l'air sincèrement tourmenté. « *Ce qui se passe en Syrie est scandaleux et bouleversant* », a-t-il réagi. Mais « *l'idée selon laquelle la manière de résoudre chacun de ces problèmes est de déployer notre armée, cela n'a pas été vrai dans le passé et cela ne le sera pas plus maintenant* ». Pour M. Obama, il est hors de question de lancer des frappes sans mandat de l'ONU. Le président ne veut pas risquer de dissoudre les fragiles coalitions qu'il a réussi à assembler sur la Corée du Nord ou l'Iran. Et il est réticent à considérer une action militaire alors qu'il y a encore 90 000 soldats américains en Afghanistan.

Depuis le début du soulèvement syrien, il a avancé avec une grande réserve. Ce n'est qu'en août qu'il a

appelé Bachar Al-Assad à démissionner. En Libye, rien ne mettait en jeu l'intérêt national américain. En Syrie, « *nos valeurs et notre intérêt coïncident* », relève Martin Indyk, le vice-président de la Brookings Institution. « *Ce serait un coup dévastateur porté à l'Iran. Assad est le canal d'influence de*

l'Iran dans la région. » John McCain confirme : ce serait « *le coup le plus sévère porté à l'Iran en vingt-cinq ans* ». Mais le président est en campagne électorale et ne souhaite pas l'affrontement avec Téhéran avant d'avoir exploré la voie des négociations qui doivent s'engager à nouveau sur son programme nucléaire.

La Maison Blanche a néanmoins fait savoir que les plans avaient été étudiés pour définir ce qu'un éventuel rôle américain pourrait être. « *On peut tout faire* », a assuré le chef d'état-major interarmes le général Martin Dempsey. En privé, les chefs militaires ont exposé toutes les difficultés de l'entreprise. Damas possède une défense anti-aérienne sophistiquée, située près

« **Combien de civils doivent encore mourir ?**

10 000 ? 20 000 ? »

John McCain,
sénateur républicain

des centres de population, ce qui renforce les risques de dommages collatéraux. Il faudrait « *une période de temps étendue et un grand nombre d'avions* », a précisé le général Dempsey. Pour protéger un corridor humanitaire le long de la frontière turque, des troupes au sol seraient nécessaires. Armer l'opposition ? Il n'en est pas question pour l'instant, a répété mardi le porte-parole de la Maison Blanche Jay Carney : ce serait risquer d'entraîner « *une plus grande militarisation* » de la Syrie. Mais les Américains acceptent de fermer les yeux sur les fournisseurs d'armes actuels. Et ils ont fait savoir qu'ils livreraient du matériel de communication et de renseignement à l'opposition.

Ils s'inquiètent aussi du morcellement de la rébellion. Là non plus, John McCain a fait savoir qu'il n'était pas dupe. « *Je rejette l'argument "nous ne savons pas qui ils son-*

L'armée régulière syrienne reprend le contrôle d'Idlib

L'armée syrienne a pris le contrôle total de la ville rebelle d'Idlib, dans le nord-ouest du pays, au terme d'un assaut qui a duré quatre jours et qui a poussé les insurgés à se retirer, a affirmé, mercredi 14 mars, un militant. « *L'Armée syrienne libre a préféré se retirer. Tout le monde sait qu'elle est incapable de faire face à [la puissance de feu] de l'armée* », a ajouté le militant. « *Trois jours après le début de l'opération d'envergure dans la ville d'Idlib (...) celle-ci s'est terminée en un temps record* », avait indiqué le quotidien privé Al-Watan, proche du pouvoir, qui a par ailleurs annoncé la tenue d'élections législatives le 7 mai. – (AFP, Reuters.)

t". Ils se battent parce qu'ils veulent les mêmes droits que ceux qui sont garantis dans notre Constitution. »

La secrétaire d'Etat Hillary Clinton a rencontré mardi son homologue russe Sergueï Lavrov. L'administration ne désespère pas d'adoucir la position de Moscou lorsque Barack Obama prendra contact avec le président Vladimir Poutine à Camp David le 18 mai. ■

CORINE LESNES

AFP

Irak/pétrole: nouvelle passe d'armes entre Bagdad et le Kurdistan

ERBIL (Irak), 15 mars 2012 (AFP)

LE CONFLIT OPPOSANT de longue date le gouvernement irakien à la région autonome du Kurdistan a rebondi jeudi lorsque les dirigeants kurdes ont accusé Bagdad de minimiser les exportations de la région et de freiner volontairement son développement.

Le Kurdistan exporte 90.000 à 100.000 barils de pétrole par jour depuis le début de l'année, mais Bagdad affirme que les exportations n'atteignent que 65.000 bj et que cela lui occasionne "des pertes financières quotidiennes", déplore le gouvernement régional kurde dans un communiqué sur son site.

"Si les affirmations du ministère du Pétrole sont correctes, cela signifie que 25.000 à 35.000 bj sont perdus dans le processus de mise sur le marché (...) Le Kurdistan estime que cette divergence doit faire immédiatement l'objet d'une enquête, au cas où quelqu'un s'attribuerait la différence", souligne le communiqué.

Le Kurdistan accuse en outre le gouvernement central de bloquer depuis mai 2011 les paiements aux entreprises concernées, et de lui devoir plus d'un milliard de dollars de chiffre d'affaires pour 2011. "De plus, pas le moindre dollar n'a été versé pour les exportations en 2012", affirme-t-il.

Le Kurdistan prévient que ses exportations pourraient être menacées à terme si le gouvernement n'honore pas ces arriérés. Dans le cas contraire, la région pourrait les faire passer à 175.000 bj "ou même 250.000 bj".

Le Kurdistan irakien a signé dans le passé une quarantaine de contrats avec des compagnies étrangères. Or, le gouvernement irakien ne reconnaît que les accords signés avec le ministère du Pétrole, et a jusqu'à présent

interdit à toute compagnie pétrolière ayant un contrat avec le Kurdistan de participer à des appels d'offres dans le reste du pays.

Le Kurdistan et Bagdad s'opposent notamment depuis des mois sur le cas de la major pétrolière américaine ExxonMobil, qui a signé un contrat d'exploration avec le Kurdistan.

Le groupe s'est vu sommer par Bagdad de choisir entre ce contrat et celui qu'il a dans le champ pétrolier de Quma-Ouest (sud), où il produit avec la compagnie anglo-néerlandaise Shell environ 370.000 bj. Il s'agit d'un contrat de service avec le gouvernement irakien, pour lequel le cartel ne touche que 0,92 dollar par baril extrait.

"Les responsables au gouvernement central qui refusent d'accepter ces contrats sont des ratés qui n'arrivent pas à donner à l'Irak ce que nous donnons au Kurdistan", s'est insurgé le dirigeant kurde Massoud Barzani lors d'un discours jeudi à Erbil, la capitale régionale.

"Ils veulent que nous soyons comme eux", a-t-il ajouté.

"Le problème n'est pas que ces contrats violent ou non la Constitution, mais qu'ils ne veulent pas que la région se développe", a-t-il accusé.

L'Irak échoue depuis 2007 à adopter une loi régissant l'exploitation de ses ressources en hydrocarbures, vitales pour sa reconstruction, ce qui pèse lourdement sur le climat d'investissement.

Le pays a toutefois augmenté sa production ces derniers mois et pompe actuellement environ 3 millions de barils par jour, son plus haut niveau depuis 1979, ont indiqué de hauts responsables début mars.○

AFP

Le PKK dénonce un raid turc sur l'Irak et revendique un attentat à Istanbul

ERBIL (Irak), 14 mars 2012 (AFP)

LES REBELLES KURDES du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) ont dénoncé mercredi un nouveau raid contre une région du nord de l'Irak où ils maintiennent des bases et ont revendiqué un attentat à la bombe à Istanbul le 1er mars.

Dans la nuit de mardi à mercredi, des avions de chasse turcs ont mené "des raids et des bombardements" contre la région de Dohouk, dans la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien, a indiqué le PKK dans un communiqué.

Déjà le 8 mars, l'aviation turque avait mené des attaques dans des zones voisines, a ajouté le groupe sans préciser si ces séries de raids avaient fait des victimes.

Le nord de l'Irak est utilisé par le PKK comme base arrière pour ses opéra-

tions dans le sud-est de la Turquie, peuplé en majorité de Kurdes.

Le PKK a par ailleurs revendiqué l'explosion d'une bombe au passage d'un car de police ayant fait 16 blessés dont 15 policiers dans le centre-ville d'Istanbul le 1er mars.

"Cette opération fait suite au nettoyage militaire et politique auquel le gouvernement turc continue de se livrer", a ajouté le groupe, en accusant ce dernier de vouloir "mener un génocide contre notre peuple et nos forces".

En octobre, la Turquie a lancé une grande offensive par air et sur terre contre les séparatistes kurdes dans le sud-est du pays ainsi que dans le nord de l'Irak.

Le PKK, qui a pris les armes en 1984, est considéré comme un mouvement terroriste par Ankara et une bonne partie de la communauté internationale.○

AFP

Total en discussion pour des contrats pétroliers au Kurdistan irakien

KOWEÏT, 13 mars 2012 (AFP)

TOTAL est entré en discussions en vue de décrocher contrats pétroliers au Kurdistan irakien mais n'a signé aucun accord à ce sujet pour le moment, a déclaré mardi le PDG de la compagnie pétrolière française Christophe de Margerie, au cours d'un déplacement au Koweït.

"Le Kurdistan fait partie de l'Irak, et beaucoup d'entreprises investissent au Kurdistan irakien, et je ne vois pas pourquoi Total ne pourrait pas le faire, donc nous regardons les opportunités, nous discutons, mais nous n'avons rien conclu encore", a déclaré le patron de Total à des journalistes, en

marge du 13e Forum international de l'énergie qui se déroule jusqu'à mercredi au Koweït.

Il a précisé que Total cherchait à négocier avec d'autres sociétés déjà propriétaires de permis d'exploration d'hydrocarbures au Kurdistan irakien, en vue d'acquiescer des participations dans ces projets d'exploration, mais que "dans tous les cas, il faut l'accord du gouvernement du Kurdistan".

La compagnie pétrolière américaine ExxonMobil a signé à la mi-octobre un accord d'exploration pétrolière avec la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien, s'attirant les foudres du gouvernement central irakien, qui considère cet accord comme nul et non avenue.

Le gouvernement de Bagdad ne reconnaît que les accords signés avec le ministère du Pétrole, et a jusqu'à présent interdit à toute compagnie pétrolière ayant un contrat avec le Kurdistan de participer à des appels d'offres dans le reste du pays.○

Assad supporters march 'for Syria'

BEIRUT

Regime puts on a show of force on anniversary as opposition splinters

BY ANNE BARNARD

Many thousands of Syrians gathered in a central square in Damascus on Thursday, waving Syrian flags and pictures of President Bashar al-Assad in what the government billed as a "global march for Syria" and against the year-old uprising that it portrays as led by terrorists and foreigners.

The state had ordered people to show up for work on a national holiday — Teachers' Day — that fell on Thursday, the one-year anniversary of mass demonstrations centered in the southern city of Dara'a that turned sporadic protests against the government into a national uprising. The government threatened punishments for truants in what anti-Assad activists called a transparent move to make it easier to bus in state employees and students to attend the rally.

Men jumped up and down, cheering, as the flags of Russia, Syria's main international backer and arms supplier, and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group that has been a stalwart supporter of Mr. Assad, whipped in the wind alongside the black, white and red Syrian tricolor. Syrian television channels continuously broadcast the scenes from Umayyad Square.

"I am ready to go one and two and a thousand times for the sake of Bashar," a woman attending the rally told the Syrian TV channel Addounia. Another woman dressed in a military uniform told the channel: "We're here to say we won."

In elaborately produced advertisements, Addounia said the pro-government demonstrations would last through Saturday and exhorted viewers to "join us in the global march for Syria."

The Damascus rally came a day after the main Syrian exile opposition group suffered a serious fracture as several prominent members resigned, calling the group autocratic, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and powerless to

"I am ready to go one and two and a thousand times for the sake of Bashar. We're here to say we won."

help Syrian rebels as government forces, having flushed insurgent strongholds in the north, swept into Dara'a.

The government's near-complete takeover of the cities of Homs and Idlib fueled frustration with the exile group, the Syrian National Council, said one activist who had resigned, Kamal al-Labwani, a respected dissident released from Syrian prison last year halfway through a 12-year sentence.

Although the government's role in the Damascus demonstration was clear, not all the support for Mr. Assad is manufactured. Some Syrians back him out of worry that his departure could usher in sectarian revenge against his Alawite sect and the Christian population, which is wary of rule by the Sunni Muslim majority — fears that Mr. Assad's government has stoked by portraying itself as a bulwark of protection for minorities. Others simply want to see an end to instability and economic hardship brought on by a year of unrest.

A Syrian soldier reached by telephone, who gave his name as Samer, said no one had forced him to attend the rally, along with his wife and sons. "We danced the dabkeh," a traditional celebratory dance, he said. "I would shoot in the air if they allowed me."

To him, the rally celebrated victory over traitors instigated by Qatar, a supporter of the uprising, and other countries. "We defeated the traitors," he said. "We won over the conspiracy."

Mr. Assad received more public support from Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, the powerful Shiite militant group that is part of Lebanon's ruling parliamentary coalition, shares Mr. Assad's hostility toward their common enemy Israel, and is believed to depend on Syria as an arms supplier and conduit for weapons from Iran.

Anti-Assad activists reported shelling in the city of Homs on Thursday and said they had discovered the bodies of 23 people in the city of Idlib who apparently had been summarily executed. The bodies were handcuffed and blindfolded, each with a bullet to the head, and no identifications, according to the Local Coordinating Committees, an activist network.

Members of the Free Syrian Army, the main armed opposition group, killed five members of the security forces in an ambush in Tafass, on the outskirts of Dara'a, said Yazid al-Baradan, an activist reached by telephone. Other activists reported via e-mail that government forces retaliated with a tank assault.

In Aleppo, the government reported large pro-Assad demonstrations, while activists said security forces fired on an antigovernment protest there.

Claims and counterclaims of fighting and casualties in the Syria conflict are impossible to corroborate because of government restrictions on outside press access.

Activists have said hundreds of people had been killed in Homs alone as rebel fighters, their pleas for weapons unanswered, were heavily outgunned by the Syrian military in more than a month of shelling.

"What happened in Homs is betrayal," Mr. Labwani said in an interview. "There is a sense of irresponsibility on the part of the council."

The council, he added, was in danger of causing splits in Syrian society by failing to create a single rebel military command under its control, leaving individual militias to seek their own sources of help. He accused Muslim Brotherhood members within the exile opposition of "monopolizing funding and military support."

The 270-member council has been plagued by internal disagreements. A member of its executive committee, Samir Nachar, played down the latest frictions, saying the members had not submitted formal resignations. One, he said, was simply frustrated at his exclusion from a meeting with the United Nations special envoy, Kofi Annan. Mr. Nachar said Mr. Labwani had attended few meetings.

Mr. Nachar acknowledged the council needed to improve but said disagreements were inevitable, noting that many members had never met before the uprising and had widely varying backgrounds and opinions.

But this time the departing members include some well-known figures with deep credibility among Syrians both inside and outside the country, including Mr. Labwani and Haithan Maleh, an executive committee member and lawyer in his 80s who served many years in prison after defending Syrian dissidents, including Muslim Brotherhood members.

Mr. Maleh could not be reached for comment, but told Al Jazeera that he had resigned because of chaos within the group and doubt over what it could accomplish, adding, "We have not gotten very far in working to arm the rebels."

Hwaida Saad contributed reporting.

Weighing the perils and promise of Syria

ISTANBUL

Reluctant to intervene, Turkey feels pressed by refugees and reputation

BY DAN BILEFSKY

The intensifying crackdown by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has prompted more than 1,000 Syrians to cross into Turkey during the past 24 hours, Turkish officials said Thursday, amid growing fears of a refugee crisis spilling into the country.

The yearlong uprising in Syria has proven both deadly and intractable, confronting the world with the potential for a regional war and a humanitarian crisis even as the international community is accused of looking the other way.

The spiraling crisis in Syria has presented Turkey with an opportunity, both perilous and promising, to show its

heft to the world as the large Muslim country of 79 million people strives to become a regional leader. But so far Turkey has been largely stymied in its efforts to influence events within Syria.

Despite heavy deployment by Syrian forces along the Turkish border, frightened Syrians are continuing to flee, with more than 14,700 now sheltered in five camps in Hatay, a Turkish province on the border.

"There has been an increase in those fleeing from Syria to our country," the Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Selcuk Unal said Thursday. "Yesterday, the number of people who had come was 13,700. This morning, the number is 14,700."

He said that a top Syrian general was among the newest refugees, the seventh high-ranking military officer to have defected. Turkish officials said Ankara was making contingency plans in the event of a massive inflow of Syrians; it had built a camp of prefabricated houses to host 15,000 people in Kilis, an eastern border town. Another camp was being built in Sanliurfa province, along the border with Syria, to house up to 20,000 people.

While the Syrian opposition remains hopelessly divided and the world has been unable to unify against the Assad regime amid intransigence by Russia and China, a Europe distracted by economic malaise and a United States reluctant to become mired in a volatile region, Turkey has intensified its criticism of the Syrian regime.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey recently likened Mr. Assad to

Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian strongman who plunged his country into an ethnically driven civil war.

Yet for all of its bluster and resolve, Turkey has also been reluctant to intervene, insisting that it will not take unilateral military action and that any such initiative should come from the Arab League or the United Nations.

Proposals to create a buffer zone or a humanitarian aid corridor within Syria as well as to arm the rebel Free Syrian Army or to establish an Arab peacekeeping force are expected to be discussed at a Friends of Syria meeting set for April 2 in Istanbul.

Turkish officials say they have not ruled out having its military participate in an international plan to create a buffer zone in the event that Mr. Assad continues to slaughter his own people and an even larger influx of refugees ensues.

Turkish officials say privately that Ankara will not act unilaterally in imposing such a zone because Russia and Iran are backing Syria, making the risks too high.

Analysts say Turkey is also extremely wary of taking military action partly because of concerns that sectarian strife in Syria could migrate to Turkey. Turkish officials fear that Turkish boots on the ground could undermine Turkey's popularity in a region where memories of Ottoman rule still run deep.

Despite its limited room to maneuver, Turkey has been jockeying to position itself as a country that can influence a post-Assad Syria. It is hosting the Syrian opposition, including the Syrian National Council, and the rebel Free Syrian Army, a group of some 10,000 soldiers that is being housed in an army camp in Turkey near the Syrian border.

But as Mr. Assad continues to cling to power, Turkey risks finding itself the patron of a failed revolt while also being saddled with a refugee crisis or, worse, a civil war on its doorstep.

"The stakes are very high for Turkey in Syria," said Soli Ozel, columnist for Haberturk, a leading Turkish newspaper. "If Turkey proves to be ineffectual

"The stakes are very high for Turkey in Syria."

in resolving the Syrian conflict, then all of the claims of its regional prowess will take a big hit."

Turkey has been playing a leading role in marshalling a coalition to put pressure on Syria in the Arab League. At the same time, aides say, the Syrian

crisis has made Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan an indispensable ally to President Barack Obama.

The conflict in Syria, however, has laid bare the limits of Turkey's power in the region. Just a year ago, Turkey was emerging as one of Syria's closest allies, with the two countries holding joint cabinet sessions and Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Assad even vacationing together. Turkey's 910 kilometer, or 500-mile, border with Syria is its longest, and trade between the two countries had more than tripled to \$2.5 billion in 2010.

Despite years of diplomatic engagement and economic investment, Turkey could not persuade Mr. Assad to back down.

The conflict in Syria is seen as a crucial test for Turkey as it struggles to carry out its newly muscular foreign policy in the region. Turkey's aspirations to join the European Union are all but dormant. The conflict with Cyprus appears as intractable as ever. Efforts to reach a solution over Armenia are at an impasse.

Meanwhile, diplomatic ties with Israel are frozen over an Israeli commando raid on a vessel that tried to reach Gaza from Turkey. Iran remains deeply suspicious of Turkey's agreement to host a NATO missile shield.

Bordered to the east by countries including Syria, Iraq and Iran, Turkey — with its majority Sunni population — risks becoming mired by the sectarian divisions convulsing its neighbors. While Syria is tipping toward civil war, Iraq is once again buffeted by sectarian strife and Iran has aligned itself firmly behind the Assad regime.

Sami Kohen, foreign affairs columnist at Milliyet, a leading Turkish newspaper, noted that sectarian divisions threatened to spill over into Turkey. The country is home to around 10 million Alawite citizens, some of whom are sympathetic to Mr. Assad, also an Alawite.

Meanwhile, Turkish officials express concern that Syria, backed by Iran, could seek to embolden the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., as a means to punish Turkey for supporting the Syrian opposition.

While Turkey could clearly benefit if Mr. Assad were overthrown, analysts note that Arab countries would be loath to see Turkey exert too much influence.

"Arab countries don't want Turkey to be the kingmaker in Syria," Mr. Ozel said. "Arabs are Arabs and Turks are Turks."

Şebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

Syria's Kurds undecided over future

By Tom Little BBC Monitoring

SYRIA'S KURDS appear divided and unsure whether to join the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad as they marked the anniversary of bloody clashes between the Kurdish minority and security forces in 2004.

Syria's Kurds live mostly in the north-eastern border region with Iraq and Turkey, and make up 10-15% of the population.

For decades the authorities have discriminated against the Kurds for fear that they might seek self-determination. Many were denied citizenship under a controversial law in the early 1960s.

Frustration at this treatment boiled over in March 2004 in the town of Qamishli, when Kurds rioted before security forces moved in.

Although the world's media have largely forgotten the riots, online activists opposed to President Bashar al-Assad have found new significance in the Qamishli events and urged their compatriots to mark the date.

Qamishli riots

The Syrian football teams Al-Fatwa, which is largely supported by Arabs, and Al-Jihad, favoured by the Kurds, played in Qamishli on 12 March 2004.

Riot police moved into the stadium not long after play began, and a slanging match turned violent. Six supporters were killed and another three died in a stampede to escape the stands.

The next day anger amongst Kurds erupted when security forces fired on the funerals of the supporters, and unrest spread to neighbouring towns and villages.

Kurds demonstrated in the streets of Qamishli, chanting anti-government slogans and even toppling a statue of the former president, Hafez Assad.

In a now familiar development, Syrian security forces moved swiftly to crush the unrest, and many Kurds fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Eight years on

In light of the uprising in Syria, President Assad's online opponents have sought significance in the Qamishli events, seeing clear parallels with the current nationwide crackdown.

Since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, social media sites have carried reports and footage from Syria, where journalists have been prevented from reporting freely.



Many Syrian Kurds have taken part in the current protests against the government



Protesters in Qamishli in March 2012, some waving Kurdish flags

Syrians Kurds perform a traditional dance in Qamishli during a protest on 12 March 2012 Many Syrian Kurds have taken part in the current protests against the government

Some of these sites advertised the eighth anniversary of the Qamishli clashes in the weeks running up to 12 March, encouraging Syrians to mark the date.

These calls were initially published on sites aimed at Syrian Kurds, but spread to larger Facebook pages like The Syrian Revolution 2011, which has over 300,000 members.

The commemoration appears to be part of a new trend, as activists have used the anniversary of past crackdowns in Syria to further discredit the government and persuade more to oppose it.

In February, online activists marked the 30th anniversary of the bloody attack on the central town of Hama in 1982, during an insurrection by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Kurds undecided

The 2004 riots showed that the Kurds have little love for the government in the main, and many have been ready to take part in protests in the current uprising.

But many of the Kurdish political parties, which have been operating secretly in Syria for decades, have yet to join the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella body trying to unite opposition groups.

Some community leaders feel the SNC has not done enough to ensure Kurdish rights, which has led them to withhold full support. The SNC has more recently tried to reach out to minorities in Syria, including Kurds.

There are also tensions between some Kurdish groups due to long-standing political differences.

Some Kurdish anti-Assad activists in Syria have accused members of the Democratic Union Party of Kurdistan (PYD) of supporting the government.

The PYD, a party that operates clandestinely in Syria, has denied the allegations, but the episode shows the minority is far from united.

In a gesture to placate the Kurds, President Assad granted full citizenship to many Kurds last April, although there has been no clear indication of how Syrian Kurds have received this.

The priority for Syria's Kurds is to secure their civil rights rather than to ally themselves with any particular opposition group. Whatever their decision, it is certain that Kurds will play an important role in the outcome of the Syrian uprising. □

Irak: la corde d'"Ali le chimique" donnée à une ville victime d'un massacre

HALABJA (Irak)-(AFP)

La corde ayant servi à exécuter Ali Hassan al-Majid, dit "Ali le chimique", a été remise vendredi aux autorités de Halabja, ville du Kurdistan irakien dont il avait été reconnu coupable d'avoir fait massacrer près de 5.000 habitants en 1988.

La corde sera conservée dans le monument consacré aux quelque 5.000 victimes, pour la plupart des femmes et des enfants, tuées le 16 mars 1988 dans le bombardement au gaz de la ville par les avions de Saddam Hussein, dont il était l'homme de main.

"Ali le Chimique", condamné quatre fois à mort, dont l'une pour le massacre de Halabja, avait été pendu le 25 janvier 2010.

Le Parti démocratique du Kurdistan, principale formation politique dans la province de Souleimaniyeh où est située Halabja, a indiqué dans un communiqué vendredi que les autorités locales avaient tenté en vain d'obtenir que l'exécution se déroule dans la ville.

"Le don de la corde va aider les familles des victimes à se sentir mieux et



apaisées", a estimé Alaa Talabani, une députée kurde.

En 1988, alors que la guerre avec l'Iran tirait à sa fin, les peshmergas kurdes s'étaient emparés de la ville, dans les montagnes du Kurdistan irakien.

L'armée irakienne avait riposté en pilonnant la localité, forçant les combattants kurdes à se replier vers les collines alentours, laissant derrière eux les femmes et les enfants.

Le 16 mars en fin de matinée, des avions de chasse irakiens avaient commencé à survoler la zone et, pendant cinq heures, allaient lâcher un mélange de gaz moutarde et des neurotoxiques Tabun, Sarin et VX.

Ali Hassan al-Majid, cousin et homme de main de Saddam Hussein, avait écopé de trois autres peines de mort, dont une pour la répression de la rébellion kurde, la campagne Anfal de 1987-1988, qui avait fait près de 180.000 morts. □

Le Kurdistan menace de cesser ses exportations faute de paiement de Bagdad

AFP

BAGDAD, 26 mars 2012 (AFP)

LA RÉGION AUTONOME du Kurdistan irakien, en conflit avec le gouvernement central sur des questions territoriales et d'exploitation pétrolière, a menacé lundi de mettre fin à ses exportations de brut si Bagdad n'honorait pas ses dettes envers elle.

Le Kurdistan a également reproché à Bagdad de vouloir conclure un accord selon lui illégal avec la major BP pour accroître la production de pétrole dans la région de Kirkouk, au coeur du conflit territorial, selon un communiqué distinct lundi soir.

"Les exportations de pétrole de la région du Kurdistan ont été réduites à 50.000 barils par jour (bj) et pourraient cesser d'ici un mois si le gouvernement fédéral à Bagdad continue de bloquer les paiements aux compagnies productrices", affirme le gouvernement régional dans un premier communiqué publié sur son site internet.

Le texte, qui cite le porte-parole du ministère kurde des Ressources naturelles, souligne que la dette cumulée du gouvernement central envers le Kurdistan s'élève à "près de 1,5 milliard de dollars". Le dernier versement remonte à mai 2011.

Le Kurdistan précise qu'il "maintient son objectif d'exportation de 175.000 bj prévu dans le budget 2012 de l'Irak et pourrait exporter beaucoup plus si le gouvernement honorait ses engagements à payer".

Le Kurdistan et Bagdad sont en conflit sur de nombreux thèmes. Ces der-

niers mois, le cas de la major pétrolière américaine ExxonMobil, qui souhaite s'implanter à la fois dans les deux parties du pays, ce que refuse catégoriquement le gouvernement, a suscité une vive polémique.

Erbil et Bagdad s'opposent aussi sur la souveraineté d'une bande longue de 650 km, riche en hydrocarbures, à cheval sur quatre provinces et comprenant la ville multiethnique de Kirkouk. Cet épineux dossier est considéré comme l'une des principales menaces sur la stabilité de l'Irak à terme.

Un nouveau point de litige est apparu lundi soir lorsque les autorités kurdes ont reproché au gouvernement central de vouloir conclure un accord avec BP sans les avoir consultées, ce qui est selon elles contraire à la Constitution.

Cette prise de position intervient "suite à des informations selon lesquelles la compagnie publique North Oil Company a signé ou est sur le point de signer un accord préliminaire avec BP pour accroître la production dans le gisement de Kirkouk", selon le communiqué.

Le Kurdistan "demande au ministère fédéral du Pétrole et à la North Oil Company de respecter la Constitution du pays et de s'asseoir rapidement avec toutes les parties concernées pour décider de la meilleure façon de renforcer et revitaliser les gisements actuels de Kirkouk".

"En attendant, le Kurdistan demande aux compagnies pétrolières internationales de s'abstenir de toute activité enfreignant la Constitution", selon le texte.

Le président kurde Massoud Barzani avait accusé la semaine dernière le Premier ministre Nouri al-Maliki de monopoliser le pouvoir. ○



Kofi Annan (au centre), lors de son passage en Syrie, a rencontré les autorités religieuses du pays. L'émissaire de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe doit rendre compte, aujourd'hui, au Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, des premiers résultats de sa mission de médiation.

Après un an d'insurrection, les scénarios pour la Syrie

► La répression s'accroît, la contestation s'étend.
 ► Impasse, solution négociée, guerre civile aboutissant à une « reconstitution » du pays, *La Croix* examine les trois scénarios plausibles.

1. L'impasse

Les diplomates européens le reconnaissent : « *On est dans une impasse totale en Syrie.* » Sur le terrain, la répression s'accroît, la contestation s'étend. Ce constat éloigne toute perspective de négociation et de résolution pacifique de ce conflit. L'équilibre des forces est clairement en faveur du régime : « *L'armée syrienne est toujours très soudée, confie un Syrien. Les officiers qui l'encadrent sont presque tous alaouites. Ils détiennent le pouvoir du feu. La troupe, elle suit.* »

Le pouvoir s'est lancé avec succès dans la reconquête des villes et zones abandonnées à l'opposition et les verrouille : Homs, Idleb et Deraa aujourd'hui. L'armée syrienne s'inspire de la stratégie militaire russe, éprouvée pendant la guerre en Tchétchénie : bouclage des quartiers périphériques et carrefours, bombardements massifs pour effrayer les civils, afin qu'ils quittent la zone avant de donner l'assaut.

Les insurgés n'ont plus d'autres choix que de se retirer comme ils l'ont fait à Baba Amr, à Homs ou à Idleb. En même temps, l'armée

s'emploie à sécuriser ses frontières avec le Liban et la Turquie en les minant pour empêcher les livraisons d'armes à l'opposition et le passage des combattants.

Le rapport de force entre l'armée régulière et l'opposition armée est totalement déséquilibré. L'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) est mal encadrée, pas formée et peu équipée. Elle est composée de civils qui ont pris les armes et de quelques soldats qui ont fait défection. Même si les promesses de l'Arabie saoudite et du Qatar de lui fournir armes et munitions se concrétisent, le rap-

« Beaucoup de Syriens ne bougent pas. Ils ont peur. Ils voient leur pays aller à vau-l'eau... »

port de force n'en sera pas bouleversé avant longtemps. Armer l'opposition reviendrait, selon des diplomates, à entrer dans le jeu de la confrontation, ce que souhaite le régime qui ne cesse de dénoncer ces « *groupes terroristes armés* » soutenus par l'étranger.

Sur le plan politique, les tentatives de contraindre le président Assad au départ - particulièrement française et américaine - ont échoué. D'autant que ni la France ni les États-Unis n'ont caché qu'ils n'interviendraient pas militairement.

Trois résolutions ont été proposées au Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, toutes rejetées par la Russie et la Chine, qui ont opposé leur veto.

Le plan de sortie de crise, proposé en janvier par la Ligue arabe, qui appelle le président à déléguer « *des prérogatives au vice-président pour traiter avec un gouvernement d'union* » nationale avec « *une personnalité de consensus* » à sa tête, qui préparera des élections législatives et présidentielle « *pluralistes et libres* », a lui aussi été rejeté par Moscou.

Un homme d'affaires syrien résume assez bien l'ambiance dans son pays : « *Beaucoup de Syriens ne bougent pas. Ils ont peur. Ils voient leur pays aller à vau-l'eau. Le clan Assad ne fait pas de quartier. Il tient tout et décide de tout. Le gouvernement n'existe plus, les ministres se taisent. Personne n'ose lever la tête, personne n'ouvre la bouche. Le pouvoir a acheté le silence des grandes familles commerçantes sunnites, en échange de leur sécurité. Très nationalistes, les Syriens redoutent un éclatement du pays et l'immixtion des militants djihadistes dans le conflit. L'opposition est hétéroclite. Burhan Ghalioun, chef du Conseil national syrien (CNS), est un intellectuel, pas un homme politique.* »

2. La solution négociée

Seule une solution politique peut stopper le cycle de la violence. L'émissaire de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe, Kofi Annan, s'y emploie. « *Il*

est le mieux placé pour obtenir quelque chose du régime syrien, car il connaît tous les acteurs de ce conflit, confiait un diplomate à l'ONU. Mais si dans quinze jours il n'obtient rien, le scénario du pire est à craindre. »

Kofi Annan doit rendre compte aujourd'hui au Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies des premiers résultats de sa mission de médiation en Syrie. Il a reçu une réponse de Bachar Al Assad à ses propositions de règlement de la crise syrienne, mais il a souligné que « des questions » demeuraient et qu'il avait demandé des clarifications. Il a réclamé un arrêt immédiat des violences et des meurtres, un accès pour les organisations humanitaires et un dialogue politique.

Mené par des dirigeants politiques européens de premier plan, le Conseil européen des relations étrangères (ECFR) propose, quant à lui, un schéma de négociation qui passe « au minimum par l'assentiment de la Russie ». « Sans la pression de Moscou, estime-t-il, le régime syrien n'acceptera ni de réduire la répression, ni d'entrer dans un processus politique. »

Moscou doit être considéré moins comme un obstacle que comme une courroie de transmission et de dialogue avec les forces de Bachar Al Assad qu'il arme. D'autant que les Russes ont montré des signes d'exaspération devant la lenteur des réformes en Syrie et ont annoncé qu'ils étaient favorables ○○○

●●● à une solution négociée, à condition qu'elle ne se fasse pas au détriment de ses intérêts.

L'ECFR fait le constat que, bien que Bachar Al Assad soit politiquement et économiquement affaibli, son départ peut prendre des mois, voire des années. Le coût humain n'en sera que plus élevé. L'instauration d'un dialogue politique favoriserait automatiquement l'opposition, à condition qu'elle s'ouvre davantage aux minorités du pays (chrétiens, alaouites, druzes), et, à terme, pourrait conduire au départ de Bachar Al Assad.

Les experts de l'ECFR préconisent la formation d'un groupe de contact avec des représentants de la Russie, du régime syrien, de l'opposition et des voisins de la Syrie, auquel il fixe trois objectifs : établir un consensus international ; déconnecter la crise syrienne d'objectifs stratégiques plus large (pour l'Occident et certains pays du Golfe, affaiblir l'influence de l'Iran par la chute du régime Assad, et, pour l'Iran et le Hezbollah, maintenir un régime qui

protège leurs intérêts) ; et renforcer l'opposition politique.

3. La guerre civile et confessionnelle et la création d'un « réduit » alaouite

Gilles Chenève, ancien des services de renseignements, est un expert du monde arabe. Dans son livre *Le Réveil du monde arabe, douze scénarios d'avenir* (1), il estime qu'à court terme, si la situation de confrontation sur le terrain perdure, on s'achemine vers une « fragmentation de la Syrie et un affaiblissement de l'axe chiite ». Dans ce schéma, dit-il, « l'opposition au régime se militarise (grâce à l'aide extérieure) et s'étend à l'ensemble du territoire, la contestation évolue en une guerre civile, marquée par des luttes confessionnelles. Les communautés se regroupent dans des zones où elles se sentent en sécurité. »

Selon lui, la minorité alaouite (dont est originaire le clan Assad), pourrait alors migrer vers sa région d'origine (Lattaquié) où ils sont majoritaires pour y créer un « réduit alaouite. Fortement militarisée et autonome, cette région, pour être viable, encadrerait le Djebel Ansariyah, avec, à l'ouest, la plaine littorale et, à l'est, la plaine du Ghab qui suit la vallée de l'Oronte vers le sud, jusqu'à la frontière libanaise. »

Cette recomposition laisserait le reste du pays sous l'autorité des sunnites, majoritaires. Une région majoritairement kurde s'établirait le long de la Turquie et dans la région nord-est de la Djézireh.

Et les chrétiens ? « Pour ceux qui n'auront pas choisi l'exil, ils seraient, selon lui, regroupés dans quelques îlots, des zones refuges comme le Golan (sous protection israélienne) ou en zone alaouite. »

AGNÈS ROTIVEL

(1) Éditions du Cygne, 159 p., 16 €.

REPÈRES

UN AN DE RÉPRESSION

Le bilan humanitaire

● Le bilan de la répression par le régime syrien du soulèvement populaire qui a commencé le 15 mars 2011 est d'environ 8 000 morts, au moins 200 000 personnes déplacées en Syrie et 31 000 réfugiées au Liban, Turquie et Jordanie, selon des estimations des Nations unies.

L'opposition

○ **Conseil national syrien (CNS).** Fondé en octobre 2011 et présidé par Burhan Ghalioun, le CNS est considéré comme la principale mouvance d'opposition. Il prône l'intervention militaire étrangère pour faire tomber le régime. L'influence des islamistes sur le Conseil, qui pourraient détenir jusqu'à la moitié des sièges, et le caractère peu représentatif de sa composition, sont souvent mis en question. Le CNS a été reconnu comme un « interlocuteur légitime » par la France.

○ **Groupe patriotique syrien (GPS).** Créé en février 2012 par l'avocat Haytham Al Maleh, Kamal Al Labwani et Catherine Al Talli (entre autres), le groupe a fait sécession mardi du Conseil national syrien. Plus radical que le CNS, le GPS prône un soutien matériel direct à l'insurrection armée, en renforçant les liens entre l'opposition politique et l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL).

● **Comité national de coordination pour le changement démocratique (CNCCD).** Coprésidé par Haytham Al Manna et Hassan Abdul Hazim, il regroupe plusieurs autres figures de l'opposition comme l'économiste Aref Dalila. Le CNCCD (fondé en juin 2011) est opposé à toute intervention étrangère, prône la résistance pacifique et, dans une moindre mesure, le dialogue avec le régime. Il bénéficie d'un certain écho auprès de la population syrienne, en particulier auprès des minorités et des classes moyennes de Damas et Alep.

● **Conseil pour le changement national (CCN).** Créé par et autour d'Ammar Al Qurabi, il se définit d'abord par opposition au CNS, dont il critique l'influence islamiste. Prônant un soutien direct à l'insurrection armée, le CCN est assez proche des thèses du GPS. Ammar Al Qurabi et Kamal Al Labwani se sont d'ailleurs rencontrés la semaine dernière à Istanbul.

● **Construire la libération (CLL).** Fondé mercredi dernier par le cheikh Nawaf Al Bashir, chef de la tribu Al-Baqara, le mouvement s'oppose au CNS dont il dénonce l'impuissance et l'absence de soutien au sein des militants sur le terrain.

Syrie : Moscou en passe d'imposer ses vues à l'ONU

Kofi Annan, dont le plan politique a été rejeté par Damas, lance une mission « exploratoire » soutenue par la Russie

Après un an de tuerie en Syrie, et alors que les Occidentaux craignent de plus en plus une explosion régionale au Moyen-Orient dont la fuite en avant sanguinaire du régime de Damas et les engrenages intercommunautaires formeraient l'épicentre, l'idée russe de placer la Syrie sous la surveillance d'observateurs internationaux semble faire son chemin.

Lors d'un briefing à huis clos, réalisé vendredi 16 mars par vidéoconférence depuis Genève, l'émissaire de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe pour la Syrie, Kofi Annan, a confirmé au Conseil de sécurité l'envoi dans les prochains jours d'une mission à Damas pour discuter de cette éventualité. L'objectif : définir les modalités d'un mécanisme d'observation, dans la perspective d'un accord de cessez-le-feu.

« J'espère qu'ils auront accès à tout ce qu'ils demandent », a déclaré l'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU, qui se plaint de n'avoir obtenu de Damas que des « réponses décevantes jusqu'ici ». De source diplomatique européenne, le commentaire est plus lapidaire : « Bachar Al-Assad a envoyé paître Kofi Annan ! » La rebuffade a été telle que le diplomate ghanéen a attendu plusieurs jours avant de rendre compte devant l'ONU de sa mission à Damas, où il n'a pas réussi à faire valider un plan prévoyant un arrêt des violences, un accès humanitaire et l'ouverture de négociations politiques. Faute de mieux, Kofi Annan s'apprête-t-il à remettre de facto les clefs du dossier à la Russie ?

Celle-ci a fait de son opposition à toute politique extérieure de changement de régime à Damas une ligne rouge absolue. Le « troc » russe peut se résumer ainsi : les armes cesseront de parler en Syrie si le monde extérieur renonce à demander le départ de son allié Bachar Al-Assad. Dire que le président syrien est illégitime, c'est « contre-productif » a insisté l'émissaire

russe pour le Proche-Orient, Mikhaïl Bogdanov. Dans ce contexte, l'idée d'une mission exploratoire pour un mécanisme d'observation – qui semble avoir été agréée par le pouvoir de Damas tout en y posant des conditions – servira-t-elle de diversion pendant que se poursuivent les massacres, de ville en ville ? Bref, un jeu de « dupes » comme s'en méfie Alain Juppé, le chef de la diplomatie française, dans un entretien accordé au *Monde* ?

La France a fait savoir qu'elle ne renoncera pas à l'exigence d'un processus de transition politique à Damas, considérant que c'est le « minimum », inscrit d'ailleurs dans le mandat même de Kofi Annan, qui découle d'une résolution de l'Assemblée générale de l'ONU faisant référence à un plan de la Ligue arabe daté du 22 janvier. Selon ce texte, le président syrien doit « accorder à son premier adjoint l'autorité pleine pour coopérer avec un gouvernement d'union nationale » chargé de « préparer des élections libres, législatives et présidentielles ». L'abandon du pouvoir par Bachar Al-Assad n'est pas explicitement exigé, mais il est censé découler d'un futur processus électoral. Autrement dit, le plan laisse une marge d'interprétation,

Dire que M. Al-Assad est illégitime, c'est « contre-productif »

Mikhaïl Bogdanov
diplomate russe

dont la Russie s'est vite emparée.

Mais pas seulement elle, semble-t-il. À l'ONU, les Britanniques qui président ce mois-ci le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU aimeraient se prévaloir d'un succès et poussent pour le vote d'un texte, après des mois de blocage russe et chinois – quitte à accepter certains accommodements. Ban Ki-moon, le secrétaire général des Nations unies a

plaidé dans ce sens. Les États-Unis semblent aussi tentés. Le président Barack Obama qui redoute tout scénario de borborygme régional a récemment souligné, devant la presse, qu'il fallait traiter la question syrienne avec prudence, « en évaluant bien les conséquences avant d'agir ». Il a assuré : « Assad va partir. La seule question est de savoir quand. »

Vendredi, Kofi Annan a assorti son appel à l'« unité » du Conseil de sécurité d'un rappel des périls au Proche-Orient. Si cette crise n'est pas gérée de manière appropriée, « elle peut avoir des conséquences dans toute la région au-delà de la Syrie », a-t-il dit. Il a rappelé comment, en 2005, un vote unanime du Conseil avait convaincu la Syrie de retirer ses forces du Liban. Russes et Chinois ne se sont pas opposés au principe d'un « message uni » pour appuyer la mission de M. Annan. Britanniques, Américains et Français tentaient vendredi de s'accorder sur le type de texte :

une résolution, à valeur contraignante mais sans référence explicite au plan de paix de la Ligue arabe prévoyant un transfert des pouvoirs de Bachar Al-Assad, ou une déclaration présidentielle, qui a un moindre impact politique.

La Syrie pose déjà des conditions : la mission d'évaluation doit se limiter à un soutien technique et Damas doit la conduire... Bachar Al-Assad, tout en se déclarant « ouvert au dialogue », a dit à M. Annan à quel point il était déterminé à combattre les « terroristes » – terme qu'il use pour l'opposition. Appuyé par Moscou, il refuse de donner, le premier, l'ordre à ses forces armées de cesser le feu. Dans ce marasme diplomatique, la Turquie, qui prépare une prochaine réunion du Groupe des amis de la Syrie, a recommencé à parler, vendredi, de « zone tampon » en Syrie pour protéger des civils. ■

ALEXANDRA GENESTE
(NEW YORK, NATIONS UNIES) ET
NATALIE NOUGAYRÈDE

LE FIGARO

lundi 19 mars 2012

Syrie : trois attentats avant une médiation

Trente personnes sont mortes à Damas et Alep, avant l'arrivée d'experts onusiens.

GEORGES MALBRUNOT

MOYEN-ORIENT Alors qu'Alep, la deuxième ville du pays, commence à être gagnée par la contestation, un attentat à la voiture piégée y a détruit dimanche le siège de la sécurité politique, faisant au moins trois morts et de nombreux blessés. La veille, deux autres attaques à la voiture piégée avaient fait 27 morts et 140 blessés à Damas.

L'un des attentats avait visé le quartier général des renseignements de l'armée de l'air, dans le secteur chrétien de Qassaa. « *Nous avons eu très peur* », nous déclarait peu après un habitant de Qassaa. Pour les autorités, ces attaques sont l'œuvre de « *terroristes islamistes* ». L'opposition, elle, accuse le régime d'avoir fabriqué une « *machination* ». Fin décembre, deux attentats du même type avaient déjà visé des centres de la sécurité à Damas. Ils avaient été revendiqués quelques semaines plus tard par la branche d'al-Qaïda en Irak, une revendication jugée crédible par l'Administration américaine, inquiète depuis de la pénétration djihadiste en Syrie. « *Ces attentats surviennent tout de même à un moment un peu particulier* », remarque notre interlocuteur chrétien, tandis qu'un autre habitant de la capitale, chrétien lui aussi, jure que ces « *attaques de barbus font peur à tous les indécis, qui hésitent entre le régime et son opposition* ».

Comme en décembre – juste avant l'arrivée d'observateurs arabes en Syrie –, ces opérations coïncident avec l'envoi ce lundi à Damas d'experts mandatés par Kofi Annan pour négocier la mise en place d'une mission d'observation visant à mettre fin aux violences, qui ont fait plus de 9 000 morts en un an. Cette mission fait suite au déplacement à Damas la semaine dernière de l'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU, qui était mandaté par les Nations unies et la Ligue arabe pour trouver une sortie de crise auprès de Bachar el-Assad.

Armer l'insurrection

Mais vendredi, Annan a qualifié de « *décevantes* » les réponses syriennes à ses propositions : arrêt des violences de la part des forces armées, aide humanitaire et amorce d'une solution politique. El-Assad, lui, a répondu qu'un dialogue avec les insurgés ne pouvait être envisagé avant leur désarmement. En coulisses, la Russie cherche à convaincre son allié syrien d'accepter le plan Annan, mais Moscou ne veut pas entendre parler d'une transition sans Bachar, un préalable posé jusqu'à présent par l'opposition et les pays occidentaux. Tandis que sur le terrain, l'offensive du régime contre les rebelles s'est poursuivie dimanche, avec un assaut sur une localité de la province d'Idlib, l'opposition en exil continue à afficher ses divisions. À Istanbul, cinq groupes ont annoncé la formation d'une nouvelle coalition, in-



Combattants de l'Armée syrienne libre à Idlib le 11 mars. L'armement de la rébellion réclamé par le Qatar et l'Arabie Saoudite ne fait pas l'unanimité parmi les pays occidentaux. R. ABD/AP

dépendante du Conseil national syrien, qui ambitionne de regrouper la plupart des courants de cette opposition. De son côté, un diplomate arabe a confié à l'AFP que l'Arabie saoudite armait les rebelles, via la Jordanie, ce qui a été démenti par Amman. Riyad et le Qatar ont publiquement réclamé que des armes soient fournies aux activistes, une initiative qui fait maintenant quasi l'unanimité contre elle, parmi les pays occidentaux. ■

AFP

Irak/pétrole: ExxonMobil toujours actif au Kurdistan (présidence kurde)

BAGDAD, 17 mars 2012 (AFP)

LA PRÉSIDENTE de la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien a démenti samedi que la major pétrolière américaine ExxonMobil ait suspendu un contrat d'exploration passé avec elle à l'automne, comme l'avait affirmé plus tôt un responsable gouvernemental à Bagdad.

"La compagnie pétrolière ExxonMobil continue de travailler au Kurdistan et n'a fait aucune annonce au gouvernement kurde relative à un gel de ses activités au Kurdistan", a indiqué samedi à l'AFP le secrétaire général de la présidence kurde, Fouad Hussein, à Erbil.

"Il y a constamment des réunions entre les parties concernées dans la région et les dirigeants du groupe américain", a souligné ce responsable.

Plus tôt dans la journée, un responsable gouvernemental avait indiqué à l'AFP sous couvert d'anonymat que le groupe "suspendait" ce contrat, au sujet duquel Bagdad et la région autonome sont en conflit depuis plusieurs mois.

"ExxonMobil a envoyé une lettre au ministère irakien du Pétrole ce mois-ci pour l'informer qu'il avait suspendu son contrat avec le Kurdistan", a-t-il indi-

qué à l'AFP, sans plus de détails.

ExxonMobil avait signé à la mi-octobre un accord d'exploration pétrolière avec le Kurdistan, s'attirant les foudres du gouvernement central irakien, qui considère cet accord comme nul et non avenu.

Le gouvernement de Bagdad ne reconnaît que les accords signés avec le ministère du Pétrole, et a jusqu'à présent interdit à toute compagnie pétrolière ayant un contrat avec le Kurdistan de participer à des appels d'offres dans le reste du pays. Le Kurdistan a signé dans le passé une quarantaine de contrats avec des compagnies étrangères.

Le groupe américain s'est vu sommer par Bagdad de choisir entre le contrat kurde et celui qu'il a par ailleurs dans le champ pétrolier de Qurna-Ouest (sud), où il produit avec la compagnie anglo-néerlandaise Shell environ 370.000 b/j.

Le bras de fer autour d'ExxonMobil en Irak est perçu comme hautement significatif pour les autres grands groupes pétroliers internationaux, dont beaucoup convoitent les vastes réserves pétrolières du pays.

Le groupe français Total a récemment indiqué être entré en discussions pour des contrats pétroliers au Kurdistan irakien mais n'avoir signé aucun accord à ce sujet pour le moment.

Iraqi Kurd leader denounces Baghdad 'power grab'

By MAZIN YAHYA | Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The president of Iraq's self-ruled Kurdish region threatened Tuesday to pull support from the nation's already wobbly coalition government, criticizing the central government for a power grab he denounced as ideological terrorism.

Kurdish Regional Government President Massoud Barzani stopped short of directly saying he would declare independence for the three-province Kurdish region from the that makes up Iraq's north. But he called political agreements between the region and Baghdad "meaningless" and said he was willing to put a decision to his people "in order not to blame us in the future."

The speech signaled a sharp deterioration in Iraq's already shaky political alignment. Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki kept his job only with Kurdish support after his party fell short of a majority in the 2010 parliamentary elections.

It came a week before an Arab summit is set to convene in Baghdad, already shaken by a wave of deadly attacks by militants.

"It is time to say that enough is enough, because Iraq is headed toward an abyss, and a small group of people are about to pull Iraq into a dictatorship,"



Barzani said in a speech that his aides billed as a major announcement. He delivered it on the occasion of Nowruz, the Kurdish and Iranian new year.

He said Iraq is facing "a serious crisis, and this situation absolutely is not acceptable to us."

Baghdad has been arguing for months with Kurdish leaders over whether Exxon Mobil Corp. should be allowed to develop lucrative oil fields in the north without the central government's approval.

Iraq's Oil Ministry last week said Exxon agreed to shelve its plans to avoid being blacklisted from other oil deals in Iraq until the country passes its oil law, which could take months at least, if not years. A spokesman for the Kurdish region denied that Exxon has frozen its plans, and Exxon officials have not commented.

Barzani accused Baghdad of pressuring oil companies against working in the north. "They in Baghdad get mad whenever any corporation come to the region to sign contracts," he said.

Barzani's heated complaints come the week before top Arab leaders are to meet in Baghdad in what the government hopes will showcase Iraq's move toward stability and national unity after years of sectarian fighting. The Kurdish president predicted that Iraq will not resolve any of its political feuding until after the Arab League summit ends March 29.

Sami al-Askeri, a close Shiite aide to al-Maliki, called the speech "unjustified" and said Barzani was just jealous he does not have a role to play in the summit.

"It comes in a period that we should have harmony, because we are close to the Arab League summit," al-Askeri said in an interview about Barzani's speech. "He wants to make a crisis, not to solve the situation."

It's not the first time in recent months that Iraq's government has been on the brink of falling apart. In December, the Sunni-dominated Iraqiya block walked out of parliament and the Cabinet in protest after the government issued an arrest warrant against Vice President Tariff al-Hashemi on terrorism charges he says are politically motivated. The boycott brought government work to a standstill until Iraqiya returned in February.

Talks to enact a power-sharing agreement between Iraqiya and al-Maliki's coalition have limped along without resolution for more than a year.○



March 23, 2012

PKK: An Excuse for Turkish Invasion of Syria? PKK's Sudden Support for Assad Changes the Equation

by Jason Ditz, news.antiwar.com

Is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)'s sudden support for Syrian President Bashar Assad an excuse for Turkey to invade Syria, or a risk so great it might convince Turkey not to launch a planned incursion to create a buffer zone?

Since PKK commander Murat Karayilian's recent comments, promising to turn "all of Kurdistan into a war zone" if Turkey invades, the speculation about a Turkish ground invasion of Syria has centered entirely around the Kurds.

A complicated situation made moreso – Turkey is accusing

Assad, a long-time Turkish ally, of using the PKK as an auxiliary wing against the rebel forces. Yet Turkey's backing of the SNC and FSA rebel factions was in many ways a cynical effort to tamp down calls for Kurdish autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan by replacing Assad with a more populist Sunni Arab faction.

In many ways, the PKK's insinuation into events is exactly what Turkey wanted, a direct Kurds versus Sunni Arabs battle. Yet the Turkish-backed rebels are losing the civil war quickly, and the oft-threatened direct Turkish invasion threatens to make the PKK violence inside Turkey itself dramatically worse, a risk it seems they can ill afford to take.□

Wave of attacks kill 49 in Iraq

AFP

ATTACKS in more than a dozen cities have killed at least 49 people on the anniversary of the US-led invasion.

The wave of deadly attacks yesterday came just days before Baghdad hosts a landmark Arab summit.

The violence, which left more than 250 people wounded, bore the hallmarks of al-Qaida, which typically tries to launch coordinated nationwide mass-casualty bombing campaigns, although no one immediately claimed responsibility.

It was swiftly condemned by Iraq's parliament speaker as a bid by the jihadist group to derail this month's summit, while United Nations envoy Martin Kobler described the violence as "atrocious".

Bombings and shootings rocked 14 towns and cities spanning the northern oil hub of Kirkuk and the Shiite shrine city of Karbala, south of Baghdad, from 7:00 am local time, in the deadliest violence to strike Iraq in more than two months.

"We lost everything," said Mohammed Sobheh, a policeman wounded in the Kirkuk attack. "Not one of my colleagues is alive - they were all killed."

"I will never forget their screams, as long as I live."

In central Baghdad, a car bomb exploded in the car park opposite the foreign ministry, despite dramatically heightened security in the capital in preparation for the March 27-29 Arab League summit.

At least three people were killed and nine wounded, officials said, underscoring concerns over Iraq's ability to maintain security for the meeting.

Parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi condemned yesterday's "brutal criminal" attacks, and said they were part of efforts by al-Qaida to "derail the Arab summit, and keep Iraq feeling the effects of violence and destruction."

Following the attacks, the government declared a week of public holidays from March 25 to April 1.

Coupled with Kurdish New Year festival Nowruz today and the weekly Muslim day of prayer on Friday, much of the country will be largely closed



US invasion anniversary: A man examines the scene of a car bomb in Kirkuk, one of a series of attacks across the country that have been blamed on al-Qaida. Picture: AP Source: AP

until after the summit, while security forces have mooted the possibility of imposing a city-wide curfew on March 29, when Arab leaders are expected in Baghdad.

Yesterday's deadliest attacks occurred in Kirkuk and Karbala, where 26 people died in total.

In ethnically-mixed Kirkuk, a suicide bomber blew up a vehicle at a police building, killing 13 people and wounding 50, according to Major Salam Zangana. All of the dead were police, as were the vast majority of those hurt.

The explosion, which was followed minutes later by a smaller car bomb, also badly damaged dozens of police cars and nearby homes belonging mostly to the tiny Kakaiyah religious minority.

"We have also received parts of bodies, but we do not know who they belong to," said Mohammed Abdullah, a doctor at Kirkuk hospital.

In Karbala, two roadside blasts at the entrance to the city killed 13 people and wounded 48, according to provincial health spokesman Jamal Mehdi.

Karbala police spokesman Major Alaa Abbas gave the same casualty toll in the city, which is home to the shrines of revered Shiite leaders Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas.

Hours before yesterday's foreign ministry attack, a car bomb set off by a suicide attacker in the centre of the capital killed four people and wounded eight, officials said.

An early-morning gun attack on a Baghdad church also left three police dead.

Car bombs in Hilla, south of Baghdad, and Ramadi, west of the capital, killed four people and woun-

ded 42, officials said.

A later roadside bombing in Ramadi targeting Anbar provincial governor Qassim Mohammed Abed left two people wounded, although Abed himself was unharmed.

Separate gun and bomb attacks in Salaheddin province, north of the capital, killed four people, including a city councillor, police said. Gunmen also killed a member of the Shabak minority in the main northern city of Mosul.

Bombings in Mosul, the refinery town of Baiji, the northern towns of Baquba, Daquq and Al-Dhuluiyah, and the central town of Mahmudiyah left 32 people wounded. A car bomb in the Salaheddin city of Samarra caused no casualties.

Security forces also said they defused six more car bombs.

Yesterday's violence was Iraq's deadliest day since January 14, when 53 people were killed in a suicide bombing outside the southern port of Basra.

The attacks come on the ninth anniversary of the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq which ousted Saddam Hussein, and just days before Baghdad hosts the Arab League summit, the first meeting of the 22-nation bloc to be held in the Iraqi capital since Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Officials insist Iraq's forces are capable of maintaining security for the summit, but admit they may need to effectively shut down Baghdad to do so.

TIME

MARCH 20, 2012

In Turkey's Kurdish Southeast, an Incendiary Celebration

By Piotr Zalewski / Diyarbakir

On Sunday morning on the outskirts of Diyarbakir, the biggest city in Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast, a pair of boys, no older than 12, took a break from throwing stones at a burning carcass of a truck to set the record straight. "We were the ones who set fire to it, and also to the others," one of them proudly told me, pointing to a row of nearby vehicles swallowed by flames. The trucks had belonged to Turkcell, Turkey's biggest mobile phone operator. Before I could ask what had made the vehicles a legitimate target — perhaps the widespread rumor that the company had colluded with Turkish authorities to wiretap Kurdish activists — a police car approached. The boys scampered off.

Thousands of men and women streamed past the burning trucks en route to an open field where the celebrations of Newroz, the Kurdish new year, were due to take place. Many had spent the morning battling squadrons of riot police who had attempted to block access to the area. Molotov cocktails and stones had been met with water cannons, tear gas, batons and, in some instances, live ammunition. (A few policemen had fired warning shots into the air.)

Even before the government's decision to deny the Kurds' request to organize Newroz on March 18 — the authorities in Diyarbakir and Istanbul insisted that it be held on the traditional date, March 21, a weekday — the stage was set for some sort of showdown. In late December, a botched airstrike by the Turkish army had killed 34 Kurdish smugglers near the border with Iraq. And in the days preceding Newroz, dozens of Kurds became the latest in a wave of some 5,000 activists — including members of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) — detained on terrorism-related charges since 2009. Weapons and explosives were seized during some of the arrests, according to Turkish media.

Although Prime Minister Recep



Demonstrators, holding a portrait of jailed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan, walk past a burning mobile telephone relay station in Diyarbakir, southeastern Turkey, March 18, 2012. Reuters

Tayyip Erdogan's government has taken some steps to give new cultural rights to Turkey's 12 million to 15 million Kurds (as much as 20% of the country's population), Ankara has made it clear that political autonomy is not up for discussion. In the face of a backlash by Turkish nationalists, a series of proposed reforms packaged as a "Kurdish opening" has come to naught.

Muhittin Ozel, a pensioner, stopped to take photos of the burning trucks — the mountains on one side and half-built apartment blocs on the other appeared to make for a good background. "Erdogan suspended dialogue, that's why we're at war again," he said, referring to renewed clashes between the Turkish army and the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). "We want to live alongside the Turks, but with autonomy and language rights."

From a stage set up at the edge of the field, Abdullah Demirbas, the BDP mayor of central Diyarbakir, took in the view — crowds of tens of thousands who had arrived in defiance of the government ban, smoke from the bonfires lit to celebrate Newroz, and smoke from the burning cars — and warned of things to come. "We're the last generation that wants a peaceful end to this conflict," he told me, our conversation occasionally drowned by chants, music and applause. "If there is no solution, the Kurdish politicians will no longer have any authority, and the young people will go to the mountains [to join the PKK]." Unless the government puts a stop to the arrests, Demirbas said, the

Kurdish southeast will explode. "What people are saying this Newroz is that this is the last chance for peace."

Standing below the stage, Yildiz, an elderly housewife decked out in her Newroz finest, her head wrapped in a green-yellow-and-red headscarf, said she would rather dance and celebrate than politic. But because the authorities cut electricity to the stage, she complained, there was no musical program to speak of. "We'll still come, even if the state doesn't allow it, and even if there's no music."

From atop a party bus in the middle of the field, Selahattin Demirtas, the leader of the BDP, cursed the police helicopters hovering overhead. As he announced that Turkish police had tried to break up Newroz demonstrations in Istanbul — a BDP politician was killed in the resulting clashes — the surrounding crowd broke into chants of "Erdogan murderer" and "PKK is the people, and the people are here."

"When there are protests in Egypt or in Syria, Erdogan tells their leaders to listen to the voice of the people," Demirtas said. "If he doesn't want to be like the dictators in the Middle East, he has to do the same."

Three young men, having made their way onto the roof of another bus parked less than a hundred yards away, interrupted Demirtas' speech, yelling the text of a prepared statement into a microphone. The armed struggle must be kept alive, they insisted. For lack of a mask, one

had wrapped a banner with the image of the PKK's jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan around his face. "Without the leader, there'll be no freedom," the men shouted, intoning Ocalan's name. The crowds around me, turning their back to Demirtas, repeated the chant.

Standing next to me, Rahima, a young Kurd living in Sweden, rolled her eyes. "These guys, they make it hard for the politicians," she said. In the 1980s and 90s, "when no one listened to the Kurds, the PKK was necessary. Not now." Over 30 years, the conflict has claimed 40,000 lives,

victims of armed clashes, brutal reprisals by Turkish security forces and terrorist attacks by the PKK. Today, says Rahima, violence no longer makes sense. "Ocalan may have been the first to speak up for the Kurds, but no one has ever elected him. I want Kurds to listen to their politicians, not him."

Easier said than done. Even if the PKK tries to keep the BDP on the same wavelength, Kurdish politicians "don't have to be told to do anything," Henri Barkey, a Turkey expert at Lehigh University, told me. "Most of them really buy into the PKK line.

The PKK's great success is that it has crystalized Kurdish identity around [itself]."

As the festivities died down and the crowds trickled back to the city center, I spotted another pair of GSM trucks to the left of the stage, burnt-out, disfigured, belching clouds of ash. Groups of children surrounded them. The girls, wearing bright sequined dresses, watched as the boys set about gutting the vehicles' remains for scrap metal.

□ □ □

Rudaw

21 March 2012

No Consensus on Kurdish Flag at Erbil Youth Conference

By BARZAN MUHAMMAD

rudaw.net

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region -- At the International Kurdish Youth Conference in Erbil this month, youth groups could not reach a consensus on the issue of the Kurdish flag.

Some youth organizations closely tied to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) even boycotted parts of the conference.

The conference presented a number of proposals, among them the state of the Kurdish flag.

"The national Kurdish flag must be respected and raised above political party flags," stated the proposal.

As the proposal was read out, it received warm applause from the majority of attendants, but youth representatives from the PKK, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), the Democratic Unity of Kurdistan Party (PYD) and the Democratic Solution Party of Kurdistan (PCDK) opposed the motion.

Shimal Ulkem, coordinator of Ciwanan Kurdistan of the PKK, said, "We can decide on Kurdish youth issues, but not the whole Kurdish nation. A 23-year-old person cannot decide for all the Kurds in the world and choose a Kurdish flag."

Ulkem also delivered a speech at the conference, suggesting that the issue of choosing a national flag be decided at a national convention, not at the youth conference.



A youth speaker at the Kurdish Youth Conference in Erbil. Photo DIHA.

"For this reason, we boycotted the conference," said Ulkem.

Youth groups who walked out of the conference returned only after organizers agreed to adjourn the issue of the flag for a national convention in the future.

Umed Khoshnaw, secretary of the Union of Kurdistan Youth, said, "We did not choose the national flag of Kurdistan and call for respect to be shown to the flag. Let the national convention decide on the matter of the flag and select a flag that can be respected by all parts of Kurdistan."

Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani spoke on the first day of the conference, saying a national convention would be held in the future. Now it seems the issue of a national flag will bring some arguments to that congress as well.

The current flag that is widely

accepted by the Kurds was first raised in 1946 when Qazi Muhammad declared the Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad in western Iran. It is red, green and white with a sun in the middle. The PKK uses a different flag that is red, yellow and green.

Osman Ocalan, brother of jailed PKK leader Abdulla Ocalan and one-time leader of the PKK, expressed his surprise at the attitude of the youth groups, saying that the PKK leadership accepted the current flag of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2002.

Ocalan, who has since resigned from the PKK and lives in Koye city, said, "At that time, a delegation from the National Kurdish Congress visited us in the mountains and asked the PKK to accept the Kurdish flag as their own flag. The PKK were divided into two groups and one group did not accept this flag. But later, in the name of the PKK leadership council, the flag was accepted as the national flag of all Kurds."

Ocalan believes youth members of the PKK are influenced by their ideological and ethnic tendencies.

"Now the leftist and the Alawite groups are influential within the PKK and they work together," he said. "The support base of these two groups is among young people who have little nationalistic sentiment and can refuse this flag. This is not nice for the Kurdish nation."◆

Syrie : la minorité kurde cherche sa voie

Damas tente de se ménager le soutien de ce groupe fort de deux millions de personnes, dont une partie réclame le départ d'el-Assad.

Par Fatma Kizilboga

Aldar Xelîl est absorbé par les images de manifestations retransmises sur l'écran plasma du petit hôtel dans lequel il reçoit. «Les villes à majorité kurde sont celles où la rue reste la plus mobilisée», lâche fièrement ce responsable du parti de l'Union démocratique (PYD), rencontré à Erbil, capitale du Kurdistan irakien et nouveau bastion de l'opposition syrienne kurde en exil. Le rassemblement est diffusé sur Ronahi TV, la dernière chaîne du paysage audiovisuel kurde, lancée au mois d'octobre par la diaspora de Suède. Réunie par dizaines, une foule majoritairement constituée de femmes et d'enfants affiche les couleurs kurdes et entonne des chants populaires ponctués de «Azadi!», «Liberté!». Au moment où la répression menée par le régime el-Assad s'intensifie dans les villes du Nord-Est, un curieux vent de liberté caresse la minorité kurde de Syrie, estimée à plus de deux millions et longtemps victime de la politique d'arabisation du régime baasiste.

«On ne peut pas parler de progrès en matière de droits, dans la mesure où les lois restent les mêmes. Mais nous comptons bien mettre à profit la situation actuelle», explique Aldar. Sur le terrain, cela s'illustre notamment par des cérémonies de réattribution symbolique de noms de villages kurdes et l'ouverture de centres culturels, de Qamishli à Alep en passant par Damas. Ceci, sans que les autorités syriennes interviennent.

«Que doit-on faire? Leur demander de nous envoyer leurs tanks?», ironise Aldar. «Le gouvernement est débordé par la contestation dans les villes sunnites, la majorité des forces de sécurité est donc concentrée à l'ouest du pays», poursuit l'homme, les yeux à nouveau rivés sur le petit écran alors que la caméra s'attarde sur un portrait d'Abdullah Öcalan. La manifestation prend soudain des airs de meeting en faveur de la libération du leader du PKK, le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, emprisonné à perpétuité en



Turquie.

Si le PYD revendique le soutien de 60% de la communauté kurde de Syrie, ses liens avec le PKK suscitent la méfiance du reste de l'opposition. Car les rapports entre le groupe armé kurde et le régime syrien ont toujours davantage dépendu du degré d'entente entre Ankara et Damas que du climat politique intérieur. Pendant dix-neuf ans, c'est depuis la plaine de la Bekaa, alors sous contrôle syrien, qu'Öcalan dirige son mouvement en guerre ouverte contre la Turquie. Face au refus de Damas d'extrader l'ennemi public numéro un d'Ankara, la Turquie menace en 1998 d'entrer en guerre. Rapidement, le fondateur du PKK est prié de quitter le territoire. S'ensuit une cavale qui prendra fin en février 1999. À l'heure où l'équilibre régional est à nouveau fragilisé, Ankara met en garde le régime baasiste contre toute tentative de manipulation du groupe armé kurde, alors qu'un récent rapport des services secrets turcs rend compte de l'infiltration de combattants du PKK par la frontière syrienne. Des informations auxquelles a réagi le ministre turc des Affaires étrangères, Ahmet Davutoglu, qui a prévenu qu'Ankara n'hésiterait pas à déployer ses troupes dans le nord-est de la Syrie si la sécurité de la Turquie était menacée.

«PÉRIODE POUR L'AVENIR DES KURDES DANS LA RÉGION»

«Nous n'avons rien à voir avec ces personnes!», s'empresse de clarifier Abdulhamit Bashar, à la tête du KNCS,

le Conseil national kurde en Syrie. Formée en octobre 2011, cette organisation regroupe 11 partis politiques prokurdes et souhaite s'imposer comme représentante légitime de la minorité. Fin janvier, le KNCS ainsi que 200 figures de l'opposition se sont réunis à Erbil à l'appel de Massoud Barzani. Le président du Kurdistan irakien, qui soulignait le «caractère historique de la période pour l'avenir des Kurdes dans la région», appelait cette coalition à mettre de côté les divisions et à s'entendre au plus vite avec le Conseil national syrien. Des négociations qui semblent avoir porté leurs fruits. À l'issue de la réunion des «amis de la Syrie» tenue le mois dernier à Tunis, le secrétaire général du Conseil national syrien, Burhan Ghalioun, promettait la reconnaissance de l'identité kurde, ainsi que la mise en place d'un système décentralisé si le régime el-Assad venait à tomber.

«Tout le monde semble aujourd'hui accepter la future création d'une région autonome kurde en Syrie, à l'instar du modèle irakien. La question est aujourd'hui de savoir qui sera à la tête de cette région», explique une source proche du gouvernement régional kurde en Irak, avant de poursuivre: «En laissant le champ libre au PKK, el-Assad menace indirectement la Turquie. Au-delà de l'urgence humanitaire, la chute du régime baasiste est donc devenue pour Ankara un enjeu sécuritaire. Difficile de prédire comment se terminera ce bras de fer, mais une chose est sûre: la position des Kurdes de Syrie, comme ce fut le cas en Irak, n'en sera que renforcée.»

Turquie: vaste opération anti-PKK, 6 policiers et 6 rebelles tués

DIYARBAKIR (Turquie)-(AFP) - Six policiers et six rebelles kurdes du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) ont été tués en deux jours d'intenses combats dans le sud-est de la Turquie, a-t-on indiqué jeudi de source de sécurité.

Plusieurs milliers de soldats et de policiers participaient aux opérations appuyées par l'aviation turque (hélicoptères de combat et chasseurs) aux abords du mont Cudi, dans la province de Sirnak, proche de la frontière avec la Syrie et l'Irak, a-t-on précisé.

Le ministre de l'Intérieur Idris Naim Sahin avait annoncé mercredi soir que cinq policiers avaient été tués dans les heurts survenus depuis mardi.

Mercredi, un sixième membre des forces spéciales de la police a été tué et six rebelles abattus dans l'offensive turque contre un nombre indéterminé de membres du PKK qui se cachent dans cette zone montagneuse, selon la source de sécurité.



afp.com/Mustafa Ozer

M. Sahin et de hauts responsables militaires se sont rendus sur les lieux des combats, les plus violents de cette année, qui se poursuivaient jeudi.

Pour sa part, le porte-parole de l'aile militaire du PKK, Bakhtiyar Doghan, a indiqué par téléphone à l'AFP à Erbil dans le Kurdistan irakien, que "les patrouilles du PKK avaient tué huit soldats turcs mercredi".

Les membres du PKK, retranchés dans des caches situées en Turquie et

dans le nord de l'Irak, frappées régulièrement par l'aviation turque, profitent de la fonte des neiges au printemps pour s'infiltrer d'Irak en Turquie afin d'y organiser des attaques.

C'est pendant cette période que les forces d'Ankara intensifient les opérations contre les rebelles.

La police est de plus en plus impliquée dans la lutte contre les rebelles du PKK, alors qu'auparavant cette tâche revenait essentiellement à l'armée.

Le conflit kurde en Turquie a fait plus de 45.000 morts, selon l'armée, depuis le début de l'insurrection du PKK en 1984 dans le sud-est anatolien, peuplé majoritairement de kurdes.

Le PKK est considéré comme une organisation terroriste par la Turquie et de nombreux pays. Son chef Abdullah Öcalan, purge depuis 1999 une peine à vie dans une prison de Turquie d'où il dirige son mouvement armé par le biais de ses avocats qui lui rendent régulièrement visite.■

En Turquie, l'interdiction de la célébration de Nowrouz enflamme les régions kurdes



mercredi 21 mars 2012 à Istanbul, Jérôme Bastion

La célébration du printemps kurde, Nowrouz, est à nouveau entachée de violences en Turquie, après l'interdiction des rassemblements prévus par l'opposition kurde. Après les troubles du dimanche 18 mars 2012, particulièrement violent à Istanbul, c'est le sud-est qui a connu des affrontements entre policiers et manifestants, faisant des blessés des deux côtés.

Dans cinq provinces du sud-est, à majorité kurde, il y a eu des scènes d'intifada comme on en avait plus vues depuis longtemps. C'est l'interdiction de tout rassemblement, d'abord décrétée à Istanbul, qui a mis le feu aux poudres alors qu'habituellement, et depuis des années, les célébrations étaient fortement encadrées certes, mais autorisées.

Des coups de feu tirés

Dimanche 18 mars, à Istanbul, les quartiers prévus pour accueillir le rassemblement du parti prokurde BDP a été le théâtre d'importantes déprédations et de bagarres de rue, dans lesquelles un homme a été tué par une grenade lacrymogène reçue en pleine tête. Ce mardi, ce sont des manifestations spontanées et interdites dans les villes de Mersin, Batman, Sirnak,



Van, Cizre et Yüksekova qui ont dégénéré en affrontements d'une grande intensité.

Plusieurs députés du BDP ont été molestés et l'un d'eux a même été hospitalisé après avoir reçu un coup de poing dans l'œil, apparemment administré par un policier en tenue. Dans deux de ces manifestations, des coups de feu ont même été tirés contre les forces de sécurité, blessant au moins huit policiers.

Les célébrations prévues ce mercredi 22 mars à Diyarbakir ont également été interdites.■

La fête du Newroz tourne aux affrontements en Turquie

Delphine Nerbollier (à Istanbul)

● Les célébrations du printemps kurde ont été interdites, sauf le jour du 21 mars, par le gouvernement turc.

● Ankara durcit sa politique envers les Kurdes de Turquie.

À QUOI CORRESPOND LA FÊTE DU NEWROZ ?

Célébrée le 21 mars dans les pays turcophones, en Afghanistan, en Iran – où elle correspond au Nouvel An – et par les Kurdes, elle marque le premier jour du printemps. En Turquie, cette fête a une dimension très politique. Elle est devenue l'un des temps forts de la communauté kurde, dont le mouvement armé du PKK (Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan), qui en a fait un symbole de la résistance au pouvoir d'Ankara. Les autorités turques ont cherché à se réapproprier cette fête. Ainsi, mercredi, le préfet d'Istanbul a accompli le saut au-dessus d'un feu, lors d'une cérémonie très encadrée, aux côtés de représentants du monde turcophone et au son des fanfares ottomanes.

POURQUOI LES CÉLÉBRATIONS ONT-ELLES MAL TOURNÉ ?

La tension est forte lors de ces célébrations, et les heurts fréquents. Pour la première fois depuis de nombreuses années, Ankara a interdit toutes célébrations en dehors du mercredi 21 mars, qui n'est pas un jour férié. Les organisations kurdes avaient prévu concerts et meetings dans 130 localités. Pour Gültan Kisanak, coprésidente du parti BDP (Parti pour la paix et la démocratie), cette décision est une « provocation »



(MUSTAFA OZER/AFP)

En Turquie, des Kurdes protestent contre le gouvernement d'Ankara tout en effectuant le « saut au-dessus du feu » l'un des symboles de la fête de Newroz.

et une « décision personnelle du premier ministre ». Elle l'a appelé à faire du 21 mars une fête nationale, mais sa demande est restée sans réponse. Malgré les interdictions, des dizaines de milliers de personnes se sont réunies dimanche dernier à Diyarbakir, principale ville kurde de l'est du pays. Le rassemblement a tourné aux affrontements. De même à Van, Mersin, Istanbul où le président d'un bureau local du parti BDP a été tué d'un jet de grenade lacrymogène. Mardi, le très respecté député Ahmet Turk a été frappé au visage par un policier en uniforme. Et, mercredi, un policier est mort en service à Cizre.

QUELLES CONSÉQUENCES POUR UNE ÉVENTUELLE RÉOLUTION DE LA QUESTION KURDE ?

Les célébrations du Newroz servent de baromètre à l'état des relations entre Ankara et les groupes kurdes. La gestion de cette fête par les autorités turques est critiquée dans

les milieux libéraux qui estiment que cette interdiction, sans fondement, a attisé les tensions déjà très vives. Pour l'intellectuel Cengiz Çandar, ce Newroz, « le plus violent des vingt dernières années », révèle « l'échec de la politique sécuritaire » d'Ankara depuis les élections de juin 2011 et l'abandon des négociations secrètes avec le PKK.

Depuis l'été dernier, un régime draconien d'isolement a été imposé au leader kurde Abdullah Öcalan, emprisonné depuis 1999, tandis que les arrestations de militants et sympathisants kurdes (dont des maires et des avocats), soupçonnés de liens avec le PKK, se poursuivent à un rythme quasi quotidien. Mercredi 6 soldats et 7 membres du PKK sont morts lors d'affrontements dans le sud-est du pays. □

Turquie: 15 femmes rebelles kurdes tuées par les forces de l'ordre

ANKARA (AFP) - Quinze rebelles kurdes, des femmes, ont été tuées samedi dans des combats avec les forces de sécurité dans le sud-est de la Turquie, a annoncé le ministère turc de l'Intérieur.

Les heurts se sont produits dans une zone rurale de la province de Bitlis, un des théâtres de la rébellion armée du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), précise un communiqué, rapporté par l'agence de presse officielle Anatolie.

Un "gardien de village", force supplétive kurde armée par l'Etat turc contre le PKK, a été tué et trois autres blessés dans les combats, selon le document.

De source de sécurité locale dans le sud-est anatolien, zone peuplée majoritairement de Kurdes et champ d'action du PKK, on précise que le mouvement séparatiste kurde dispose d'unités entièrement constituées de femmes et c'est une telle formation qui a été décimée.

Sept policiers et six rebelles avaient été tués lors d'une vaste opération qui a duré trois jours et s'est achevée vendredi aux abords du mont Cudi (sud-est), proche

de la frontière irakienne.

En moins d'une semaine, les combats ont ainsi coûté la vie à 29 personnes, 21 rebelles et huit membres des forces de sécurité, signe d'une recrudescence des violences avec l'arrivée du printemps.

Les membres du PKK, retranchés dans des caches situées en Turquie et dans le nord de l'Irak, frappées régulièrement par l'aviation turque, profitent de la fonte des neiges pour s'infiltrer d'Irak en Turquie afin d'y organiser des attaques.

C'est pendant cette période que les forces d'Ankara, l'armée et de plus en plus des unités spéciales de la police ces derniers temps, intensifient les opérations contre les rebelles.

La presse turque a rapporté ce derniers jours que le gouvernement du Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP, issu de la mouvance islamiste) avait décidé de changer son fusil d'épaule, cessant tout contact direct avec le PKK, dans un nouvel effort politique d'en terminer avec ce mouvement.

Le contact sera également rompu avec Abdullah Öcalan, le chef historique du PKK qui purge depuis 1999 une peine à



Quinze rebelles kurdes, des femmes, ont été tuées samedi dans de combats avec les forces de sécurité dans le sud-est de la Turquie, a annoncé le ministère turc de l'Intérieur. (© AFP Mustafa Ozer)

vie dans une prison du nord-ouest de la Turquie d'où il dirige son mouvement par le biais de ses avocats qui lui rendent régulièrement visite.

Un politique d'ouverture pro-kurde de l'AKP lancée en 2009 a fait long feu, et a été très critiquée par ses détracteurs car elle impliquait des premières discussions directes avec la direction du PKK.

Le Premier ministre Recep Tayyip Erdogan, qui a préféré adopter un ton plus ferme à l'égard du PKK, multipliant les opérations armées et une offensive judiciaire contre les

ramifications du PKK, chercherait, selon le journal libéral Milliyet, à s'allier le président du Kurdistan irakien, Massoud Barzani, pour obtenir notamment un désarmement des rebelles retranchés dans la montagne irakienne.

Le conflit kurde en Turquie a fait plus de 45.000 morts, selon l'armée, depuis le début de l'insurrection du PKK en 1984 dans le sud-est anatolien. Le PKK est considéré comme une organisation terroriste par la Turquie et de nombreux pays. ●



22 mars 2012

Le PKK met en garde la Turquie contre toute incursion en Syrie

Reuters

Les séparatistes kurdes du PKK ont menacé, ce jeudi, de transformer en «zone de guerre» toutes les régions kurdes si les forces turques pénètrent en Syrie.

«L'Etat turc prépare une intervention contre notre peuple», a affirmé Murat Karayilan, commandant du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), à l'agence de presse Firat, proche des séparatistes. «Que les choses soient claires: si l'Etat turc intervient contre notre peuple au Kurdistan occidental, tout le Kurdistan se transformera en une zone de guerre», ajoute-t-il.

Prise de position pour le régime de Bachar al Assad

Les nationalistes kurdes regroupent sous l'appellation de Kurdistan occidental les régions du nord-est de la Syrie. Dans leur lexique, le Kurdistan englobe, lui, toutes les régions kurdes, en Turquie, en Irak, en Syrie et en Iran.

La mise en garde suggère que le PKK pourrait prendre position pour le régime de Bachar al Assad en Syrie, où le mouvement séparatiste compte des alliés et où la communauté kurde représente au moins 10% de la population. □

AFP

Irak: Maliki accusé par ses alliés kurdes de monopoliser le pouvoir

BAGDAD, 20 mars 2012 (AFP)

LE DIRIGEANT KURDE Massoud Barzani a lancé mardi une attaque en règle contre le Premier ministre irakien Nouri al-Maliki, accusé de monopoliser le pouvoir, laissant craindre une nouvelle crise politique à quelques jours d'un sommet de la Ligue arabe à Bagdad.

Le président du Kurdistan a célébré à sa façon le Nouvel An kurde, qui tombe mercredi, en se lançant dans une violente diatribe contre le Premier ministre chiite, dont sa faction est l'alliée au gouvernement depuis les élections législatives de 2010.

"Il est très regrettable qu'un petit nombre de gens à Bagdad se soit imposé et ait monopolisé le pouvoir", a-t-il tempêté dans un discours à Erbil, capitale du Kurdistan irakien, selon une traduction de son discours en anglais.

"Le partage du pouvoir et le partenariat entre Kurdes, arabes sunnites et chiites, et autres est à présent totalement inexistant et a perdu tout son sens", a-t-il accusé.

Les députés kurdes occupent près d'un cinquième des sièges du Parlement, et l'alliance kurde, constituée des deux principaux partis de la région, compte cinq portefeuilles au gouvernement.

M. Barzani a aussi accusé M. Maliki de mettre sur pied une force à ses ordres. "On assiste à une tentative de mettre sur pied une armée d'un million d'âmes dévouées à une seule personne", a-t-il souligné.

"Où, dans le monde, une seule et même personne peut-elle être Premier ministre, chef des armées, ministre de la Défense, ministre de l'Intérieur, chef des services secrets et chef du conseil de sécurité nationale ?", a-t-il martelé.

Deux ans après les élections législatives, M. Maliki n'a toujours pas désigné de ministres de la Défense et de l'Intérieur, en dépit de la situation sécuritaire toujours précaire de l'Irak.

Les disputes entre les Kurdes et Bagdad ne sont pas nouvelles. Ces derniers mois, le cas de la major pétrolière américaine ExxonMobil, qui souhaite s'implanter à la fois dans les deux parties du pays, ce que refuse catégoriquement le gouvernement, a suscité une vive polémique.

Erbil et Bagdad s'opposent aussi sur la souveraineté d'une bande longue de 650 km et riche en hydrocarbures, à cheval sur quatre provinces et



comprenant la ville multiethnique de Kirkouk. Cet épineux dossier est considéré comme l'une des principales menaces sur la stabilité de l'Irak à terme.

L'Irak est coutumier des crises politiques: la dernière avait éclaté en décembre entre M. Maliki et un autre de ses alliés, le bloc Iraquiya, lorsque l'un de ses dirigeants, le vice-président irakien Tarek al-Hachémi, avait été accusé d'avoir dirigé un groupe de tueurs et avait trouvé refuge au Kurdistan.

Le conflit, qui avait suscité des craintes de guerre confessionnelle, est depuis retombé et Iraquiya en est considéré comme le principal perdant.

Reste que les critiques de M. Barzani, qui dénotent un vif accroissement des tensions entre Bagdad et Erbil et suggèrent une possible rupture, tombent mal pour l'Irak.

Le pays a connu mardi une nouvelle journée sanglante, avec une série d'attentats qui a fait 50 morts. Bagdad s'apprête en outre à accueillir les 27-29 mars un sommet de la Ligue arabe sur lequel il compte énormément pour retrouver un rôle régional après le départ des forces américaines en décembre 2011.

Les critiques à l'encontre de M. Maliki font écho à celles de l'organisation de défense des droits de l'Homme Human Rights Watch (HRW), qui avait dénoncé en janvier l'"autourisme" croissant de l'Irak, qualifié d'"Etat policier en devenir".○

AFP

Irak: Bagdad minimise les menaces kurdes sur le pétrole (ministre)

BAGDAD, 27 mars 2012 (AFP)

LE MINISTRE IRAKIEN des Finances a relativisé mardi les menaces proférées la veille par le gouvernement autonome du Kurdistan sur un éventuel arrêt des exportations de pétrole.

"Nous n'avons pas peur si la région du Kurdistan décide d'arrêter les exportations", a dit à l'AFP le ministre Rifaa al-Issawi en marge du sommet des ministres arabes de l'Economie et des Finances qui se tient à Bagdad.

Il a précisé que le gouvernement fédéral avait provisionné cette année 650 milliards de dinars (546 millions de dollars) dans le budget et était prêt à payer les compagnies étrangères opérant dans les trois provinces kurdes du nord, une fois reçus les documents appropriés du gouvernement autonome.

De nouvelles tensions liées au pétrole ont surgi lundi entre la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien et le gouvernement central, accusé par Erbil

d'importants arriérés de paiement et d'avoir conclu un accord illégal avec la major BP.

Ces nouveaux litiges interviennent sur fond de conflit territorial persistant entre le Kurdistan et Bagdad, et alors que la capitale s'apprête à accueillir son premier sommet de la Ligue arabe depuis plus de 20 ans, signant le retour de l'Irak sur la scène régionale.

Le Kurdistan a menacé lundi de mettre fin à ses exportations de brut si Bagdad n'honorait pas ses dettes envers elle.

"Les exportations de pétrole de la région du Kurdistan ont été réduites à 50.000 barils par jour (bj) et pourraient cesser d'ici un mois si le gouvernement fédéral à Bagdad continue de bloquer les paiements aux compagnies productrices", a affirmé le gouvernement régional dans un communiqué.

Le texte souligne que la dette cumulée du gouvernement central envers le Kurdistan s'élève à "près de 1,5 milliard de dollars". Le dernier versement remonte à mai 2011.

Le Kurdistan précise qu'il "maintient son objectif d'exportation de 175.000 bj prévu dans le budget 2012 de l'Irak et pourrait exporter beaucoup plus si le gouvernement honorait ses engagements à payer".○

America needs a Kurdish policy

BY JOHN HANNAH

Among the Iraq-related anniversaries to consider, here's one more: Twenty-one years ago this week, millions of Iraqi Kurds set flight for the desolate, snow-capped mountains bordering Turkey and Iran, frantically seeking to escape the advancing armies of Saddam Hussein. Fresh off his humiliating defeat in the first Gulf War, Saddam had quickly trained his guns on wiping out all internal opposition to his tyrannical rule.

Where the Kurds were concerned, his purpose seemed clear. Saddam aimed to eliminate once and for all the persistent challenge this proud, irrepressible minority had long posed to his dictatorship. Genocide was on tap, the completion of a job begun in 1988, when Iraqi forces razed thousands of Kurdish villages, murdered their inhabitants, and rained chemical weapons down on the innocent men, women and children of a town called Halabja.

Now, with their backs literally to the wall, freezing to death on a barren mountainside, facing Saddam's full vengeance, the Kurds' destruction seemed nigh.

Until, that is: America. Said. No. Working with a small group of allies, the United States, quite simply, saved the Kurds. Saddam's army was ordered to stand down or face renewed hostilities. U.S. ground forces deployed to northern Iraq and organized one of history's greatest humanitarian rescues, Operation Provide Comfort. A no-fly zone was established over Kurdistan, which U.S. aircraft patrolled until 2003, when America finally settled its score with Saddam for good, liberating almost 30 million people from his republic of fear, including the long-suffering Kurds.



It's a story of deliverance and American leadership well worth recalling, especially this year. For the first time in a generation, Iraq's Kurds find themselves without direct American protection. President Obama's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq has once again left the Kurds largely alone. While no longer confronting Saddam's terror, the long shadow of their anguished history remains, as do unresolved tensions not only with Iraq's majority Arabs, but with powerful neighbors in Iran, Syria and Turkey struggling with disadvantaged Kurdish minorities of their own.

It's a mix of fear, loathing and foreign meddling that, left untended, could easily lead to conflict and even war -- both inside Iraq and, perhaps, regionally. That, indeed, would be tragic -- for the often-betrayed Kurds, to be sure, but also for the prestige and long-term interests of their main benefactor, the United States.

Say what you will about the American project in Iraq, its application in Kurdistan was well down the path toward success. As happened in Germany, Japan and South Korea after World War II, a few decades of intense American engagement had begun working wonders for the Kurds. Excellent security -- indeed, not a single U.S. combat death in areas under Kurdish control. A booming economy with growing levels of foreign investment. And an emerging democracy that, while far from perfect, has seen real opposition parties emerge, as well as a burgeoning civil society and media. Yes, corruption, lack of accountability, and uneven develop-

ment remain serious problems. But certainly no worse than, say, South Korea circa the 1970s, at a similar point in that country's experience under America's wing.

Properly nourished, Iraqi Kurdistan has all the makings of a U.S. strategic asset. Iraq's Arabs may have been profoundly ambivalent about a continued role for American troops. But not the Kurds, whose leaders loudly proclaimed their desire for a permanent U.S. presence, and whose population of some 5 million is overwhelmingly pro-American. Sharing borders with Iran and Syria, Kurdistan could play a vital role in U.S. strategy to combat the serious threats now emanating from those anti-American regimes. Kurdish security and intelligence forces are competent and battle-hardened, and after years of cooperation have built up excellent working relations with their U.S. counterparts, including in fighting Al Qaeda. And sitting atop 40-50 billion barrels of oil, Kurdistan is poised to become one of the world's largest petroleum producers, a major contributor to global energy security.

Confident in its U.S. backing, Kurdistan could serve as both engine and anchor for the rest of Iraq's democratic development. But America's precipitous retreat has left behind a dangerous vacuum, a potential breeding ground for destructive acts of self-help that could easily spiral out of control. That vacuum urgently needs to be filled by a concerted American strategy to define a new, "special" relationship with Iraq's Kurds. Making clear that Kurdistan's well-being within a truly federal Iraq is a high U.S. priority could serve both to

deter potential aggressors while encouraging Kurdish restraint, patience and cooperation in dealing with the turmoil of Baghdad's day-to-day politics.

When Kurdish President Masoud Barzani visits Washington next month, the Obama administration would be well advised to use the opportunity to establish a new Joint Commission on U.S.-Kurdish relations to oversee the bilateral relationship, composed of high-level officials from both sides. America's consulate in Kurdistan should be led by a sen-

ior foreign service officer of ambassadorial rank, perhaps seconded by a retired general. Under the rubric of U.S. security assistance for Iraq, programs for equipping and training Kurdish security and intelligence services should be established, including robust channels for information sharing and other cooperative efforts. A joint initiative to expand dramatically American investment in Kurdistan needs to be launched, with a focus on expediting the region's emergence as a reliable energy exporter to Western markets. Technical assistance should be pro-

vided to support Kurdish efforts to battle corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and ensure human rights.

More than two decades after saving Iraq's Kurds from annihilation, it's time for America to institutionalize a long-term strategic relationship with them -- one that understands that a secure and prosperous Kurdistan, confident in its ties to the world's sole superpower, can be a boon to U.S. interests, and a force for stability and modernism throughout Iraq and the broader Middle East.●

Daily Press

March 22, 2012

Kurd militants threaten Turkey if it enters Syria

By Jon Hemming | Reuters

ANKARA - Turkish Kurd militants threatened on Thursday to turn all Kurdish populated areas into a "war zone" if Turkish troops entered Syria, a sign the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which has allies in Syria may be taking sides in the conflict there.

A renewed alliance between Damascus and the PKK would anger Turkey and could prompt it to take an even stronger line against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad over his brutal repression of anti-government protesters.

PKK field commander Murat Karayilan said Turkey was preparing the ground for an intervention in Syria.

"The Turkish state is planning an intervention against our people," the Europe-based Firat news agency, close to the militants, quoted him as saying.

"Let me state clearly, if the Turkish state intervenes against our people in western Kurdistan, all of Kurdistan will turn into a war zone," he said.

Western Kurdistan is the term Kurdish nationalists use to describe Kurdish areas of northeast Syria, while by Kurdistan they mean the Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said last week that setting up a "safe zone" or a "buffer zone" along the border with Syria to protect civilians from Assad's forces was among the options being considered should the stream of refugees turn into a flood.

Setting up such a zone would involve troops entering Syria to secure territory. Turkey has turned sharply against its former friend Assad and has taken a lead in trying to forge international agreement on the need for stronger action on Syria.

While Syrian government forces are clashing daily with insurgents demanding the downfall of Assad, Syrian Kurdish areas have remained relatively calm, despite many Kurds' long-standing opposition to the government.

Some Syrian Kurdish groups opposed to Assad have formed

their own umbrella group after complaining of being sidelined by the main opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), which they say is dominated by Arab nationalists.

But the comparative calm in Syria's Kurdish northeast may also be related to what some Kurdish analysts say is the growing influence of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish group allied to the PKK which has kept away from the opposition.

TURKEY WARNS SYRIA ON PKK

The PKK, set up in 1984 to fight for Kurdish home rule in southeast Turkey, is commanded from bases in the remote mountains of northern Iraq, but was once backed by Syria.

Though Turkey has the second biggest army in NATO, it has failed to quash the PKK in 27 years of bitter fighting. More than 40,000 militants, soldiers and civilians have been killed in the conflict. Turkey, the United States and the European Union all list the PKK as a terrorist organization.

Turkish officials say they are watching closely for signs Syria may renew its support for the PKK, which it dropped in late 1998 after Turkish tanks massed on the Syrian border. Damascus was forced to deport PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan who was later seized by Turkish special forces in Kenya.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has repeatedly said Syria "would not dare" make such a mistake again.

Kurds make up at least 10 percent of Syria's population. Like the majority of Syrians, they are Sunni Muslims, but have struggled to assert their ethnic identity under 40 years of Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party rule.

The Assad regime had denied some stateless Kurds Syrian nationality documents but it has made concessions since the start of the uprising to ease unrest in Kurdish areas.

Some Arabs are concerned that the Kurds, mostly based in northeast Syria on the borders with Turkey and Iraq, secretly seek a separate state that includes cross border territories.

Syrian Kurd opposition groups deny wanting a separate state, but say they want autonomy similar to that of the Iraqi Kurds.

BBC NEWS

22 MARCH 2012

7 Kurdish rebels and 6 Turkish police officers have been killed in clashes in the far south-east of the country

Turkish forces launched a large-scale operation against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) near Mount Cudi, in the province of Sirnak, on Wednesday.

Helicopter gunships were used in this, the largest attack on rebels in 2012.

Correspondents say the fighting was sparked by tensions surrounding the Kurdish New Year celebrations, Novruz.

Five of the officers died on Wednesday, while another was killed on Thursday, security officials said.

One rebel is reported to have been captured in the operation, which

involves both army troops and special operations police forces.

On Sunday, police in the south-eastern city of Diyarbakir used tear gas and water cannon to prevent thousands of Kurds from holding a demonstration timed to coincide with Novruz. The unrest later spread to other Turkish cities.

PKK rebels recently have stepped up their operations, correspondents say.

The rebel Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been fighting for autonomy in Turkey's largely Kurdish south-east since 1984, in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives. □

middle east online
میدل ایست اونلاین

MARCH 21, 2012

Barzani tells Iraqi PM 'enough is enough'

Kurdish leader accuses Maliki of monopolising power, building one-million-strong army loyal only to him.

Middle East Online — By Prashant Rao - BAGHDAD

Kurd leader Massud Barzani hinted on Tuesday at a possible break with Iraq's unity government, complaining that premier Nuri al-Maliki was monopolising power and building an army loyal only to him.

His remarks raised the rhetoric between his autonomous regional government in Arbil and the central government in Baghdad, with several key disputes festering between the two sides.

Barzani said the partnership that built a national unity government formed at a meeting he had hosted was now "completely non-existent and has become meaningless."

"There is an attempt to establish a one-million-strong army whose loyalty is only to a single person," Barzani, president of Kurdistan, said in a speech in Arbil, according to an English transcript.

He claimed that Maliki and the government were "waiting to get F-16 combat planes to examine its chances again with the peshmerga (Kurdish militia)," referring to a government order for 36 warplanes from the United States.

"Where in the world can the same person be the prime minister, the chief of staff of the armed forces, the minister of defence, the minister of interior, the chief of intelligence and the head of the national security council?" he asked.

Barzani said that while he was committed to an alliance with Iraq's majority Shiites, he was not committed to one with Maliki.

The premier has yet to appoint permanent ministers of defence and interior, more than two years after parliamentary elections.

Kurdish MPs hold nearly a fifth of the seats in parliament, and Barzani's Kurdish Alliance bloc has five cabinet posts in the nation-



nal unity government formed in November 2010.

Barzani continued: "We are committed to our alliance with the Shiites but not with this group of people who have monopolised power and with their policies have even marginalised other Shiites."

"It is time to say enough is enough. The current status of affairs is unacceptable to us and I call on all Iraqi political leaders to urgently try to find a solution. Otherwise, we will return to our people and will decide on whatever course of action that our people deem appropriate."

The central government and Kurdish regional authorities have been locked in protracted disputes over oil contracts with foreign oil firms and the status of a swathe of disputed territory around the northern oil hub of Kirkuk.

The Kurdistan region has signed around 40 contracts with international companies on a production-sharing basis without seeking the express approval of the central government's oil ministry.

The national oil ministry, meanwhile, has awarded energy contracts to international companies on the basis of a per-barrel service fee. It has also refused to sign deals with any firm that has agreed a contract with Kurdistan.

Arbil also wants Kirkuk and the disputed tract of land to be incorporated into its autonomous three-province region, but officials in Baghdad have steadfastly rejected those demands.

That dispute is regarded by diplomats as one of the greatest threats to Iraq's long-term stability.

In Iraq, growing gap sets Kurdistan apart



Ernesto Londono/The Washington Post -

Iraq's northern Kurdish region is thriving as foreign investors pour in, lured by its investment-friendly policies, security and vast oil reserves. The once sleepy city now has an air of Dubai grandeur.

BY ERNESTO LONDOÑO

IRBIL, Iraq — To land at the gleaming new airport in this booming regional capital is to glimpse what the United States hoped a decade ago that all of Iraq might become.

Cranes swivel across a skyline whose glittering high-rises and five-star hotels bring an air of Dubai grandeur. Modern malls with brightly lit boutiques do a brisk business. Modern, wide highways include pedestrian bridges, some with escalators.

This is Iraqi Kurdistan, a region that was semiautonomous even under Saddam Hussein, but one that has been transformed in remarkable ways since the American invasion of 2003. While the rest of Iraq remains saddled by scars and trauma from the conflicts the U.S. invasion unleashed, the Kurdistan region increasingly stands apart, with its own fractious, impoverished past mostly a distant memory.

But Kurdistan can only be held up as a success story with significant caveats. Security has come at the expense of the repressive features of a police state. Two ruling political parties have held on to power through a vast network of patronage that has given the opposition little breathing

room.

Perhaps most alarmingly, its historically acrimonious relationship with Baghdad has become downright poisonous since the last U.S. soldiers left the country last December — casting a pall over the sustainability of its aspirations.

"If the other Iraq cannot lift itself you will have a gap, and that gap will lead to conflict," Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to Kurdistan's president, Massoud Barzani, said in an interview in his office in Erbil.

Under Hussein, Kurdistan sat on vast oil reserves, but there were no commercial flights into the region. The gray, drab architecture spoke of a bygone era. Roads were rudimentary. Kurdish politics were infused with mistrust and the deeply entrenched grudges of a civil war.

Today, a combination of security, investor-friendly policies and the allure of unexplored energy reserves have attracted an increasing number of oil companies, including the world's largest, Exxon Mobil, which last year signed a landmark deal with Kurdish officials.

At the same time, the social, cultural and political gaps between

Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq have widened in recent years as the northern region, which was largely insulated from the insurgency and had virtually no U.S. military presence during the war, continues to prosper while the rest of the country remains beset by violence.

"The Kurdistan region, in terms of development and economic growth, has the potential to become the Iraq the U.S. had hoped for the entire country," said Denise Natali, a National Defense University professor who has studied the Kurds for decades.

'The other Iraq'

Irbil's new airport, completed in 2010, offers direct flights to Vienna, Dubai, Istanbul and Cairo, and it has been expanding steadily. Most foreigners can enter Kurdistan without a visa or may obtain one at the airport, unlike in Baghdad, which manages a cumbersome and expensive visa system that has long bedeviled prospective foreign investors.

The construction boom in virtually every corner of Irbil stands in sharp contrast to the dilapidated city of Mosul, just 50 miles east, where vast sections lie in ruins as a result of years of bombings by al-Qaeda in Iraq. To enter Kurdistan from the parts of Iraq controlled by Baghdad, Arab Iraqis must apply for special permission from Kurdish authorities, then navigate a series of checkpoints manned by Kurdish soldiers who often make little attempt to hide their contempt for Arabs.

Kurdistan now markets itself as "the other Iraq," with a revenue base that had grown to more than \$10 billion this year, mostly from oil exports and Turkish investment, from just \$100 million in 2003. Its battles with the rest of the country revolve around how to distribute oil wealth and whether the Kurds should be allowed to formally incorporate vast new areas into the region.

The growing schism has fueled the hopes for statehood that Kurds have long held. Zhenar Bakhtiar, 21, a salesman at a perfume shop in a sleek mall in Kurdistan's second largest city, Sulaymaniyah, said he dreams of the day when he will no longer bear an Iraqi passport.

"Five years from now, the Kurds will have their own state," he said on a recent afternoon. He identifies himself as Iraqi only when he travels abroad and must present his passport. "I'm a

— Kurd.”

Competing visions on oil

At first glance, the prospect of Kurdish statehood might seem plausible, if not inevitable. But the two regions remain intrinsically linked in two vital ways: Kurdistan gets its budget from Baghdad and must export the bulk of its oil through a pipeline the central government controls.

Baghdad and Irbil have laid out competing visions for how Iraq’s vast oil reserves should be explored. In the absence of an agreement, the two administrations have signed separate contracts with international oil companies in recent years. Officials in Baghdad are particularly irked by the nature of the Kurdistan region’s contracts, which give the oil companies a direct stake in the reserves.

The deals Baghdad has signed offer a flat rate per barrel of oil to internatio-

nal companies running the field, a less attractive type of deal. The dispute has prevented Iraqi lawmakers from producing a new hydrocarbons law. The recent Exxon deal was particularly jarring to Baghdad because it includes fields in disputed territories.

“Right now there are no negotiations, no process whatsoever,” between Baghdad and Irbil over the oil law, said Joost Hiltermann, an Iraq expert at the International Crisis Group. “This can only go on for so long. Once these fields start producing, Baghdad may draw a line and if the Kurds ignore that you can end up with a conflict.”

During its final years in Iraq, the U.S. military came to view the disputed territories along Kurdistan as one of the country’s most potentially destabilizing problems. American officials drew up plans to maintain large diplomatic missions in the provinces that border Kurdistan, in large part to act as honest

brokers. Those plans were later scaled down as it became apparent that the United States would not be able to leave behind a small number of troops in Iraq.

As oil production soars, and more money is at stake, anger among Arabs who live in the disputed territories is likely to flare up, said Abdullah Humaid Alyawar, the leader of the influential Shammar tribe. “When citizens see their political officials disappointed them, we will see them rely on themselves and their tribes,” he said.

Left to their own devices, Iraqis are unlikely to reach a solution, said Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish lawmaker.

“It needs an influential broker,” he said. “Between political blocs themselves we can’t solve it. The issue will stay as it is.” ■

the guardian March 24, 2012

Turkey: 15 female Kurdish rebel fighters killed in clashes with security forces

SUZAN FRASER—Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish forces killed 15 female Kurdish rebel fighters in clashes in southeast Turkey, officials said Saturday, in what is believed to be the largest one-day casualty toll for women since their guerrilla group began fighting for autonomy nearly 28 years ago.

The clashes occurred in a mainly Kurdish province of Bitlis, and in addition to the women it killed a government-paid village guard helping Turkish forces and wounded three others, the government said. The private Dogan news agency said the clashes occurred all day Friday.

The PKK, which is fighting for autonomy in Turkey’s mainly Kurdish southeast, was born out of Marxist ideology and believes in equality between men and women. It is believed to have several female units. Female PKK militants carried out suicide bombings in 1990s, killing dozens of troops and civilians.

Many female fighters have been killed alongside male comrades in clashes, but

Saturday’s toll was the highest number of female PKK casualties killed in clashes at any one time.

Earlier this month, unconfirmed Turkish media reports said eight female fighters were killed in an avalanche in neighboring northern Iraq, where the rebels maintain bases that launch hit-and-run attacks on Turkish targets.

The clashes in Bitlis coincided with an upsurge in fighting between the rebels and the security forces. At least seven Turkish security force members and 24 Kurdish rebels — including the 15 women — have been killed in fighting this week. Spring is the time when fighting picks up as snow melts from mountain passes, which the rebels use to sneak into the country from Iraq.

The PKK, considered a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States, took up arms in 1984. The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people since then.

A government campaign to reconcile with Kurds — who make up around 20 percent of Turkey’s 74 million people —



by granting them more rights stalled in 2009 amid a surge in fighting.

The government has also acknowledged that officials have held secret talks with the PKK, but has since vowed to maintain its military drive until the group lays down arms.

However, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other government officials have left the door open for dialogue with Kurdish groups not involved in violence.

Still, Kurdish politicians accuse the government of insincerity, citing police roundups of Kurdish activists, journalists and others suspected of rebel links.

□ □ □

Bagdad et Riyad renouent à la veille du sommet de la Ligue arabe

Est-ce un nouvel effet de la diplomatie Nayef? Depuis sa désignation comme héritier du trône des Saoud, le prince Nayef Ben Abdel Aziz se démène sur la scène régionale. Face à l'ennemi héréditaire, l'Irak perse et chiite, et son allié syrien, le futur homme fort de l'Arabie saoudite cherche à resserrer les rangs arabes. Malgré son hostilité à l'équipe au pouvoir à Bagdad, l'Arabie saoudite a donc mis fin à une anomalie de près de vingt-deux ans en rétablissant, fin février, des relations diplomatiques avec son voisin irakien.

L'Irak et l'Arabie saoudite n'avaient plus échangé d'ambassadeurs depuis la guerre du Golfe de 1990. L'invasion du Koweït par Saddam Hussein avait entraîné la rupture des relations diplomatiques. L'Arabie saoudite reprochait à Saddam Hussein de menacer la sécurité régionale et de vouloir contrôler par la force la majorité des réserves pétrolières du Moyen-Orient. Le régime baasiste, quant à lui, n'avait pas pardonné à Riyad d'avoir abrité l'énorme armada américaine à la tête de la coalition internationale qui avait chassé l'armée irakienne du Koweït à l'issue de l'opération « Tempête du désert » en janvier-février 1991.

Depuis, malgré les bouleversements régionaux, les choses étaient restées en l'état. L'invasion de l'Irak par les États-Unis en 2003 et le renversement de Saddam Hussein auraient dû rouvrir la voie à des relations diplomatiques normales. Mais l'afflux de djihadistes saoudiens en Irak, venus y combattre les occupants américains et les « hérétiques » chiites, ainsi que l'irrésistible montée en puissance des partis chiites pro-iraniens en Irak ont causé de nouvel-

les tensions. Et l'Irak en guerre civile est devenu le champ de bataille de la guerre d'influence politique et religieuse que se livrent l'Arabie sunnite et l'Iran chiite.

Lors des élections législatives irakiennes de 2010, les Saoudiens avaient ouvertement soutenu la liste Irakiya d'Iyad Allawi, principal rival du premier ministre sortant Nouri Al-Maliki. Bien qu'il soit arrivé derrière M. Allawi, c'est finalement Nouri Al-Maliki qui est resté à la tête du gouvernement avec le soutien de Téhéran. L'Arabie saoudite s'est vengée en faisant capoter à deux reprises le sommet arabe que devait accueillir Bagdad, pour la première fois depuis 1990.

Ce sommet, qui marque le plein retour de l'Irak dans la « famille arabe », se tient finalement du 27 au 29 mars. Bagdad comme Riyad ayant intérêt à sa bonne tenue, les deux pays ont mis leurs différends en sourdine. « L'Irak ne peut se permettre de diriger un sommet sans le soutien des monarchies du Golfe, et l'Arabie saoudite a besoin de la neutralité irakienne sur le dossier syrien », analyse un diplomate de la Ligue arabe.

Depuis l'annonce, le 21 février, de la nomination d'un ambassadeur saoudien non-résident en Irak – c'est le diplomate en poste en Jordanie qui s'occupera des deux pays –, une délégation irakienne de haut niveau s'est rendue à Riyad pour débloquer l'épineux dossier des prisonniers saoudiens détenus en Irak pour terrorisme. Un premier échange va concerner soixante-deux Saoudiens et une quarantaine de détenus irakiens de droit commun en Arabie saoudite. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

Tansu Ciller, la « dame de fer » turque

Seule femme (laïque) devenue premier ministre de son pays, elle reste associée à la guerre sans merci qu'elle lança contre la rébellion kurde. Quitte à y impliquer des réseaux criminels avec lesquels elle fut accusée de complicité



GETTY IMAGES/AFP

1946 Naissance à Istanbul.

1990 Diplômée en sciences économiques, Tansu Ciller quitte son poste d'enseignante à l'université du Bosphore et se lance dans la politique.

1993-1996 Première ministre.

1996-1997 Ministre des affaires étrangères.

2002 Battue aux législatives, elle se retire de la vie politique.

(PRESQUE) PLUS PERSONNE N'EN PARLE

GUILLAUME PERRIER

Istanbul, correspondance

Les apparitions publiques de Tansu Ciller se font rares. En 2011, elle avait assisté, seule femme au milieu d'une assemblée officielle masculine, aux funérailles de Necmettin Erbakan, l'ancien chef de file du mouvement islamiste turc, mort à l'âge de 85 ans. La « dame de fer » se tient prudemment à

distance des affaires politiques depuis sa défaite aux législatives en 2002. L'arrivée du parti islamo-conservateur de Recep Tayyip Erdogan, l'AKP, au pouvoir depuis lors, a poussé cette professeure d'économie, aujourd'hui âgée de 66 ans, vers une retraite discrète, dans un quartier huppé d'Istanbul. Tansu Ciller reste célèbre pour avoir été la première femme, et, à ce jour,

la seule, à avoir dirigé un gouvernement en Turquie. Première ministre de 1993 à 1996, M^{me} Ciller, qui dirigeait le Parti de la juste voie (DYP), une formation de centre droit, avait su tirer profit des jeux de coalitions pour s'imposer dans le sillage de Suleyman Demirel, devenu président de la République en 1993.

Femme éduquée et moderne, aux

brushings impeccables et aux tailleurs immaculés, M^{me} Ciller fut le symbole, malgré elle, de la laïcité turque, au nom de laquelle les femmes se virent accorder le droit de vote et d'éligibilité dès 1934. Mais, pour une majorité de Turcs, elle restera avant tout associée aux heures les plus sombres des années 1990 : une période de violence ponctuée d'affaires judiciaires retentissantes qui firent éclater au grand jour les liens entre les autorités, les forces de sécurité et les clans mafieux.

Les Kurdes se souviennent de l'ère Ciller comme celle d'une répression sanglante contre la rébellion armée du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK). Décidée à mener « une guerre totale contre le terrorisme », M^{me} Ciller donna les pleins pouvoirs aux cellules clandestines de contre-guérilla, agissant au sein de l'appareil étatique. Ce fut le pic de la « sale guerre » dans les régions insurgées du sud-est de la Turquie. Des milliers d'exécutions extrajudiciaires et d'enlèvements furent perpétrés. La torture était pratiquée à grande échelle. Plusieurs fosses communes découvertes

récemment ont commencé à révéler une partie de ces horreurs.

Une fortune rondelette

Dans sa croisade sécuritaire, Tansu Ciller s'appuyait sur Mehmet Agar, qui, après avoir commandé la police turque et organisé son unité de forces spéciales, se fit élire député et fut nommé ministre. Sous la conduite de ce duo de choc, l'Etat turc, pour lutter contre le PKK, n'hésita pas à impliquer dans la bataille les réseaux criminels liés à l'extrême droite nationaliste et aux parrains mafieux prospérant notamment sur le trafic de drogue.

En 1996, le scandale de Susurluk confirma cette stratégie. Dans l'épave d'une Mercedes encastrée sous un camion, on retrouva, côte à côte, Abdullah Catli, un tueur recherché par Interpol, sa compagne, une ancienne reine de beauté, un chef de la police, ainsi que Sedat Bucak, député et puissant chef d'un clan kurde loyaliste, figure de proue du trafic de drogue à la frontière avec la Syrie. Ainsi que des armes, du matériel d'écoute et des

faux papiers. Tansu Ciller elle-même et son mari, l'homme d'affaires Ozer Ucuran, furent accusés de collusion avec la mafia.

Un tribunal allemand l'avait même accusé de protéger le trafic de drogue entre la Turquie et l'Europe. Le couple Ciller a, en peu de temps, amassé une fortune rondelette (près de 50 millions d'euros), achetant des propriétés à Istanbul, des centres commerciaux, un hôtel et une villa dans le New Hampshire (Etats-Unis). Une enquête pour malversation et corruption fut ouverte et rapidement refermée.

Depuis l'avènement de Recep Tayyip Erdogan en 2003, M^{me} Ciller a parfois été tentée par un retour en politique, comme en 2011, où elle avait été pressentie pour prendre la tête du Parti démocrate (DP) afin de reconstituer un centre droit moribond avant les élections législatives. La menace d'une procédure judiciaire qui plane sur sa fin de carrière l'a sans doute découragée. ■

Le Monde

Mercredi 28 mars 2012

Premier sommet de la Ligue arabe à Bagdad depuis 1990

Les pays membres sont très divisés sur le dossier syrien, qui devrait dominer les débats

Ce sont les quinze kilomètres les plus chers du monde. La longue avenue reliant l'aéroport international de Bagdad à la « zone verte » sécurisée, là où se déroule le sommet de la Ligue arabe, du mardi 27 au jeudi 29 mars, a été rénovée à grands frais. Les travaux, réalisés par des entreprises turques, ont coûté pas moins de 200 millions de dollars (150 millions d'euros), et sont à l'origine du plus grand scandale de corruption en Irak, en 2011.

En empruntant cette autoroute ensermée dans des murs antibombes, les chefs d'Etat arabes auront donc tout loisir d'admirer les rares espaces verts de l'ancienne capitale abbasside, qu'ils n'avaient pas revue depuis 1990. Ce sommet, prévu initialement en mars 2011, est le premier accueilli par Bagdad depuis... l'invasion du Koweït par Saddam Hussein, le 2 août 1990

Par la suite, le dictateur irakien était resté brouillé avec ses pairs arabes. Puis Bagdad, à partir de 2003, est devenue une capitale sous occupation américaine. Pas question d'y tenir un sommet sous la garde des GIs. Ces derniers ont définitivement quitté l'Irak en décembre 2011 et l'Arabie saoudite a renoué des liens diplomatiques avec Bagdad le 21 février, levant tous les obstacles à la tenue du sommet. L'Irak assure désormais la présidence tournante de la Ligue arabe, après le Qatar.

Les chefs d'Etat, qui ne passeront qu'une douzaine d'heures sur place jeudi, ne sortiront pas de la « zone verte ». Le 20 mars, une série d'attentats dans tout l'Irak, ayant causé plus de 50 morts et 225 blessés, a rappelé combien la situation restait précaire dans ce pays. Pour la première fois, c'est un chef de l'Etat kurde, l'Irakien

Jalal Talabani, qui présidera un sommet arabe, le premier depuis le début du « printemps arabe ».

Bagdad et l'Irak ne sont pas les seuls à avoir changé. Quatre vieux habitués de ces sommets ont disparu de la scène depuis début 2011. Le Tunisien Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali l'Egyptien Hosni Moubarak, le Libyen Mouammar Kadhafi et le Yéménite Ali Abdallah Saleh ont été successivement emportés par la vague révolutionnaire. Cela sera-t-il le cas du Syrien Bachar Al-Assad ? Il est le grand absent, son pays ayant été suspendu des

institutions de la Ligue arabe à l'automne pour non-application de son plan de paix.

Le dossier syrien occupera l'essentiel des discussions du sommet, dont la déclaration finale doit être préparée par une réunion ministérielle mardi et mercredi. L'Irak, dirigé par le premier ministre chiite Nouri Al-Maliki, est réputé nettement plus favorable au régime de Bachar Al-Assad, qui appartient à la minorité alaouite, une branche dissidente du chiisme, mais surtout allié de l'Iran, tout comme Bagdad. Des tensions risquent donc d'apparaître avec les monarchies du Golfe, en particulier l'Arabie saoudite et le Qatar, les plus hostiles à Bachar Al-Assad et à son parrain iranien. Tandis que des pouvoirs islamistes sunnites s'installent en Tunisie, en Egypte, et probablement bientôt en Libye et au Yémen, le sommet risque de cristalliser l'affrontement entre chiites et sunnites à l'œuvre dans toute la région.

Un diplomate arabe tempère les risques de clash : « L'Irak ne pourra pas se mettre à dos la majorité des autres Arabes en soutenant trop ouvertement le régime syrien. D'autant, poursuit ce diplomate, que l'essentiel des décisions de la Ligue sont prises hors des sommets annuels, lors des réunions ministérielles, dont la présidence est assurée pour l'année à venir par le Koweït. Et le Qatar va continuer à diriger le comité spécial chargé du dossier syrien. »

Mais les pays du Golfe vont aussi devoir tempérer leurs positions, souligne le diplomate. « Ils ont perdu l'initiative depuis l'entrée en scène de Kofi Annan [l'envoyé spécial de la Ligue arabe et de l'ONU pour la Syrie]. Leur stratégie maximaliste a trouvé ses limites, Bachar n'est pas tombé. » C'est désormais à Moscou, principal soutien de Damas ces derniers mois, que se joue le sort du régime syrien. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

Les chefs d'Etat ne sortiront pas de la « zone verte » ultrasécurisée de Bagdad, toujours la cible d'attentats

Les Occidentaux changent de tactique sur la Syrie

Le plan Annan, accepté par Damas, signe l'échec de l'approche privilégiant un départ rapide de Bachar Al-Assad

Amorçe d'une sortie de crise, simple accalmie ou manœuvre dilatoire? Annoncé mardi 27 mars, le ralliement de Damas au plan de Kofi Annan, l'émissaire des Nations unies et de la Ligue arabe en Syrie, laisse les chancelleries occidentales dans l'expectative. « C'est en goûtant que l'on sait si c'est bon », a ironisé Gérard Araud, l'ambassadeur de France à l'ONU, résumant par cette boutade la circonspection de mise à New York, où l'on parle désormais de « plus de 9 000 morts » en Syrie, après un an de révolte et de répression.

Le plan Annan, qui avait été approuvé le 21 mars par le Conseil de sécurité, ambitionne principalement de réduire les tensions sur le terrain, de façon à empêcher la Syrie de basculer dans une guerre civile généralisée. Il préconise la cessation des violences « par toutes les parties », l'acheminement d'aide humanitaire et la libération des prisonniers. Son volet politique est minimal, puisque au lieu de demander la mise à l'écart du président syrien Bachar Al-Assad, comme le faisait le plan de la Ligue arabe concocté en janvier, il prône la mise en place d'un « processus politique ouvert, dirigé par les Syriens ».

La formulation est suffisam-



Mardi, Bachar Al-Assad a paradé dans les ruines de Baba Amro, l'ancien bastion de l'Armée syrienne libre à Homs. REUTERS

ment vague pour que la Russie et la Chine, allergiques à toute idée de changement de régime par la force et qui s'étaient opposées à deux projets de résolution en ce sens du Conseil de sécurité, aient donné leur blanc-seing à Kofi Annan. Après avoir obtenu dimanche à Moscou l'aval du président russe Dmitri Medvedev, l'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU s'est rendu mardi à Pékin, où il a reçu l'appui

des dirigeants chinois. C'est là que lui est parvenue la nouvelle de l'acceptation de son plan par le régime syrien, qui n'avait pas d'autres options que de se ranger à l'avis de ses deux protecteurs. « Un premier pas important », a commenté M. Annan, qui a fait passer un message impérieux à Bruxelles et aux Vingt-Sept : « Evitez les initiatives intempestives qui risquent de me compliquer la tâche. »

Résistance inattendue

Si ce profil bas se confirme, il marquera une rupture avec l'attitude adoptée ces derniers mois par les grandes puissances occidentales et leurs alliés arabes. A la tactique du passage en force, principalement défendue par la France, le Qatar et l'Arabie saoudite, qui tablaient sur un effondrement à court ou moyen terme du régime syrien, pourrait succéder celle des

Des opposants syriens accusés de recourir à la torture

COUP sur coup, Human Rights Watch (HRW) a publié deux rapports gênants sur la Syrie. Dans le premier, le 21 mars, l'ONG de défense des droits de l'homme déplore les abus commis par les groupes armés affiliés à l'opposition syrienne. Dans le second, publié le 25 mars, elle dénonce, exemples précis à l'appui, l'utilisation par l'armée gouvernementale syrienne de boucliers humains lors de ses récentes offensives dans le nord de la Syrie. Si les exactions des forces de sécurité ne surprenent pas, tant elles sont massives depuis le début du soulèvement, il y a un peu plus d'un an, les accusations visant les insurgés sont plus embarrassantes au moment où le

Conseil national syrien (CNS) est encouragé par la communauté internationale à s'élargir et à se restructurer afin de constituer une alternative crédible.

Embuscades

HRW n'établit aucun parallélisme entre les forces du régime et l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), mais le constat dressé de ces abus est inquiétant pour l'avenir. Selon l'ONG, le mouvement de protestation était très majoritairement pacifique jusqu'en septembre 2011. Mais à la sortie d'un mois de ramadan particulièrement sanglant, des civils, rejoints par des déserteurs en nombre croissant, ont pris les armes, d'abord pour défendre

les manifestations puis pour mener des embuscades contre les forces du régime.

Cette militarisation s'est accompagnée d'enlèvements, de torture et d'exécutions sommaires. Certains enlèvements ne sont pas motivés par l'affiliation politique ou sécuritaire, mais par l'appartenance confessionnelle, voire l'obtention de rançons. Les civils de la communauté alaouite, une branche dissidente du chiisme dont est issue la famille de Bachar Al-Assad, sont particulièrement visés par des groupes armés d'obédience salafiste.

HRW liste plus d'une vingtaine de cas où les aveux de chabiha, les miliciens prorégime, souvent res-

ponsables des pires exactions, sont arrachés sous la torture, notamment à l'électricité. Enfin, HRW rapporte plusieurs cas d'exécutions sommaires, par pendaison ou par balles, de chabiha et de membres des renseignements de l'armée de l'air, le service le plus redouté par les manifestants.

Le CNS a « déploré » ces violations des droits de l'homme. « Nous travaillons à l'instauration d'un code de conduite et d'une coordination entre les différents groupes sur le terrain pour nous assurer qu'aucune violation des droits de l'homme ne soit commise au cours de cette lutte pour la liberté », a affirmé Bassma Kodmani, porte-parole du CNS. ■ C.A.

petits pas, qui prend acte des capacités de résistance inattendue de la dictature baasiste. « Aujourd'hui, ce sont les deux grands qui reprennent la main, analyse un diplomate arabe. La Russie, qui veut qu'on la reconnaisse comme acteur central, et les Etats-Unis, qui ont la hantise de ne pas répéter les erreurs de 2003 en Irak, c'est-à-dire éviter la destruction de l'Etat en même temps que la chute du régime. C'est pour cela qu'ils y vont très lentement. C'est cynique mais rien ne sert de trop se presser: tout le monde sait que Bachar est fini, même ses alliés. »

Cette évolution inquiète ceux des opposants syriens qui aspirent à une plus forte implication de la communauté internationale, voire à une intervention militaire occidentale, qui n'est pas à l'ordre du jour pour l'instant. « Le départ d'Assad, nous ne pouvons pas y renoncer car des milliers de Syriens sont morts pour cela », dit Bassma Kodmani, la porte-parole du Conseil national syrien (CNS), l'interlocuteur principal des Occidentaux, en marge d'une réunion à Istanbul, où les différents courants de l'opposition tentent de s'unifier. « Assad joue la montre, tempête Adib Chichakli, un autre participant. Ça

veut dire encore et encore des morts. A chaque heure qui passe, nous avons cinq morts. »

Le diplomate arabe, peu suspect de sympathie pour le système Assad, estime cependant que le plan Annan est plus réaliste que celui de ses prédécesseurs: « A l'instigation de Doha et de Riyad, la Ligue arabe est allée très vite, sans avoir les moyens de ses positions, dit-il. Si la seule négociation porte sur le départ de Bachar Al-Assad, pourquoi négocierait-il? D'autant qu'on a demandé à la Syrie de négocier tout en la suspendant des instances de la Ligue. C'est contradictoire. » Et il ajoute: « On a parlé sur la Syrie d'un processus à la yéménite sans réaliser qu'au Yémen la mise à l'écart d'Ali Abdallah Saleh [l'ex-président yéménite] a été l'aboutissement d'un processus, et non son point de départ. »

La caution de Moscou et de Pékin incitera-t-elle Bachar Al-Assad à se prêter à un jeu similaire? En décembre, il n'avait eu aucun mal à se défaire d'un premier plan de la Ligue arabe, qui prévoyait un cessez-le-feu et des libérations de prisonniers. Les observateurs déployés en Syrie avaient dû plier bagage au bout d'un mois, vic-

times des provocations des services de sécurité syriens et des calculs de l'Arabie saoudite, impatiente de durcir la position de l'organisation panarabe.

Mardi, en dépit du feu vert de Damas au plan Annan, les violences se sont poursuivies, faisant 31 morts, dont 18 civils. Le dirigeant syrien a même paradé dans les ruines de Baba Amro, l'ancien bastion de l'Armée syrienne libre à Homs, reconquis début mars par les troupes régulières. Hillary Clinton, la secrétaire d'Etat américaine, l'a invité à « prouver immédiatement » sa bonne foi « en ordonnant à ses forces de baisser les armes et de se retirer des zones habitées ». Un premier bilan sera tiré vendredi, lors de la seconde réunion du groupe des Amis de la Syrie, à Istanbul, une grand-messe diplomatique de soutien au CNS. Pour ne pas réduire sa marge de manœuvre déjà étroite, Kofi Annan pourrait rester à l'écart de ce rassemblement. ■

**CHRISTOPHE AYAD
ET BENJAMIN BARTHE,
AVEC JEAN-PIERRE STROOBANTS
(À BRUXELLES)**

Un plan en six points

Fin de la violence Mise en place d'une pause de deux heures dans les combats, puis d'un cessez-le-feu permanent, sous la supervision de l'ONU.

Aide humanitaire Acheminement de l'aide dans toutes les zones touchées par les combats.

Libération des détenus Multiplier les mesures d'élargissement, assurer l'accès à tous les lieux d'emprisonnement.

Dialogue politique Mettre en place un « processus politique ouvert, dirigé par les Syriens ».

Liberté de la presse Garantir la libre circulation des journalistes dans toute la Syrie.

Réformes politiques Respecter la liberté d'association et le droit de manifester pacifiquement.



30 MARS 2012

La Ligue arabe en division régionale

SYRIE La résolution adoptée contre Damas ne parvient pas à cacher les désaccords entre pays arabes.

Un sommet arabe, pour quoi faire? En tout cas, pas pour trouver une solution à la crise en Syrie. Lors de leur réunion hier à Bagdad pour la première fois depuis vingt-deux ans, les représentants de 21 pays arabes ont témoigné d'un certain embarras face à la situation dans ce pays au regard de laquelle ils se sont montrés désunis. Ils ont même révélé qu'ils étaient eux aussi en crise, comme l'indique bien la présence de simples ambassadeurs pour représenter l'Arabie et le Qatar en lieu et place de leurs dirigeants. Suspendue de la Ligue arabe, la Syrie n'avait pas été convoquée au sommet.

Balkanisation. Certes, la résolution finale, adoptée à l'unanimité, « condamne les violations des droits de l'homme contre les civils et considère le massacre de Bab Amro [quartier de la ville de Homs, ndlr] commis par les forces syriennes comme des crimes contre l'humanité ». Mais, hormis la Tunisie, aucun pays n'a demandé le départ de Bachar al-Assad. Et, si la résolution appelle « toutes les composantes de l'opposition à s'unifier », elle n'envisage pas d'armer la rébellion pour autant. Les participants disent aussi privilégier « le dialogue » entre le gouvernement et l'opposition et « appuyer la mission de Kofi Annan pour entamer des négociations politiques sur la base de l'initiative » approu-

vée par le Conseil de sécurité et la Ligue arabe. Or, on sait déjà que Bachar al-Assad n'a nulle intention de respecter le plan de l'émissaire spécial qui prévoit l'arrêt des violen-

ces et qu'il a pourtant formellement accepté. Preuve en est l'intensification des opérations contre les rebelles au moment même où l'ONU annonçait que Damas avait accepté le plan. « Au lendemain de la prétendue acceptation par le régime de Damas, nous constatons que la répression a encore fait plusieurs dizaines de victimes en une seule journée », soulignait hier le Quai d'Orsay.

Ce que les dirigeants arabes commencent à prendre en compte, c'est que Bachar al-Assad ne va pas s'en aller du jour au lendemain. D'où leur actuel embarras, en particulier pour l'émir du Qatar et le roi d'Arabie Saoudite qui voulaient envoyer des armes aux rebelles avec l'idée que le régime allait rapidement s'effondrer. Or, l'hypothèse la plus vraisemblable est celle d'une balkanisation de

la Syrie, avec des zones tenues par le pouvoir et d'autre part l'opposition. Confrontés à cette hypothèse, les pays de la région seraient alors contraints de s'impliquer dans le conflit. Eclateraient au grand jour les divisions du monde arabe entre chiïtes et sunnites, entre monarchies du Golfe et Etats ayant fait leur révolution.

Livraison. Le Premier ministre irakien Nouri al-Maliki a mis en garde hier contre les menaces d'une « guerre régionale et internationale par procuration » à laquelle conduirait la livraison d'armes aux deux camps. Cela « préparera le terrain pour une intervention armée étrangère en Syrie, ce qui porterait atteinte à la souveraineté d'un pays arabe frère », a-t-il ajouté. Une déclaration qui a dû faire sourire les participants qui ont un peu de mémoire: lui-même a accédé au pouvoir grâce à une... intervention étrangère, celle de l'armée américaine qui a chassé Saddam Hussein, en 2003.

JEAN-PIERRE PERRIN

Turkey eyes Syrian crisis through lens of Kurdish stability

MARIA FANTAPPIE

www.thenational.ae

Turkey appears to be keeping all options open for intervening in Syria - even arming the opposition. But Ankara's failure to monitor the development of the Kurdish issue in Syria, and Bashar Al Assad's struggle for power, have left room for others to instill their agendas there.

In Syria's Kurdish-populated areas, the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, is expanding its military front against Turkey. Leaders in Iraqi Kurdistan are stretching their political influence and campaigning for the establishment of a Kurdish region in Syria.

The PKK and Iraqi Kurdish agendas in Syria could open a Pandora's box of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, furthering Kurdish demands for autonomy and bolstering armed struggle. Turkey is in a state of alarm. It is using all means to influence the situation in Syria to avoid a domestic crisis of its own.

Turkey sees the Kurdish question as the most important threat to its stability. Kurds account for nearly 20 per cent of the Turkish population, and their demands range from the recognition of Kurdish cultural rights to the secession of the Kurdish-populated areas from the Turkish state. Since 2007, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan sought to mitigate this question by granting Kurds some cultural rights, yet still preventing them from attaining significant autonomy and combating separatism.

Turkey saw the fall of the Assad regime as an opportunity to influence Syria's Kurds. Turkey had hoped to oversee negotiations on the Kurdish issue by hosting the Syrian National Council on its soil. Ideally, after Mr Al Assad fell, Kurdish rights would be recognised within "the unity of the Syrian state". Thus, Syria's Kurds would be prevented from gaining any form of autonomy, the PKK's branch in Syria - the Democratic Union Party (PYD) - would be undermined, and Turkey's own Kurdish separatist movement would not be further inflamed. Turkey was relying on the Iraqi

Kurds to leverage the Syrian Kurdish parties to accept negotiations.

But Turkey's strategy backfired. Mr Al Assad has not fallen as Turkey wished. The Iraqi Kurds are pushing for their own agenda and Mr Al Assad is fighting back by allowing the PKK free rein in Syria.

The Syrian National Council failed to attract and retain Kurdish members. In January, Kurdish parties withdrew their membership from the Syrian opposition, and 11 of them eventually gathered in the Kurdish National Council under the Iraqi Kurdish umbrella. The Syrian National Council was left with only a few Kurdish members and without legitimacy to form the basis of negotiations.

Under the auspices of the Kurdish National Council, the Iraqi Kurds have expanded their political grip over the Syrian Kurdish parties. Although Kurdish demands in Syria were previously limited to decentralisation, the Kurdish National Council's executive body is calling for a higher degree of autonomy - applying the Iraqi vision of a Kurdish region to Syria.

As the Syrian crisis drags on, the Iraqi Kurds are empowering the Kurdish National Council as the sole representative of Kurdish demands. The Iraqi Kurds are aware that any political entity aspiring to govern Syria in the near future would need the Kurds in order to establish itself as a legitimate power. The council may raise the stakes and deal only with a counterpart that will accept its demands for a large degree of autonomy.

The PKK is also furthering its agenda and has found in Mr Al Assad a willing ally to consolidate and expand its military front across the Syrian frontier. In the past few months, the party has had carte blanche to conduct its activities in the northwest Syrian district of Afrin, in Aleppo. From Afrin, the PYD is expanding east and opening new offices in the Syrian-Turkish border cities of Ras Al Ayn and Ayn Al Arab. The PKK may now use the expansion of its Syrian branch to establish a military front that stretches from western Syria to eastern Iraq.

The escalation of the Syrian crisis into a

long-term civil conflict provides the best opportunity for the PKK in particular to consolidate its influence and proliferate within Syria. As the Assad regime persists in its struggle to hold onto power, it could grant even more leeway to the PYD as its anchor for maintaining control of the northern Syrian Kurdish areas. If the armed conflict engulfs the Kurdish areas, it could help the PYD grow roots in the region. Being the only Syrian Kurdish party to bear weapons, the PYD could try to gain legitimacy as the protector of Kurdish civilians.

Turkey has tried to step into the Syrian crisis under the guise of an international front. But so far support for intervention, both military and humanitarian, has been met with resistance.

Therefore, a newly empowered Syrian National Council could be Turkey's best route to penetrate Syria and reinstate some degree of control over the Kurdish issue.

The Syrian National Council is now opening a military bureau, which should be in charge of organising the Free Syrian Army against the regime. Through this body, Turkey could attempt to channel the support of the Free Syrian Army, secure its loyalty in keeping the northern Syrian provinces under control, and halt the military advancement of the PKK.

Turkey might also hope to recast the Syrian National Council as the sole legitimate opposition body in Syria, in order to bring the Kurdish members back into its fold, and regain oversight of negotiations on the Kurdish issue in Syria.

Channelling armed support through the Syrian National Council might serve Turkey's interest in stemming the PKK and Iraqi Kurdish agendas. But instead of helping the Syrian revolution to achieve the regime's downfall, Turkey risks plunging Syria into an extended domestic conflict.

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Turkey and the Kurds

Rebellious days

A fresh wave of protests shows how far Turkey is from pacifying its Kurds

DIYARBAKIR AND NUSAYBIN

"FROM here on we must stop serving in the Turkish army, paying taxes and using the Turkish language. A new phase has begun." The call for defiance came from Murat Karayilan, the top field commander of the rebel Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). He issued it after another spate of bloody clashes in the predominantly Kurdish south-east.

The unrest was sparked on March 18th when, in defiance of a government ban, tens of thousands of Kurds massed in the streets of Istanbul and Diyarbakir to celebrate the Kurdish new year (Nowruz). One Kurdish politician and a Turkish policeman died, hundreds of Kurds were arrested and many others were wounded as riot police, backed by helicopters and armoured personnel-carriers fired tear gas to disperse the crowds. In Batman, Ahmet Turk, a revered Kurdish politician and a heart patient, was punched in the face by a policeman and taken to hospital. "Was it a holiday or a war? I couldn't tell," said Arif Arslan, who runs Batman Cagdas, a daily newspaper.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, blamed the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). It picked a fight, he claimed, by ignoring government orders to celebrate Nowruz on its official date, March 21st. The BDP retorted that last year the government let it move the celebrations to the weekend, enabling more Kurds to attend—so why not this time?

Until last summer Mr Erdogan's Justice and Development (AK) party had been holding secret talks with the PKK in Oslo and with its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan. The so-called "Kurdish opening", which saw the inauguration of Turkey's first state-run Kurdish-language TV station, was meant to be



crowned with a deal ending the PKK's 28-year-long rebellion. Despite a wave of anti-PKK sweeps that landed thousands of Kurds in jail, AK won half the votes in the south-east in the June 2011 general election. Yet far from using this mandate to push ahead with reforms, the government has gone the other way, pounding PKK bases in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq and arresting thousands more Kurds on thinly supported charges that they are "terrorists". Elected mayors, fire chiefs, doctors and even tea boys have all been locked up.

"The number of detentions doubled last year, and torture and sexual harassment of prisoners is on the rise," says Raci Bilici, acting chairman of the south-eastern chapter of Turkey's Human Rights Association. His predecessor has been in jail since 2009. The association's offices have been repeatedly raided and its files seized.

Mr Bilici says the government's new tactic is to coerce Kurdish youths into becoming agents. Botan Cankurt, a 19-year-old bus steward who is now in prison facing terrorism charges, told a court in Diyarbakir last month that he

had been trained by the police to make Molotov cocktails and to organise anti-government demonstrations. Tekosin Bulca, a fellow suspect, said that she had been recruited to seduce BDP members and report on their activities. Seyma Urper, a defence lawyer, claims that "the idea is to use these children to provoke violence against the security forces allowing the latter in turn to justify their arrests...it is another way of dividing and weakening the Kurds."

The government's broader strategy appears to be to beat the Kurds into submission before drafting a new democratic constitution that Mr Erdogan has long been promising to produce. Yet there is also talk of introducing optional Kurdish-language classes in government schools. One of Mr Erdogan's strengths is his knack for pulling back from the brink. Some of his supporters suggest that a fresh round of peace talks and reforms may be in the works.

Sadly, the crackdown on Kurdish nationalists has bolstered the BDP's overblown claims that AK was insincere from the beginning. Indeed, although Mr Erdogan insists that it is all the PKK's fault for escalating its attacks last summer, "It is becoming increasingly difficult to defend AK," contends Sahismail Bedirhanoglu, chairman of the South-eastern Businessmen and Industrialists Association in Diyarbakir. "Bonds between Turks and Kurds have never been this stretched, we are near the breaking point."

A bigger risk lurks in Syria, which is home to an estimated 2m Kurds. Syrian Kurds are believed to make up as much as a third of the PKK's fighting force. The now irreversible breach between Mr Erdogan and Syria's president, Bashar Assad, may have revived Mr Assad's friendship with the PKK. Growing discord between Iraq's Kurds in Erbil and the Shia-led central government in Baghdad is another worry. "Sooner or later, an independent Kurdistan is bound to emerge," says a senior Western diplomat. Either way, Turkey needs to offer its own Kurds a better deal.

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'New' Kurdish strategy item by item

Yesterday (Thursday) in two newspapers (*Milliyet* and *Taraf*), two stories almost identical with each other were published about the state's new strategy on the Kurdish and the PKK issues. I want to discuss this new strategy based on one of these stories, the one daily *Milliyet's* Ankara Representative *Fikret Bila* penned. *Bila* has summarized "the milestones and the road map it envisions" in 10 items.

Let's go item by item:

1) In solving the Kurdish issue, no channel other than the channel of civil politics will be trusted or used: Here, it is remarkable that, instead of a flexible sentence such as "the civilian politics channel will be taken as a basis," it is stated that no other channel will be trusted. Actually this is not a new discourse; several governments in the past persistently defended this line. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had, at exactly this point, the opportunity to make a difference because it also trusted other channels. This means that they are giving up on the search to make a difference. Consequently, there is no "new" approach; there is rather a "return to the past" in question.

2) Öcalan in İmralı and PKK, the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party - in either Kandil or in Europe - will not be recognized as interlocutors, they will be left out of the circuit. We can read this item as a kind of a self-criticism from the AKP. This is because these channels, which were partially used by previous governments, were systematically used by the AKP and serious investment had been poured in them. The stance that the prime minister took during the last MYT crisis was seen as a signal that there might be a return to these types of negotiations, but obviously this is not the case.

3) Kurdish citizens living in the southeast and other regions will be protected from the pressure of the PKK and KCK (the Kurdistan Communities Union, the alleged urban wing of the PKK). Again, this is a discourse from previous times. The only thing that is new is the addition of the KCK alongside the PKK. We have seen how this item was attempted to be implemented during the mercilessly applied KCK operations; however, the last incidents have shown that it is not so easy to break the connection between the people and the organization. In fact, those steps taken to break the bond actually strengthened the connection.

4) With this aim, a solution will be sought through the civilian politics channel. In an environment from which the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) has been excluded, it is obvious that what is meant by "civilian politics" is the AKP. However, we can say that the ruling party, which has selected low-profile names as deputies for the southeast, has a decreased chance to address the Kurds after the policies of oppression that were applied after the elections.

5) No platform outside Parliament will be accepted as a place for a solution. Members of parties who have been elec-

ted through democratic means and are able to exert political initiative will be the interlocutors. We are going around in circles in the desire to create "a legal Kurdish political movement alternative to the PKK." The life of this search, which was brought back to the agenda recently with Kemal Burkay's return to the country, was not even a few days. Since it is out of the question for the BDP to challenge Yırmalı and Kandil, in the end it seems as if the AKP will try to solve the Kurdish issue alone.

6) As long as the PKK continues its armed actions, armed clashes will continue: there is not too much to be said on this. No state can stay quiet against a force rebelling against it with arms.

7) If there are more negotiations with the PKK, these can only be for them to lay down arms. This is the most key item of the strategy. Operations against the PKK and the KCK after the elections, the isolation of Öcalan, were all seen as tools to bring the PKK to its knees. We also hear that, at this point, quite a mission was loaded upon the Iraqi Kurds and predominantly on Barzani. However, what has been experienced so far shows that the PKK has no intention of laying down its arms.

8) When the PKK hands in its weapons to Turkey, it will be determined what kind of a procedure will be applied to those who do not have judicial responsibility. In the event that the PKK lays down its weapons, since the biggest debate will focus on the future of the group's leadership, this item cannot be called very meaningful.

9) There will not be a Kurdish identity or autonomy arrangement in the new constitution; the new constitution will be based on human rights and the equality of all citizens before the law. However, it cannot be said to be within reason to draw such red lines for the new constitution at the beginning of the road. Besides, the existing constitution also claims to be based on human rights and equality of citizens before law.

10) Local governance will be strengthened and principles based on international law will be taken as a basis: After the previous item, the promise to strengthen local governments does not sound credible at all. At the end of the day, when you take a look at the mindset of the state, it does not look possible that a new constitution will contribute much to the solution of the Kurdish issue.

If all 10 of these items are evaluated collectively, it does not seem possible to define this strategy as "new" and hope for a sustainable solution from them. □

Rusen Çakır is a columnist for daily Vatan in which this piece was published on March 23. It was translated into English by the Daily News staff.

Turkey, Syria, Iraq and the Kurdish issue

BY SOLI OZEL

Syria, as always, is more than just Syria. The outcome of the deepening civil war or the violent fragmentation of the country will have a bearing on developments in the region, particularly for neighboring states.

The strategies chosen by the regime to fight off the challenge against it have intensified sectarian divisions. A prolonged civil war that further consolidates these divisions is likely to engulf neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, both of which have had their own sectarian calamities, and put pressure on Jordan and Turkey and possibly Israel. On the other hand, the fate of the regime and the future course of the country will also be determined by the geopolitical games that have intensified in the wake of the American withdrawal from Iraq.

As had often been the case in the past, Syria is at the center of a strategic power play that pits Arab countries, Turkey, the United States and Europe against Iran. Russia, in turn, seething with anger after what it considers to be a double cross in Libya, is using its power and ties to the regime to sustain President Bashar Assad and family in power.

The all-important contiguity between Iran and Syria and, beyond that, with Hezbollah in Lebanon, is secured by the Iraqi government's support of Assad. Such choices on the part of the Iraqi leadership help deepen the sectarian dimension of the geostrategic game and increase the pressure on all regimes in the region where religious minorities exist and may be restless.

So far, the picture suggests that the Syrian regime can deploy enough violence to

have the strategic upper hand on the ground. As long as Iran continues to back it and Russia does not withdraw its protection, the incentive for the regime to accept a mediated solution or a plan to leave power is very weak.

This configuration and the weighing in of Tehran and Moscow, with Beijing tagging along, have thrown Ankara off balance. Turkey invested heavily in the Syrian regime in the past decade; arguably, Syria was the centerpiece of Turkey's much vaunted "zero problems" principle in its regional foreign policy. Now, this principle is in tatters. In fact, since the departure of the Americans from Iraq and the failure of Turkey's efforts to convince Assad to reform his system, Ankara's relations with the governments of Iran, Iraq and Syria are highly problematic to say the least.

After the effort to convince Assad proved futile, Turkey estimated (wrongly it now seems) that the regime did not have much staying power. Convinced of this prognosis and desiring to hold the moral high ground, Ankara toughened its stance and rhetoric vis-a-vis Damascus. It supported the opposition, allowed it to organize inside the country, settled refugees in camps and hosted the commander of the Free Syrian Army. After last ditch efforts in August failed to change Assad's ways, Ankara began to strongly condemn the Baathists and cut all dialogue, albeit while keeping its embassy open.

Soon it became evident that Turkey had a soft spot for the Muslim Brotherhood among the groups that make up the hapless Syrian National Council. Long insistent on presenting itself, a secular country, above the fray in sectarian

issues, Turkey ended up being accused of siding with the Sunnis in Iraq, too, by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. With its position diametrically opposed to that of Iran in both Syria and Iraq, Ankara's relations with Tehran also soured. This tension had already been building up as a result of Turkey's inclusion in NATO's missile shield and the deployment of the radar for this system in the Turkish province of Malatya.

Given their long shared border, Turkey will be part of any plausible development concerning Syria. Recently, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that Turkey was considering the creation of a buffer zone inside Syria. Given that this would mean an infringement on Syrian sovereignty and that Turkey is against international military intervention and is reluctant to intervene militarily itself, how the buffer zone would be protected is not clear. Nor is it clear where the legitimation for such a move is going to come from or whether the backing of the self-selected "friends of Syria" would suffice.

The issue of the buffer zone also brings to the fore one of the most downplayed issues related to developments in Syria and one that ties Syrian developments to those in Iraq. Since the Iraq war, and now with the unfolding events in Syria, the region's Kurdish issue has become truly transnational.

Already in Iraq, the Kurds enjoy a near independent stature in their autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government. Ironically, after years of writing off the Iraqi Kurdish leadership as simple tribal leaders, Turkey has established the closest of ties with the KRG. The Kurds have emerged as Turkey's natural ally in Iraq, its most important trading partner and investment destination not just regionally but globally, and a partner in containing the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) whose stronghold is the Kandil

Mountains inside the KRG.

Now, Syria's Kurds have finally emerged as part of the picture nationally and regionally. Assuming Syria does not break up, it is highly likely that Syrian Kurds will enjoy more rights than they ever had before. What makes this interesting is that Turkey's nemesis, the PKK, enjoys a fair degree of popularity in the KRG and is politically very strong among Syrian Kurds. Therefore, whatever the future status of Syrian Kurds in the new Syria, an element of trans-border solidarity and perhaps cooperation will flourish. This should increase the KRG's power and influence and pit it against the PKK's presence in Syria.

As Idrees Muhammed, an observer of Turkey's foreign policy, notes, "Should Syria's Kurds be granted rights, while not replicating the situation of Iraqi Kurds, they will certainly enjoy a better life. . . . Turkish Kurds will feel themselves further oppressed by state-inspired obstacles to greater freedoms and, encouraged by their co-nationals, will be motivated to obtain greater Kurdish rights." In other words, it would be much more difficult to contain the Kurdish problem in distinct countries as a national issue. If regional sectarian strife does not break out and Syria remains territorially intact, this emergence of trans-border Kurdish politics may be the most important consequence of the Syrian crisis.

Under such circumstances, the Turkish government ought to be careful about the kind of buffer zone it wishes to establish. As Gokhan Bacik from Zirve University warns, Turkey should make sure that the zone's borders are not drawn along ethnic or sectarian lines.

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Les Loups sont entrés dans Paris

Réseaux. Les Loups gris et autres ultranationalistes turcs militent aussi en France.

PAR CLAIRE MEYNIAL

Dans la case « Date et objet de la manifestation », le demandeur a inscrit « 21/1/2012, Contestation de la pénalisation de la liberté d'expression », noble motif revendiqué par la Fransa Türk Federasyon de Pantin. Officiellement, c'est la Fédération des Turcs de France qui a organisé la marche de protestation contre le projet de loi pénalisant la négation du génocide arménien. Sauf que, comme l'indique une note de la Direction centrale du renseignement intérieur (DCRI), la multitude de tracts diffusés montre l'implication d'une nébuleuse d'organisations. Surtout, la Fédération des Turcs de France, branche française d'une structure paneuropéenne, n'a, selon la DCRI,

« absolument pas le caractère fédératif que son nom laisse supposer. Il s'agit en vérité de la couverture des seuls Loups gris, organisation nationaliste parfois violente ». Les Loups gris ? Ces jeunes militants du MHP, ultranationalistes, antikurdes et anti-communistes, ont semé la terreur en Turquie dans les années 70, dans des attaques contre des groupuscules d'extrême gauche, jusqu'au coup d'Etat de 1980. Et même si, depuis l'élection de Devlet Bahçeli à sa tête, en 1997, le MHP tente de se montrer plus fréquentable, les parcours de certains participants aux manifestations françaises, épinglés par la DCRI, donnent une idée des sympathisants. Ainsi d'un certain Yusuf Ziya Arpacik, « paramilitaire qui a été impliqué dans de nombreuses opérations troubles, menées directement ou indirectement par la Turquie, dont la biographie mérite en soi d'être rapportée ». Arpacik, né en 1958, cumule les faits d'armes : engagé dans les Foyers idéalistes (nationalistes), échappé de prison deux fois, il a organisé des attentats contre les « ennemis des Turcs » à l'étranger, été garde du corps d'Al-

Infiltrés. Des Turcs protestent, à Paris, le 21 janvier, contre l'adoption de la loi sur le déni de génocide. Des membres du Parti d'action nationale d'extrême droite (MHP), les Loups gris, font partie des manifestants.

Officiellement, c'est la Fédération des Turcs de France qui organise la manifestation. Mais la DCRI note l'implication d'une nébuleuse d'organisations nationalistes turques.

parsan Türkes, fondateur du MHP, est allé se battre contre les Arméniens du Karabakh et contre les Américains en Irak, du côté des Turkmènes. Il aurait aussi été impliqué dans l'attentat contre le Conseil d'Etat en 2006. Or, sur les photos figurant dans la note de la DCRI, il est attablé, « peu après la manifestation de janvier 2012 », avec Tayfur et Fadimé Erdugrul-Tastan, adjointe au maire d'Hérouville et qui serait responsable des Loups gris locaux. « Il est absolument notable, assure même la DCRI, que le maire [Rodolphe Thomas, fidèle de Bayrou, NDLR] est apparemment très informé des activités parallèles de Mme Tastan et qu'il les cautionne, sans doute par clientélisme électoral. » Contactée, la mairie d'Hérouville-Saint-Clair, qui « travaille en collaboration étroite avec (...) l'association Amitiés franco-turques de Basse-Normandie », nie avoir connaissance des liens d'Erdugrul-Tastan avec les Loups gris.

Vitrine. D'autres clichés des cortèges attestent la présence du représentant des Loups gris d'Anvers, de celui de Strasbourg, du président de l'organisation des jeunes « idéalistes » belges, Muhammed Aksoy. Pour la DCRI, la Fédération des Turcs de France a utilisé son réseau pour rassembler les rancœurs contre le projet de loi, sans se mettre en avant. Le centre culturel Anatolie, par exemple, est la « vitrine présentable de la manifestation », dont le président, Demir Onger, cardiologue, parle à la presse française. L'association Ataturque, plus modérée, Turquie News et Radio MIT, ou encore l'Association pour la pensée d'Atatürk et le Comité Talaat Pacha, qui « semble avoir été créé au plus haut niveau de l'Etat turc afin de nier le génocide des Arméniens », ont aussi pris part aux manifestations. Ce qui rassemble ces organisations ? « L'élément nationaliste », affirme la DCRI, pour laquelle la négation du génocide des Arméniens « semble constituer le socle identitaire ». La loi a été annulée par le Conseil constitutionnel et le nouveau texte sera présenté après les législatives. De quoi mobiliser à nouveau les communautés turques européennes ■

La laborieuse quête d'unité des opposants syriens

Après un an de soulèvement contre le régime de Damas, l'opposition n'est toujours pas une alternative crédible

Dans le Rubik's Cube syrien, cette face-là n'est pas la plus aisée à assembler. Depuis des mois, l'unification et l'élargissement de l'opposition syrienne est devenu le mantra des diplomaties occidentales. Plus qu'une invitation, une injonction. « C'est une condition sine qua non si l'on veut espérer un jour remplacer le régime de Bachar Al-Assad, dit un diplomate français. Mais pour cela, il faut d'abord qu'émerge une alternative crédible. Et c'est loin d'être le cas. Il faut que le Conseil national syrien s'ouvre plus aux minorités, aux chrétiens, aux Kurdes, aux alaouites, aux druzes. Le CNS doit dire quelle est sa vision de la Syrie de demain et de la période transitoire. »

Critiqué tant par ses parrains que par ses concurrents, contesté jusque dans ses rangs et miné par les divisions, le Conseil national syrien (CNS) a tenté de se relancer, lors d'une réunion lundi 26 et mardi 27 mars à Istanbul. Un impératif car le Groupe des amis du peuple syrien, une coalition internationale opposée à Bachar Al-Assad, qui se réunit pour la seconde fois, dimanche 1^{er} avril en Turquie, a fait du CNS le pivot de sa stratégie.

« Nous sortons de cinquante ans de désert politique, plaide Bassma Kodmani, la porte-parole du CNS. Il n'est pas facile de mettre sur pied en quelques mois un conseil de 300 personnes avec un fonctionnement bien rôdé. On nous demande de parler d'une seule voix, c'est irréaliste. Nous ne sommes pas le parti Baas. »

Malgré ses dysfonctionnements, le CNS reste la seule plateforme largement reconnue par les manifestants en Syrie. L'autre coalition, le Comité national de coordination pour le changement démocratique (CNC), de Hassan Abdel Azim, est jugé trop molle avec le régime et trop « intellectuelle » : ses principaux membres viennent quasiment tous de la gauche nationaliste arabe ou kurde. Pour Haytham Al-Manna, représentant du CNC à l'étranger, le CNS est le jouet de puissances étrangères comme le Qatar, l'Arabie saoudite et la Turquie : « Nous ne sommes



pas des révolutionnaires sur commande », affirme-t-il.

Interférences étrangères

Le CNC n'est pas venu à Istanbul. Il avait conclu avec le CNS au Caire, le 31 décembre 2011, un accord qui a capoté à cause de la pression des islamistes et du Qatar, accuse M. Manna ; parce que le CNC ne voulait pas entendre parler de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), explique le CNS. Depuis, la tension règne entre les deux organisations. A tel point qu'un dirigeant occidental, exaspéré, a parlé de « suicide ».

En revanche, d'autres formations, comme le Mouvement démocratique pour la réforme d'Ammar Al-Qourabi, viennent de rejoindre le CNS. Haytham Al-Maleh, un avocat islamiste indépendant, qui avait annoncé sa dissidence du CNS, est rentré au bercail.

Lé reproche le plus souvent fait au CNS est celui d'être manipulé par les islamistes, censés être sous influence étrangère. « Sur les douze membres du bureau exécutif, seuls



Ci-dessus, Burhan Ghalioun, chef du Conseil national syrien (CNS). Ci-contre, Haytham Al-Manna (en haut), représentant extérieur du Comité national de coordination pour le changement démocratique, et Haytham Al-Maleh, un avocat islamiste qui a rejoint le CNS. REUTERS

deux sont islamistes, dont un Frère musulman », tempère M^{me} Kodmani. « Les Frères sont les seuls à être organisés en parti politique, note un compagnon de route du CNS. Ils sont bien plus efficaces et influents que les autres. » Leur poids devrait se diluer avec l'élargissement, décidé à Istanbul, du CNS aux hommes d'affaires, aux militants syndicaux et à plus de représentants des comités révolutionnaires locaux.

George Sabra, membre du bureau exécutif du CNS, chrétien et marxiste, défend la confrérie : « Les Frères ont publié le 25 mars, une déclaration de principe que j'aurai pu signer. Ils reconnaissent même la liberté de croyance. »

Le CNS est sans cesse tiraillé entre Doha, Istanbul et Paris, où chacun a une idée précise de la façon dont les choses doivent se passer. Et où chacun a ses sources et ses relais. Ainsi, Bassma Kodmani, qui a fondé le centre d'études Arab Reform Initiative, basé à Paris, est régulièrement accusée d'être trop proche de la France ou des Américains, parce qu'elle a dirigé un temps la succursale cairote de la Ford Foundation.

Quant aux Frères musulmans syriens, plusieurs d'entre eux sont membres de l'AKP, le parti du pre-

mier ministre turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan, depuis la grande répression du début des années 1980 qui les a chassés de Syrie.

Méfiance des Kurdes

Cette proximité suscite la méfiance des partis kurdes, regroupés au sein du Conseil national kurde (CNK), à l'exception du PYD, membre du CNC. Ils ont claqué la porte de la réunion d'Istanbul au prétexte que leur demande d'autonomie, voire d'autodétermination, n'était pas dans le document final : « On ne peut pas prendre des engagements sur l'avenir à la place du peuple syrien », rétorque M. Sabra. Malgré tout, le dialogue entre le CNK et le CNS reste ouvert.

Beaucoup plus qu'entre laïques et islamistes, la ligne de fracture au

sein du CNS passe entre exilés anciens et exilés récents, comme le note Thomas Pierret, spécialiste de la Syrie à l'université d'Edimbourg. Les seconds, qui viennent tout juste de quitter l'enfer de la répression en Syrie, ne comprennent pas toujours que les premiers hésitent à soutenir la lutte armée où à appeler à une intervention étrangère. Ils acceptent mal de se voir dicter leurs positions, voire le choix de leur représentant, par des

personnes connues en Occident mais absentes de Syrie depuis des décennies. Enfin, les exilés récents, comme George Sabra, reprochent au CNS de n'avoir pas assez soutenu les révolutionnaires par des dons et de l'aide humanitaire.

Tous les torts ne reviennent pas

au CNS. Les Occidentaux se sont aussi fourvoyés dans leur approche. « Il aurait peut-être fallu prendre le problème à l'envers, fait remarquer un bon connaisseur des affaires syriennes. Commencer par reconnaître le CNS aurait créé une dynamique d'intégration. »

En demandant aux différentes factions de s'unir, on a provoqué un émiettement : chacun a voulu arriver à la table des négociations sous son étiquette, pour négocier au mieux son ralliement. Un diplomate arabe regrette pour sa part qu'on ait insisté sur « l'unification

des groupes plutôt que sur celle des positions ». « Il aurait fallu commencer par travailler sur un texte commun et laisser de côté les questions organisationnelles », affirme-t-il. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD
ET BENJAMIN BARTHE

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune MARCH 30, 2012

Baghdad summit meeting underscores divisions among Arab leaders

BAGHDAD

BY JACK HEALY

Under heavy security and a clear blue sky, Arab leaders stepped off their private planes in Baghdad on Thursday to gather for a meeting billed as a show of unity but underscoring divisions among Arab nations about the bloody crisis in Syria.

Soon after they arrived, a muffled explosion was heard near the gathering, apparently caused by a mortar landing not far from the Iranian Embassy. Officials at the Arab League gathering said there were no casualties. The area surrounding the meeting had been sealed off by security forces in advance.

The explosion underscored the fact that the city is rocked by mortar and rocket attacks and improvised explosions nearly every day. As they sought to secure Baghdad for the Arab gathering, Iraqi officials pointedly avoided predictions that they would be able to prevent such attacks during the meeting.

The arrival of Arab leaders was the culmination of a three-day meeting of Arab League nations, a landmark event for Iraqi leaders looking to polish their reputation and prestige. But on the most pressing questions facing the Arab world, the gathering has offered more symbolism than substance.

On Wednesday night, Arab diplomats urged Syria to adhere to a cease-fire

The meeting has offered more symbolism than substance.

plan brokered by the United Nations, echoing calls from other international diplomats. But the Arab ministers and ambassadors signaled that they would go no further, refusing to adopt measures calling for the resignation of Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, or to arm opposition fighters.

"We have no new initiative to bring except for the issues we've already dis-

cussed," Iraq's foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, said at a news conference on Wednesday night.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry on Thursday repeated its rejection of any moves related to Syria, whose membership of the Arab League has been suspended because of the violence in the country. The Syrian Arab News Agency, the state news outlet, quoted a spokesman, Jihad Maqdisi, as saying Syria's relationship with Arab countries since its suspension were conducted on a state-by-state basis. "Therefore it won't deal with any Arab League initiative at any level in its absence," the spokesman said.

For Iraqi officials, the goal of the Baghdad gathering was never a breakthrough to resolve the increasingly sectarian conflict in Syria. Their aim was to showcase Iraq as a safe and stable country that had emerged from more than two dark decades of war, sanctions, occupation and status as a diplomatic pariah.

At least 10 leaders are attending the summit, including those of Lebanon, Su-

dan, Tunisia and Kuwait, which was invaded by Saddam Hussein in 1990. The U.S. secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, was also in Baghdad to promote the six-point peace proposal and addressed his comments on Thursday to Mr. Assad. "The world is waiting for commitments to be translated into action," he said.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have led calls for more aggressive action against Syria's government, have sent only lower-level emissaries to Baghdad. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Qatar's prime minister said his nation was "sending a message" about its displeasure with growing sectarianism among Iraq's Shiite leaders.

To prepare Baghdad for the meeting, Iraq spent \$500 million on hotel renovations, bouquets, lavish meals and sleek black Mercedes sedans, and placed the capital under a virtual lockdown.

As many as 100,000 security forces have descended on the city. Nearly every bridge over the Tigris River is closed to traffic. Roads are closed by

brambles of concertina wire, entire neighborhoods are blockaded. On Thursday, residents in several neighborhoods in western Baghdad said they had no cellphone service, suggesting that the government had cut the mobile networks to try to prevent terrorist attacks.

So far, central Baghdad has been almost eerily quiet, its congested streets empty. The government has declared a national holiday for the meeting, so many Iraqis are staying home to watch the coverage of the meeting on television, or they have decamped to the northern Kurdistan region to avoid the hassles of checkpoints and random searches.

Security officials hailed their measures as a success.

"We were able to defuse the terrorist plans and hold back the attacks," said Dhia al Wakeel, a security spokesman. "That proves that they are helpless to disturb the atmosphere of the Arab summit."

Yasir Ghazi contributed reporting.

Iraqi hope on display at summit

BAGHDAD

Hosting Arab League, leaders seek to reclaim influential role in region

BY JACK HEALY

As Arab leaders converge on Baghdad for a landmark summit meeting this week, they will be treated to carefully chosen glimpses of a new Iraq: gleaming hotel lobbies, renovated palaces and young palm trees lining an airport highway once called the Road of Death.

For Iraqi diplomats and officials, the three-day meeting of the Arab League is a banner moment for a country emerging from decades of war, occupation and diplomatic isolation. Iraqi leaders see a rare chance to reassert themselves as players in a transformed Arab world by hosting the first major diplomatic event in Iraq since U.S. troops withdrew in December.

But just beyond the cement walls and freshly planted petunias of the International Zone lies a ragged country with a bleaker view. Out in the real Iraq, suicide bombings still rip through the streets. Sectarian divisions have paralyzed its politics and weakened its stature with powerful neighbors like Saudi Arabia and Iran, who use money and militias to aggressively pursue their own agendas inside Iraq. Despite its aspirations to wield influence as a new Arab democracy, Iraq may well remain more of a stage than an actor.

But that is not for lack of effort to reclaim its role as a powerful player in the region. In recent weeks, Iraqi diplomats intensified a campaign of deal-making and diplomacy aimed at wooing Sunni Arab nations while trying to refute the popular suspicion that its rulers are tools of Shiite Iran.

Iraq and Kuwait recently resolved a \$500 million dispute over reparations from the Gulf War, an agreement that will now allow Iraq's state-owned airplanes to venture abroad without fear of being seized to pay off its old war debts. Iraq also agreed to provide \$408 million in back pay owed to Egyptian workers who fled Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait.

And last month, Iraq and Saudi Arabia tried to overcome years of discord and distrust by signing a joint security agreement and discussing an exchange of prisoners. The Saudis also named their first ambassador to Iraq in two decades, though he will remain based in Amman.

The summit meeting, the first such meeting of the Arab League since popular uprisings began to sweep the region last year, remains a great gamble for Iraq after more than two years and \$500 million worth of preparations.

"This country has been isolated, sanctioned, was a rogue state expelled from the ranks of the Arabs and

Muslims," said the Iraqi foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari. "It was one of our major obstacles to get this country back on its feet, to show it has become a normal country."

Questions of how to stop the bleeding in Syria are likely to dominate the summit meeting. The Arab League has sent monitoring teams into Syria — which failed to stem the violence there — and called for a peaceful transition. Its leaders are not expected to call for military intervention or armed support to the opposition.

Although Arab League members will probably acknowledge the waves of popular uprising, few observers expect any of them to ask hard questions about the pessimism, violence and stagnation that have set in after the heady rush of the Arab Spring.

Iraq is eager to keep any discussion of its own problems out of the meeting. It does not want to talk about accusations of the creeping authoritarian rule under Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, a Shiite; the bitter disenfranchisement of Iraq's Sunni minority; or a worsening dispute between Baghdad and Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq over control of oil resources and division of the national budget.

But Iraq's weakness abroad starts at home. If it wants to truly re-engage with the region as an independent Shiite Arab nation that can counterbalance powerful neighbors like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, analysts say it will have to move beyond the rigid sectarianism that defines its politics and divides its voice abroad.

"Iraq's internal issues — and differing interpretations of threats and interests — make it difficult for the country to pursue a coherent, unified foreign policy and to project its influence," Emma Sky, a former adviser to Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the onetime U.S. commander in Iraq, wrote in a forthcoming paper.

Just one day after the last U.S. troops left the Shiite government set off a maelstrom by accusing the Sunni vice president of running death squads. The political opposition is divided and rudderless. And a progressive youth movement, formed in the image of the Tahrir Square uprising, has been pulverized by arrests, intimidation and infiltration by Mr. Maliki's increasingly autocratic government.

Vestiges from decades of war linger. Every year, Iraq still pays billions of dollars in reparations to Kuwait for Saddam Hussein's disastrous invasion. Five percent of Iraq's oil revenues are being garnished as war reparations to Kuwait, and the two nations are scrabbling over com-

peting ports and access to the Gulf. Its own military leaders admit they cannot secure the desert borders that are conduits for drugs, weapons and militants.

And its efforts at fence-mending — as well as Iraq's reluctant, tepid calls for change in Syria — may be real steps toward reintegrating Iraq back into the Arab world. Or they could simply be the price Iraqi leaders are willing to pay to avoid the embarrassment of a half-filled meeting hall.

Syria, which has been suspended from the Arab League, will not attend.

Syria remains a divisive issue between Iraq and its Sunni Arab neighbors. Recently, Iranian cargo planes suspected of carrying weapons have crossed through Iraqi airspace, bound for Syria, whose government is a staunch Iranian ally. After repeated entreaties from U.S. officials, Mr. Maliki has responded and the flights appear to have all but stopped.

Over the next few days in Baghdad, the leaders at the summit meeting will gather in the former Republican Palace, one of several government buildings and hotels that have been remodeled with new chandeliers, marble, wood trim and the other gilded trappings of what Iraq aspires to look like.

The government has also spent millions to redeploy thousands of security forces to the capital and is juggling transportation and accommodations for thousands of leaders, diplomats and journalists. It has bought 2,000 suits and 2,000 ties with the summit meeting's insignia. It is corralling 600 cars. It is spending \$600,000 on stationery and \$1 million on flowers.

In Baghdad's streets, the response to the Arab summit meeting is complex. Some Iraqis see it as a source of national pride. Others, with a pessimism as hard-baked as desert soil, dismiss it as a waste of money by a self-serving political elite. Fears abound that the summit meeting will attract more suicide bombers to Baghdad than heads of state.

The meeting was postponed last April because of the upheaval in the region, giving Iraqi leaders more time to polish the areas of the city visible to delegates with new sidewalks, streetlights, fountains and grass. But in the poorer precincts of Baghdad, where gutters flow with raw sewage and the power comes on for just four hours a day, little has changed.

Every Iraqi did get one thing, though: In honor of the summit meeting — and to reduce the congestion and chaos of vehicle bans and checkpoints — the government has declared a weeklong national holiday.

In the Arena

Joe Klein



TO READ JOE'S BLOG POSTS, GO TO time.com/swampland

Is Iran Dangerous—or Desperate? Both. How Obama and the Israelis have backed Iran's leaders into a corner

HOW DANGEROUS IS IRAN, REALLY? Rick Santorum, who truly is a severe conservative, says, "The theocracy that runs Iran is the equivalent of having al-Qaeda in charge of a country." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu believes Iran is run by a theocratic death cult that will attack Israel as soon as it gets a nuclear weapon. And given Iran's twitchy, trigger-happy behavior this winter—the alleged "sticky bomb" attacks on Israeli diplomats in India and Georgia, the bomb factory that exploded in Thailand, the alleged plot to kill a Saudi diplomat in Washington, the threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's nuclear braggadocio—Santorum's and Netanyahu's extravagant fears would appear to have some basis in fact. Israel is certainly acting as if Iran were an imminent threat, dropping hints—very unusual for the traditionally mum Israelis—that a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities may be coming sooner rather than later.

Or maybe not. The reality is that Iran right now is more desperate than dangerous. Its economy is collapsing under the weight of brutal sanctions. Its prime ally, Syria, seems to be collapsing as well. Its internal politics are fractured. Ahmadinejad has been humiliated and marginalized by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; most of Ahmadinejad's allies were struck from the ballot for the coming parliamentary elections. And Iran's alleged attempts to cause mayhem in the world—the bombings, the assassination plot in Washington (which, I'm told by intelligence sources, was as real as it was weird)—have been marked by ineptitude and utter failure, especially when compared with the alleged, but likely, Israeli campaign to assassinate Iran's nuclear scientists. Indeed, the pathetic nature of Iran's responses

show that it is intimidated by Israel's retaliatory capabilities: Where are the truck bombs of yesteryear? How intimidating can attacks in New Delhi and Tbilisi be compared with murders carried out in the streets of Tehran? Even Iran's nuclear project has been severely compromised by an ongoing, joint U.S.-Israeli sabotage effort; experts say a successful nuclear weapon is at least two years away.

The Iranian collapse has not happened by accident. It has been stage-managed by the Obama Administration. Even the "failure" of President Obama's initial efforts to



negotiate with the regime served a larger purpose: it made clear to the Europeans, Russians and Chinese that Iran's leadership was intransigent, which made Russian and Chinese cooperation on the U.N. sanctions possible. Now Iran is nearly isolated in the world, the regime is extremely unpopular domestically, and its revolutionary fervor has ebbed. Far from being the theocratic martyrdom cult that Santorum and others allege, Iran is a fairly traditional military dictatorship with a patina of religiosity. "Khamenei has marginalized the clergy," says Mehdi Khalaji of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Khalaji should know: his father is an ayatollah who was imprisoned for a time by the regime. The real power in Tehran is the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—and there are signs that the IRGC is growing impatient with the Supreme Leader as well. Obama's diplomacy, augmented by Israel's hints of violence to come, has backed Khamenei into a corner. His only reasonable option is to negotiate. But Khamenei is not a reasonable man.

It is difficult to sustain fanaticism. Iran's religious zeal had faded by 1989, when its original revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, died. The country was exhausted and decimated by a million casualties suffered in the war against Iraq. "There were two models that Khamenei considered when he came to power," says Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who has done a close study of Khamenei's writings. "There was the Chinese model, which was favored by [then] President Hashemi Rafsanjani: build the economy, seek rapprochement with the West but retain complete political power." Khamenei was obsessed by a Russian example, though: Mikhail Gorbachev had just proved that if you compromise, you collapse. "Khamenei has never compromised. He has been unrelenting and unengageable."

Today the Chinese path is more compelling than ever—especially since the Revolutionary Guards control about 30% of the economy and are getting clobbered by the sanctions. But there is a new model to consider: Pakistan. "Some Revolutionary Guard leaders see that as soon as Pakistan gained nuclear capability, the world had to treat it with more respect," Sadjadpour says. But Iran's economy is likely to collapse before the Pakistani option is viable. And Obama shows no sign of making any concessions until Iran stops enriching uranium and opens its nuclear books.

Iran faces its greatest crisis since 1979. The Supreme Leader faces the defining choice of his career: compromise or collapse. One way or the other, his time is running out.

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDON FOR TIME; KHAMENEI: REUTERS/LANOOY

Syrian rebels stepping up attacks on Assad forces

BEIRUT

BY HALA DROUBI
AND ALAN COWELL

Syrian rebels seemed to intensify attacks on individual members of President Bashar al-Assad's security forces on Thursday, with the state news media in Syria reporting that insurgents had kidnapped an air force general near Damascus while gunmen in the northern city of Aleppo fatally shot two army colonels as they drove to work.

The attacks, both in broad daylight, seemed to reflect an attempt by opponents of Mr. Assad to demonstrate that they could strike with impunity. Elsewhere, video posted by activists showed what seemed to be evidence of a fresh bombardment of the central city of Homs, a focal point of the yearlong uprising.

The shelling in Homs, coupled with the daily tally of violence elsewhere, appeared to contradict assertions that Mr. Assad has accepted a six-point peace plan proposed by Kofi Annan, a former secretary general of the United Nations who was designated a special envoy to

Syria by the United Nations and the Arab League.

Mr. Assad said in a letter quoted by news agencies on Thursday that he would "spare no effort" to make Mr. Annan's mission succeed but that it would depend on an agreement from armed groups to stop what he called their "terrorist acts."

The Aleppo shootings also seemed to underscore the increasingly violent and targeted nature of the uprising with attacks on places regarded as relatively quiet bastions of support for Mr. Assad. The Syrian Arab News Agency reported that four assailants in a car opened fire on the two officers, identified as Col. Abdul-Karim al-Raei from the Northern Command and Col. Fouad Shaaban from what was called the military's appointments directorate.

The Syrian authorities accused the rebels of targeting "the national expertise and intellectuals."

The news agency also said an "armed terrorist group" — usually reference to army defectors and rebels grouped in the Free Syrian Army — had "kidnapped" a pilot holding the rank of brigadier general while "he was heading to his job" in the countryside around Damascus. The

"There are more killings, mass murders and no withdrawal of forces from streets."

agency identified the officer as Brig. Gen. Pilot Mohammed Omar al-Derbas.

Syria's international isolation, meanwhile, seemed to deepen yet further as

Belgium joined many other nations, including the United States, Turkey, European powers and Arab countries, in closing its embassy in Damascus.

The Local Coordinating Committees, a Syrian activist group, said 26 people had been killed in the country by mid-afternoon on Thursday.

The activists, whose reports could not be independently verified because of government reporting restrictions, said confrontations had been reported in many parts of Syria, from Aleppo and Idlib in the north to the suburbs of Damascus, the capital.

Mr. Assad's exiled adversaries are meeting in Istanbul before a gathering there on Sunday of the so-called Friends of Syria, a coalition including Western and Arab nations seeking Mr. Assad's ouster. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is set to attend.

The exiles, grouped mainly in the Syrian National Council, have not so far given a formal response to the Annan proposals but have voiced skepticism about its chances of success, referring to a proposal last November by the Arab League that Mr. Assad accepted but has not carried out.

"We know that there was a initiative of the Arab League and the regime pretended that they agreed, but what happened?" said Walid Banani, a member of the Syrian National Council, at a news conference in Istanbul. "There are more killings, mass murders and no withdrawal of forces from streets."

"So, it's another way of going around and gaining more time," he said, referring to Mr. Assad's apparent acceptance of the plan, "so we hope that it's not another maneuver by the regime and we lose more lives."

THE TIMES
OF ISRAEL

March 30, 2012

Syrian Kurds 'training in Iraq for the day after Assad'

Kurds break from Syrian opposition after hopes for an autonomous region are dashed

By Elhanan Miller

Kurdish citizens of Syria have fled to the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq, where they are receiving military training in preparation for the post-Assad era, an Arabic-language Kurdish website reported Thursday.

According to xabar24, at least 330 Kurdish Syrians are being trained in a military camp run by the Peshmerga, the Kurdish

armed forces. According to one youth in the camp, training began last week south of the Kurdish capital Irbil following a decision of "the highest ranks of the Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP)," led by the region's President Masoud Barazani.

The Kurdish youth told xabar24 that the training is shrouded in secrecy, with cadets banned from leaving the training grounds. He added that the military training will allow Kurds to "intervene in the Kurdish areas [of Syria] to prevent chaos when the Syrian regime falls."

Kurds, a Sunni Muslim ethnic minority, comprise an estimated 9% of Syria's population, mostly concentrated in the country's north and north-east. Many Kurds have fled Syria to the neighboring Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, as Assad's crackdown on Syrian towns intensified over the past months.

Kurdish representatives stormed out of a Syrian opposition meeting in Istanbul Tuesday, after their demands for an autonomous federal region within Syria went unmet.○

Les Kurdes, les grands oubliés du conflit syrien



Manifestant brandissant des drapeaux kurdes et de l'opposition syrienne lors d'une marche contre le Bachar al Assad la semaine dernière à Kamichli, dans l'est de la Syrie. Photo prise le 23 mars 2012/REUTERS/Shaan News Network

par Khaled Yacoub Oweis -(Reuters)

ISTANBUL - Les Kurdes de Syrie, qui représentent environ dix pour cent de la population, sont les grands oubliés du soulèvement vieux d'un an contre le régime de Bachar al Assad.

"La question kurde est une bombe à retardement. On ne peut attendre la chute de Bachar al Assad pour la régler!", se lamente Radif Moustafa, l'un des défenseurs de longue date de la cause kurde.

Les espoirs des Kurdes syriens ont été douchés lors de la réunion, cette semaine à Istanbul, du Conseil national syrien (CNS), dominé par les islamistes, qui a refusé une demande de reconnaissance de cette importante minorité et ses revendications autonomistes.

Adversaires de longue date du parti Baas au pouvoir à Damas depuis des décennies, les Kurdes syriens sont pourtant restés, en grande partie, soigneusement à l'écart des dernières manifestations.

Pour le cercle de réflexion britannique Henry Jackson Society, le rallie-

ment des Kurdes au mouvement d'insurrection anti-Assad pourrait cependant se révéler décisif et faire pencher la balance.

Mais leurs profondes divisions internes et la méfiance des Kurdes à l'égard du CNS et des autres mouvements d'opposition arabes font que cette communauté ne s'est pas vraiment associée jusqu'ici à la lutte armée.

La réunion d'Istanbul s'est achevée sur un accord visant à élargir le CNS assorti d'une promesse de réconciliation et de création d'un Etat démocratique une fois le régime Assad renversé.

Les Kurdes ont alors quitté les débats en refusant de signer la déclaration finale omettant toute référence à leurs droits propres en tant que communauté, le texte d'Istanbul se contentant d'une promesse de reconnaissance des droits individuels de tous les Syriens.

TENTATION SÉCESSIONNISTE?

Contrairement à l'Irak, où les Kurdes ont obtenu la création d'une région semi-autonome dans le Nord,

les dirigeants kurdes syriens affirment ne vouloir qu'un système fédéral leur garantissant la citoyenneté, le droit de propriété; un système éducatif en langue kurde et une répartition équitable des recettes budgétaires.

Les Kurdes vivent pour la plupart dans l'est, riche en pétrole, de la Syrie et dans le nord-est limitrophe de la Turquie, dans la région rurale d'Ifrine. D'importants quartiers de Damas et d'Alep, la capitale économique située à moins de 50 km de la frontière turque, sont aussi dominés par des Kurdes.

Certains dans les rangs de l'opposition syrienne ne cachent pas leurs craintes de voir les revendications des Kurdes déboucher sur une tentation sécessionniste.

En outre, insistent-ils, leur accorder trop de droits risquerait de déplaire à la Turquie, qui a déjà maille à partir avec sa propre et remuante minorité kurde, et d'affaiblir le soutien apporté par Ankara au soulèvement syrien.

"La priorité reste de faire chuter Bachar al Assad", explique l'une des figures de l'opposition, le sunnite Najati Tayyara, très respecté des Kurdes.

La mouvance kurde de Syrie a la particularité d'être extrêmement fragmentée, avec des partis régionaux kurdes soutenant des groupes rivaux. Il existe même une formation kurde syrienne qui a pris fait et cause pour le régime de Damas.

La plupart des partis kurdes se sont rassemblés cette année sous la bannière du Congrès national kurde (CNK) pour soutenir le soulèvement syrien et plaider la cause kurde.

UNE "LIGNE ROUGE" POUR ANKARA

Le CNK, qui bénéficie du soutien du gouvernement régional au pouvoir au Kurdistan irakien, est la principale faction kurde à avoir claqué la porte lors de la réunion d'Istanbul.

L'autre grande faction kurde syrienne, le Parti de l'union démocratique (PUD), a l'appui du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK, formation kurde de Turquie qui prône la lutte armée contre le gouvernement central d'Ankara) et se tient à l'écart de toutes les activités de l'opposition.

Le père de Bachar al Assad, Hafez, décédé en 2000, avait donné l'asile politique durant de longues années à Abdullah Öcalan, le chef du PKK turc, avant de le renvoyer à l'étranger où il a fini par se faire enlever par des agents secrets turcs. "Apo" croupit actuellement dans une prison d'une île de la mer Egée.

Bachar al Assad a, pour sa part, coopéré avec les Turcs pour réprimer les maquisards du PKK dans le cadre d'un réchauffement des relations entre Damas et Ankara.

Un nouveau soutien de Damas au

PKK constituerait une nouvelle "ligne rouge" pour Ankara, qui s'est élevé contre la répression par le régime de Damas des manifestations prodémocratiques ainsi que contre l'escalade du conflit.

Le PUD, considéré comme un obligé de Damas, est accusé par l'opposition syrienne d'agir au nom du régime en place en réprimant les manifestations dans les régions kurdes et en assassinant des militants anti-Assad.

Au début de la révolte syrienne, Bachar al Assad a fait des concessions

aux Kurdes en promulguant notamment un décret accordant la nationalité syrienne aux Kurdes qui en avaient été privés à la suite d'un recensement remontant aux années 1960.

Mais d'après des activistes kurdes, seuls 6.000 des quelques 150.000 Kurdes apatrides ont en fait retrouvé la nationalité syrienne et la plupart des mesures discriminatoires, comme l'interdiction de l'enseignement de la langue kurde, sont toujours en place.●



Les minorités syriennes ne se sentent pas représentées par le CNS

mardi 27 mars 2012

Par RFI

Plusieurs organisations de l'opposition se sont réunies ces 25 et 26 mars 2012 à Istanbul, en Turquie, pour tenter de mettre en place une plateforme commune, une semaine avant la conférence des Amis de la Syrie. Malgré les appels à l'union d'une partie de l'opposition, les divergences persistent sur le fond.

La réunion à Istanbul de ce lundi 26 mars a été convoquée à l'initiative du Qatar et de la Turquie. L'idée est bien de tenter d'unifier les voix de l'opposition, comme l'avait demandé Kofi Annan. Mais toute l'opposition n'y sera pas représentée.

Khaled Issa est le vice-président de la section étrangère du Comité de la coordination nationale pour le changement démocratique (CCNCD), un groupe de l'opposition qui refuse de participer à la réunion convoquée par le Qatar et la Turquie ce 26 mars. Selon lui, les minorités -dont les Kurdes- ne sont pas sûres d'être entendues, et le poids du Conseil national syrien est déséquilibré : « Les chrétiens sont inquiets, les alaouites, les druzes, les ismaéliens, les Kurdes, inquiets. Notre Comité de coordination qui regroupe 15 partis politiques et un grand nombre d'intellectuels, ne disons pas que nous ne représentons toute la population mais le Conseil national syrien, non plus ».

Certains reprochent la présence importante de représentants islamistes au sein du Conseil mais pour Bassma Kodmani, porte parole du CNS, l'heure est justement à l'union de toutes les forces d'opposition et il faudrait désormais trouver une base commune au-delà des divergences communautaires : « Il est indispensable aujourd'hui que toutes les formations qui



21 mars 2012, à l'occasion de la fête de Navrouz, un manifestant anti-al-Assad brandit le drapeau de l'opposition syrienne (à dr. sur photo), à côté du drapeau kurde. © Reuters

sont opposées au régime soient unifiées. C'est en étant présent au sein de cette opposition unie que les organisations peuvent peser de tout leur poids ! »

Malgré cet appel à l'unité du Conseil national syrien, les formations comme le CCNCD n'ont pas été à Istanbul. Elles souhaitent une réunion dans un lieu plus neutre qu'Istanbul, comme Genève par exemple, et sous l'égide directe de Kofi Annan pour réaliser sur le fond une véritable union de l'opposition.■

Kurds struggle for recognition in Syrian revolt



Demonstrators holding Kurdish and Syrian opposition flags gather during a protest against Syria's President Assad in Qamishli (HANDOUT, REUTERS / March 25, 2012)

By Khaled Yacoub Oweis

ISTANBUL (Reuters) - Veteran Kurdish human rights campaigner Radeef Mustafa lived in the shadow of huge Syrian secret police compounds towering over his decrepit hometown on the border with Turkey.

When security police cracked his son's head open with an iron bar in a demonstration last year, Mustafa fled.

He and his family came to Turkey where he joined the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), hoping the year-long uprising against President Bashar al-Assad would end discrimination against the country's largest ethnic minority.

His hopes were dashed, though, when the SNC, dominated by Islamists, vetoed a proposal at a meeting in Istanbul this week to recognise Syria's Kurds and their demand for self-rule.

"This is chauvinism. The international community is worried about civil war and is demanding that the opposition

guarantees minority rights," Mustafa told Reuters.

"The Kurdish issue is a time bomb. It cannot be left to be decided when Assad falls."

Constituting about 10 percent of the population, Syria's Kurds have long opposed the ruling Baath Party, but have largely stayed out of the latest demonstrations.

If the Kurds fully joined attempts to overthrow Assad, it could prove decisive, a recent report by the Henry Jackson Society, a Britain-based think-tank, said.

But deep internal divisions among the Kurds and distrust of the SNC and the other Arab-dominated opposition groups have so far kept the Kurds largely out of the fight.

The Istanbul opposition meeting succeeded in reaching an agreement to expand and reform the SNC, and promised a democratic state and reconciliation once Assad is removed.

But the Kurds walked out and refused to sign the declaration as there was no reference to rights for them as a community, only promises to recognise

individual rights for all. **SEPARATISM OR RIGHTS?**

Unlike Iraq, where Kurds rule a semi-autonomous region in the north, Syrian Kurdish leaders say they only want a federal system that would guarantee citizenship, property rights, Kurdish language education and an equitable budget distribution.

They point to a wide distribution of Kurds across several regions of the country, and their integration into Syrian society and the job market, which makes autonomy impractical.

Most of Syria's Kurds live in the east, where the country's oilfields lie, in the arid region of Ayn al-Arab, and in the Ifrin agricultural area on the border with Turkey.

Large neighbourhoods of the capital Damascus and the commercial hub of Aleppo, just 45 km (28 miles) east of the border with Turkey, also are dominated by Kurds.

"When I went to school I did not know a word of Arabic and I was wondering why the teacher did not teach us to write Kurdish," said Mustafa, who is from Ayn al-Arab, a Kurdish town despite its name.

"Our demands are about the right to learn our own language, to sing and to dance, and for compensation for historic discrimination," the burly, soft spoken activist said, referring to what he described as land taken from Kurds and given to Arabs along the Turkish border in the eastern province of Raqqa.

But some in the opposition are wary that Kurdish demands could lead to separation and a copycat movement among other ethnic groups. Too much leeway for Kurds, they say, also could upset neighbouring Turkey, which has a large and restive Kurdish population of its own, and undermine Ankara's support for the revolt.

"The priority is to bring down Assad. We have agreed on general democratic principles and guaranteeing the national rights of everyone under the umbrella of the unity of Syria as a people and a landmass," said

senior opposition figure Najati Tayyara, a liberal Sunni respected by the Kurds.

In the middle of Ayn al-Arab, secret police headquarters and observation points stand like fortresses, in marked contrast to Mursitpinar, the neat Turkish town just across the border. The towns are separated by the old Berlin-to-Baghdad railway.

Intelligence agents fled the compounds during protests that swept Kurdish areas of Syria in 2004, returning after Assad's forces put down the revolt, in which 30 people were killed.

When the revolt against Assad's rule broke out in southern Syria, crowds took to the streets across Kurdish regions to denounce the president. Authorities, fearful of provoking the Kurds, generally have refrained from using deadly force to put down protests in Kurdish regions.

REGIONAL RIVALRIES

The Kurds also are deeply divided among themselves, with regional Kurdish parties backing rival groups and one Syrian Kurdish party taking sides with Assad and his government.

Most Kurdish political parties united under the Kurdish National Congress (KNC) umbrella group this year to support the uprising and push Kurdish demands, but this has not translated into action on the streets, where demonstrations mostly are staged by young men with little party affiliation.

The KNC is backed by the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq and was the main Kurdish faction that walked out of the Istanbul meeting.

The other main Syrian Kurdish faction, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is backed by the Turkish Kurd militant Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and has kept out of all opposition activities.

Assad's father, the late Hafez al-Assad, for years sheltered PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, before the threat of a Turkish invasion in 1998 forced him to send Ocalan abroad >

➤ where Turkish agents eventually captured him and brought him back to Turkey.

Bashar al-Assad later cooperated with Turkey by cracking down on the PKK as relations between the two countries improved after he inherited power in 2000.

Renewed Syrian backing for the PKK would be a further red line for Turkey which repeatedly has warned Assad over the violent crackdown on protests and escalating conflict.

The PKK's Syrian proxy, the PYD, is accused by the Syrian opposition of acting as enfor-

cers for Assad, putting down demonstrations in Kurdish areas and assassinating anti-Assad activists, most notably Mashaal Tammo, a charismatic Kurdish leader who was killed last year as he was seeking to form a broad-based anti-Assad political coalition.

Assad made concessions to Kurds early in the uprising, such as a decree to grant stateless Kurds nationality they were deprived of as a result of a census in the 1960s, and easing laws making it difficult for Kurds to own property.

But only an estimated 6,000 out of 150,000 stateless

Kurds have been given nationality and most discriminatory regulations, including banning the teaching of Kurdish, are still on the books, Kurdish activists say.

Tension also have risen between Assad's opponents and the Kurds after the opposition declaration on Wednesday pledged "equality to all citizens regardless of their religion or ethnicity" but did not mention the Kurds by name.

"Saideline Ismail, a senior Kurdish politician and a member of the Kurdish National Congress said he was dis-

mayed that the SNC, led by Burhan Ghalioun, a Paris-based secular professor, opposed mentioning the Kurdish cause.

"I don't understand why they did not make an effort to gain the Kurdish street," he said.

"The Kurds are the first who want to see the downfall of the Assad regime and are demanding a right of self determination within a united Syria.

Bloomberg

Kurds May Halt Crude Exports If Iraq Withholds \$1.5 Billion

March 27, 2012 — By Nayla Razzouk -

CRUDE EXPORTS from Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region dropped to 50,000 barrels a day and may cease in a month if the central government refuses to pay about \$1.5 billion owed to producers, Kurdish authorities said.

The Kurdistan Regional Government also called today on foreign companies including BP Plc (BP/) not to make separate agreements with Iraq's central government to develop oil fields in and around the disputed northern city of Kirkuk. The central government has said it is talking with BP about boosting output at a field called Kirkuk, near the same city.

A dispute over oil revenues between Iraq's government and Kurdish authorities led to a yearlong halt in exports from the region that ended in February 2011. Iraq holds the world's fifth-biggest crude reserves, based on BP statistics that also include Canadian oil sands, and it seeks to boost oil exports to help rebuild an economy recovering after years of conflict, sanctions and sabotage.

"This latest chapter in the protracted struggle between the central and regional government puts something of a downer on the realization of Iraq's vast crude export potential," JBC Energy GmbH, a Vienna-based consultant founded by Managing Director Johannes Benigni, said in a note today.

Kurdish Potential

The Kurdish Ministry of Natural Resources cut its oil exports from 175,000 barrels a day "because of the production costs and the re-investments needed by the producing companies in the region," according to a statement on the official KRG website. The Kurds are targeting 175,000 barrels a day, as specified in the Iraqi federal budget, and could export "significantly more" if the central government in Baghdad fulfills commitments to pay companies pumping crude at Kurdish fields, the KRG said.

The Kurds export crude through a pipeline controlled by the central

government, which paid producers in the Kurdish region a total of \$514 million last year, according to the statement.

"We still remain hopeful that the authorities in Baghdad will realize the damage being caused to Iraq's economy by their continued failure to comply with their commitments," the KRG said.

The Iraqi Finance Ministry has allocated 650 billion dinars (\$558 million) in the government's annual budget for payments to foreign companies working in the Kurdish region, and it will release the funds upon completion of an official audit, Finance Minister Rafih Al-Issawi said.

Halt Not Feared

"We do not fear the halt of crude exports from the Kurdistan Regional Government," he told reporters in Baghdad today, without elaborating.

BP is in talks aimed at raising production at the Kirkuk field by 300,000 barrels a day, more than double the deposit's current output, Hussain Gholam, the deputy director general of Iraq's North Oil Co., said in a March 22 interview.

The Kurdish ministry, in a separate statement on the KRG website, said the central government doesn't have exclusive authority over Kirkuk or any other oil field. Developing the nation's energy deposits requires the approval of regional governments, the KRG said.

The central government refuses to do business with companies working in the Kurdish region. It said on March 22 that Exxon Mobil Corp. (XOM) had agreed to freeze business the company had arranged with the Kurds.

Iraq produced 2.76 million barrels a day of crude in February, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Most of the output comes from southern fields. The central government, which expects to pump 3.4 million barrels a day by the end of the year, has awarded 15 energy licenses since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that ousted former President Saddam Hussein. It plans a new licensing round in May. □

Les Kurdes du PKK comptent sur Damas pour appuyer leur lutte contre Ankara

LAURE MARCHAND
ISTANBUL

DANS L'OMBRE du conflit en Syrie mais bien présent, le PKK, le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, en guerre contre le pouvoir central turc depuis plus d'un quart de siècle, inquiète Ankara. La Turquie redoute que son soutien à l'opposition et à la résistance syriennes ne lui vaille un sévère retour de bâton : le renouvellement de la traditionnelle alliance entre Damas et le PKK.

La rébellion kurde a réagi vivement à l'évocation d'une zone tampon le long de la frontière en Syrie, « un scénario » mentionné à plusieurs reprises par le gouvernement turc. Pour Murat Karayılan, commandant du PKK retranché dans les montagnes du Kurdistan irakien, une intervention turque en Syrie serait dirigée contre son « peuple ». Les Kurdes de Syrie, qui représentent environ 10 % de la population, vivent principalement au nord-est du pays. En cas d'entrée des troupes turques sur le sol syrien, « tout le Kurdistan (à cheval sur la Turquie, l'Iran, l'Irak et la Syrie, NDLR) serait transformé en zone de guer-

re », a-t-il menacé dans une déclaration à l'agence prokurde Firat.

Le Sud-Est turc connaît toujours une situation de guerre civile larvée. L'interdiction par les autorités turques de la majorité des célébrations de Newroz, le Nouvel An kurde, a déclenché des émeutes dans tout le pays, il y a quinze jours. Et les clashes entre les rebelles et l'armée se sont intensifiés ces dernières semaines. Un sanctuaire pour la guérilla, en terri-

« Même un régime baasiste agonisant peut jouer encore cette carte kurde contre la Turquie »

UN ÉDITORIALISTE DU JOURNAL «MILLIYET»

toire syrien, juste de l'autre côté de la frontière, renforcerait sa lutte contre Ankara. La zone kurde en Syrie est déjà largement sous influence du Parti de l'union démocratique (PYD), la branche syrienne du PKK. Depuis le début de la répression, le PYD ne s'est pas rangé du côté de l'opposition syrienne et a observé une certaine neutralité à l'égard du régime de Damas. En échange, Bachar el-Assad lui

laisse les mains libres dans le Nord-Est. Cela lui permet de se concentrer sur les fondations d'une zone semi-autonome. Une inquiétude supplémentaire pour les Turcs.

Ahmet Davutoglu, le ministre des Affaires étrangères turc, s'est plaint du passage de combattants kurdes entre la Syrie et la Turquie. Il a dit que son gouvernement pourrait demander au Parlement d'autoriser l'envoi de troupes sur le territoire syrien afin d'empêcher le PKK de traverser la frontière. Dans les années 1980 et 1990, la guérilla était hébergée en Syrie et il avait fallu une menace d'Ankara de conflit armé pour que Damas finisse par expulser Abdullah Öcalan, le leader du PKK, en 1998. « *Même un régime baasiste agonisant peut jouer de nouveau cette carte kurde contre la Turquie* », analyse Kadri Gürsel, éditorialiste à *Milliyet* et spécialiste de la question kurde. Précisant que certains indices indiquent que Damas se serait mis à soutenir discrètement le PKK par mesure de rétorsion contre Ankara, qui a choisi le camp des opposants syriens. Le pouvoir de nuisance de la rébellion oblige donc le gouvernement islam-conservateur à jouer la prudence dans la gestion de la crise en Syrie. ■

Les Occidentaux recadrent l'opposition syrienne

GEORGES MALBRUNOT

ET SOUDAIN, le miracle se produisit. Miné par les divisions, il y a deux semaines encore, le Conseil national syrien (CNS) vient miraculeusement d'accoucher d'une « charte », sorte de projet politique dessinant la Syrie de l'après-el-Assad. Cette avancée a eu lieu à Istanbul



« Ceux qui dominent le CNS restent les mêmes barbus sans barbe »

MICHEL KILO, OPPOSANT SYRIEN

juste avant la conférence des « Amis de la Syrie ». Elle doit beaucoup à l'activisme en coulisses des diplomates français et américains. Jusqu'à maintenant, les pairs occidentaux du CNS lui reprochaient une double incapacité : à unifier l'opposition, et à rassurer les minorités religieuses ou ethniques. « *Tout le monde voulant être chef, nous avons finalement renoncé à organiser le CNS, avoue un diplomate français, mais nous avons réussi à*



Il y a deux semaines, Alain Juppé dénonçait publiquement les divisions parmi les opposants à Bachar el-Assad.

PLATIAU/REUTERS

les faire accoucher d'un projet commun. »

En échange d'une reconnaissance internationale, qui ne devrait pas en-

core intervenir à Istanbul, Français et Américains ont exigé que cette charte mentionne le caractère « civil » (c'est-à-dire laïque) de la future Constitution et qu'elle souligne bien l'égalité entre hommes et femmes, ainsi que le respect des minorités (chrétienne, alaouite ou kurde). Problème : il fallait que les islamistes, très influents au sein du CNS, acceptent d'avaler la pilule. « *Ils n'avaient pas le choix* », relève un opposant. « *Après la première conférence des Amis de la Syrie à Tunis en février, les Occidentaux ont été mécontents de voir les dissidences continuer au sein du CNS et que leurs appels n'aient pas été entendus. Ils se sont faits plus menaçants.* »

Il y a deux semaines, Alain Juppé dénonçait publiquement cette opposition qui se déchire, et mardi dernier, Hillary Clinton, la secrétaire d'État américaine, déclarait vouloir « *les inciter fortement* » à présenter un visage unifié à Istanbul. Résultat : à l'issue de longues palabres, une déclaration a été votée mardi par 400 opposants, donnant la part belle à la laïcité, aux droits de l'homme et au respect des minorités,

notion très importante dans un pays dont les divisions en multiples obédiences font redouter une guerre civile.

Dans un esprit de «*reconciliation nationale*», la justice dans la Syrie de demain ne sera pas fondée «*sur la vengeance ou la vendetta*», précise même le texte. Mission accomplie, dans la forme en tout cas. Pour ne pas donner l'impression que les islamistes s'étaient fait tordre le bras, la branche syrienne des Frères musulmans avait pris les devants en publiant peu avant un «*engagement national*» dans lequel elle promet d'élaborer une Constitution civile.

Les Kurdes claquent la porte

Si les islamistes ont accepté ce compromis, la Turquie, elle, s'est farouchement opposée à toute référence à la question kurde dans la charte de l'opposition syrienne. Une ligne rouge pour Ankara, qui redoute le précédent vis-à-vis de sa propre minorité kurde. D'où la colère des représentants kurdes syriens, qui ont claqué la porte d'Istanbul, atténuant la portée de cette avancée. «*Il s'agit d'un simple toilettage*», déplore l'opposant. Pour que la marque islamiste soit diluée, trois cents autres opposants issus de la diaspora avaient pourtant été invités à ratifier le texte d'Istanbul.

D'autre part, aucun intégriste ne devait être présent à la tribune de la

conférence de presse, qui annonça la charte. Bref, à quelques jours de la conférence d'Istanbul, cette réunion des opposants devait montrer un visage plus conforme aux attentes de leurs alliés. Mais dans la réalité, rien ne dit que l'influence islamiste – que les Occidentaux ont tenu à minimiser publiquement jusqu'à maintenant – va se réduire: «*Ceux qui dominent le CNS restent les mêmes barbus sans barbe, des islamistes ou des proches des Frères musulmans*», constate Michel Kilo, une figure de l'opposition, qui a refusé d'aller à Istanbul. Rien ne dit qu'ils aient définitivement renoncé à leur dessein, une fois parvenus au pouvoir à Damas. ■

LE FIGARO

samedi 31 mars - dimanche 1^{er} avril 2012

Le front anti-Bachar en quête d'un second souffle

Les « Amis de la Syrie », réunis dimanche à Istanbul, vont presser Damas d'appliquer le plan de paix.

ALAIN BARLUET

DIPLOMATIE Les représentants de soixante-dix pays, dont de nombreux ministres, parmi lesquels Alain Juppé et Hillary Clinton, sont attendus dimanche à Istanbul pour la deuxième réunion des « Amis de la Syrie ». Un premier rendez-vous, à Tunis le 24 février, avait permis à ce front anti-Bachar el-Assad de compter ses forces... et ses divisions, notamment entre partisans et opposants d'une militarisation de l'opposition. Depuis, la donne a passablement évolué. La poursuite de la violence en Syrie, l'inflexibilité russo-chinoise à l'ONU ont contraint les pays occidentaux et arabes à tenter de relancer la diplomatie sur une base minimale, acceptable par tous les protagonistes.

Le 20 mars, le Conseil de sécurité a adopté une déclaration présidentielle, sorte de sous-résolution, appuyée, cette fois, par Moscou et Pékin. Un texte qui, à la différence des précédents, ne distingue pas les violences perpétrées par le régime et par l'opposition et n'appelle pas au départ de Bachar el-Assad. La déclaration avalise en revan-

che le plan de paix en six points de Kofi Annan prévoyant l'amorce d'un dialogue politique, le cessez-le-feu, un retrait de l'armée hors des villes, l'acheminement de l'aide humanitaire et un libre accès pour la presse. La Russie, la Chine et Damas ont accepté le plan sans toutefois que l'armée de Bachar ne mette l'arme au pied.

À Istanbul, le groupe des « Amis de la Syrie » devrait réaffirmer son soutien à la mission de Kofi Annan, qui – c'est symptomatique – ne sera pas dimanche sur les rives du Bosphore. Car l'ex-secrétaire général entend se préserver de toute initiative qui mettrait en péril sa fragile démarche de médiateur. C'est désormais lui qui est en première ligne dans les grandes manœuvres diplomatiques, les exigences a priori formulées par la France, la Grande-Bretagne, les États-Unis, le Qatar et l'Arabie saoudite n'ayant pu amorcer un dialogue avec Damas. Certes, côté occidental, on parle d'«*imbrication*» entre les diverses initiatives et de «*cartes*» à jouer alternativement (sanctions, menace de la justice internationale...). À Paris, on fait valoir que le plan Annan s'appuie sur celui de la Ligue arabe (adopté le

22 janvier dernier) fixant les conditions d'une transition politique avec, notamment, un retrait de Bachar el-Assad.

« Organiser la transition politique »

Le flou maintenu par le plan de Kofi Annan sur les questions clés d'un règlement a permis l'accord de la Russie et autorise les pays les plus en pointe, comme la France, à continuer d'afficher leur détermination. «*L'enjeu est maintenant d'organiser la transition politique. On peut laisser une marge, mais l'objectif reste le départ de Bachar el-Assad*», souligne un diplomate français. Il est clair néanmoins que toute initiative

faisant de ce départ un préalable, et non l'aboutissement d'un processus comme ce fut le cas au Yémen, serait vouée à l'échec. À Istanbul, des sanctions additionnelles contre Damas seront à l'étude même si les diplomates concèdent que la panoplie est déjà très complète. Une mission d'observateurs de l'ONU est également envisagée, un projet destiné à pallier l'inexpérience démontrée l'an dernier par les observateurs de la Ligue arabe. L'opposition, largement fragmentée, constitue un autre paramètre majeur de l'équation syrienne. Français et Américains ont été très actifs pour accompagner le tournant qui a été pris. (lire l'article ci-dessous). Pour cette opposition, «*vouloir se débarrasser de Bachar ne peut plus suffire, il lui faut se projeter dans le futur*», explique un diplomate à la manœuvre.

Il se félicite de l'adoption, cette semaine à Istanbul, par quelque 400 personnalités de l'opposition syrienne d'une «*charte*» sur l'avenir du pays. Très précieuse, l'ensemble de ce processus tient néanmoins sa force du mandat qu'il a reçu de la communauté internationale, plaide ce même diplomate. «*Si nous échouons, cela signifierait que la Russie et la Chine ont aussi échoué*», relève cette source qui évoque, dans cette hypothèse, un possible retour devant le Conseil de sécurité. ■

400
opposants

syriens, réunis à Istanbul, ont voté une charte sur l'après-Bachar.

Kurdish Officials: Development of Kirkuk Oil Fields Requires KRG Approval

RUDAW

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region -- The Ministry of Natural Resources of the Kurdistan Region released a statement this week reiterating its constitutional rights to any oil development in the northern regions of Iraq.

The press release emphasizes that the Iraqi Ministry of Oil cannot unilaterally award contracts to develop oil fields in the Kirkuk province or the surrounding areas.

The statement points to Article 112 of the constitution which specifies that the Iraqi government must work in conjunction with regional and provincial governorates in managing fields that were in production at the time the constitution was approved in 2005.

"However, Article 115 provides the exclusive right to the regions and governorates to manage all future fields -- that is, the undeveloped discoveries and unexplored structures,"

the statement adds.

The ministry released the constitutional reminder in response to news that the state-owned North Oil Company was in the process of signing an agreement with BP for increased production at the Kirkuk oil field.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has yet to be consulted about the negotiations.

The Ministry of Natural Resources warned that current activities risk breaching the constitution, saying, "The Kurdistan Regional Government requires the federal Oil Ministry and the North Oil Company to respect the country's constitution and sit down soon with all the relevant parties to determine how best to enhance and revitalize the present Kirkuk fields, so that the people of Iraq will benefit from the extra revenues in a timely manner, as the constitution obliges."

This follows some confusion earlier this month, when Iraq's minister of



An oil field outside the city of Kirkuk. Photo AFP.

oil claimed that ExxonMobil had sent a letter saying that they had suspended their contract with the Kurdistan Region.

Days after the minister made the claim, ExxonMobil CEO Rex W. Tillerson clarified the matter by saying the company continued to honor contracts with both the Iraqi government and the KRG. ♦

REUTERS

Iraq approves \$560 mln for Kurdish oil payments

BAGHDAD, March 27, 2012 (Reuters)
By Serena Chaudhry and Mariam Karouny

IRAQ'S CENTRAL government has approved payment of close to \$560 million to oil producers in the autonomous Kurdish region, its finance minister said, after Kurdish authorities threatened to halt exports due to a lack of payments from Baghdad.

The central government has a long-standing dispute with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the north over the control of oil in the region, which has throttled payments. Baghdad maintains it alone has the right to export oil.

On Monday, the KRG said it had reduced exports to 50,000 barrels per day (bpd) and warned it would stop them altogether if Baghdad was not forthcoming with payments, which it said amounted to around \$1.5 billion.

"We've allocated 650 billion Iraqi dinars (\$559.4 million) in the 2012 budget to pay the companies, which we will release after we receive the audit from the board of supreme audit," Finance

Minister Rafie al-Esawi told reporters on the sideline of the Arab League summit on Tuesday.

Iraq's ministries and government offices are all audited by the board of supreme audit, an independent body.

Iraq is hosting the meeting for the first time in 20 years, and the three day event opened on Tuesday, with talks focused on economic and financial cooperation between Arab states.

Iraq approved a \$100 billion budget for 2012 in February, based on an average oil price of \$85 per barrel and 2.6 million bpd in crude exports.

Its Deputy Finance Minister Fadhil Nabi told Reuters a total of about \$2.53 billion had been set aside as payment for oil companies working in Iraq, which included the \$560 million for oil producers in the northern Kurdish zone.

Iraq, which has the fourth-biggest oil reserves in the world, aims to boost its oil production capacity to 8-8.5 million bpd by 2017, which could vault it into the top echelon of world producers.

As much as a third of the oil extracted in northern Iraq is refined locally for domestic use, partly due to late payments from Baghdad for crude pumped into the major pipeline to Turkey and in part because it reduces the costs of producers.

Tensions between Baghdad and the KRG over oil have been high since October, when Exxon Mobil announced a Kurdish exploration deal that the central government deemed illegal. (\$1 = 1161.9000 Iraqi dinars) □