

THE LEBANONIZATION OF SYRIA

Report on the actors of the Syrian crisis

Paris, January 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Syrian nationals who accepted to meet us and answer our questions, as well as the Arab and European diplomatic staff, heads of the intelligence services, members of humanitarian organisations and journalists of the international press whom we also interviewed.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Organised at the instigation of the Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement (French Center for Intelligence Research - CF2R¹) and the Centre international de recherche et d'études sur le terrorisme et d'aide aux victimes du terrorisme (International Center for Research and Study on Terrorism and Aid to Victims of Terrorism - CIRET-AVT²), an international delegation of experts travelled to Syria from December 3rd to December 10th, 2011, in order to assess the situation in Syria in an independent and impartial manner and to meet with the actors of this nine-month-long crisis. It completed its assessment mission with meetings with various representatives of the Syrian opposition abroad, as well as with a panel of Middle East experts from Europe.

The delegation was composed of the following individuals:

- Ms. **Saïda Benhabylès** (Algeria), former Minister of Solidarity, former Senator, founding member of CIRET-AVT, United Nations Civil Society Prize winner;
- Mr. **Richard Labévière** (France), international consultant and writer, specialist on the Middle East, former editor-in-chief at Radio France internationale (RFI), of *Défense* journal of Institut des hautes études de Défense nationale (Institute of Higher Studies for National Defence - IHEDN) and founding member of CIRET-AVT ;
- Mr. **Eric Denécé** (France), director of the Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement (CF2R).

Ms. **Anne-Marie Lizin** (Belgium) also took part in the preparation and drafting of this report, although she was unable to travel to Syria with the other members of the delegation due to prior scheduling obligations.

Anne-Marie Lizin is honorary president of the Senate of Belgium and Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). She was a European MP (1979 to 1988), Secretary of State for European Affairs (1988 to 1992), deputy, Senator and President of the Belgian Senate (the first woman to hold this position).

The guiding principles for the action of the delegation were as follows :

- adherence to democratic principles: freedom, human and women's rights, resistance to oppression as established by the acts and decisions of the UN;
- safety and protection of the civilian population;
- neutrality with regard to the conflict;
- opposition to any foreign military intervention in violation of international law, or according to a supposed right to outside interference in contradiction with the founding principles of the UN;
- enunciation of the facts without judgement;
- exercise of critical reasoning;
- refusal by delegation members to promote their own national interests.

¹ <http://www.cf2r.org>

² <http://www.ciret-avt.com/>

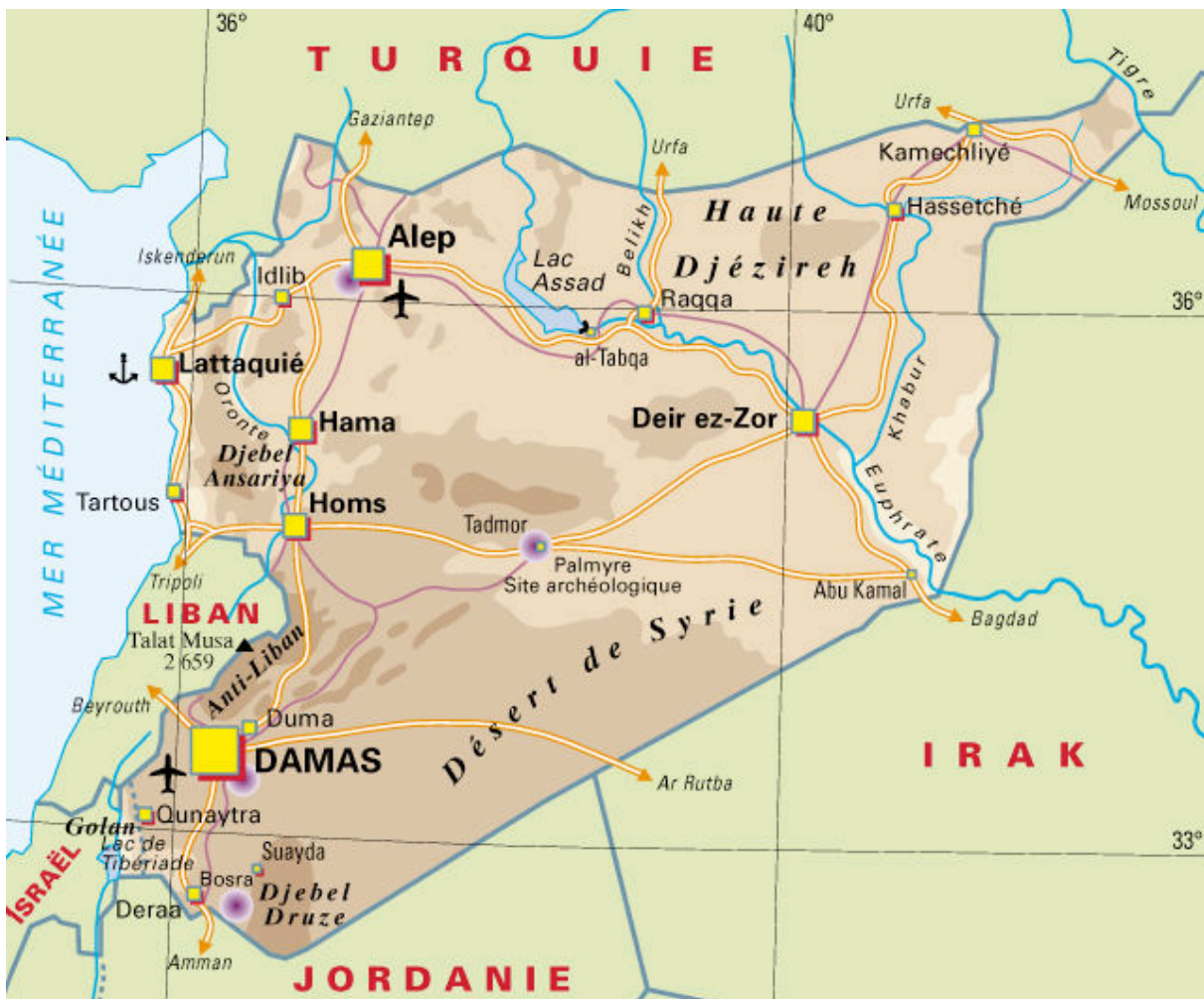
Concerning this last point, we would like to point out that members of the delegation have longstanding, in-depth expertise in the analysis and decoding of crisis situations and techniques of misinformation. For the duration of the mission, in a conflict that is more a media war than a military conflict, the delegation was particularly attentive to the risk of being manipulated by the interviewees. It succeeded in keeping a safe distance from both critics of the rebellion and those who unquestioningly support the regime in Damascus.

Finally, the mission was independent with regard to translation, due to the presence and engagement of Saïda Benhabylès, and the other members of the delegation would like to take this opportunity to extend their thanks to her.

NB :

The present report covers events up to the end of 2011, the eve of the deployment of the Arab League observer mission.

Map of Syria



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian crisis began on 15 March, 2011. According to the United Nations, approximately 5,000 people have died in the crisis (as of December 2011). The crisis in Syria can be described as the forced « Lebanonization » of the country.

The crisis has taken place over three successive phases:

- the beginning of a social movement with people seeking greater civil and political freedoms, echoing the Tunisian and Egyptian « revolutions » of January and Spring 2011;
- the confirmation of sectarian radicalization leading to terrorist operations and the establishment of three zones of armed conflict that echo the Lebanese civil-sectarian war (1975-1989): Deraa, Homs and Itlib ;
- the crystallization of a Sunni/Shia confrontation mirroring the geopolitical duality of American neoconservative ideology that continues to inform and inspire the policy of the Obama administration, meaning a division between so-called « moderate » Arab countries and states and organisations within the « Axis of Evil »: Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas.

Our principal observation is that the Iranian issue largely conditions the way the Syrian crisis is being handled.

This « manufactured Lebanonization » of Syria is the result of actions led by three main groups:

- the Syrian regime, its military units and various security services;
- political and religious groups including the Muslim Brotherhood and leaders of Salafist groups with support from governments and political forces in neighbouring countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Iraq;
- regional and international powers involved in the zone : Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, France.

The media networks of the Gulf states, with support from major Anglo-American press agencies and their European and French counterparts, have become frontline players in this crisis, with « global » coverage aimed primarily at the overthrow of the Damascus regime, similar to what occurred in Libya.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Winter of 2011, countries in the Arab World have been shaken by popular movements and unrest with the populace protesting against the existing order: aspiration to greater freedoms and democracy, a more equitable distribution of wealth, a response to economic and social ills, discontent with nepotist regimes, etc. Throughout the Arab World, we find the same causes for protest.

In the wake of events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen, Syria has been impacted in its turn by the phenomenon. But the Syrian « Spring », an expression of a truly popular movement and born of legitimate claims to greater political freedoms, was quickly transformed at the end of Spring, given the movement's incapacity to weaken the regime, into an armed crisis between an opposition in the throes of radicalization and a security regime.

Though it began as part of the Arab Spring dynamic, the Syrian situation differs greatly from other Arab « revolutions » because of its international ramifications.

The fact is Damascus has been Iran's ally for three decades. Iran is a figurehead of the « Axis of Evil » as decreed by Washington, and a country which the Americans seek to destabilize by any means possible, because of its nuclear program, its support of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and its growing regional influence.

Accordingly, the Iranian issue largely conditions the international approach to the Syrian crisis, a crisis which has emerged against the backdrop of the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the growing concerns of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in the face of a possible Damascus/Baghdad/Teheran axis.

Foreign influences therefore play an essential role in the Syrian crisis - even more so than in Libya - and the interference of international players can be observed every day, both in their support of part of the opposition and in the information war being waged against Damascus by Arab and Anglo-American media networks.

Clearly, the Syrian regime is not a model of democracy, but Syria's adversaries are pitting all their might to blacken the picture and sway international opinion behind external opposition forces to justify measures taken against the regime, in the hope of hastening its downfall.

This falsification of the facts seeks to hide from global public opinion the support - often reluctant - that the majority of the Syrian population have for the current regime and the fact that the external opposition is not the most legitimate stakeholder (as opposed to longstanding domestic opposition groups), neither do they espouse democratic ideals that they pretend to promote (given their strongly Islamist character).

The aim of the present report is to provide objective information on a crisis which is being substantially deformed by the control that Syria's adversaries have over international media networks. To this end, the report will cover the following points:

- a timeline of events since the beginning of the Syrian « Spring »;
- the various components of the opposition, their legitimacy, objectives and strategies ;
- the response of the regime, their responsibilities and the attitude of the populace to central government;
- the media coverage and dimension of the crisis, in particular how events are presented in an orchestrated and misleading manner;
- the 'great game' that foreign powers are playing, which pursues foreign policy objectives that do not reflect the situation in-country and that are based on unwavering support for the regime's opponents.

1. ORIGIN AND CONTEXT OF THE REVOLT

► A security regime

Syrian political power is built around two pillars: a Marxist and nationalist-oriented ideology promoted by the ruling Baath party and the minority Alawite religious group of which President Bachar al-Assad's family is a member.

Officially, Syria is a multi-party, parliamentary republic. There is a coalition of eight political parties called the National Progressive Front (NPF) dominated by the Baath Party. But members of the Assembly, called the « People's Council of Syria » (*Majlis al-Sha'ab*), and who are elected for a four year term have no real authority. The President, elected for seven years, is leader of the NPF and Secretary General of the Baath Party which holds all the positions required to steer state policy and civil society. In reality, nobody can legally oppose the government and its President.

The Army and the security forces are the cornerstones of the regime. The state apparatus is based on a large number of special services and praetorian guards. The leaders of these institutions, though they prefer to stay away from the limelight, are the most powerful figures in the country. Though the President officially has complete control, he must deal with the notables of the regime who can launch a coup d'état at any moment if his decisions do not agree with them.

Since his arrival to power, Bachar al-Assad – who did not aspire to this position - ran up against a system entirely in the hands of the leading dignitaries of the regime. He was obliged to compose with the mandarins who hold, not only the levers of political power through the secret services and Army, but also the keys to the economy, through their control of the huge, sclerotic government bureaucracy.

In addition, the President was only able to implement economic reforms, which though they may appear substantial, were very slow to be put into place. Those reforms were only implemented in the period 2006-2007. There is corruption at every level of the state. Corruption is frequently denounced by the President himself as one of the endemic and structural failings of the regime.

Like his father before him, Bachar has the support of the religious minorities, the rural population, the urban Sunni bourgeoisie and a large part of the plethoric civil service.

► Short-lived political liberalisation

On July 10th, 2000, when Bachar al-Assad succeeded from his father Hafez, there was great hope that the regime would undergo a process of liberalisation. We can call this moment the « Damascus Spring ». Throughout the country, there were hopes that a real civil society could emerge, giving rise to a new era of political openness. Many Syrians from civil society and the domestic opposition believed in such an opportunity for

openness, or even that a change in the country's regime was possible. Discussion groups grew in number nationwide and drafted lists of grievances.

But in February 2001, the security services put an end to the activity of these forums and imprisoned most of the group coordinators. The various circles of power – the intelligence services, certain high-ranking officers of the Army, the Baath leadership, the Alawite « Old Guard » - believed that the « Damascus Spring » was going too far and would lead to a kind of Syrian *perestroika* that would topple the regime.

This short six-month-period, which saw the emergence of new social and political debate, left a long lasting impact on the country's elites, including within the state apparatus which can be divided into two main currents, the « Old » partisans in favour of a status quo where the Baath Party's political monopoly continues, and a more « Modern » strand, in favour of modernisation and a progressive opening up of the regime.

The American invasion of Iraq (2003) led to a hardening of the regime, which hardened once again in 2005, following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (14 February 2005) and the first conclusions of the International Commission of inquiry which accused the Syrian regime of being behind the assassination.

Hussein al-Odat, spokesperson of the National Coordination Committee that regroups domestic opponents to the regime was arrested at that time. Opposition groups sought to regroup and organise, but these attempts failed. Al-Odat remarks that the regime did everything in its power to impede the emergence of a responsible national opposition movement. *« The servants of the regime constantly manipulate reality and give out false information. Syrian citizens no longer have consensual points of reference: no freedom, no democracy, no equality, no separation of powers. No rule of law. This a regime founded on the security services which have all the room for manoeuvre and can do anything with full impunity. Every initiative must be submitted for authorisation : 113 professions require the approval of the services before they can work (civil servant, teacher, etc.). This is a security regime founded on generalised corruption and nepotism: deputies, judges and magistrates are appointed by the regime. There is no social justice, no change in political power. And, the sovereign administration has never shown its competency in any area at all ».*

► **Structural economic and social problems**

Syria has faced major social and economic challenges for the last several years: endemic unemployment, a massive rise in living costs and the influx of Iraqi refugees to swell the numbers of Palestinian refugees already present in the country.

Unemployment affects 25% of the population (23 million inhabitants) including many young people (75% of the jobless are aged between 14 and 24 years of age). 60% of the population are under 20 years of age. Palestinian refugees (435,000) and above all, Iraqi refugees (1.2 million), as well as 305,000 displaced persons from the Golan Heights since 1967, are also a huge break on the country's economy.

Lower-level civil servants are often obliged to work a second job in the private sector to meet their living costs. Though Western-style luxury boutiques are growing in number, they remain out of the reach of the general populace. Official inflation figures are put at 5.5%, but, in reality, inflation is actually as high as 25% ! Consequently, a third of the population lives under the poverty line and 10% (more than 2 million people) no longer have the means to meet their basic needs.

Some examples of price hikes: rents rose by 300% in 2007; many fruit and vegetables have doubled in price; in October 2007, the price of petrol at the pump was ratcheted up by 20%. Though this inflation was accompanied by social assistance measures, the negative trend increased in 2009 and 2010 with average inflation for staple goods at 10 and 15%.

The economy is undermined by corruption, ageing state-run industries, an unstable and under-productive agricultural sector, the rapid depletion of oil reserves, an anachronistic educational system and the flight of capital. American sanctions, political uncertainty and the escalation of regional tensions all weigh heavily on the business environment.

In addition, there has been a « mafiaization » among the heirs of the regime's mandarins from the time of Hafez al-Assad. They have infiltrated all the echelons of power for their own personal benefit. They have profited from the loosening of state structures to encourage an individualistic capitalist system, creating a space for themselves within a fledgeling consumer society which they control. This trend began with them seizing control over the new technology industries and services sectors (in particular the mobile phone business). This was completed via the gradual buying out of traditional industries and a firm hold on land and property. This new cadre of businessmen, for the most part hailing from Damascus and Aleppo, have the support of the ruling power elite.

The unleashing of the Arab « revolutions » caught the ruling elite unawares, given that the majority of the political, military and economic elites continued to believe that Syria was insulated by two Maginot lines: the country is the birthplace of Arab nationalism which guarantees an unswerving social and national identity; the Israeli occupation of the Golan heights (since June 1967) is a factor that cements national identity and allows the regime to prolong a state of emergency indefinitely.

2. THE EVENTS

► The outbreak of the « New Syrian Spring »

The riots that sparked off the beginning of the Syrian revolt erupted on 15 March, 2011, in the border town of Deraa : this is the « route of radical Islamism, that leads to Amman and Saudi Arabia », as they say in the circles of power in Damascus. Transborder Sunni tribes have never accepted the authority of Damascus and the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood are active in the region. Since the events in Bahrain, Saudi investors have returned to the region to heap generous gifts on tribal leaders, in return for their fealty.

The events were triggered primarily by the children of Deraa scandal. A first demonstration took place in front of the mosque in the city centre. Children wrote tags on the walls criticizing the regime and demanding the withdrawal of the governor. They were immediately arrested and tortured (finger nails pulled out, etc.). Three of the children were killed. When their parents came to demand their release, the governor told them: « *All you have to do is have more children. And if you are not capable, bring your women here and we will do it ourselves* ». Publicly humiliated, the parents called on tribal leaders who organised demonstrations in front of the governor's palace. The protests quickly turned violent. The governor of Deraa was later dismissed by Bachar al-Assad, who met with the relatives of the victims.

The Army cracked down on the demonstrations, while similar protest movements began in other towns of the country, though not in the country's two main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, which account for nearly half of Syria's population. As of the month of April, the movement grew in intensity and the first Army soldiers defected to the demonstrators in Deraa, Deir el-Zor (north-east) and in several localities the length of the north-western border. In general, demonstrations took place in the vicinity of Sunni mosques, after Friday prayer.

As in Tunisia and Egypt, initially the demonstrations were social movements demanding greater civil liberties. At this stage, the absence of a clear political organisation gave the protests an improvisatory feel organised through solidarity among family members and neighbours.

In a second stage, the movement became more sectarian. Sunni mosques played the role of a catalyst while representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood abroad (Aix-la-Chapelle, London and Washington) called for a widening of the mobilisation, but without giving clear directives. The survivors of the first « Damascus Spring » and leaders of the domestic opposition were unprepared. « Electronic and social networks » were widely used to organise the movement.

Undermined by incompetent services and the escalating violence employed by corrupt local officials, central government failed to grasp the true scale of the movement. The fiasco of Deraa was symptomatic of the failures of the Syrian government and Bashar al-Assad did not take the opportunity to calm the situation and reopen a national debate. Under the influence of the regime's hardliners, he chose the road of repression and accused foreign influences.

► Centers of protest

The rebellion erupted in regions with a long running history of contesting central government (similar to Benghazi in Libya). The focal points of the protest were, more often than not, towns bordering Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. The two cities where the largest demonstrations and most violent clashes took place were Deraa and Homs.

- **Homs** is a town with a majority Sunni population. It is close to Lebanon (20 km) and there is much cross-border trade (legal and illicit trade). It is also adjacent to Hama, scene of the armed revolt of the Muslim Brotherhood (between 10,000 and 20,000 victims). It is also the largest governorate in Syria. It covers 25% of the country's territory, with the largest area of agricultural lands, demarcated by borders from Lebanon to Iraq.

Homs traditionally has high crime rates (drug trafficking and consumer goods smuggling). Armed gangs began operating there as of May 2011. In June, so-called self-defence militia groups were established, switching gradually from the protection of Sunni areas to attacks on Alawite districts, police stations and Army premises. At that point, self-professed 'Salafist' armed groups appeared, inspired by the Lebanese model in terms of recruitment, demands and operational tactics, that recall the siege of Nahr el-Bared¹. Accordingly, on 8 December, 2011, armed men attacked the refinery in Homs to worsen shortages and incite further popular discontent. The insurgents took control of several districts in Homs and announced the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

- **Deraa** (to the south of the country, four kilometers from the Jordanian border on the road that leads to Amman and on to Saudi Arabia) has always had the reputation of a city in revolt against the supremacy of the Baath party and the ruling Alawite minority, and drawing its legitimacy from rural regions and clientele. As a transborder people, the Sunni tribes have never accepted the authority of Damascus and this center of Islamist subversion has long been a bridgehead for the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Riyadh, who are well established in the city.

However, less people took to the streets in Damascus and Aleppo, and in the capital only the working class suburban areas to the north-east and south-east of the city were concerned. This stability can be explained in particular by the alliance between the Sunni bourgeois trading class and the regime. As long as commerce is not affected by the situation and the children of this privileged business class do not move, these two urban

¹ On 20 May, 2007, the Lebanese Army attacked the camp following the presence of radical group Fatah al-Islam.

centres – true pillars of the regime and country – maintain a stability that also draws on the Christian, Kurdish and, to a lesser extent, Druze minorities.

► **The radicalization of the movement**

On 18 March, three days after the beginning of the movement, military weapons were spotted not only in Deraa, but also in Homs, Hama and in different towns near the Turkish border. However, for three months, demonstrations were mostly peaceful. With ties to contraband networks, militants did not use their weaponry, but established stockpiles and dug tunnels for storage and refuge purposes.

Before the protest movements began, the regime had identified approximately 65,000 smugglers operating unmolested along the country's borders with, for the most part, the complicity of local authorities (governorate, police and security services, customs and tribes). It was via these various networks that weapons of war came into the country.

After several weeks of revolt and repression, many peaceful demonstrators were arrested, leaving the streets to the more radical elements. The population then observed the appearance of armed demonstrators with support from abroad, just as the first defections from the Army began. As of June 2011, the movement began to radicalize in most of the centers of protest and the activists began to demand the resignation of Bashar al-Assad and the end of the regime.

According to many witness reports from among representatives of the domestic opposition and leaders of the religious communities, after the appearance of these armed activists in the summer of 2011, demonstrations were no longer peaceful and protesters were actively seeking direct confrontation with the security forces and started making use of their military hardware.

Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III believes that *« it is not a normal revolution with young people who have a specific aim and direction, but rather a willingness to destroy and provoke in order to escalate violence and create a damaging image of Syria »*. In his native village, located some ten kilometers from Damascus, the Patriarch talked about the first demonstration of some 300 people that took place in May 2011. The protesters sought direct confrontation with the Army who responded in kind. 3 people were killed. The next day, 10,000 people took part peacefully at the funerals of the victims shot the day before and *« nothing happened »*.

The leaders of the domestic opposition do not know these « new demonstrators », who were not involved in the « Damascus Spring » in the Summer of 2000. In their view, they are part of this « spontaneous generation » whose identity has strengthened through the use of social and electronic networks, as occurred in Tunisia and Egypt.

The protest movement is not unified. It is largely improvisatory, without central coordination, and uses forms of local solidarity: families, neighbourhoods, tribes, religious groupings. The reference point that is the Friday prayer accentuates the growing sectarianism of the movement.

It remains extremely difficult to identify the armed rebels who benefit from a convergence between ordinary criminals, smugglers and Salafist groups (Syrian, Iraqi, Jordanian and Lebanese).

The radicalization of the movement is principally the result of three interacting factors: the rise in the number of refugees in camps located along the Turkish border (north-east), the growing number of Sunni soldiers who are defecting and the takeover of Sunni neighbourhoods in Homs.

► **Defections and the Free Syrian Army (FSA)**

Desertions are a longstanding and almost structural component of all Arab conscription armies. The Syrian Army is no exception and has gotten used to the fact. Initially, deserters left their army unit to go back to their family. In a second phase, defectors left with weapons and baggage to meet up with armed groups and areas in the hands of rebels. In December 2011, reliable military experts estimated the numbers of deserters involved to be under 20,000 servicemen, a phenomenon that can be qualified as marginal for an army of 450,000 servicemen and of which the elite units compose a system of 40,000 trained, well-armed soldiers.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has approximately 3,000 gunmen. Its operational importance has been wildly exaggerated and the widespread media coverage it has received does not reflect its true operational capabilities. Present in the refugee camps the length of the Turkish border, it says it has command of organised units in the Sunni districts of Homs. Until the end of 2011, it was not capable of sustaining frontal combat with the loyalist army. Armed with light weapons, hand guns, hunting rifles and kalachnikovs, it has gradually obtained Chinese RPGs and mortars from Iraq and Lebanon.

Other armed groups have emerged the length of the Turkish, Lebanese, Iraqi and Jordanian borders to wage a jihad in Syria against « the heretic Baathist regime ». Recruiting from among the ranks of Sunni radicals, they come, for the most part, from a regrouping of Jund al-Cham, Osbat al-Ansar and Fatah al-Islam. These groups, in disarray, had found refuge in the Tripoli (Lebanon) area, as well as in Turkey and Jordan, and have funding from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Until December 2011, these different groups had no territory under their control except for several neighbourhoods in Homs and refugee camps located in Turkey. The length of the Syrian-Turkish border, a strip 20 km deep, remains in the hands of loyalist troops.

► **Growing influence of Salafist groups**

In 2009, Asma Kaftaro - coordinator of the Syrian Islamic Women's Forum, member of the Sunni Women's Organisation and grand-daughter of the Grand Mufti of Damascus, Ahmad Kaftaro - published an article signalling the presence of Salafist groups in Douma (north-eastern suburb of Damascus) and Deraa.

Salafism is spreading essentially in the peripheral regions abandoned by the central government where poverty and corruption are endemic. « 3 or 4 years ago, Salafi beards and clothing (*niqab*) did not exist in Syria. These customs were imported from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, by businessmen and NGOs », she explained, « and now, at the slightest opportunity, one hears « *Allahu Akbar* » and these words are being sullied ».

Asma Kaftaro believes that the Syrian regime has fuelled this radicalization through its religious policy, by appointing imams known for their extremist views to the various bodies of official Sunni Islam and who have spread fanatical ideas. Over the last eight years, she added, moderates have been sidelined and discredited.

She remarked that « *this is the strategy of the Minister for Religious Affairs, Mohamed Sayed, not the President's. 4 years ago, he facilitated in a revolting way the appointment of Salafists, while pretending to do the opposite. I myself was excluded from several bodies for denouncing this strategy that seeks to divide Syrian citizens* ».

For a long time, Syria sought to insulate itself from the dangers of terrorism by granting certain concessions to jihadist groups in the region. Damascus was a hub for and even a supporter of certain organisations who, in return, pledged to avoid conducting attacks on Syrian territory. This type of policy is not an exact science, and mistakes were made which undermined the policy and it remains one of the reasons for the country's negative reputation abroad.

5 years ago, the *tanzim* (organisation) Abu Kaka claimed responsibility for a bomb attack on the offices of the national television network. At the time, this type of attack could be explained by Syria's « stop and go » policy in Iraq, a theatre of war subject to a trifecta of divisions: Anglo-American forces/resistance groups; Sunni/Shia; Al-Qaida/Dawa, to which can be added Kurdish factions supported by the Israeli army, who also form one-off alliances with Salafist elements.

Other Salafist groups entered Deraa after Saudi Arabia's crackdown on the « Bahrain Spring ». Saudi financiers at that time were encouraging Jordanian armed groups, with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood, to take action in the region of Deraa. Deraa was suffering from a serious drought and there was social unrest that led agricultural day labourers who had gone 4 months without pay to protest. These groups dug tunnels and bunkers to hide their weapons, similar to techniques used by the Algerian 'Armed Islamic Group (known by its French acronym - GIA) during the decade 1988–1998.

The same techniques have been used in Homs, a city that has become the epicenter of the armed struggle against the regime thanks to its unique geographic and demographic features.

► Calls to crime and sectarian strife

Before the end of 2011, Homs had become the symbol of Sunni/Alawite religious radicalization and a « Lebanonization » of the conflict. The regime and Salafist groups share the responsibility for this « manufactured » process of Lebanonization, that makes

a one-sided security response possible, shelving a political resolution of the crisis until later.

In Asma Kaftaro's opinion, Arab and Western media networks, as well as religious leaders in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, also share responsibility for this « forced Lebanonization » of Syria.

In addition to repeated misinformation campaigns conducted by Al-Jazeera, local Qatari television network – Qatar TV – is openly calling for religious confrontation claiming that « Bashar al-Assad is a traitor to Muslims ».

In the Spring of 2011, a sheikh in Hama removed his djellaba saying that he would only put it back on when 300 Alawites had been executed. He put it back on after the massacres and clashes of June/July, which took place near the Turkish border.

In several texts published by the Muslim Brotherhood in London since the beginning of the Syrian revolt, the following message was addressed to demonstrators in Syria: « *If you want the Syrian issue to be raised at the UN, at least several thousand people must die* ». Various fatwas have been launched at mosques in Finsbury and other places of prayer in the Marble Arch area, stating a third of the population must die, in particular Alawites, the only solution to save the remaining two-thirds.

Asma Kaftaro believes that the objective of the Salafists and their foreign sponsors is the destruction of Syria and its social and multi-denominational model, which is an exception in the Arab World. « *This specificity of the Syrian nation has for a long time been insufferable for radicals in the Gulf states, who insist that all Arabs adhere to wahhabism, while in Syria, the Shia are not looked down upon. We must continue to protect ourselves against Salafism and the Gulf states* ». Asma Kaftaro hopes that the civil war will not spill out from Homs. « *If the Lebanonization process spreads throughout Syria and turns into a real civil war, it will be more dramatic and more protracted than the civil war in Lebanon* », she says.

Most of the leaders of the domestic opposition believe that the slogan « *The Alawites in the tomb, the Christians to Beirut* », was invented by the authorities to scare the minorities. In addition to the various theatres of armed conflict, small groups of agitators are carrying out acts of provocation in Christian neighbourhoods in the cities of Hama and Damascus, without anybody being able to identify their identity or origin with certainty. « *The country is seeing both the spread of gratuitous violence the causes of which are difficult to ascertain, while the identity of the perpetrators of the violence remains unknown* », a European diplomat stationed in Damascus explained.

► Acts of terrorism

Since September 2011, the conflict has become « Algerianized »: gratuitous violence, anonymous killings, with three recurrent flash points for armed clashes: Homs, Deraa and Itlib. Several Alawite officers and their children had their throats slashed in May 2011, something the Western press did not deign to cover. Syria's representative to the

United Nations in New York has tried to explain several times that some 1,100 police and army officers have been killed since March 2011, but he is met with disbelief.

On Facebook and other Internet networks black lists circulate detailing the names of those sentenced to death by insurgents who decide who they believe must die, which person is a « collaborator » and who is not. According to Mother Agnès-Mariam de la Croix, a Carmelite Mother Superior at Saint James Convent (Damascus area), the 6th of December, 2011 in Homs was one of the worst days. More than 100 people were killed in sectarian fighting, including a large number of people who were dismembered. « *There were horrible scenes, women raped, breasts cut off, individuals dismembered and cut into pieces* », she explained; « *a young Christian bridegroom was assassinated because he refused to take part in a demonstration alongside the insurgents. A Sunni shopkeeper was killed because he had just sold an item to a police officer* ».

Kurdish leader Omar Oussi explained to us that this type of revenge killing is completely foreign to Syria's culture and history and he believes that these practices have been imported by the Salafists. The insurgents wear police or army uniforms to carry out their atrocities. In order to counter this tactic, the security forces have opted to change uniforms on a regular basis.

Some of our interlocutors confirmed that Salafist militants disguise themselves, shave off their beards and carry pro-government signs and banners to infiltrate demonstrations held in support of Bashar al-Assad. According to several corroborated security sources, Libyan militants (Berbers from the djebel Nefoussa, partisans of Abdel-Akim Belhadj) have infiltrated the kataebs (brigades) of the Free Syrian Army. They enter via refugee camps located the length of the Turkish border.

► **Response of the security forces**

Through the intermediary of General Mohamad Nassif, advisor to Bashar Al-Assad – he was also the advisor to his father Hafez - certain senior Alawite leaders from the mountains have clearly pushed the hardline « security » response since the beginning of the events. They know that the crackdown in Hama (1982) remains imprinted in Sunni memories and that they will be in danger if they lose power. They fear a reaction and act out of a reflex to protect their community, something which could explain the brutality of the initial crackdown.

Several of our interlocutors favourable to the regime admitted that « at the outset, many errors of assessment and response were committed », and deplored the brutality of the repression, admitting that the crackdown had only made matters worse.

But the months of May and June signalled a shift after which the security forces began to find themselves in danger. Several officers were executed at their homes and many rank and file soldiers were caught between their commanding officers and their community of birth. Soldiers identified as Alawites became a target and distrust began to grow among the multi-denominational regiments. There were several mutinies, in particular in the north-west and north-east. These mutinies often led to gun battles, with the mutineers heading to refugee camps on the Turkish border.

According to Asma Kaftaro, the repeated accusations against the Mukhabarat – the Syrian secret service – are sometimes grounded in fact, but « *though, the secret services are no saints, very often the armed insurgents do far worse* ». And, as often in this type of situation, claims of police brutality are made primarily by the opposition who are incapable of providing evidence to back up their accounts.

« *Even though this version of the facts is today inaudible in Western embassies and media, many security chiefs are trying to stall and win time, or at least avoid aggravating the situation* », said a European Defence attaché stationed in Damascus. In reality, armored units could reduce the rebel districts of Homs. Several plans have been presented to Bashar Al-Assad who has chosen a strategy of *containment* rather than a frontal solution to eradicate the rebel forces, the same source explained to us. In the same way, during the rare peaceful protest marches which continue, the regime's units have orders to avoid contact and to simply « channel » crowd movements.

In May 2011 in Deir el-Zor, Bashar Al-Assad asked several units to carry out crowd control without weapons. When the militants saw that they were unarmed, they took advantage of the situation and started shooting at the security forces. Several dozen soldiers were killed and rank and file soldiers fled. This created unrest among the security forces who believed that the President had abandoned them. But orders were respected and soldiers who opened fire were brought before military courts. The media did not talk about the punishments meted out to soldiers to avoid seeing demonstrators increasing their provocations and, above all, to avoid despair among the army rank and file.

However, the intelligence services and Air Force continue to have a very bad reputation given their direct involvement in the crackdown. Several leading figures of the domestic opposition explained to us that « *certain demonstrators would prefer to die rather than risk being arrested which could result in torture and a long spell in prison. This attitude explains, in part, the radicalization of behaviour and the nature of this spiral of violence which is escalating like a court trial without a defendant* ».

► **Toll of the crackdown**

Up to end date of our mission, and prior to the deployment of observers from the Arab League, the United Nations stated that 5,000 people had died and tens of thousands had been injured in the crisis, though these figures are difficult to verify. More than 14,000 opponents have been arrested and detained and some 12,000 people have left the country.

According to the domestic opposition, thousands of activists have been arrested and tortured. Their representatives insist on non-compliance with basic civil and political rights by the regime's security services. But they also recognize that the report by the United Nations was drafted under questionable circumstances and was based on unsubstantiated information.

For example, Loai Hussein, a historic Alawite opposition figure and head of the « Rebuild Syria Front », was arrested in front of his house on 22 March, 2011 at 11.15 am. The Mukhabarat bundled him into an unmarked car after beating him. They then went to his house, broke down the door, confiscated his daughter's computer, and searched everything before taking CDs and books. They brought him to Section 215 (interrogation center). He was beaten again during the trip. Then the Mukhabarat brought him to his office where they confiscated three more computers, books and other documents before bringing him back to Section 215. During the interrogation, they asked him about phone calls he had made (his phone was tapped). He was released after three days. Several other leaders and notable figures of the opposition were treated in the same way. « *This type of behaviour leads to the radicalization of the leading figures of the opposition* », remarked Loai Hussein.

► Internal situation at end of December 2011

In nine months, the armed groups have failed to deliver a decisive blow on the ground. Since the beginning of the revolt, three border towns constitute the zones where what can be qualified as a « civil war » is taking place, pitting the regular forces against armed groups who have yet to be clearly identified. Until December 2011, these three flash points were surrounded by the Syrian Army, and there is no impression that the entire country is at war. Contrary to the image relayed by international media networks, the internal situation in the country appears relatively calm.

During our visit to Hama (the martyr town of the bloody crackdown of 1982), on Wednesday 7 December, we did not see any checkpoints on the road, and there were no tanks stationed on the strategic Damascus/Homs/Hama highway. We only passed one military convoy. We observed a few BMP 3s (Russian infantry fighting vehicle) at the south entrance to Hama, an immobile, embedded T 62 (Russian battle tank), several cursory checkpoints starting at Homs (sandbags, embankments), but nothing more. We saw no sign of fighting, no impact of artillery fire on buildings in the city.

In the town, we did not witness any sign of military deployment and police officers on traffic duty were unarmed. From our observations, all the shops, stores and schools were open. We did not observe any tension or concrete signs of insecurity.

We moved about the town in the company of two national television teams and five local police officers. The local people did not run away and some gathered around the cameras when we asked them questions with our escorts looking on.

The security system in place in the cities of Hama and Damascus appears solid. Once a crowd gathers, agents of the Mukhabarat dressed in civilian clothing intervene immediately, using unmarked vehicles (buses, vehicles). They are present throughout the capital, in civilian clothing but are easily identifiable by the populace.

In Damascus, soldiers are on guard at Abbasside Square stadium as this is a traditional gathering place, but also because this position marks the 'borderline' between downtown Damascus and the restive suburbs, that is to say the north-east and south-

east suburban districts. Near the city center, the security forces are in charge of monitoring the main entry points to the capital.

Generally speaking, local people are tired of the last nine months of clashes, insecurity and violence. Many townspeople, encountered on the streets of Damascus and Hama, wish only for a return to peace and normality. « *As long as the Syrian nation, proud of being one single nation, remains united, as long as the Army's operational units do not defect, nothing will happen* », remarks Omar Oussi, President of the National Initiative for Syrian Kurds.

He says that mobilisation has declined and that the scale of the demonstrations has also decreased. « *If the stranglehold of the international community recedes* », he said, « *street demonstrations will decline and a political process can begin. The regime will not take any major decision under pressure from the street and the international community, two forces that are connected as far as the future of Syria is concerned. Syria refuses the Israeli-American plan for the Middle East* ».

3. A DISPARATE OPPOSITION

The Syrian opposition is made up of three distinct groups :

- A longstanding, national and internal opposition, who are opposed to any kind of foreign interference, but also opposed to talks with the government. They demand the departure of the government: the NCCDC, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change.
- Domestic opposition groups in favour of talks with the government in order to avoid chaos via a negotiated road map out of the crisis.
- An external opposition with support abroad that seeks military intervention: the SNC, Syrian National Council.

► **The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC)**

The NCCDC (also called « Body » or « Coordination ») is an umbrella group that includes 11 Arab, Kurdish, Syriac parties and independent national figures. Of the Coordination's twenty members, five are Alawites.

This opposition grouping is the regime's most credible and legitimate opponent. All its directors have spent time in Syrian prison cells on account of their engagement and criticism of the regime. But the NCCDC is riven with rivalry between its members. Given their past experience with the regime, many of its leaders are looking for personal revenge against the regime. The central government has refused talks with the Committee, and as a result the NCCDC is now in turn refusing to negotiate. The Coordination now believes that the regime may fall and is calling for Bashar al-Assad to go. The Committee is, therefore, also partly responsible for the current stalemate. Though it claims to have a road map to resolve the crisis, it has not yet presented a credible, alternative platform.

The Coordination lacks effective communications, much like the central government itself, with its often clumsy attempts at communications. Turned in upon itself, without any real international connections, the NCCDC remains little known abroad, although it makes up the most important, the oldest and most legitimate opposition movement. Only recently have foreign ambassadors stationed in Damascus begun to show interest in the Committee.

While the NCCDC is against internationalising the Syrian crisis and foreign intervention (which its leaders do not believe will occur), it has called on the protection of the civilian population through the intermediary of the media, NGOs and observers from the international community.

Loaï Hussein admits that the domestic opposition currently does not have the human resources to ensure a takeover from the current regime. This is why the NCCDC recommends a transition period, in order to introduce institutional reform. It is also asking the government to authorise peaceful demonstrations in order to remobilise the

country's elites. « *Today, we do not have sufficient human resources to organise an alternative government, even if we were to go into a power-sharing arrangement* », we were told by another NCCDC director who did not wish to be named. The Coordination is currently seeking to have its supporters released from prison and wishes as a priority to obtain the right to hold peaceful demonstrations.

► **Domestic opposition in favour of dialogue**

This component is the smallest of the three. It brings together the Syrian Nationalist Party, the Kurdish Initiative, the Syrian Communist Union, various youth and women's associations, certain tribes and a section of the middle classes.

It is peaceful and is opposed to any foreign intervention and interference; it has denounced the « external » opposition in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is currently in talks with the regime and is trying to persuade the NCCDC to join the negotiating table. In their view, many of the Committee leaders are on a path of personal revenge which impedes any hope of progress.

The Kurds (3 million out of a population of 23 million) represent an important part of this « moderate opposition ». For a long time they were marginalised in the country and oppressed in many sectors of activity by the Baath Party. 160,000 of them were considered as « alien non-citizens » (*ajanib*). Though they were obliged to carry out their military service, they did not have the right to vote. 75,000 other Kurds were unable to obtain resident permits. In the mid 1990s, Syria signed agreements with Turkey to fight Kurdish separatists, the PKK.

In the beginning, they were with the street, as the demands appeared legitimate. The vast majority of the Kurds are for reforms, civil and political freedoms and the introduction of a democratic regime. However, they believe that the armed radicalization of the revolt is becoming very dangerous and consequently endangering the future of their community in Syria and in the rest of the Middle East.

Moreover, several reforms were recently voted in their favour, including naturalisation. This was the first time that the Kurds were officially recognized as a party, when they met recently for talks with the government. They took part in adding to certain legislative bills. The West tried to detach the Kurds from the regime, in early February 2011, but they did not give way as Syrian national sentiment remains very strong among the Kurds of Syria.

Most Kurds support Bachar al-Assad and are opposed to any foreign intervention. In their view, the Islamist alternative represented by the Muslim Brotherhood is the worst possible solution. They refuse all dialogue with the SNC which includes several Kurds, but those Kurdish members are considered traitors as they accepted to sit in on talks held in Ankara.

► Syrian National Council (SNC)

The Syrian National Council is largely dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, even though it frontlines several French-speaking academics, researchers and university professors funded by the Ford Foundation and other American organisations, as well as by Qatari financiers. This Council seeks to replicate the tactic employed by the National Transitional Council of Libya (NTC), but it lacks a real footing in Syria. The SNC is regularly denounced by the domestic opposition which affords it no legitimacy whatsoever.

There has been no movement that officially represents a political Islam inside Syria since 1982 (massacre in Hama). The Muslim Brotherhood are mostly present outside Syria – in Germany, London, Brussels and Washington – having only kept a few dormant networks in the country. They have, however, succeeded in establishing different support networks via front associations and with counterparts in various Salafist groups.

Since the beginning of the events, with the help of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, the SNC has managed to infiltrate members into the country. It would appear to have the support of some Local Coordination Committees. But protest marches organised by Salafist militants have distanced them from the domestic opposition. The street is not very politicized and so employs slogans of the SNC because it does not have anything else, but does not always fully understand the implication of those rallying calls. The SNC is partly responsible for fatalities that occurred during demonstrations because it persuaded the street that the regime was going to topple in two weeks, thus pushing the street to radicalize. The Muslim Brotherhood has a tradition of getting people to march in the street, but their organisers make sure to stay away from the front lines, and then pretend to have no part or influence in the violence that they themselves helped stir up.

The SNC also claims ties with the armed groups of the FSA, supported by Saudi Arabia and Rafic Hariri's Lebanese militia, under Turkey's tolerant gaze. Traditionally the Brotherhood pushes jihadists onto the scene to spread terror and thus make themselves more acceptable. The SNC strives to give the impression of a country embroiled in a daily bloodbath in order to promote the option of a foreign Libyan-style intervention. The Brotherhood and the SNC believe that only this scenario will bring them to power.

According to one of their leaders, if the SNC comes to power, Syria will immediately cut its ties with Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran and will open peace talks with Israel. This position shocked many Syrians who now refer to the SNC using the pejorative term « *Majlis Istanbul* » (the Council of Istanbul), and Kurdish representatives of the NCCDC claim that they will never serve under the banner of the SNC, which they see as an Ankara-run organisation.

Asma Kaftaro notes that the SNC often creates unnatural alliances. She believes that this organisation will never constitute a real alternative for Syria, « *because its leaders are too closely tied to the Gulf states and the United States* ».

► Opposition groups divided over strategy to be adopted

The SNC has little influence and footing in Syria, few militants, no internal power base, and is supported and financed by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Western powers and their media networks. The main objective of this support is to legitimise an eventual Western intervention in Syria, something that the SNC is calling for.

On the other side of the equation, the NCCDC is isolated and without funding. Worse still, it is ignored by foreigners, even though it represents the legitimate body and without their input, no alternative seems possible. It is above all opposed to any foreign intervention.

For the two currents of the domestic opposition, the solution to the crisis must be a purely Syrian resolution that must come about inside the country and not from abroad. Some of their representatives hope that a reconciliation between the regime and the opposition is possible in order to plan for a transition period leading to free and fair elections. But, for the moment, the road to talks remains blocked.

For these reasons, an agreement between the NCCDC and SNC appears to be beyond reach. A facade of coordination was attempted in Cairo, but the representative of the NCCDC, Michel Kilo, was shabbily treated. However, for Hassan Abdel Azim – the NCCDC's main coordinator - divisions among the opposition have been exaggerated, and the opposition share a common priority : the fall of the regime and the introduction of a democratic process. He believes that within the SNC, contradictions have emerged that could lead to a rapprochement between certain members and the NCCDC. *« But the problem is that Turkey is stopping them from establishing such ties and Turkey wants demilitarized buffer zones along its borders »*. This opinion is not shared by all the leaders of the domestic opposition whom we interviewed.

Hussein al-Odat believes that if the opposition succeeds in uniting, then a solution could be possible with the support of the people: a general strike, frequent one-off *sit-ins*, general civil disobedience, etc. Fayez Sarah believes that the United Nations and the Arab League must find a common arrangement for a restricted but peaceful international intervention.

Hassan Abdel Aziz believes that there cannot be a military intervention. He also does not believe in the risk of a civil war *« because the Syrian people is not capable of it. But there will be a civil war of there is foreign military intervention! »*.

The President of the Initiative of Syrian Kurds, Omar Oussi, does not believe in a foreign military intervention either, *« because it would have already taken place. Such an intervention would trigger a war that would inflame the entire region and would create huge international tensions around Iran, in particular with Russia and China »*. He is convinced that the West has taken military intervention off the table and is now seeking to undermine the regime in order, as their ultimate goal, to surround Iran. The dynamics and evolution of the Iranian issue remain key to the Syrian crisis.

4. A REGIME OVERWHELMED BY THE EVENTS ?

Syria believed it was insulated from the shockwaves that began to roil the Arab World at the beginning of January 2011. Though alerted by several reports by its intelligence services, the regime was totally unprepared and gave the impression of being overwhelmed by the events. « *The regime preferred to stick its head in the sand, refusing to acknowledge the reality frontally, refusing the slightest political concession, refusing any attempt at dialogue* ». This observation was made by Hassan Abdel Azim, the principal coordinator of the domestic opposition, the NCCDC. As of January 2011, he personally drew the attention of the regime to events in Tunisia and their consequences in Egypt and other countries in the Muslim-Arab World, « *but they replied that it was the workings of a Zionist-US plot. Beyond this purposefully blind approach to events, it was the hardline security policy of the regime that led to the radicalisation of the movement* ».

► Responsibilities of the regime

The regime is blind. The majority of NCCDC members whom we interviewed believe that the regime simply does not wish to confront the radicalization, the risks, the impact of economic sanctions, the crisis, and the day-to-day difficulties for the average person in the street. They all deplore a drastic fall in tourism, trade and the halting of economic life of the country. « *The regime is in denial over the impact of the sanctions on the country with a remarkable stubbornness* », remarked Abdel Azim, who thinks that « *by its inaction and mental block regarding the situation, the government is opening the door to foreign intervention* ».

« *This posture comforts, encourages and pushes the most extreme and violent branches of the opposition headlong into a catastrophic situation* », he adds, insisting: « *the regime itself is consciously encouraging the Lebanonization of the country which has begun (...) From a peaceful revolt, we run the risk of falling into armed insurrection. And they are doing nothing to stop this spiral of madness. The Convention for National Dialogue is an artificial entity and is really an empty shell. Established in July 2011, it includes some one hundred figures. It proposed 18 measures of which zero have been implemented as of today. The latest texts that it drafted are largely worthless. The new law on information includes more articles that impose a ban than articles in favour of freedom of expression and information. The same goes for the Law on political parties* ».

Fayez Sarah believes that the regime is amplifying the propaganda surrounding the Islamist threat and the risk of a civil war in order to justify the regime's own hardline security policy: « *the State lives through and promotes conspiracy theories. But there really is a social and economic crisis that is hitting the majority of the Syrian people. We can clearly say that the regime is playing for time and refusing to face the reality of the crisis* ».

The Minister of Information, Adnan Mahmoud, admits the weaknesses and responsibilities of the regime and that many errors have been made in dealing with the crisis, in particular at the beginning in Deraa, but he also criticizes the « all or nothing » approach of the opposition which led to the emergence of terrorism and armed groups.

Representatives of the NCCDC respond by saying that it was the regime that pushed the most virulent critics to armed struggle, and according to some of them, *« we have arrived exactly where the regime wanted to : an armed conflict that supports its propaganda of a conspiracy plotted abroad and more precisely by the Western powers. The regime is itself opening the door to the risk of a foreign intervention similar to what occurred in Libya ».*

Diplomats stationed in Damascus have confirmed that the authorities have deliberately hampered their work, in violation of international laws and to the detriment of the country's own interests, given that access on the ground is fundamental for diplomats. Moreover, the security services have organised attacks on several embassies, including the French embassy in Damascus and its consular representation in Aleppo.

► Impossible dialogue?

Since the beginning of the events, the regime has made contact with various currents of the domestic opposition. But nothing concrete has emerged from these talks and the dialogue has been interrupted. Syria's Vice President made contact with Hussein al-Odat to set up a first meeting in August 2011. The first exchanges took place in September. *« But it was already too late. There had already been too many deaths in Deraa and Homs. Then the demonstrations got more radical and everything degenerated. There were further deaths and arrests ».*

« It seems clear that the regime wants to open talks, but without making any fundamental concessions » al-Odat adds. He also remarks that *« the President and his immediate circle may wish to have talks, but they do not have the means which remain in the hands of the ruling families and security services ».* Vice President Farouk al-Sharah *« asked me for help to try and convince the circles of power »*, says Abdel Azim, but the entourage of Bashar al-Assad blocked these attempts and is hiding the real situation in the country from him.

Al-Odat did however meet with advisors of the President about a dozen times, to no avail: *« the government confuses dialogue with negotiations and does not want to hear about a plan to concretely implement reforms which should be taken as a matter of urgency (...) They want to take our ideas, claim them as their own, even sketch out the beginning of the implementation process, but without our participation... »*

Relations between the NCCDC and the regime remain therefore extremely difficult. One of the Committee's most popular figures, Fayez Sarah, explains that Bashar al-Assad and his entourage do not really seek dialogue, even though they sometimes pretend to do so. He is clearly in favour of a foreign military and political intervention, but he remained evasive when it came to naming the figures within the government most culpable of stonewalling the process. In his opinion, President Bashar al-Assad is the person chiefly

responsible for this « situation that is totally blocked ». For Abdel Azim « *the President has the final responsibility for what occurs on Syrian national territory, whether his orders are followed or not* ».

Nevertheless, the domestic opposition is also refusing to budge from its positions, claiming that progress made by the regime on reforms to the constitution including the removal of infamous article 8 – which ensures the Baath Party's monopoly over politics – is just a ploy to gain time and control over the negotiation process. Excessive focalisation has been made over this point which means that talks have lost sight of the real policies of liberalisation that have been implemented in Syria. Several members of the NCCDC admit that article 8 is no longer the problem and believe that the question of the status currently afforded the President by the constitution, an almost god-like status, is the real problem of the Syrian regime.

► **Cautious outreach**

Despite the ongoing crisis, we were able to freely meet with the most important members of the domestic opposition without escorts present. These members have their own offices where our interviews took place. They themselves were also able to move freely when they came to meet with us at the premises of various media networks. They release their communiqués, speak with foreign embassies and to the press and can travel abroad, as evidenced by the example of Michel Kilo.

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that since the beginning of the first riots in Tunisia, several important reforms have been announced by President Bachar. Also, given the popular protests, the government has opened up several lines of reform: abolition of the state of emergency; granting of Syrian nationality to stateless Kurds; a new law on the one-party system and a law on the media. There is much left to do, in particular the constitutional revision following the effective removal of article 8 on the role of the Baath Party.

Municipal elections could provide the first occasion for a certain thaw, even though they will not be held in the zones of armed conflict. In principle, legislative elections could be held in the Spring of 2012 which would coincide with the opening of a national conference for dialogue, in the Summer of 2012.

Above all, President Bachar has accepted the arrival of observers from the Arab League.

► **Loyalty of the Army**

The Syrian Army is a conscription army: on paper it numbers 600,000 servicemen, with approximately 400,000 boots on the ground. It is structured according to the Soviet model, with well-trained professional officers from the various communities in charge, even though Alawites are over-represented among the senior officer class and in operational units.

Most of the Russian hardware manufactured in the 1970s – tanks, armored vehicles, artillery – is obsolete. Only a few armored divisions, (the 4th¹, the 8th, the 9th and the 11th) remain operational thanks to more recent equipment delivered by Moscow and with cooperation from Iran. When added to the Republican Guards, the commando and paramilitary units, these various units make up approximately 40,000 men, and thus constitute a sufficiently robust force to rule the country and manage the three main pockets of civil war (Homs, Deraa and Itlib). We should also mention the regular supply from Russia (since 2008) of radars and short and medium range missiles, as well as some fifty last generation *Sukhoi* jet fighters.

Several Western military experts had countenanced a division within the Syrian Army, or even the possibility of a coup d'état. Up to December 2011, this scenario remained far fetched. Despite the widespread media coverage of Army desertions of rank and file soldiers (the most serious evaluations do not exceed 10,000 cases), there have been no high ranking defections. No operational unit has defected.

Certain leaders of the internal opposition have however reported that there are deep divisions within the Army which could come to the light if the crisis were to harden, but there is no evidence to substantiate these claims.

► Popular support for the regime

The Qatari television network Al-Jazeera claims that all the demonstrations in support of President Bashar al-Assad's regime are organised by the regime itself and they are not spontaneous expressions of support. Though it does appear that these demonstrations are well organised and managed by the regime, a large number of Syrians freely take part in these shows of support. Moreover, spontaneous mass popular reactions of support have indeed taken place, in particular when Syria was suspended from the Arab League. But international media networks rarely cover such pro-regime events.

« In Syria, the majority of the population is not actively for or against the regime. They seek greater freedoms and to safeguard the existing model of society. Moreover, if it has to choose between Bashar and the Salafists and therefore chaos, the people will support Bashar », said one of the spokespeople of the Coordination who did not wish to be named; *« for the people, there really is no alternative. Clearly, the regime, despite all its faults, is preferable to chaos. The Syrian people want peace and the rest is pure misinformation ».*

We have already underlined the point that more than 50% of the Syrian population live in Damascus and Aleppo. The country's two main cities were free of violence up to December 2011. Between the « pro-Bachar » and « anti-Bachar » groups, there is still an enormous silent majority which has distanced itself from the regime, but which has not turned to active protest.

¹ The 4th armored division (a majoritarily Alawite unit), in charge of the security of the Greater Damascus region, is now headed by Maher Al-Assad, the President's brother, who continues to head the Republican Guard (3,000 elite servicemen), whose mission is the protection of the Syrian regime.

« The President is strong, he still holds the country », bemoans an opponent. « He lacks neither charisma nor support », it is said in the Christian community of Saint-Paul ; « he represents the future and the modernisation of the country but is impeded by Salafist groups who wish to launch an operation of ethnic and religious cleansing in the country ».

In the opinion of Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III, Bachar al-Assad is a new man, with an open mind and a modern mindset. He has lived in London, has travelled widely and knows his country well. He says *« give him a chance while also demanding concrete reforms, but clearly he needs time ».*

Gregorios III has asked foreign heads of state (in a written request dated 4 May, 2011) *« to call for dialogue and understanding ».* The country, he wrote *« has already made much progress in the direction of a more open regime ».* He appeals to the heads of state *« to encourage this process of openness and modernisation ».*

5. MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CRISIS

In Syria, the difference between the situation on the ground and the perception given by Anglo-American and Arabic media networks is stark, even more so than in Libya where several members of the present delegation were able to observe the same phenomenon at work. It is important to underline the intense media campaign being waged against Damascus. This observation of fact should not be construed that the authors of the present report are in favour of one side or another in the conflict.

The Syrian crisis is the subject of a veritable media war involving a number of MMC – means of mass communications – conducted via the international media networks, American radio stations, *Sawa*, the Lebanese media with close ties to the « March 14 » movement, etc. It is also necessary to add that French-speaking media networks, though secondary players in this crisis, often take up the conclusions of the major Arab and Anglo-American media networks without verifying such information.

Consequently, the media coverage is overly one-sided and appears to fit the dominant geopolitical agenda, that of the American neoconservatives who have divided the Middle East between « moderate Arab nations » (Egypt, Jordan and the oil-rich monarchies) and the « forces of the Axis of Evil » (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas). On the Syrian crisis in particular, information is too often manipulated to comply with this dominant ideology, so dominant that it can be now called *Mainstream*. The media coverage only broadcasts information that makes the case against the regime, only part of which is true.

Patriarch Gregorios III remarked that « *the position of the international press and foreign players is to act as if absolutely nothing true or good could come from the Damascus regime, and to make them responsible for every problem. This has made Syrian public opinion turn against Western countries and their journalists* ».

Asma Kaftaro, though she has a different point of view from that of the government and the internal opposition, recalls that in response to the beginning of the events, the government in fact did announce a program of political reform to head off any revolution such as those occurring in other countries during the « Arab Spring ». « *No one covered or explained these attempts at reform* », she says, « *just as no international media organisation covers the demonstrations against foreign intervention which take place frequently* ». She complains that we only hear the « foreign view », « *the harshest criticism of the regime comes from abroad, from the international press, far more than from inside the country* ».

More than 120 delegations of foreign journalists have travelled to Syria to speak with the Minister of Information, Adnan Mahmoud. In his opinion, « *none of them have presented a balanced view of the situation* ». Under the impulsion of Al-Jazeera, as underlined by several representatives of the internal opposition, the international media present a simplistic dichotomy of « goodies » and baddies » that occludes the

complexity of the situation and refuses to consider the brutalities of the opposition on the same level as those perpetrated by the regime.

► **Misinformation techniques employed**

The editorial board of Al-Jazeera has selected very precise wording to target the Syrian government and legitimize the demonstrations, and even acts of violence and terrorism:

- generalisation: specific localities are never mentioned, only « Syria » is mentioned or a « a family-ruled country » ;
- labelling: no mention of « Salafist groups », rather the « Free Syrian Army » or « forces of resistance » ;
- antedating: events are antedated, clashes are announced before they take place.
- fraudulent imagery: several Arab satellite stations have broadcast images from Egypt or Yemen (images filmed several weeks or months beforehand), claiming that they were filmed in Syria. Often, these videotaped images do not correspond to the season, the day's weather, showing individuals marching in coats during the high summer period of 2011, etc.

Reports are rarely « sourced ». In the manner of Fox-News, a commentator may refer to the « *opposition* » and the « *resistance* ». Expressions such as « *many believe that* », « *in the city, it is reported that* », or « *the inhabitants saw* » are frequently employed. For the most part, reference is made to « *witnesses* » and the name and role of victims are rarely given. Places and dates are often approximate and archival images are almost never referred to as such.

In the media, various individuals presenting themselves as « Syrian militants » are regularly interviewed, without spectators being given the slightest evidence of the quality of information relayed. In one specific case, a pseudo-witness was shown to be a Lebanese journalist living in the Netherlands. Several correspondents on French television networks, « witnesses to massacres », were found to be living in Dubai, Jordan and Kuwait.

Finally, one of the main sources for Western media on the atrocities of the Syrian regime and the number of deaths due to the crackdown is the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an organisation that is recognized by the European Union and which purports to use figures provided by Local Coordination Committees which count the number of victims on the ground. But its legitimacy appears highly questionable. The Observatory was established by Muslim Brothers living in exile in Aix-la-Chapelle, Germany, before moving to London. Its director, lawyer Al-Maleh, 81 years of age, President of the Syrian Commission for Human Rights, was sentenced to eight years in prison for membership of the Muslim Brotherhood. He only left prison in 2010.

Above all, for the last 5 months Qatari television network Al-Jazeera has spent nearly 70% of its broadcasting coverage on the Syrian crisis. Does this country objectively warrant such massive coverage? As in Libya, we can legitimately ask the question: in the name of what political agenda is this network service continuing to deploy such resources for coverage which is more militant in nature than informational.

There are many examples of media manipulation that could be cited:

- In Latakia, on 11 September 2011, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya both announced on air that shooting had begun at 2am. In reality, gunfire did not commence for another two hours, at 4 in the morning.
- In Damascus, on 23 September 2011, the same two television networks reported that major demonstrations were taking place on Abbasside Square. Those demonstrations would not take place until the following Saturday.
- In Douma, in November 2011, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya announced at 1.30 am that a Syrian security center had been attacked and bombarded. Syrian TV sent a team on site at 2.30 am which showed that nothing had occurred. However, the center was attacked, at 3.00 am !
- Frequently, long queues for taxis on Umawiyeen Square, because of city gridlock, are presented as anti-regime demonstrations.
- In Homs, at the beginning of 2011, a demonstration took place with protesters demanding the departure of the governor who was failing to properly protect the population against insurgents. The march was presented by foreign media outlets as an anti-regime demonstration.

Clearly, each of these examples merits an in-depth inquiry and methodical deconstruction which the modest format of our present report does not allow for. Historians and researchers will carry out that work one day, but history will have moved on and disinformation tactics will have accomplished their ends.

It should also be recalled that on 6 June 2011, it was reported that Syrian activist Amina Abdallah Araf el-Omari had been abducted by the regime's security services. The news caused great emotion among the ranks of opponents and their international supporters. However, this blogger, campaigner for gay rights and a leading figure of the protest against Bachar al-Assad's regime, turned out to be a fictitious person. The character was created by an American, an activist for the Arab cause, who revealed the hoax a few days later.

The most marked instance of media manipulation occurred in Homs where a woman saw her child killed by insurgents and less than one hour later the image of this atrocity was broadcast by Al-Jazeera as a barbaric act committed by the Syrian Army. The delegation met with the woman and her family, on 7 December 2011. Together we watched the images broadcast by the Qatari network. We provide an account of the story below.

The woman's name is Georgina Ianios Njama and she works at a cable company. She is a Christian (Greek-Orthodox). She lives in Homs, in the district of Bayada where the event took place, but has since taken refuge with her family in the suburbs of Hama, where we met her¹.

On the morning of 1 December 2011, her son, Ibrahim Saoud, 9 years of age, wanted sweetbreads. She went out with him at 8.30 am to buy the cakes. As the mother and child left the store, gunfire broke out. The mother took the child in her arms. She felt blood pouring onto her and thought that she had been hit, but then her son fell unconscious, he

¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te_ROvqm_h4&list=UUPjO1-6xQiUI63LkoZPgLZQ&index=1&feature=plcp

had been hit by a bullet under his left armpit. Blood spilled from his neck. She did not know what to do and screamed at him to wake up.

Youths tried to rescue her son but men stopped them from evacuating the victim. They grabbed the dying son and brought him to the hall of a building where they laid him out on the floor and filmed him as he died. The mother was scared that they would dismember him. During this time, the child was bleeding to death. The men filmed the woman as she screamed and took a close-up shot of a Christian cross that she wore on her jumper. Then they fled screaming « Allahu Akbar ». The Red Crescent arrived, but it was too late. The child was already dead. When the woman arrived with the body of her son at the hospital, armed groups fired at the building and shouted the same slogan.

One hour later, just after 10 am, Al-Jazeera broadcast the images of the dying child and the woman in tears by his side. The commentary indicated that it was another example of atrocities perpetrated by the Army who were now attacking the Christian minority.

At the time of the attack, « *there were no police or soldiers in the district. If the security forces had been there, maybe Ibrahim would not be dead* », said the mother. The dozen armed men wearing headscarves were not residents of the neighbourhood, though they appeared to know their way around. The attack lasted about 30 minutes. Several witnesses say that it was a « raid » designed to spread terror and that the attackers were clearly looking to draw soldiers into the neighbourhood to ambush them.

The family of Georgina Ianios Njama are poor farmers. The members of the family insist on the peaceful coexistence and « normal » relations between communities, as well as their attachment to President Bachar. They praise the health and educational systems. They implored the army to provide better protection.

► **The Arab media, an « aggravating factor » in the conflict**

For Adnan Mahmoud, Minister of Information, there is a political agenda behind this war which pits the international media against Syria. He told us that « *the media are the most important players in the conflict. Certain media are partners of armed groups operating inside the country, and who obey the same orders. The messages relayed are defamatory and are designed to incite hatred. The wording employed incites violence and division, with a divisive focus on ethnic identity and religion* ».

Fortunately, the truth about the death of the child in Homs was revealed, and several representatives of the Saint-Paul community expressed their relief when they heard this. But there is clearly a case to question possible complicity between armed gangs and certain media outlets in the Gulf. Given such practices, Syrian authorities closed the offices of Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, as well as BBC World, and expelled their representatives, something which obviously irked Western news teams. These chains now work with independent journalists who operate clandestinely, use « social and electronic networks » and whose claims are difficult to verify.

Asma Kaftaro insists on Al-Jazeera's « very negative » role. The TV station « *continues to lie in a revolting manner, which directly contributes to the escalation of the crisis. The incitement to hatred and sectarian clashes by the Arab media worked in Homs. The city succumbed to sectarian hatred. The regime is not responsible for this. It is foreign media outlets and religious groups who are aggravating the situation* ».

Qatar-TV calls for sectarian strife when it repeats that « Bachar al-Assad does not represent the Muslims ». One of the most violent preachers on this television station is Sheikh al-Qaradawi, who also presents a programme every Friday on Al-Jazeera. He had previously legitimised a religious fatwa calling for the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi.

► The destruction of independent witness reports

In addition to their unilateral media bombardment, Arab and Anglo-American media networks have also disrupted the broadcast or publication of reports and studies on atrocities committed by protesters. When they are unable to infiltrate such video reports beforehand, media networks will not hesitate to interrupt live statements given by witnesses on air when such testimonials fail to comply with their version of the events. They also seek to discredit anyone who, in the press or on social networks, provides a contradictory version, that differs from their line of « information ».

When the bloodshed began, Mother Agnès decided that it was time to act. L'œuvre d'Orient (a French-based NGO) asked for her community's view on the local situation. She was harshly criticized as of her first article, which was attributed to – by several French sources – the Syrian special services. She had written a well-documented first text (research, witness reports, personal observations) to describe what she was experiencing. She then wrote other articles, in particular about the Wadi Sayer district in Homs.

As soon as her first article was published, Mother Agnès was severely criticized by the Gulf media. Several sites claimed that it was a « set-up » by the Mukhabarat and « that this supposed Mother Superior does not exist ».

She then gave an interview to Thierry Meyssan without knowing who he was. He posted large parts of her testimonial online, which discredited her further. Mother Agnès then organised a visit to Syria for the Catholic media, to allow them check the veracity of her statements. She toured Europe to mobilise them. *KTO, RTBF, La libre Belgique, Le Dimanche, Washington Group Institute, KTO Belgique, RAI 2, El Mundo*, as well as several independent media groups and web sites came to Syria upon her invitation.

She brought this delegation of journalists to the Alawite neighbourhoods of Homs¹. Instead of seeing peaceful demonstrations, they saw security forces under siege from unidentified gunmen, RPG impact damage and they were able to gather testimonials from the local populace who had suffered atrocities at the hands of the insurgents. However, they did not publish these facts upon their return, fearing they would be criticized by the *Mainstream* media for breaking with the generally accepted narrative.

ITV journalist Marc de Chalvron, who took part in this visit, even reported that he had seen 15,000 people demonstrating against the regime in the forecourt of the mosque of Kenj, in the village of Kusayr. This is a small village in Bekaa, on the Damascus/Homs

¹ The drafting of our report was completed prior to the death of France 2 reporter, Gilles Jacquier, on 11 January 2012.

road, a few kilometers from the Lebanese border. The forecourt of the mosque is only 12 metres long and could not contain such a large number of people!

► The role of « social networks »

In addition to the media, « social and electronic networks » have played a considerable role in the protests. On Twitter we counted representatives of some fifty so-called « political parties », without being able to identify the identity or role of the correspondents. They organise demonstrations which take place for the most part at nightfall, and attract between several dozen people and a few hundred people at most, who shout anti-regime slogans before disappearing after a few minutes (*Flash Mob* technique). Al-Jazeera broadcasts these images around the clock to give the impression that there are large-scale popular demonstrations taking place constantly.

An American organisation (AVAAZ¹) is also playing an important role in Syria, after being involved in other Arab « revolutions »². Ricken Patel, founder of AVAAZ (and a former member of the Rockefeller and Bill Gates Foundations), here talks of actions undertaken by his NGO: « *AVAAZ was at the heart of the struggles for democracy in the Arab World. Thanks to 1.5 million dollars from small donations provided by our members, we were able to put an end to the black-out that the dictators had attempted to impose having expelled all foreign media. This funding allowed us to train a substantial number of citizen journalists, equip them with modems and hi-tech satellite phones and provide them with internet connections.* »

AVAAZ states that, with regard to Syria, 30% of information broadcast by the largest global media networks such as the BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera come from his network of digital activists. « *While no other organisation was capable of doing it, our network clandestinely shipped in more than 1 million dollars of essential first aid equipment for people under violent siege in Syria. We also secretly brought militants and their relatives over the border, people who risked being tortured or killed. Our safe houses provide a secret refuge for dozens of militants wanted by the regime's henchmen and these safe houses allow militants to continue their operations in security. The criminal regime of Assad appears to be very unhappy because Syrian state television called our head of campaigns 'the most dangerous man in the world' for the regime. In parallel to our active engagement with pro-democracy movements, we have also kept up constant global pressure on our governments to force them to make life very difficult for these brutal regimes: millions of AVAAZ members have carried out victorious campaigns that have resulted in the passing of oil sanctions by the EU and other sanctions by the Arab League against Syria.* »

Last October, AVAAZ continued its activities, basing their actions on erroneous or unverifiable events³, as the example here shows: « *The Syrian regime has reached new levels of cruelty: its death squadrons use ambulances and hospitals to attract and assassinate injured demonstrators. But Russia, Syria's key ally and weapons provider, could end this carnage. We, citizens of the world, ask you to use all peaceful means to call on the*

¹ <http://www.avaaz.org/fr/>

² <http://signal-monitoring.blogspot.com/2011/12/lorganisation-americaine-avaaz-au-coeur.html>

³ http://www.avaaz.org/fr/stop_the_horror_in_syria_fr/?fpbr, posted October 18, 2011.

Syrian regime to stop the carnage and allow a quick transition to democracy. We call on you to reinforce international pressure to make Russia stop its support for the current regime and the supply of Russian weapons of death which are used to kill peaceful demonstrators and humanitarian workers ».

► **The botched response of the Syrian authorities**

In the face of this torrent of misinformation, the Syrian government, ill prepared for the information war, has been totally overwhelmed. Its response has been clumsy and inappropriate and has only served to reinforce suspicions surrounding the regime.

Syrian TV has also fallen into the trap of misinformation. An example of such misinformation includes the attack on the French ambassador and his escort, on Saturday 24 September, 2011, in Bab Charki (Damascus), as he was leaving a meeting with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch. Commentators talked of a provocation by the French, which led a « crowd » to throw eggs and stones at the diplomat.

The communications plans of the Syrian government are aimed primarily at domestic audiences, and only marginally for international opinion. Their rare attempts at a communications strategy have proven largely counter-productive. Lack of preparation, poor wording and the inappropriate timing of programmes, have made communications operations backfire each time against the authorities in Damascus. A salient example is the interview given by the Syrian head of state to ABS-News, on 6 December 2011. Confusing the responsibilities of the army and his own responsibilities as president, Bashar al-Assad gave the impression of being doubly incompetent, showing a lack of command over his media message and a more damaging lack of command over the security strategy and management of the crisis on the ground.

The President's press service should organise special programmes on national television to explain the President's real message. His spokespeople should explain why and how ABS-News betrayed his trust by broadcasting edited and incomprehensible soundbites that were then picked up by other media networks around the world. There are many members of the Syrian government, including some very close to Bashar al-Assad who admit that « *we do not know how to do communications!* ».

6. THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE CONFLICT

In the eyes of the Western World, the Syrian regime is endowed with every defect imaginable. An enemy of Israel, an ally of Iran, Russia and China, a supporter of terrorist movements such as the Hezbollah and Hamas, all these factors make the country a certified member of the exclusive « Axis of Evil » that is such an intrinsic part of American rhetoric.

► Reasons for Syria's negative international image

Alliance with USSR. The first reason goes back to the Cold War. Like Nasser before him, Hafez al-Assad chose to align his country with Moscow. Binding the interests of Syria to those of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact countries is easily explained given the context of the Cold War that deemed Israel as a bridgehead for the « free world » in the Middle East. This alliance had its ups and downs, prompting former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to famously remark that, « *in the Middle East, there cannot be war without Egypt and there cannot be peace without Syria* ». Even though Hafez al-Assad anticipated the end of the Cold War when he began granting guarantees to the Americans in the mid 1980s, the image of Syria remains solidly associated with the « communist side », despite the participation of Damascus in the international coalition against Iraq in 1991.

The intervention in Lebanon. The second reason is closely linked to the fifteen years of civil and regional war in Lebanon (1975-1990), during which time Syria emerged as one of the main regional players, at the same time as Israel and the Western powers. It is easy to forget that the Syrian Army entered Lebanon in the Spring of 1976 at the formal request of the Republic's president, a Maronite Christian, Suleiman Frangié, and the Christian camp, to reduce the Palestinian refugee camps. Following several shifts in alliances, Damascus would then play by its own rules and impose a *Pax Syriana* with the active support of Washington and Paris. Nevertheless, Damascus was accused of benefitting from divisions between Lebanese factions in order to restore, with the help of Moscow, a « Greater Syria » covering Lebanon and Palestine.

Against this backdrop, various extremist organisations were indeed given refuge and armed by the different Syrian security services and Syria emerged as one of the main centers of international terrorism. Quite aside from any of these historical considerations, in the collective memory of the « Lebanese war » generation and more precisely those who suffered at the hands of the various Lebanese Christian organisations, Syria remains one of the main culprits behind one of the bloodiest civil wars in the history of the XXth century.

Finally, the third reason is the **assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri**, on 14 February 2005 in Beirut. In the minutes that followed the fatal blast, many embassies and Arab and Western media networks were accusing Syria and its elites of being behind the attack.

A few months later, the first report published by the International Inquiry Commission directly accused the young President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian secret services based on testimonial evidence that would later be shown to be wholly unreliable. Conclusions of the following reports would fluctuate, accusing successively the Hezbollah and Iran, before invariably coming back to the trail of Syria. In the same vein, Washington has never stopped accusing Syria of fuelling terrorism aimed at American troops in Iraq. From its historic alliance with Soviet Russia to the assassination of Rafic Hariri, via interference in Lebanon, Syria is invariably categorised as a « terrorist state », the second threat after Iran within the Axis of Evil ; this is the interpretative framework used by ideologues of both Bush administrations.

Despite its change in style, the Obama administration has not altered the way it reads the situation nor US strategic priorities in the Middle East. Despite the spectacular reconciliation forged with France in the Spring of 2008 after the Arab Summit in Damascus (29-30 March) and made concrete by France's invitation to Bashar al-Assad to come to Paris for the inauguration of the Union pour la Méditerranée (Union for the Mediterranean - UPM), on 13 July 2008, Syria remains on America's list of terrorist states and allies of Iran.

The fourth reason is ***the strategic partnership between Iran and Syria*** that has existed since 1980 and which is an crucial geopolitical factor in the region. Iran continues to use Syria as a staging ground (and loyal ally) which allows it to extend its influence in a predominantly Sunni area. Syria is part of what King Abdullah of Jordan has named the « Shia crescent », by which he means the Iranian sphere of influence in the Middle East.

Cooperation between Iran and Syria exists in the military, security, economic and scientific spheres. The Supreme Guide of the Iranian Revolution, Ali Khamenei, declared in February 2007 that Iran and Syria shared a « strategic depth » that was beneficial to both. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also confirmed that *« Iran and Syria share common enemies, which requires effective coordination in dealing with the plans of those enemies ; this is made possible by an optimization and deepening of relations between the two countries »*.

Aside from the military cooperation that allows Syria to acquire arms with Teheran picking up the cost, bilateral economic relations have increased, in particular in the areas of industry, agriculture, research and energy. Iranian investment in Syria is likely to have reached three billion dollars in 2010. Teheran has even proposed to share its « civilian » nuclear know-how with Damascus.

Finally, both countries openly support the Lebanese Hezbollah. Syria is used as a transit hub for the supply of arms to the Lebanese politico-military organisation.

► **An obstacle for US policy in the Middle East**

The Middle East is currently undergoing profound turmoil. Since the first (1990/1991), and second (2003) Iraq Wars, the world has witnessed the implementation of the American policy known as the *Greater Middle East*, a plan to install a Greater Middle East

through the dismantling of regimes hostile to a remodelling of the region in accordance with US-Israeli interests.

This policy has been given the term « constructive instability ». It is based on three principles :

- maintain and supervise low intensity conflicts ;
- promote political and territorial division;
- encourage sectarianism, or, failing that, ethnic and religious cleansing.

The policy was greatly influenced by a briefing paper drafted by Oded Yinon, a senior official at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated February 1982, which details the geostrategic project for the division of the whole Middle Eastern area into the smallest possible units, recommending, in other words, the outright dismantling of Arab states that border Israel¹.

Oded Yinon wrote : « *Lebanon's total dissolution into five provinces serves as a precedent for the entire Arab world including Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the Arabian peninsula and is already following that track. The dissolution of Syria and Iraq later on into ethnically or religiously unique areas such as in Lebanon, is Israel's primary target on the Eastern front in the long run, while the dissolution of the military power of those states serves as the primary short term target. Syria will fall apart, in accordance with its ethnic and religious structure, into several states such as in present day Lebanon, so that there will be a Shi'ite Alawi state along its coast, a Sunni state in the Aleppo area, another Sunni state in Damascus hostile to its northern neighbor, and the Druzes who will set up a state, maybe even in our Golan, and certainly in the Hauran and in northern Jordan. This state of affairs will be the guarantee for peace and security in the area in the long run, and that aim is already within our reach today* ».

Exploiting sectarianism is a strong factor in the destabilisation of countries in the region targeted by the « constructive instability » policy as formulated by US neoconservatives. In Syria, the US administration seeks to provoke regime change. As Robert Satloff, Director of the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, remarks, the Americans « *have no interest in the survival of the Assad regime, a minority regime, and whose fragile foundations are fear and intimidation. Cracks in the edifice of the regime can quickly be transformed into fissures and then earthquakes*² ». In his view, the United States must focus on three priorities :

- gather as much information as possible on the political, social, economic and « ethnic » dynamics inside Syria;
- launch a campaign on the themes of democracy, human rights and rule of law;
- refuse Syria an escape plan, unless President Bachar el-Assad states that he is ready to travel to Israel as part of a peace initiative or if he expels all anti-Israeli organisations from Syria and states publicly that he denounces violence, « *armed struggle or national resistance, to use the local jargon* ».

¹ Oded Yinon : *Kivunium*, n° 14, February 1982. Journal published by the Department of Publicity, World Zionist Organisation, Jerusalem. This article was sent to the *Revue d'études palestiniennes* by Israël Shahak and published in n° 5, Autumn 1982.

² Robert Satloff, *Assessing the Bush Administration's Policy of Constructive Instability (Part I): Lebanon and Syria*, Washington, Institute for Near East Policy, 15 March 2005.

A major offensive for constructive instability took place at the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2005. American diplomacy presented its Middle East priorities:

- maintain pressure on Syria, accused of being a transit hub for many international militants into Iraq. The accusations against Damascus also concerned the Lebanese question. Even though Syria is committed to full cooperation with the international inquiry into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, Washington continues to seek the disarmament of Hezbollah, something also ardently demanded by Tel-Aviv.
- convince the international community of the importance of indicting Iran before the Security Council on the nuclear issue.

With Iraq in stalemate, the containment of Iranian influence has become the new priority for Washington. The question now is to ratchet up international pressure to get Teheran to abandon its nuclear programme, or, at least, to limit its response capabilities in the event of an attack on its nuclear facilities. This containment involves forcing Syria, Iran's last state ally in the Middle East, to break its alliance and disarm the Lebanese Hezbollah.

With the US withdrawal from Iraq and planned drawdown of troops from Afghanistan, the continued implementation of this plan now appears compromised, and the Russians and Chinese, bitter about NATO's war in Libya, continue to put up resistance not only at the United Nations Security Council, but also on several other international issues, in particular Syria.

Damascus therefore remains on the list of terrorist states because it refuses the implementation of a « Greater Middle East », and because it has been Iran's ally since 1980, the beginning of the Iran/Iraq War (1980-1988). In addition, an attack on Syria is an attack on Iran and Damascus is considered Iran's weak link. Several officials in the US administration recently declared that « *if Syria wishes to get out of this crisis, all it has to do is denounce its relations with Iran and the terrorist groups (Hamas, Hezbollah) »*. The weakening of Iran would allow Turkey to become the great regional power capable of stabilising the northern borders of Israel.

Several figures of the domestic opposition remarked that « *the United States plan everything with the Turks, but also with the Muslim Brotherhood, as part of a three-way deal. This entente was sealed during the agreements of 2008 in Istanbul »*.

It should be remembered that Washington has historically provided support to the Muslim Brotherhood, considering the Brotherhood to be most effective antidote to labour unions, left-wing and nationalist parties, and an advocate of a liberal economic policy beneficial to Western powers. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan and in the oil-rich Gulf states, not to mention Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States continue to play the Muslim Brotherhood card as they have always done since the signature of the Quincy Pact, between President Roosevelt and King Ibn Saoud on 13 February 1945. This ironclad alliance which allocated the largest oil fields in the world to American petroleum companies in return for military and political protection for the Saoud family, was extended in 2005 for 60 years. Beyond the revolts of the « Arab street », the Quincy Pact with the assistance of the Muslim Brotherhood,

continues to guide how the armed forces, powers and various « Spring uprisings » in North Africa and the Middle East are managed.

In return for the assistance and support of the United States, the SNC has repeated several times that if it comes to power, the new regime will break off relations with the Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran and will open direct talks with Israel.

But for the Muslim Brotherhood, democracy is opposed to Islamic principles. Promoting democracy is simply a means to an end for them, a decoy to reach their objective : trick the West and overthrow the regime with the help of Qatar.

► **Strategies of Syria's other adversaries**

Loaï Hussein, President of the Rebuild Syria Front, remarks that beyond the American strategy, « *we have seen scandalous interference from Qatar, Turkey and France* ». Omar Oussi also criticizes foreign interference, in particular from Western powers, as well as Israel and Turkey.

The Gulf States and the European Union are clearly acting as auxiliary figures for Washington in their handling of the Syrian crisis. The least anti-Syrian countries (Spain, Italy) have declared that it is impossible to resist the pressures of the European position, implemented in Brussels in collaboration with NATO and the Gulf states.

Qatar remains an auxiliary of the United States, an instrument at the service of US strategy (Libya, Syria). The emirate is wealthy (gas, oil), but it punches even further above its weight because of its alliance with Washington and its media network Al-Jazeera. Omar Oussi remarks that « *Qatar is a small and artificial state – 1.7 million inhabitants, including 80% immigrants – where democracy and human rights do not exist. It, despite this, does not hesitate to give lessons to a country like Syria, cradle of a rich civilisation and with a history spanning thousands of years* ».

The Emir of Qatar, Al-Thani presents himself as a moderate Salafist. Traditionally, he has sought to replace Saudi hegemony in the Sunni Muslim world. This rivalry with Saudi Arabia has turned to his advantage at the moment, as the Saudi royal family is undergoing a new succession process that pits different clans against each other.

Saudi Arabia, which has to control its own minority Shia groups, does not wish to appear in the frontline in the struggle against Syria. It also fears unrest in its own territory. Moreover, given recent events in Bahrain, Riyadh cannot take action against Iran or the Lebanese Hezbollah directly. However, the oil kingdom did not miss the opportunity of taking an indirect strike against the regime in Damascus, the weak link in the « Axis of Evil », by enabling cross border unrest.

The Arab League came onto the scene after eight months of crisis, spurred on by international pressure, in particular from the United States. In the opinion of Melkite Patriarch, Gregorios III, « *If the Arab League had done for the Palestinians a tenth of what it has done for democracy in Syria, the Palestinians would have had their own state a long time ago* ».

« *The Arab League is an unbalanced grouping, composed around the six Gulf states, which have petrodollars and the most reactionary interpretation of Islam* », explains an Arab diplomat stationed in Damascus, « *the Gulf states seek to buy off the other members, including Egypt and the countries of the Maghreb, and these latter countries are in the frontline of the « Arab uprisings »*. Since January 2011 and the Arab « revolutions », it would appear that we are witnessing the Gulf petro-monarchies getting revenge over the « Arab republics ».

Turkey is a major actor in this crisis. « *Ankara seeks to reproduce in Syria the Libyan model and wants to see its own model of government being exported to Arab countries with the support of the United States* » several heads of the Syrian domestic opposition remarked, adding « *it needs to weaken Syria and Iran to ensure its status of regional power* ». Turkey is hesitant; it wants to play a role in the future of Syria, but it fears the destabilisation of a country with which it shares 800 kilometers of borderline. The Turks are worried and inconstant. They do not want to launch an adventure as they are well aware of the might of the Syrian Army.

In addition, there is the issue of foreign trade with Damascus. Prior to the crisis, more than 200 Turkish factories located along the Syrian border were exporting goods to the Syrian domestic market. This competition had caused plants to close and job losses in Syria. Syria is an obligatory point of passage for Turkish exports by road to the Middle East and the Gulf states. These economic realities explain Erdogan's hesitations.

Ankara cannot overlook the Kurdish question either. « *Turkey officially declared to the Syrian authorities that it would not provide refuge to armed resisters on Turkish soil or support them. But this is not true* », remarks Omar Oussi ; « *Turkey will not be able to create a buffer zone along its borders. If it does that, the Kurds of Syria will ally themselves with the PKK to attack Istanbul. Ankara therefore has a serious problem on its hands* ».

Omar Oussi also remarks that « *Ankara is responsible for a genocide against the Kurds and against other peoples. Since 1984, Turkey has killed 50,000 Kurds. It bombs civilian villages with planes supplied by the United States and it cooperates with Israel. And it wants to give lessons to Syria !* ».

► Syria's supporters

Syria can continue to count on vetoes by **Russia** and China at the United Nations Security Council. These two countries still continue to work closely with Damascus on the crisis. Moscow seeks to bring everyone to the negotiating table, something which the SNC is refusing. Bachar al-Assad will not take any decision that could put his partners in difficulty.

The Russians have issued warnings to the Western powers on several occasions, « *Be careful not to threaten Syria too much!* ». Moscow, though it believes that the government was responsible for the violence, supplied a first mobile *Yakhont* coastal defence anti-ship cruise missile system at the end of 2011, to avoid any foreign military intervention by sea.

Syria is of strategic importance for Russia, as it provides Russia's fleet with its main port in the Mediterranean. The deep water harbour of Tartus can house Russian SSBNs and SSNs as well as frigates and larger surface ships. We estimate that there are a thousand Russian technical assistants in Syria.

The story that there are 2 to 3,000 Iranian Pasdarans embedded in the Syrian security forces seems far-fetched and remains unconfirmed as of the time of writing. The Syrian government does not appear to need anybody to maintain order in-country. Nevertheless, **Iran** has declared that Syria will not face a foreign attack alone, whatever the shape of such an attack.

► Economic sanctions and their impact

Patriarch Gregorios III believes that « *brandishing the threat of sanctions is utterly negative* ». Omar Oussi, President of the National Initiative for Syrian Kurds puts the impact of such sanctions into perspective when he remarks that « *the country produces 3 million tonnes of wheat and only consumes half that amount. Syria is 80% food self-sufficient. It has food reserves for 2 years* ».

Syrian agriculture, which employs 35% of the active population, provides 80% of the country's needs, even though Syria suffers from insufficient levels of modernisation and is facing water shortage issues. A major irrigation project for agricultural lands in the north and north-east of the country has begun. It is set to continue over the next several years, increasing agricultural output. Projects to grow fruit and vegetables in glasshouses, and packaging production plants for foodstuffs are also in development.

22 state-owned factories cover the entire agribusiness sector, including dairy products, fruit and vegetables, cooking oil, biscuits, tobacco, etc. They are under the control of the General Organisation of Food Industries (GOFI). Syria also maintains a monopoly over certain staple goods such as sugar, wheat, mineral water, etc.

According to various financial sources, « *the Sunni bourgeoisie would even be relieved if Turkish imports were interrupted, as those imports have caused a significant part of Syrian*

industry to disappear. Various factories have restarted operations to fill the gap ». The volume of Turkish exports towards Syria prior to the crisis reached 2.3 million dollars for Syria, while exports from Damascus only reached 600,000. The trade balance is thus skewed.

Most representatives of the domestic opposition do not believe that an embargo will be fully implemented on a long-term basis. The country's neighbours, including Turkey, have more to lose than Syria. There is growing discontent among Turkish industrialists who feel penalised and are complaining to Erdogan.

However, for the working classes, economic sanctions are beginning to bite with a rise in fuel prices, electricity cuts, etc. The first impact of sanctions on the national economy is now visible with gas prices on the rise. According to several financial analysts, inflation is set to reach nearly 20% (December 2011) and unemployment will affect 35% of the active population. Tourism has collapsed and the oil embargo has caused two billion dollars in losses.

7. WHAT FUTURE FOR SYRIA ?

Syria is undergoing a structural crisis the scale of which the country has not known since Independence. Beginning with a social movement comparable to protests that radically altered the situation in the Spring of 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, this acceleration of history quickly transformed itself into a political and sectarian confrontation. Then, it widened to become the epicenter of a new regional and international crisis that reactivated three longstanding and interconnecting factors:

- reaffirmation of the hegemony of the petro-monarchies over the rest of the Arab-Muslim World;
- Sunni leadership confronted with the « Shia crescent » ;
- implementation of the American plan known as the « Greater Middle East » that seeks to « democratize » all countries in the area, a plan that began with regime change in Iraq in the Spring of 2003.

But contrary to the events that unfolded in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the future of the Syrian crisis is not linked to the « personal destiny » of the Syrian Head of State. Bashar al-Assad - represents not only a family but also a religious group, which though in a minority, has longstanding roots in the mountainous region known as the « Alawite stronghold ». Dates put forward for the « fall of the regime » by different Western media networks are far-fetched. These articles have to be regularly updated with headlines such as « *How is the Damascus regime holding on ?* ». The fact is that the Syrian regime can endure the crisis, because central government has a strong footing in the various regions of the country and, in particular, in Damascus and Aleppo, the country's two largest cities where half the Syrian population live.

In December 2011, a foreign military intervention - comparable to that which entered Libya in the Spring of 2011 – remains highly improbable, not only because of the Russian and Chinese positions on the United Nations Security Council, but above all on account of regional geopolitics directly involving Iran.

A military intervention in Syria is closely linked to the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites, a scenario that currently has more to do with political optics than operational realities.

These two scenarios would likely lead, one or the other, to an all-out regional war which would then lead to a broader international confrontation.

As most of our interlocutors pointed out to us, « though everything has changed », a resolution to the crisis will take some time. If the regime has survived more than nine months of agitation, it is not likely to fall tomorrow. However, the chaotic evolution of the situation means that several scenarios are possible :

- A generalisation of the civil war, becoming a regional conflict spilling into Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and even Turkey, shifting the crisis from a limited « Lebanonization » to a broader scale, and even resulting in the « Balkanization » of the Middle East with repercussions on the oil producing monarchies (military experts estimate that such a scenario could cause some 300,000 deaths).

- A *containment* of the crisis limiting it to the territory of Syria, via low intensity security management, with spikes in the numbers of victims at intervals.
- A « Yemeni-style » resolution to the crisis with mediation by Russia and Iran.

► **The risk of a civil war: the forced « Lebanonization » of Syria**

At the beginning, the current crisis was neither a political nor a sectarian problem. The risk of a sectarian civil war can be avoided although the acceleration of events makes the situation highly unpredictable. The various religious denominations do not correspond to compact political blocks. The affluent Sunni trading classes in Damascus and Aleppo continue to support the regime while one meets many Alawites and Christians among opponents of the regime.

Asma Kaftaro told us that the crisis cannot be reduced to a sectarian dimension: « *we are all Syrians, whatever our religion* ». She is not calling for peace as a Sunni Muslim but as a Syrian national. She recalls that there were common prayer meetings that brought almost all the religious communities of the country together on three occasions, for the salvation and future of the country: « *the crisis will leave deep scars on our society and nothing will ever be the same again. Now, the task is to rebuild with the Alawites in particular, because resentments and enmities continue to grow given the rise in sectarian violence* ».

The Melkite Patriarch who exhorted his parishioners to vote in the municipal elections on 12 December 2011, claims that the introduction of Sharia Law would be more dangerous and restrictive for Muslims than for Christians. He recalls that in Iraq, there were more mosques than churches destroyed by terrorist groups : « *far more Muslims than Christians had to leave the country* ». It is, however, true that the Christian community paid an extremely heavy price. Out of the 800,000 Christians of Iraq, 350,000 had to flee, of which a large part sought refuge in Syria.

According to Patriarch Gregorios III, « *those who target Syria exploit ethnic and religious differences, focusing particularly on isolated Sunni regions, that are cut off and where extremist political groups can flourish. These forces are looking for the spark that will light a general civil war. But a civil war will not happen* ».

The Christians and a large part of the Alawites fear the unknown and long for a return to peace with greater freedoms. « *Everybody fears chaos, but not Islam* », a shopkeeper on Abasside Square said to us, « *the Christians are not the problem of the 'revolution'. Everyone is concerned by this acceleration of events but the misinformation is not working, they have not fooled the people. The media coverage of the little Christian boy in Homs did not push the Christians into violent protest. The Christians of Syria are very mature and will not allow themselves to be manipulated in this way by the Gulf media who have always looked down on us as if we were subhuman* ».

The « Lebanonization » of Syria is manufactured by three main groups of actors:
- the Syrian regime, its military units and its various intelligence services;

- political and sectarian leaders including the Muslim Brotherhood and leaders of Salafist groups supported by governments or political forces in neighbouring countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Iraq;
- regional and international powers involved in the area: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, France.

The risk of an all-out sectarian confrontation, global « Lebanonization » and total civil war is not an inevitability. But the armed groups will not lay down their weapons of war, engaged as they are in a spiral of violence. They are counting on an intervention by the international community, similar to what occurred in Libya. For minorities such as the Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and to a lesser extent, the Druze, the end of the Baath regime and the departure of Bashar al-Assad would provoke a civil and regional war that would have huge consequences, comparable to that of the Balkans with its 300,000 dead.

Despite the number of casualties so far, everything depends on Bashar al-Assad's drive to federate the progressive forces in the country and grant them political concessions and the economic liberalisation they desire. Today there is a huge risk of a « Lebanonization » of Syria with, in addition, a widening of a global *fitna* between an Alawite/Shia one on one side and the Sunni communities of the region on the other. This catastrophic scenario which would certainly lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people is not, however, inevitable.

► **The end of the Syrian socio-religious model?**

All the people we spoke with insisted on the social, cultural and religious specificities of their country, to which they are strongly attached. Omar Oussi believes that these specificities guarantee peace and cohesion and must be protected. Asma Kaftaro told us that it would be criminal to sacrifice this society which remains a model of tolerance in the region: « *Syrian Muslims must fight extremism through the establishment of a representative national body* ». Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III did not hesitate to recall that « *there is more religious freedom and tolerance in Syria than in any other Arab country* ».

Syria is a pluralist society. Nearly 40% of the population belong to a minority denomination: Catholic or Orthodox Christians, minority Islamic faiths (Shia, Druze, Ismailian), non-Arab orthodox Muslims (Kurds). None wish to find themselves faced with a fundamentalist Sunni Islamist power.

Nevertheless, all our interviewees were unanimous saying that « nothing will ever be the same again ». The Syrian multi-denominational model and its monopolistic power structure controlled by an authoritarian regime will undergo serious changes which could lead to either:

- ethnic and sectarian partition and cleansing (akin to the Dayton Agreement in former Yugoslavia) ;
- A Libyan-style solution which would lead to the departure of minority groups to Lebanon and other destinations ;
- An attempt at reform and the institutionalisation of a multi-denominational system comparable to the Taif Agreement (1989) in Lebanon.

The main objective of these strategies, local, regional and international, carried out against Damascus, is not simply the toppling of the regime, which, if it is capable of modernising itself could play a moderating role between the different sections of the country and its region, but rather the disappearance of the Syrian model of society.

*

« Dictocracy » can be defined as a political regime that presents the formal rules of Western democracies and principles of a market economy, as the result of external pressures, via economic sanctions or military interventions of varying degrees of intensity.

Religion plays a paramount role in cementing national identity. As witnessed with the application of the Dayton Agreement in the Balkans, « dictocracy » can generate, not only political and territorial divisions, but also fresh rounds of ethnic cleansing.

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria are all undergoing phases of transition that are set to last for a long period. Even though there are similarities between one country and another, the various situations defy easy generalisations and a 'one size fits all' approach. Given Syria's history, its socio-religious model and regional environment, the country defies such generalisations even more so.

Revolutions follow on from each other but differ widely. Whatever the outcome, it is still too early, given the electoral schedules of the « Arab revolutions », to know whether radical Islamism is compatible with democracy or post-global « dictocracy ».

Paris, January 2012

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

- **Michel Kilo**, sociologist, representative of the NCCDC and figure of the domestic opposition (end November, in Paris).
- **Members of the Greek Catholic community** of Saint-Paul le Damascène (Sunday 4 December).
- **Loaï Hussein**, President of « Building the Syria State Party » (Monday 5 December, at his office).
- **Fayez Sarah**, writer and journalist, civil society intellectual, Founder of the Coordination in 2005 (Monday 5 December).
- **Gregorios III Laham**, Melkite Patriarch of Antioch (Monday 5 December, at the headquarters of the patriarchate).
- **Hussein al-Odat**, writer and journalist who worked as advisor for 14 years to the Prime Minister (Tuesday 6 December, at his office).
- **Omar Oussi**, President of the National Initiative for Syrian Kurds. Political advisor to Ocalan for the Middle East for 15 years until his arrest in 1999 (Tuesday 6 December).
- **Mother Agnès Mariam de la Croix**, Franco-Lebanese Mother Superior who heads the Greek Catholic Community « Unité » of Antioch, based at the monastery of St James, located 90 km from Damascus (Tuesday 6 December).
- **Hassan Abdel Azim**, lawyer. Main coordinator of the NCCDC (Tuesday 6 December, at his office).
- **Georgina Ianios Njama** (mother of the child killed in Homs) and her family (Hama, Wednesday 7 December).
- **Asma Kaftaro**, director of the Sunni Women's Organisation, a civil women's association, member of the Islamic Syrian Women's Forum and the International Forum for Social and Solidarity Economy (Thursday 8 December, at her home)

- **Dr Adnan Mahmoud**, Minister of Information (Thursday 8 December, at his office at the Ministry).

- **Ghaleb Kandil**, member of the National Audiovisual Media Council of Lebanon (Thursday 8 December).

The authors also met with several European diplomats and diplomats of members states of the Arab League stationed in Damascus and Paris as well as other actors and observers of the Syrian crisis who did not wish to be named.

APPENDIX 2

A FEW HISTORICAL REFERENCE POINTS

The history of Syria as an independent state began with a misunderstanding. To reward them for their uprising against the Ottoman Empire (1916), Great Britain promised the Arab nationalist movement under the leadership of the Sharif of Mecca to establish a kingdom with Damascus as its capital. In 1918, the Arab forces entered Damascus and founded the kingdom directed by Faisal, brother of Abd Allah ibn Hussein, son of the Sharif of Mecca, born of a great Hachemite family.

The kingdom was short-lived because the French and British signed an agreement to share the remains of the Ottoman Empire. The Sykes-Picot Agreement brought an end to Greater Syria - Bilad al-Cham -, which included the current territories of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. After the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920, French forces under the command of General Goybet entered Damascus. Paris imposed its Mandate on the country given to it by the League of Nations, which led to the exile of Faisal to Iraq.

The period of the Mandate saw a rise in nationalism and frequent uprisings against French rule. After the collapse of June 1940, the British and Free French took control of the country. The Syrian campaign of June/July 1941 gave back power to the Free French. With the assistance of the British, the Syrians continued to demand the departure of the French. This occurred in 1946, the first year of modern Syria's history. Hachem al-Atassi became the first President of the Republic of Syria.

After the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, Colonel Husni al-Za'im directed a coup d'état which put an end to the Syrian parliamentary system in March, 1949. Partisan of the restoration of Bilad al-Cham (« Greater Syria » or « Natural Syria »), the founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (known by its French acronym PSNS), Antun Saadeh, had to flee Lebanon where he faced execution and took refuge in Syria where Colonel Za'im promised him protection. However, a few months later, Za'im handed Saadeh over to the Lebanese authorities and he was executed. Following this betrayal, Za'im was himself overthrown in another coup d'état. In August 1949, Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, member of the PSNS, arrested Colonel Za'im and had him executed.

A third coup d'état occurred in December 1949, launched by Adib Shishakli. The latter proclaimed himself President of the Republic in 1951 and dissolved Parliament. The United States and Great Britain hoped that Shishakli would adhere to the Baghdad Pact¹.

¹ Referred to as the Baghdad Pact, the Middle East Treaty Organisation was signed on Feb. 24, 1955 by Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran and the United Kingdom. The United States joined the military committee of the alliance in 1958. The Pact was renamed *Central Treaty Organisation* or CENTO, after Iraq's withdrawal

In the hope that he would sign a peace treaty with Israel, Washington provided major assistance. In return, the United States wanted the authorities in Damascus to grant Palestinian refugees full Syrian citizenship. In 1952, Washington offered 400 million dollars to allow 500,000 Palestinians to settle the agricultural lands of Djezireh.

The Arab Socialist Party of Akram Hourani and the Baath Party of Michel Aflaq were violently opposed to this proposal, which represented in their eyes the sale of the Palestinians' right to return. Resulting from the alliance between Hourani's Socialist Party and Aflaq's Baath party, the newly formed Arab Socialist Baath Party attempted to overthrow Shishakli in 1952. Though the latter refused the agreement with the United States, he was overthrown in 1954. After a period of great instability, Nasser's Egypt and Syria decided to merge both countries and create the United Arab Republic (UAR), on 1 February 1958. But the UAR was not a success and General Haydar al-Kouzbari re-established the Syrian Arab Republic after another coup d'état on 28 September 1961.

Instability continued: on 8 March 1963, another coup d'état brought the National Council of the Revolutionary Command to power, headed by Amin Hafiz. The Council was composed of a group of military and civilian officers, all from the Baath Party.

A few months later, a Baath overthrow took place in Iraq. The Syrian government again pondered the possibility of a union with Iraq and Egypt. An agreement was signed in Cairo on 17 April 1963, for a referendum to be held in September. However, disagreements among the three countries developed and the federation was abandoned. In May 1964, President Amin Hafiz promulgated a provisional constitution providing for the appointment of a National Council of the Revolution (NCR).

On 23 February 1966, a group of army officers helmed by Salah Jedid, all from the Baath Party, overthrew Amin Hafiz's government. The new power dissolved the NCR, abrogated the Constitution and chased out the original founders of the Syrian Baath party - Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar and Akram Hourani -, abandoning certain ideals of Pan-Arabism in favour of a more Syrian-centered political agenda. The new leaders described it as a « rectification » of Baath Party principles. The outcome of the Six-Day War in 1967 showed up the failings of this choice and weakened the government of Salah Jedid.

On 13 November 1970, the Minister of Defence Hafez al-Assad effected a new coup d'état. By overthrowing Salah Jedid, he became, thanks to his «Corrective Movement», the new strongman of Syria. One year later, he became President of the Syrian Republic.

on 24 March 1959. The organisation was dissolved in 1979. Modelled after NATO and designed as an extension of SEATO, this alliance obliged signatories to cooperation and mutual protection without interference in internal affairs. Its main objective was to contain the influence of the USSR by creating a line of strong states on its southern border.