The INDEPENDENT

SYRIA: DESCENT INTO THE ABYSS

2011-2014

An unforgettable anthology of contemporary reportage

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SYRIA: DESCENT INTO THE ABSYSS

FEW OBSERVERS expected the Arab Spring to bring happiness to Syria. Even in 2011, the waves of popular self-liberation rippling through North Africa and the Middle-East seemed destined to crash uselessly against the rocks of an immovable Ba'athist regime. When a few brave protesters took to the streets, the assumption was that they would be crushed by President Assad's security services, as ruthlessly and decisively as previous dissenters had been crushed under Assad's father.

But the protests gathered momentum. Against the odds, rebels made inroads. There were desertions in the armed forces. The world condemned the violence of the state's response so forcefully that the status quo seemed untenable. For a few heady weeks, a Syrian Spring seemed a possibility.

Then reality reasserted itself. The regime was indeed too powerful and too ruthless to be overthrown by mere popular fervour. This was a struggle that would be decided by weaponry and brutality.

Both were in plentiful supply - and not just from the regime. A popular uprising became a civil war, which in turn merged bloodily with a wider regional and sectarian conflict to which no end is in sight.

This remarkable anthology of reportage chronicles more than three years of spiralling violence and despair in Syria: atrocity heaped upon atrocity, misery upon misery, and all - so far - to no avail. No faction is without blood on its hands; no crime, from torture to poison gas, has been deemed taboo. The dead are too numerous to count: the UN mid-2014 figure of 190,000 is one of the more conservative estimates. As for the living, close to 3 million refugees have fled Syria, with millions more internally displaced.

How did we come to this? There is no better way to answer this question than to revisit The Independent's published accounts of the unfolding tragedy. Spearheaded by peerless and profoundly experienced correspondents such as Patrick Cockburn, Robert Fisk, Kim Sengupta, our coverage has led the world in its fearlessness and insight.

Syria's tragedy is not yet over. Perhaps it has not even reached its final act. One day, however, historians will ask themselves how an ancient and proud civilisation was reduced to ruins, a century-old regional settlement reduced to irrelevance and a generation of innocent civilians condemned to live in a vicious, desolate war-zone.

When they do so, the testimony and analysis in this volume could provide a valuable starting-point.

2011

26th March 2011

PROTESTS SWEEP THROUGH SYRIA AS TROOPS OPEN FIRE

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIAN TROOPS opened fire on demonstrators yesterday as protests swept the country on an unprecedented scale with tens of thousands challenging the rule of the Assad family. In the southern city of Deraa, where the protest movement started a week ago, troops shot at demonstrators who set fire to a statue of the late President Hafez al-Assad, whose son Bashar has ruled Syria since 2000. Demonstrators first demanded reform of the regime, but increasingly call for a revolution.

In the town of Sanamein, near Deraa, security forces are reported to have killed 20 people after Friday prayers yesterday as they protested against the regime and killings by the security services.

In Hama, north of Damascus, people ran through the streets shouting “freedom is ringing out!” - a slogan used in popular uprisings in the Arab world over the past three months.

Police with batons reacted harshly and swiftly in breaking up small demonstrations in the capital Damascus including one in the ancient Umayyad Mosque. Dozens of people who chanted slogans in support of the people of Deraa were dragged away by police. In Tel, near Damascus, a thousand people rallied, calling the Assad family “thieves” and there were rallies in most other Syrian cities.

The focus of the Arab uprising has switched to Syria over the past week after police arrested a dozen children in Deraa for writing anti-government graffiti on a wall.

Security services have tried to crush the protesters by force, killing 37 of them in a mosque on Wednesday. State television made the unlikely claim that the mosque was the headquarters of a kidnap gang and showed machine guns leaning against a wall and a table with neat bundles of bank notes on it.

The protests are the biggest domestic challenge to the Assad family since the early 1980s, when President Hafez al-Assad crushed a Sunni revolt centred on Hama where some 10,000 people were reputedly killed in 1982. The current protests are secular in tone, but Deraa and Hama are Sunni strongholds resentful of the influence of the Alawites, a Shia sect, to which many members of the ruling elite belong.

The government showed some restraint early yesterday during the funerals in Deraa of those killed by the security forces, but later there was the sound of gunfire. The police had dismantled many checkpoints and were at first trying to keep a low profile. Journalists were escorted out of the city.

Witnesses said that 50,000 people had rallied in Assad Square in Deraa

chanting “Freedom! Freedom!” as they waved Syrian flags and olive branches.

Bashar al-Assad has offered concessions to the protesters such as ending the state of emergency that has existed since 1963, greater press freedom and promising a pay rise to public employees. Previously he had expressed confidence that the protests would not spread to Syria from Tunisia and Egypt, apparently believing that his family’s nationalist credentials and confrontations with Israel and the US would immunise Syria from unrest. The Baath party has held power in Syria since 1963. The government said that all those arrested in Deraa since the start of the protests had been released, but at the same time a human rights agitator, Mazen Darwish, was arrested.

28th March 2011

DESPERATE ASSAD TRIES TO BLUNT UPRISING WITH NEW PROMISES OF REFORM

By Patrick Cockburn

PRESIDENT BASHAR al-Assad is facing the greatest challenge to his family's rule over Syria since his father took power 40 years ago, as protests sweep through the country.

Yesterday the government deployed the army for the first time, in the main port of Latakia. Authorities admitted that 12 people had been killed and 200 wounded over a two-day period in the north-western city, but said all who died had been members of the security forces or their attackers.

Speculation was growing last night that President Assad would announce widespread political reforms in a bid to bring the disturbances under control. His adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban, told Al Jazeera that the emergency law in existence since 1963 and hated by Syrian reformists for the far-reaching powers it gives to security services would be lifted, but did not give a timetable.

In another bid to placate protesters, authorities released the political activist Diana Jawabra and 15 others. They had been arrested for taking part in a silent protest demanding the release of a dozen schoolchildren, detained for writing anti-regime graffiti.

While Mr Assad may offer concessions such as ending emergency law, releasing prisoners, giving the press greater freedom and legalising political parties other than the ruling Baath party, such changes are unlikely to be seen as credible as long as the same people run the army and the security forces. And the ever-creeping death toll is increasing calls for an end to the regime.

The crisis that is threatening to overturn the Syrian government has erupted suddenly over the past week, initially provoked by the security forces in the southern city of Deraa arresting the graffiti-scrawling children. Their detention provoked demonstrations that were met with live fire, and the funerals of the dead turned into vast political rallies.

Human Rights Watch says 61 people have been killed in Deraa and surrounding towns and villages.

The threat to Mr Assad is the greatest the Baathist regime has ever experienced, and it has in the past always responded to dissent with repression. During the Muslim Brotherhood guerrilla war in 1976-82 Mr Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, crushed the rebellion in the city of Hama by killing an estimated 10,000 people.

Baath party veterans may consider their best hope of staying in power at this time is to avoid making concessions, which, they believe, will only be interpreted as weakness and lead to additional demands.

Mr Assad, a British-educated eye doctor, is widely respected in Syria but his

popularity is likely to slump as he fails to speak or respond adequately to the present crisis.

His spokesmen have made contradictory statements on the release of prisoners and other issues, putting in doubt the regime's seriousness in making reforms.

They have also released unlikely explanations of the killing of protesters, claiming that demonstrators opened fire first or were foreign infiltrators. These are often directly contradicted by videos taken by mobile phone and shown on YouTube or by satellite television stations such as al-Jazeera whose correspondents entered Deraa.

In the capital, Damascus, pro-government rallies, with supporters waving Syrian flags and posters of Mr Assad, have taken over main squares and threatened to storm the al-Jazeera offices.

The anti-government protests are fuelled by the demand for political and civil liberty but Syrians, who spend half their income on food according to UN figures, are also suffering from high prices, unemployment and corruption.

Some 30 per cent of the 22 million population are below the poverty line. The government is short of money because of declining oil revenues but has tried to reduce economic discontent by cutting duties and taxes on food and other staples.

The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, yesterday drew a clear distinction between Syria and Libya, ruling out involvement in Damascus' affairs.

"Each of these situations is unique," she told CBS News. "Certainly we deplore the violence in Syria... What's been happening there the last few weeks is deeply concerning, but there's a difference between calling out aircraft and indiscriminately strafing and bombing your own cities [as in Libya], than police actions which frankly have exceeded the use of force that any of us would want to see."

In Latakia, the state news agency said "armed elements roamed the streets, occupied the rooftops of some buildings and opened fire randomly, terrorising people". Troops have now moved into the city, which is majority Sunni Muslim but its hinterland is largely populated by Allawites, the Shia Muslim sect to which much of Syria's ruling elite belongs.

29th March 2011

PRESIDENT OFFERS OLIVE BRANCH TO PROTESTERS AS VIOLENCE ESCALATES

By Patrick Cockburn

THE PRESIDENT of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, is expected to announce reforms today including the end of the 50-year-old state of emergency, to try to defuse protests as thousands of people continue to confront troops.

President Assad needs to convince Syrians that he is sincere in promising to dismantle the arbitrary powers of the ruling Ba'ath party, the security services and his own family. In the week since the demonstrations first started, the government has spoken of reforms, but has allowed its forces to open fire repeatedly on marches and rallies, killing at least 61 people. The crisis in Syria affects the politics of all the Middle East since the country is the predominant power in Lebanon, Iran's most important foreign ally, a significant player in Iraq, and a backer of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

The violence of the security forces in the southern city of Deraa, which turned initial calls for reform into demands for a change of regime, have so far failed to intimidate local people.

Witnesses, quoted by news agencies, said that 4,000 demonstrators refused to disperse as security forces fired tear gas at them and shot live rounds into the air. Tanks and army vehicles surrounded the city, while as many as 1,200 people held a sit-in the al-Omari mosque, the focus of the protests in Deraa.

Demonstrators chanted "We want dignity and freedom" and "No to emergency laws", as soldiers and security forces occupied the ground in front of the mosque and pointed their weapons at any gathering of civilians. Snipers took up positions on tops of buildings.

In Syria, there is always a danger that any attack on the regime will take a sectarian form since the Assad family and many of the ruling elite are members of the Shia/Alawite sect, though they make up only 12 per cent of the population in this Sunni-majority nation.

The biggest revolt against the Ba'athist regime was by the Sunni fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood from 1976 to 1982, which led to as many as 10,000 people being killed by the security forces during an uprising in the city of Hama.

President Assad, who is seen as retaining some credibility, has so far remained silent. Vice-President Farouk al-Sharaa said the President will give an important speech in the next two days that would "assure the people".

His aides have suggested that he would end emergency laws imposed since 1963, free thousands of political prisoners, allow freedom of expression in the media, and curb the powers of the security services. Even then, people will doubt if he and the ruling elite are really going to give up so much power.

Human Rights Watch called on the government “to hold to account those responsible for any unlawful shooting on demonstrators”.

“The government should understand that these demonstrations won’t end until it stops shooting at protesters and begins to change its repressive laws and practices,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, the group’s Middle East director.

Demonstrations spread last Friday to other Syrian cities, though there were also many pro-regime rallies.

There was fighting in the port of Latakia, a Sunni-majority city in a province in which most people belong to the Alawite sect. In outlying areas, armed residents manned their own checkpoints as the government claimed that foreign gunmen roamed the backstreets. Troops in the centre were deployed to guard the Ba’ath party headquarters and the Central Bank.

30th March 2011

ASSAD HOPES SYRIAN CABINET'S RESIGNATION WILL DEFUSE PROTESTS

By Patrick Cockburn

PRESIDENT BASHAR al-Assad yesterday accepted the resignation of the Syrian cabinet in an attempt to defuse protests against his rule as hundreds of thousands of people attended pro-government rallies in most of the country's cities.

Syrians were awaiting a speech by President Assad, who has remained silent during the 11-day crisis, laying out reforms including the lifting of the 50-year-old state of emergency. Protesters will want to see a real reduction in the arbitrary power of the security forces and guarantees of greater political and civil rights.

The president has a core of support and many Syrians are fearful of sectarian divisions turning to violence. But the turnout for yesterday's demonstrations, dubbed "loyalty to the nation marches" where marchers chanted "the people want Bashar Assad" was enhanced by schools and other state institutions being closed for the day.

The resignation of the cabinet is largely symbolic since it holds little power, which remains in the hands of the president, his relatives and senior officials in the intelligence apparatus. Naji al-Otari, the prime minister since 2003, is to remain caretaker until a new government is formed.

The government still appears divided on how it is going to respond to the unprecedented unrest which has so far led to at least 61 protesters being killed, mostly in and around the southern city of Deraa.

There has also been violence in the port city of Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, where the population is divided between the Sunni and the Alawites, the minority Shia sect to which the Assad family and other members of the ruling elite belong. Troops are patrolling streets in the centre of the city while unofficial vigilantes have set up barricades in the outskirts.

In Deraa people are increasingly calling for a change of regime, but it is highly unlikely that the state security apparatus will allow its power to be diluted significantly. President Assad, a 45-year-old British-educated doctor, was seen as a possible reformer when he succeeded his father, President Hafez al-Assad on his death in 2000. But the changes he introduced were largely cosmetic and those who took advantage of the more liberal atmosphere to criticise the regime later found themselves targeted.

The Syrian authorities have a long tradition of refusing to make concessions and fighting back vigorously against all opponents. So far this strategy has enabled them to withstand pressure from the US and Israel in Lebanon and to crush domestic opposition movements, such as guerrilla war by Sunni

fundamentalists in the early 1980s and serious unrest among the Kurdish community in 2004.

In trying to seize the initiative from the protesters the regime is emphasising Syrian nationalism and a plot against the unity of the country. “Breaking News: the conspiracy has failed!” declared one banner waved by a demonstrator at a vast rally in Damascus. In addition there were the more traditional chants of “God, Syria and Bashar.” In Deraa protesters changed this to a chant of “God, Syria and freedom.”

The government is also clamping down on the foreign media, expelling three Reuters journalists. In all Arab countries affected by the pro-democracy protests governments have struggled to gain control of information and modern communications.

31st March 2011

SHOTS FIRED AS PROTESTERS TAKE TO THE STREETS AGAIN

By Patrick Cockburn

WITHIN HOURS of President Bashar al-Assad's speech yesterday, 100 or more people went out on to the streets of the port city of Latakia in protest, shouting "Freedom!" Residents said they heard shots fired in the old al-Sleibeh district of the city as security forces confronted the demonstrators.

Opposition groups are calling for more protests after Friday prayers tomorrow, while the government will intensify security measures to stop further demonstrations.

Mr Assad's speech offered few concessions. He has not satisfied the protesters' demands or given the impression that the grip on power he and his family hold of himself and his family is weakening.

In his first response to the crisis, Mr Assad said there was "a major conspiracy" against Syria directed from outside the country, though he did not spell out who he believed was behind the plot. The opposition had expected him to introduce reforms, such as ending the state of emergency that has existed since 1963. "We don't seek battles but, if a battle is imposed on us today, we welcome it," the President said in a televised speech. Among those he blamed for provoking the violence were satellite television channels.

It may be that there are serious divisions in the leadership about how to respond to the protests. Mr Assad's adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban, said last week that a committee had been formed to study a series of reforms, including lifting emergency laws. Even so, the security apparatus is unlikely to be restrained by the exact letter of the law.

If the Syrian regime is seriously weakened by the present turmoil, and unable to bring it under control, there will be a radical change in the balance of power in the Middle East. The losers will be Iran, since Syria is its one reliable ally in the Arab world; Hezbollah in Lebanon, which relies on Syrian backing; and Hamas in Gaza, which has been able to use Damascus as a headquarters. Israel and the US, at least in the short term, will be the winners.

Mr Assad did concede that the Syrian people "have demands that have not been met", adding: "If we stay without reform we are on the course of destruction." But he appears to be thinking of incremental change to the way the

regime operates and not to any reduction in its authority. He claimed that some protesters had been “duped” into the streets, while others’ legitimate demands would be met.

31st March 2011

ASSAD VOWS TO OVERCOME THE ‘FOREIGN CONSPIRACIES’

By Robert Fisk

HE WAS not a humble President. He did not give way. There were hints, of course - an end to emergency legislation, “reforms” - but when he spoke yesterday, trying to calm a crisis that has seen more than 60 people killed in a fortnight and threatens his very office, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria did not give the impression of a man on the run.

Was it Libya that gave him the “oomph” to go on, the encouragement to stand up and say that “reform is not a seasonable issue” - an accurate translation of his belief that Syria does not have to conform to the Middle East revolution? Either way, the Ba’ath party is going to fight on. Assad remains the President of Syria. No change.

Well, of course, we shall see. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya is not a wise example to follow in time of need. Friday is another day, the traditional day of memorial and trial and questioning. If he can get through tomorrow without further killing in Deraa and Latakia, Assad may make it. He is young, his wife - wrongly derided by those who hate Syria - is a great asset to him, and his rule has banished the worst excesses of his father, Hafez. But - and it is a big “but” - torture does continue, the iniquities of the mukhabarat security services continue, freedom in Syria is as hard to find as an oasis in the desert, and the Syrian parliament remains, in the words of Al Jazeera’s analyst Marwan Beshara, “a circus of support”.

Yet there are more “buts” in Syria. It is a hard, tough country, without the avenues to free speech which were available in Egypt, to be sure, but a centre of Arab nationalism. Not for nothing do Syrians shout Um al Arabiya Wahida (“mother of one Arab nation”). Not for nothing do Syrians remember that they and they alone opposed the Sykes-Picot agreement that divided the region between France and Britain in 1916 with force of arms, their horse-riding army mown down by French tanks at the Battle of Maysalun, their king given the monarchy of Iraq as a consolation prize by Winston Churchill.

This does not justify Assad’s autocratic rule. But it says something about it. Syrians do not obey the rules. Syrians do not follow the other Arabs like sheep. They fought harder than any others for a Palestinian-Israeli peace - which Assad

described as “stagnant” yesterday, the unrest a “test for the nation” rather than a test for the President. In truth, the Hauran region - Deraa is in the Hauran, the scene of a fearsome series of government killings last week - has always been rebellious, even under French rule. But can Bashar al-Assad hold his country together?

He has managed, with a minority Alawite power (for which read Shia), to bring the Sunni Muslim majority of Syria into the economic establishment. Indeed, the Sunnis are the economy of Syria, a powerful elite who have no interest in unrest, disunity or foreign plots. It was odd that Assad talked about foreign “conspiracies” yesterday. It’s an old adage that does him no credit; foreign “conspiracies” have always been discovered when dictators feel unsafe. Yet Damascus has been attacked by Israeli agents and Saddamist agents and Turkish right-wing agents over the past 40 years. It has a resonance, this talk of the moamarer - the “plot” - which makes Syrians into patriots rather than freedom fighters.

There is a lot wrong with Syria - and Assad may have pushed his luck yesterday, failing to announce the “reforms” and freedoms that Syrians expected of him. Instead of “God, Syria and Bashar”, it was “God, Syria and my People” - but was that enough? He would not make reforms under pressure - “reforms”, by the way, means democracy - but he surely is under pressure when government snipers have shot down the innocent in the streets of Syria’s cities. He may not be in a mood for concessions. But is Syria not in need of these?

Its economy floats near bankruptcy - it was judged by the Swedish diplomatic corps to be unaffected by the West’s economic catastrophe on the grounds that it did not really exist - and its Kurdish minority in the north are in a state of semi-revolt. But Assad has two friends who give him power: the Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Islamic Republic of Iran. If the Israelis need peace in Lebanon, they need Assad, and if Assad wants to maintain his regional power, he needs Iran. Syria is the Arab gate through which Iran can walk. Iran is the Muslim gate through which Assad - and remember, he is an Alawite and therefore a Shia - can walk.

It is all too easy for Madame Clinton to berate Syria for killing its own people - a phrase she does not use for Bahrain - but the Americans need Syria to extract their last troops from Iraq. It is also easy to turn Syria’s problems into sectarianism. Nikolaos Van Dam, a brilliant Dutch diplomat, wrote a fine book emphasising that the struggle for power in Syria lay with the Alawites and that this minority effectively governed the country.

Yet Syria has always remained a unitary state, and it has complied with the West’s demands for security co-operation - until the Americans came into Syria

and shot up a Syrian security agent's house. So compliant has it been that the US sent a poor Canadian to Damascus - "renditioned", in the popular phrase - to be atrociously tortured and kept in a sewer until the Americans realised he was innocent and sheepishly allowed him to return to Toronto.

These are not issues which are going to be discussed on the television news shows or by the US Secretary of State - who is so concerned about the innocents of Libya that her air force is bombing Gaddafi but is so little concerned about the innocents of Syria that her air force will definitely not be bombing Syria.

Syria needs to be renewed. It does need an end to emergency laws, a free media and a fair judiciary and the release of political prisoners and - herewith let it be said - an end to meddling in Lebanon. That figure of 60 dead, a Human Rights Watch estimate, may in fact be much higher. Tomorrow, President Bashar al-Assad will supposedly tell us his future for Syria. It had better be good.

20th April 2011

CAN PRESIDENT ASSAD DO WHAT IT TAKES TO CLEANSE HIS CORRUPT REGIME?

By Robert Fisk

“PEOPLE ARE looking for security forces who will not treat the people like animals.” So said Daeiri el-Eiti last night, a Syrian activist, summing up the thoughts of his country. He was right. In Banias, in Latakia, in Homs, in Aleppo, in Deraa, even in Damascus itself, it is the same thing. As a friend of Bashar al-Assad, the President, said last night, “Bashar is like Fukushima. He is irradiated.”

Is this true? Can this be the end for the Ba’ath party of Syria, the very end of the “Renaissance Party” of the country which Bashar’s father Hafez supported? Is this the end of the Syrian security forces? It seems incredible, but it looks as if all Bashar’s dutiful offers of generosity - an end to the state of emergency, for example - have failed. There are those in Syria who say it is over, that there is nothing Bashar al-Assad can do to save his regime. We shall see.

The security forces - and we shall use the word “security” in quotation marks from here on - are fearful. There are long histories of torture and executions behind them and there are many within the military security apparatus inside Syria who are fearful of a riposte. For many years, the torture regime has imposed the most terrible revenge upon opponents of both the President and his father. There was the “German chair” which broke the back of opponents and there was the “Syrian chair” which broke their backs more slowly.

The current President knows all this and has tried to bring it to a halt. Largely, he has been successful. His regime has largely proved to be humanitarian. But he has not been a successful leader. In his desperate attempts to persuade Syrians that he can control his country, he has accused America, France and Lebanon of being responsible for the violence of demonstrators in his country.

Nobody in Syria believes this. The idea that Lebanon - let alone America and France - can cause demonstrations is ridiculous.

The problem lies, as Mr Eiti says, in that Syria remains a dictatorship and that Assad remains a dictator. His failure to rid his own family of the corrupt men within it (I am speaking of his uncle in particular) is the main problem for the regime. This is not a Gaddafi-corrupted government. This is not a Mubarak government. This is an Alawi regime - and essentially a Shia regime - which has been corrupted by its own family. The Assad family knows what it must do to cleanse the family name. Can Bashar do it? Does he have the power to do it? This is all that matters now if he is going to save his regime.

23rd April 2011

EVERY CONCESSION MAKES THE PRESIDENT MORE VULNERABLE

By Robert Fisk

EVERY DICTATOR knows that, when he starts making concessions, he is at his most vulnerable. It is an exquisite torture for the regime in power. Each gesture, each freeing of political prisoners, each concession - and the crowds demand more. Yesterday, it was President Bashar al-Assad who was under torture.

Had he not lifted the state of emergency for Syrians? Had he not allowed them permission to protest peacefully - albeit with permission to be obtained 24 hours in advance - and released a token number of prisoners? Had he not scrapped the hated state security court? But no such luck.

In Damascus, in Hama - that ancient city that tried to destroy Bashar's father Hafez with an Islamic uprising in the February of 1982 - and in Banias and Latakia and Deraa, they came out in their tens of thousands yesterday. They wanted 6,000 more political prisoners freed, they wanted an end to torture, an end to the security police. And they wanted Bashar al-Assad to go.

Syria is a proud country, but Tunisia and Egypt were studied by the Syrians (if not by Bashar himself - a big mistake). If the Arabs of north Africa could have their dignity, why couldn't the Syrians? And an end to the monopoly of the Ba'ath Party, while they were at it. And free newspapers; all the demands that they thought would be met 11 years ago, when Bashar walked behind his father's coffin and friends of the President told us that things were going to change. This was a confident new state under Bashar, they insisted.

But they didn't change. Bashar found that family and party and the massive security apparatus were too strong for him, too necessary for him. He failed. And now that failure is self-evident: in the tear gas fired at the crowds in Damascus; in the live rounds reportedly fired into the crowds in Hama, that dangerous, frightening city wherein there is not a man or woman over 30 who did not lose a relative or friend 29 years ago.

Bashar al-Assad is a tough guy. He stood up to Israel and American pressure. He supported Hezbollah and Iran and Hamas. But Syrians had other demands. They cared more about their domestic freedom than battles in Lebanon, more about torture in Tadmor prison than fighting for the Palestinians. And now they have marched with that ultimate demand: the end of the regime.

I'm not sure they'll get it yet. The Syrian Ministry of the Interior was playing the sectarian card again yesterday; the protesters were sectarian, they claimed. There may be some truth in this; but it is a small truth. The people on the streets of Syria want change. They were not, to be sure, in the vast numbers that Egypt produced to rid themselves of Mubarak; nor even the numbers of Tunisians. But

it has begun.

27th April 2011

IF THE RUMOURS AND CONSPIRACIES ARE TRUE, THEN PRESIDENT ASSAD'S REGIME IS ON THE ROAD TO CIVIL WAR

By Robert Fisk

EVERY NIGHT, Syrian state television is a horror show. Naked corpses with multiple bullet wounds, backs of heads sliced off. All Syrian soldiers, the television insists, murdered by “the treacherous armed criminal gangs” near Deraa.

One of the bodies - of a young officer in his twenties - has had his eyes gouged out. “Knives and sharp tools” appear to have been used on the soldiers, the commentary tells us. There seems no doubt that the bodies are real and little doubt that they are indeed members of the Syrian “security” forces - the word security needs to be placed in inverted commas these days - nor that the weeping, distraught parents in the background are indeed their families.

Pictures show the bodies, newly washed for burial, taken from the Tishrin Military Hospital in Damascus. Their names are known. Mohamed Ali, Ibrahim Hoss, Ahmed Abdullah, Nida al-Hoshi, Basil Ali, Hazem Mohamed Ali, Mohamed Alla are all carried in flag-draped coffins from the army’s mortuary by military police. They are from Tartous, Banias, Aleppo, Damascus. When al-Hoshi’s funeral cortege was passing up the Mediterranean coast road to the north, they were ambushed by “an armed gang”.

It’s easy to be cynical about these dreadful pictures and the gloss put on their deaths. Shooting at funerals, after all, has hitherto been the prerogative of the government’s armed cops rather than “armed gangs”. And Syrian television has shown not a single dead civilian or civilian funeral after the death of perhaps 320 demonstrators in more than a month. Another 20 were reported killed around Deraa yesterday.

But these reports are important. For if the dead soldiers are victims of revenge killings by outraged families who have lost their loved ones at the hands of the secret police, it means that the opposition is prepared to use force against their aggressors. But if there really are armed groups roaming Syria, then President Bashar al-Assad’s Baathist regime is on the road to civil war.

Hitherto, the demonstrators - pro-democracy or anti-Bashar or both - have been giving us the story line; their YouTube footage, internet descriptions, the stunning pictures of Syrian T-72 tanks powering through the streets of Deraa - not to mention the pathetic attempt to attack one with an empty glass bottle - have dominated our perception of the all-powerful dictatorship crushing its people in blood. And truth lies behind what they say. After the 1982 slaughter in Hama, no one is in any doubt that Syrian Baathists play by Hama rules. But their explanation for the daily series of macabre pictures on state television also lacks conviction. According to those bravely trying to telephone news out of Syria -

although not from Deraa, where the telephones and internet have been completely shut down - the mutilated bodies are those of troops who refused to shoot at their own people and who were immediately punished by execution and mutilation by the shabiha, the “hoodlums” of Alawi fighters, and then cynically displayed on television to back up false government claims it is fighting an armed insurgency and that the people of Deraa themselves had invited the army into their city to save them from “terrorists”.

Which sounds a little like the flip-side of the government’s own propaganda. Of course, the Syrian authorities have only themselves to blame for their lack of credibility. Having cited “foreign plots” - the explanation of all the region’s potentates when their backs are to the wall - the authorities have studiously banned all foreign journalists from entering Syria to prove or disprove these claims. The ministry of tourism has even been sent a list of Middle East correspondents by the ministry of interior to ensure that no reporters slip into Syria with a sudden desire to study the Roman ruins of Palmyra.

Thus history is written in rumours which begin, I suppose, with the last words displayed on Syrian television’s evening news: “Martyrs Never Die.” Clearly they do expire, but which martyrs are we talking about? A good tale from Deraa - one without a shred of evidence so far - is that after tanks of the Fourth Army Brigade of Maher Assad (little brother of the President) stormed into the city, elements of the regular army’s Fifth Brigade near Deraa - supposedly commanded by an officer called Rifai, although even this is in dispute - turned their guns on Maher’s invaders. But the Fifth, so the story goes, has no tanks and includes air force personnel who are not allowed to fly their jets.

So are there now armed civilians - an oxymoron that seems lost on the regime - now fighting back in a systematic fashion? In Lebanon, whose capital is closer to Damascus that Deraa, there is growing fear that this bloodshed is only two hours away by road. Syria’s friends in Lebanon are now claiming that the Saudis - allies of the outgoing government in Beirut - have been subventing the revolution in Syria.

One former minister produced on television copies of cheques for $300,000 (£180,000) supposedly carrying the signature of Prince Turki bin Abdul Aziz, the former Saudi intelligence head - and in that capacity once on good terms with a certain Osama bin Laden - and brother of King Abdullah, and given to Lebanese political figures to instil unrest in Syria. One of those accused of involvement by Syria is the former Lebanese minister Mohamed Beydoun. The latter has said that his accusers are guilty of “incitement to murder” and Prince Turki has indignantly called the cheques “false”. But the Syrian-supported Hezbollah has now endorsed the claim and at least one Lebanese MP, Ahmed

Fatfat, has at last uttered the fateful words. By these accusations against the “Future Movement” - the largest grouping in the outgoing government - he said, “the Hezbollah and its crew are preparing the way for civil war in Lebanon”.

Now the Syrian media have pointed the finger at Lebanese MP Okab Sadr, stating that he had been arrested - along with “Israeli officers” - in the Syrian city of Banias. In fact, Mr Sadr is safe in Lebanon where he has emerged to say that the only reason he would go to Banias would be to give blood at the hospital to its inhabitants.

In the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli this Friday, pro and anti-Assad supporters plan to hold further and larger demonstrations after morning prayers. Many Lebanese in the north fear that in the event of a civil conflict inside Syria, Tripoli will become a “capital” of northern Syria, though whether it would be a rebel or an Assad stronghold is open to question.

Somewhat more disturbing right now - and much nearer the truth - is that Ali Aid, a rather tough character from the Jebel Mohsen area of the Alawi mountains of Syria, has left his son Rifaat in charge of his proto-militia movement. He has instead built himself a fine villa next to the Syrian-Lebanese border. The problem is that Major Ali Aid is living in his new home - which lies on the Lebanese side of the frontier.

27th April 2011

WESTERN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA WOULD MAKE MATTERS WORSE

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SYRIAN army is moving to crush in blood the protesters calling for democracy and the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Unburied bodies lie in the streets of Deraa, the city in the south which has been at the centre of the popular revolt.

Will the government succeed? The chances for the moment look evenly balanced, with almost everything depending on whether or not demonstrators continue to march and rally all over Syria despite the savage repression. There is also the possibility of divisions in the army, though less so than in many other Arab countries.

The uprising against police states, both republican and monarchical, in the Arab world is entering its fifth month without a decisive victory by either the powers-that-be or the protesters. In Tunisia and Egypt the political and military elite felt that, if they got rid of their geriatric leaders along with their families and cronies, they might prevent radical changes in the political and social status quo. In Bahrain the monarchy, aided by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states, destroyed the pro-democracy movement and is terrorising its supporters.

Syria is going down the same road as Bahrain. At the end of last week President Assad and his inner circle appear to have decided that such limited concessions as they were willing to make were only being interpreted as weakness. They gave orders to their security forces to shoot unarmed demonstrators and stamp out all signs of dissent on the streets.

Repression in Syria may work for the moment. The government has a core of support based on the Alawite minority, to which the Assad family and top military and political members of the regime belong. There are others who work for the state and fear change, as well as Christian and Druze minorities who do not believe opposition claims to be non-sectarian.

Overall, however, the police states in the Arab world, which have seemed so immovable for the past 35 years, are fighting to survive. Before about 1975 there was an era of army coups d’etat, but these stopped as ferocious multi-layered security agencies turned military dictatorships into police states. East European intelligence agencies gave fraternal advice on how this could be done.

There was more to total state control than just keeping the army in its barracks. Censorship of all forms of media was pervasive, as was control of all non-state agencies such as trade unions and political parties. Only the mosque retained some autonomy, which explains why opposition to autocracy so often took an Islamic form.

By this year the old ingredients of repression had lost something of their

potency. Torturers and executioners still retained their ability to frighten. But regimes had lost their control over information and communications thanks to the internet, satellite television and even the humble mobile phone. One member of the Syrian opposition points out that when 20,000 people in Hama were slaughtered by the forces of President Hafez al-Assad in 1982 there was not a single picture of even one of the bodies. Today pictures of the dead and wounded in Deraa and elsewhere in Syria are transmitted to the rest of the world within seconds of being taken.

Of course governments can counter-attack and close down mobile-phone networks and ban journalists from operating in Syria. But 100 satellite phones distributed by an opposition Syrian businessman make total control of information almost impossible to establish. The role of the internet in the Arab awakening has been well-publicised, but that of satellite stations, notably Al Jazeera, is underplayed. The US has every reason to be embarrassed by this since Washington spent years claiming that Al Jazeera's criticism of US policy in Iraq after the invasion showed it must be linked to al-Qa'ida. An Al Jazeera cameraman was held in Guantanamo for six years so that US interrogators could find out more about the television station.

Britain, France and Italy have called for sanctions against Syria. But they should not do more because intrusive foreign intervention is likely to prove counter-productive. There are already signs of this in Libya. Justifiable action against impending massacre turns into imperial intervention. Nato air strikes against Colonel Gaddafi's tanks advancing on Benghazi have escalated into an air war, aided by foreign advisers on the ground, with the purpose of overthrowing the regime. In such an offensive the Libyan rebels, whatever their popular support and skill in media relations, may play only a walk-on part.

It is worth recalling that most Afghans were pleased when the Taliban collapsed in 2001 and most Iraqis were glad to see the back of Saddam Hussein in 2003. But it did not follow that the opponents of autocracy were united, had real support or were less corrupt or more competent than their predecessors. Nor were Afghans or Iraqis prepared to see foreign armies determine who should hold power in their countries.

People whom Western states claim they are trying to aid for humanitarian reasons are understandably sceptical about how altruistic their motives really are. Their suspicions will only be confirmed by documents published by The Independent giving details of talks between the British government and BP and Royal Dutch Shell in 2002 on how to avoid US companies excluding them from exploiting Iraqi oil reserves.

There is a further reason why Britain and other foreign states should limit

their involvement in the conflicts now raging in the Arab world. It is true that the struggle is primarily between popular protests or uprisings against vicious autocracies. But these crises have at least some aspects of a civil war: there are tribes which support Colonel Gaddafi and there are Syrians who believe that the opposition is more sectarian and Sunni-dominated than is evident from their human-rights agenda.

It is right for Britain and its allies to protest at the butchery in Syria, though their criticism might carry more weight had they been equally vocal about torture, disappearances and killings in Bahrain. But this humanitarian zeal easily becomes a cover for wider intervention, because retreat is humiliating and therefore politically impossible, and the field cannot be left open to other competing interventionist powers. The outside world can mitigate, but should not try to change, what is happening in Syria.

29th April 2011

OUT OF SYRIA'S DARKNESS COME TALES OF TERROR

By Robert Fisk

IN DAMASCUS, the posters - in their tens of thousands around the streets - read: “Anxious or calm, you must obey the law.” But pictures of President Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez have been taken down, by the security police no less, in case they inflame Syrians.

There are thieves with steel-tipped rubber coshes on the Damascus airport road at night, and in the terminal the cops ask arriving passengers to declare iPods and laptops. In the village of Hala outside Deraa, Muslim inhabitants told their Christian neighbours to join the demonstrations against the regime - or leave.

Out of the darkness of Syria come such tales.

And they are true. Syrians arriving in Lebanon are bringing the most specific details of what is going on inside their country, of Fifth Brigade soldiers fighting the armed units of Maher Assad’s Fourth Brigade outside Deraa, of random killings around Damascus by the ever-growing armed bands of Shabiha (“the mafia”) from the Alawite mountains, of massive stocking up of food. One woman has just left her mother in the capital with 10 kilos of pasta, 10 kilos of rice, five kilos of sugar, box after box of drinking water.

In Deraa - surrounded, without electricity or water or supplies - the price of bread has risen 500 per cent and men are smuggling food into the city over the fields at night.

But it is the killings which terrify the people. Are they committed by the Shabiha from the port city of Lattakia - created by the Assad family in the 70s to control smuggling and protection rackets - or by the secret police to sow a fear that might break the uprising against Assad? Or by the murderers who thrive amid anarchy and lawlessness? Three men carrying sacks of vegetables outside Damascus at night were confronted by armed men last week. They refused to stop. So they were executed.

The Syrian government is appealing to the minorities - to the Christians and the Kurds - to stay loyal to the authorities; minorities have always been safe in Syria, and many have stayed away from protests against the regime. But in the village of Hala, Christian shops are shut as their owners contemplate what are clearly sectarian demands to join in the uprising against Assad. In an attempt to rid Syria of “foreign” influence, the ministry of education has ordered a number of schools to end all English teaching - even banning the names of schools in French and English from school uniforms. Even the kindergarten where the President’s two young children are educated has been subject to the prohibitions.

There are bright lights, of course, not least among the brave men and women

who are using the internet and Facebook to keep open the flow of information from Syria. The Independent can reveal that a system of committees has been set up across the cities of Syria, usually comprising only 10 or 12 friends who have known and trusted each other for years. Each of them enlists 10 of their own friends - and they persuade 10 more each - to furnish information and pictures. Many were put in touch with each other via the cyber kings of Beirut - many of them also Syrian - and thus “circles of trust” have spread at the cost of the secret police snooping that has been part of Syrian life for four decades.

Thus there now exist - in Damascus alone - “The Co-ordination of Douma”, “The Co-ordination of al-Maydan” (in the centre of the city), “The Co-ordination of Daraya”, “The Co-ordination of Harasta” and others. Some of them are trying to penetrate the mukhabarat secret police, to get the brutal cops to work for them on the grounds that - come the end of the Assad regime, if that end ever comes - they will be spared the trials and revenge punishments to come. One Beirut blogger says that several of the cops have already declared themselves for the uprising - but are unwilling to trust them in case it is a trap to discover the identity of those behind the committees.

Yet Syrians in Lebanon say that the Syrian security police - often appointed through graft rather than any technical or detective abilities - simply do not understand the technology that is being used against them. One Syrian security official sent three Facebook posts. The first said: “God, Syria and Bashar al-Assad or nothing.” The second read: “It’s the time to declare war for Allah.” The third announced: “The legacy of God on earth is an Islamic Republic.”

“The fool was obviously supporting Bashar - but then wanted to frighten people by suggesting Islamists would take over a post-Assad Syria,” one of the Syrian bloggers in Beirut says. “But he didn’t realise that we could tell at once that they all came from the same Facebook page!” The same man in Beirut found himself under interrogation by Syrian state security police several weeks ago. “He was a senior officer - but he didn’t even know what Google was.” Many of the Syrians sending information out of their country are anxious that exaggerations and rumours will damage the credibility of their reports. For this reason, they are trying to avoid dispatches which cannot be verified; that two Iranian snipers, for example, have arrived to help the security police; that one man was actually interrogated by two Iranians - a friend suspects that the cops were from the north and spoke in the Kurdish language, which the detainee misidentified as Iranian.

More serious - and true - is the report that Khaled Sid Mohand, an Algerian journalist working for France Culture and Le Monde, was arrested in Damascus on 9 April and has disappeared into a security prison. A released detainee says

that he saw Mohand in Security Section 255 in Baghdad Street in the capital some days later. But this story may not be correct. Diplomats have been unable to see the missing journalist.

There are also reports that two young European women working for a Western embassy were arrested and gagged when they left a party at 3am several days ago, and only released several hours later after interrogation. “It means that there is no longer any immunity for foreigners,” a Syrian citizen said yesterday. “We heard that a North American had also been taken from his home and questioned by armed men.”

Especially intriguing - because there are many apparent witnesses of this episode - is a report that Syrian Fourth Brigade troops in Deraa dumped dozens of weapons in the main square of the city in front of the Omari mosque, telling civilians that they could take them to defend themselves. Suspecting that they were supposed to carry them in demonstrations and then be shot as “terrorists”, the people took the weapons to the nearest military base and gave them back to the soldiers.

The rumours of army defections continue, however, including splits in the Fifth Brigade at Deraa, whose commander’s name can now be confirmed as General Mohamed Saleh al-Rifai. According to Syrians arriving in Lebanon, the highways are used by hundreds of packed military trucks although the streets of most cities - including Damascus - are virtually empty at night. Shops are closing early, gunfire is often heard, checkpoints at night are often manned by armed men in civilian clothes. Darkness indeed.

2nd May 2011

‘WE WILL NEVER CEASE OUR STRUGGLE UNTIL WE BRING DOWN ASSAD’

By Robert Fisk

SOMETHING TERRIBLE happened in the small Syrian town of Tel Kalakh. At the most it was a massacre of 40 civilians; at the least a day of live-firing into unarmed protesters, torture, arrests and panic. Almost half the Sunni Muslim population fled over the river frontier into Lebanon, babes in arms, old people in wheelchairs, pushed through the shallow waters of the Nahr el-Kbir.

Perhaps 4,000 of the Syrian Sunnis made it to the safety of Lebanon to be given food, shelter and blankets by relatives and by strangers and they were there yesterday - 80 living in one house alone scarcely 20m from Syria, desperate to praise the kindness of the Lebanese, fearful of the things they had seen, ferocious in their anger against their president.

One man, having described detainees from the town who had returned home with their nails ripped out and their beards burned off, broke down in tears. “We will never cease our struggle until we bring Assad down,” he cried. “For 40 years, we have not been able to breathe.”

The men responsible for the killings in Tel Kalakh were members of the Syrian army’s 4th Brigade - the same unit, commanded by President Bashar al-Assad’s little brother Maher, that is besieging the southern city of Deraa - along with government snipers and “shabiha” thugs from the Alawi mountains. Dressed in black, the latter spent some time, according to Syrian refugee women, tearing the veils off girls and trying to kidnap them.

Tel Kalakh, which lies 20 miles due west of the rebellious city of Homs, had a population of 28,000 - 10,000 of them Muslims, the majority Alawi Shia, the same group to which the Assad family belongs. Even before the shooting started on Wednesday, the military and the plain-clothes gunmen spent some time separating Sunni Muslims from the Alawi inhabitants, telling the latter to stay in their houses - as good a way of starting a local civil war as you could find in Syria. Then they shot into the crowds, firing also with tank-mounted machine guns into homes on both sides of the main streets.

None of the Syrian adults would give their names or have their photographs taken but they spoke with fury of what had happened to them six days ago. Several claimed that their protests against the Assad government started two months ago - an intriguing assertion which suggests the first rural protests in Syria may have begun weeks before the world knew what was happening - but that the protesters, all Sunnis, had been protected because of the intercession of the respected Sheikh of the town’s mosque, Osama Akeri.

But last Wednesday morning, armed men seized the sheikh from his home and the Sunni Muslims of the city poured on to the streets. “We were shouting

‘independence - give us freedom and independence’ and they came in tanks and opened fire, the shabiha shooting at the men at the front; everyone started running but they went on shooting at us from the tanks and people fell everywhere,” one man said.

“The tanks completely surrounded the town. People were running away into the fields, the babies screaming, trying to get to Lebanon.”

In sight of the village of Arida Sharquia - on the Lebanese side of the border and linked to Syria by a stone bridge - many women and children were stopped by a military checkpoint, but it appears that men from Tel Kalakh set the roadblock on fire.

For three days, the Sunni Muslims fled their town, many creeping from their homes at night as shooting continued across the streets - the entire military operation a miniature version of exactly the same siege that is crippling Deraa - and some men had the courage to return from Lebanon with food for their families. Others did not dare. Tel Kalakh - just like Deraa - is not only surrounded, but all electricity and water supplies have been cut.

So fearful were those who had avoided the killings that they hid in their homes for more than 24 hours, too frightened to attend the funerals of the dead. “We didn’t want to risk being killed again,” another man said, apologising for not being able to give me even his first name. “The close families of the dead went to the cemetery and some old people. That was all.”

One of the 40 dead was Muntaser Akeri, he said, a cousin of the arrested sheikh. Villagers tell different stories of the events. Shooting apparently went on for more than 24 hours and it was only on Thursday that some of the men dragged away in buses and cars by the “mukhabarat” secret police came back.

“Some had had their fingernails torn out and the ones with beards had had them burnt off,” another man said. “There were so many soldiers and plain-clothes police and thugs that we couldn’t escape. The Alawis didn’t join our protest. We were alone.”

Arida lies on both sides of the border of Lebanon - Sharquia means “east” and the western side of the town - Arida Gharbia - stands scarcely 20m away across the river, inside Syria.

Along with the refugees, it is also a smuggling centre - indeed,children were bringing barrels of Syrian propane gas across the river yesterday - and it was possible to talk to Syrians on the other side of the water. So close to Syria are the refugees that while I was talking to them, my Lebanese mobile phone kept switching to the “Syriatel” mobile system in Damascus, the message “ping” constantly - and ominously - drawing my attention to the words “Welcome to Syria... for tourist guide, dial 1555. Enjoy your stay.”

But the men and women - and the hundreds of children - from Tel Kalakh have torn the lid off any such fantasy. Here at last were Syrians who had just fled their town, talking for the first time of their suffering, free of the mukhabarat, abusing the Assad family. A few had tried to return. One woman I spoke to walked back to Tel Kalakh yesterday morning and returned in the afternoon, shouting that it was a “hostile” town in which it was impossible for the Sunni Muslims to live. Many of the men said that all government jobs were given to Alawi citizens of Tel Kalakh, never to them.

There is, of course, room for exaggeration. No one could explain to me why so many soldiers were being killed in Syria although they said their own protests had been totally unarmed. Shooting is still heard at night on the Syrian side of the frontier, a phenomenon that has persuaded the Lebanese army to send night patrols through the orchards and olive groves on the Lebanese side. Just in case the Syrian military is tempted to chase in hot pursuit of their own refugees.

7th May 2011

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION? IT WON'T HAPPEN IN SYRIA

By Robert Fisk

IF YOU want to understand the cruel tragedy of Syria, there are two books you must read: Nikolaos van Dam's The Struggle for Power in Syria and, of course, Patrick Seale's biography Assad. Van Dam was an ambassador in Damascus and his study of the Baath party was so accurate - albeit deeply critical - that all party members in Syria were urged to read it. But this week, for the first time, Lebanese journalist Ziad Majed brought together three of Syria's finest academics-in-exile to discuss the uprising in their native country, and their insight is as frightening as it is undoubtedly true.

According to historian Farouk Mardam-Bey, for example, Syria is "a tribal regime, which by being a kind of mafia clan and by exercising the cult of personality, can be compared to the Libyan regime", which can never reform itself because reform will bring about the collapse of the Baath party which will always ferociously defend itself. "It has placed itself - politically and juridically - upon a war footing," Mardam-Bey says of its struggle with Israel, "without the slightest intention of actually going to war."

Burhan Ghalioun makes the point that "the existence of the regime is like an invasion of the state, a colonisation of society" where "hundreds of intellectuals are forbidden to travel, 150,000 have gone into exile and 17,000 have either disappeared or been imprisoned for expressing their opinion... It is impossible (for President Bashar al-Assad) to say (like Mubarak and Ben Ali) 'I will not prolong or renew my mandate' like other presidents have pretended to do - because Syria is, for Assad, his private family property, the word 'country' is not part of the vocabulary."

Assad has opened Koranic schools and "Bashar's recent proposal to create a religious Islamist satellite television channel as a 'gift' to Sheikh Mohamed Said Ramadan Buti (who supports the regime) shows very clearly his support for an obscurantist Islam which is loyal to the regime" as part of a plan, according to Ghalioun, since "the regime is gambling on sectarian discord to raise the spectre of war and chaos if the protests continue". In Aleppo and Damascus, Mardam-Bey insists very convincingly, the Assad regime wants to persuade the large Christian communities that "if the regime falls, it will be replaced by an extremist Islamist regime and that their fate will be the same as that as the Christians of Iraq".

In holding on to power, literary critic Subhi Hadidi said rather archly, the Assad regime has divided Syrians into three categories: "The first belongs to those who are too preoccupied in earning their daily bread to involve themselves in any political activity. The second group are the greedy whose loyalty is easy

to buy and who can be brought on board and corrupted in a huge network of ‘clientelism’. The third are intellectuals and activist opponents of the regime who are regarded as ‘imbeciles who believe in principles’.”

Yet none of these men reflect upon the frightfulness of the killings in Syria and the immense difficulties of reuniting a post-Assad country after civil war. By chance, the anniversary of the start of Lebanon’s own 15-year civil war, which killed up to 200,000 people, was marked last month with an Amnesty report which estimated that 17,000 men, women and children had simply disappeared in the conflict, recalling repeated promises by the post-war Lebanese authorities to investigate their fate, none of which were honoured.

A 1991 Lebanese police report did in fact give an exact figure for those who must surely be in their graves - 17,415 - but this has been disputed. Most of these people were kidnapped by Muslim and Christian militias, but some families have related how their relatives were taken by Israeli soldiers in 1982 and by armed men who transferred them to Syria, never to be seen again. This was the Syria of Bashar’s father Hafez, and Bashar did himself permit the setting up of a joint Lebanese-Syrian committee in 2005 to investigate what happened to those Lebanese who were abducted to Damascus. It has met 30 times. Needless to say, its conclusions - if any - have never been made public.

Even today, in the centre of Beirut, relatives of the disappeared camp out next to photographs of sons and husbands and fathers who vanished more than 35 years ago, clinging to a frayed thread of hope, permanent victims of the civil war. Neil Sammonds, who conducted the research for Amnesty, told me Lebanon “doesn’t carry out its obligations properly and it hasn’t done for years. The judicial authorities are unable or unwilling to do their job. Only when they do will we be able to find out the truth”.

But I fear they never will do their job. Opening mass graves in a sectarian society is a very dangerous act - the Yugoslavs did this in a search for Second World War massacre victims, and within months the Balkan wars flamed back into life with mass killing, concentration camp atrocities and ethnic cleansing. Truth and reconciliation committees do not exist in Lebanon - nor will they, I fear, in Syria - and 20 years after the Lebanese authorities agreed to produce a national school history book to include the civil war, it does not exist. An extraordinary 67 per cent of Lebanese students go to private schools (D Cameron, please note), yet they prefer to teach “safe history” like the French revolution. If Lebanese children want to read of their fathers’ and mothers’ 1975-1990 golgotha, they often have to buy British and French books about the civil war.

The Syrian academics also warned that Syria’s conflict could cross into

northern Lebanon where Sunnis live next to Alawites, the Shia sect to which the Assads belong. Touring northern Lebanon this week, I saw posters outside Sunni Muslim homes, saying “Assad - you won’t escape us”. Not something their Alawite neighbours are likely to enjoy reading. But I will end by returning to a bloody if ultimately hopeful prediction of Subhi Hadidi. “ The oppression of the (Assad) regime will be terrible. But the courage of the people in the street and the overall struggle - despite the difficulties they encounter - along with the very youth of the protesters, will lead the Syrian people to follow them all the way to freedom.”

I’m not so sure. In the wreckage of post-Assad Syria - if this time come to pass - it will be difficult to reunite Syrians amid the dried blood of their mass graves. Try writing their new history books for them.

7th May 2011

AS TANKS LINE THE STREETS, SYRIANS STAND FIRM TO DEFY BRUTAL REGIME

By Khalid Ali and Kim Sengupta

THOUSANDS OF protesters faced the guns of the Syrian regime yesterday undeterred by a ferocious crackdown and a campaign of intimidation that has failed to quell popular discontent against the rule of President Bashar al-Assad.

Security forces opened fire on marches in several cities killing at least 21 protesters, according to rights activists, continuing the brutal crackdown that has left more than 550 people dead since widespread civil unrest began in March.

The Syrian regime has arrested up to 500 people a day in a new drive to crackdown on the protest movement, according to diplomatic sources, with more than 7,000 being held in a network of secret prisons. The upsurge in detentions, taking place across the country, has been going on for the last week and is seen as an attempt to prevent the organising or co-ordinating of demonstrations.

Tanks ringed the southern city of Deraa yesterday, where the protests began and has been the scene of a major military offensive by the regime to try to prevent any major shows of defiance. The city has been the scene of a wave of arrests with local residents claiming that virtually all males over the age of 15 had been taken away in raids by security forces.

Despite the crackdown, protests were held in dozens of cities and towns across the country, with many of the protests broken up by regime forces. Video downloaded to YouTube purported to show a demonstration in Hama with protesters running down a main street and hurling stones. Loud screams could be heard as the sound of machine-gun fire started and people fled for cover.

A second video, supposedly from the central city of Homs and filmed from behind a curtain inside a home, showed two army snipers on a rooftop taking aim at unseen targets below. Neither of the videos could be verified.

“We were chanting, peaceful, peaceful, and we didn’t even throw a stone at the security forces,” a witness told The Associated Press and claimed that there were 10,000 people on the streets in the city. “But they waited for us to reach the main square and then they opened fire on us.”

Security forces yesterday targeted leaders of the opposition. They dragged off Riad Seif, a prominent figure from a rally in the Midan district of Damascus. Mr Seif, 64, and suffering from cancer, has spent a total of eight years on charges of “weakening national morale” for demanding democratic reforms and freedom of expression in his homeland, and came out of jail following his latest sentence

last year. His daughter, Jumana Seif, said “My father was shoved into a bus with other protestors who were detained during the demonstration near the al-Hassan mosque.”

Elsewhere in Damascus there were reports of shootings in two eastern suburbs while demonstrators also reportedly took to the streets in Moadamiyah and Daraya - two towns close to the capital which have seen brutal army crackdowns in recent weeks. Security forces cordoned off Douma, to the east of Damascus, and allowed nobody to enter or leave. Another witness said that he had seen tanks being transported by train to Homs, while in the north-western city of Baniyas thousands of people, many carrying olive branches and Syrian flags, chanted for the fall of the regime.

“The protests have spread more than any we have seen in the past seven weeks,” said Wissam Tarif, executive director of Middle East human rights organisation Insan. “We had counted uprisings in 108 towns and villages across the country. We have seen intimidation. There have been snipers, and a strategy of building a wall of fear. A lot of people are scared, so it’s amazing that people are coming out.”

A spokesman for the National Initiative for Change, an umbrella group for opposition figures inside Syria, claimed that yesterday’s protests indicate that the pro-reform movement was becoming too big for the government to cope with. The protests have escalated steadily since they were triggered by the arrests of 15 schoolchildren for spraying anti-regime graffiti in Deraa.

8th June 2011

THE PEOPLE vs THE PRESIDENT

By Robert Fisk

SYRIA'S REVOLT against the rule of President Bashar al-Assad is turning into an armed insurrection, with previously peaceful demonstrators taking up arms to fight their own army and the "shabiha" - meaning "the ghosts", in English - of Alawi militiamen who have been killing and torturing those resisting the regime's rule.

Even more serious for Assad's still-powerful supporters, there is growing evidence that individual Syrian soldiers are revolting against his forces. The whole edifice of Assad's Alawi dictatorship is now in the gravest of danger.

In 1980, Assad's father, Hafez, faced an armed uprising in the central city of Hama, which was put down by the Special Forces of Hafez's brother Rifaat - who is currently living, for the benefit of war crimes investigators, in central London - at a cost of up to 20,000 lives. But the armed revolt today is now spreading across all of Syria, a far-mightier crisis and one infinitely more difficult to suppress. No wonder Syrian state television has been showing the funerals of up to 120 members of the security services from just one location, the northern town of Jisr al-Shughour.

The first evidence of civilians turning to weapons to defend their families came from Deraa, the city where the bloody story of the Syrian uprising first began after intelligence officers arrested and tortured to death a 13-year-old boy. Syrians arriving in Beirut told me the male citizens of Deraa had grown tired of following the example of peaceful Tunisian and Egyptian protesters - an understandable emotion since people in those countries suffered nothing like the brutal suppression meted out by Assad's soldiers and militiamen - and were now sometimes "shooting back" for the sake of "dignity" and to protect their wives and children.

Bashar and his cynical brother Maher - the present-day equivalent of the outrageous Rifaat - may now be gambling on the old dictator's saw that their regime must be defended against armed Islamists supported by al-Qa'ida, a lie which was perpetrated by Muammar Gaddafi and the now-exiled leaders Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen and Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and the still-on-the-throne al-Khalifas of Bahrain.

The few al-Qa'ida cells in the Arab world may wish this to be true, but the Arab revolt is about the one phenomenon in the Middle East uncontaminated by "Islamism". Only the Israelis and the Americans may be tempted to believe otherwise.

Al Jazeera television yesterday aired extraordinary footage of a junior Syrian officer calling upon his comrades to refuse to continue massacring civilians in

Syria. Identified as Lt Abdul-Razak Tlas, from the town of Rastan, he said he had joined the army “to fight the Israeli enemy”, but found himself witnessing a massacre of his own people in the town of Sanamein. “After what we’ve seen from crimes in Deraa and all over Syria, I am unable to continue with the Syrian Arab army,” he announced. “I urge the army, and I say: ‘Is the army here to steal and protect the Assad family?’ I call upon all honourable officers to tell their soldiers about the real picture, use your conscience... if you are not honourable, stay with Assad.”

Differentiating rumour from fact in Syria is getting easier by the week. More Syrians are reaching the safety of Lebanon and Turkey to tell their individual stories of torture and cruelty in security police barracks and in plain-clothes police cells. Some are still using the telephone from Syria itself - one to describe explosions in Jisr al-Shughour and of bodies being tossed into the river from which the town takes its name.

For well over a month, I have been watching Syrian television’s nightly news and at least half the broadcasts have included funerals of dead soldiers. Now Syria itself declares that 120 have been killed in one incident, an incredible loss for an army that was supposed to instill horror into the minds of the country’s protesters. But then the supposedly invincible Syrian army often showed itself woefully unable to suppress Lebanese militias during the country’s 1975-90 civil war. An entire battalion of Syrian Special Forces troops was driven out of east Beirut, for example, by a ragtag group of Christian militias who would have been crushed by any serious professional army.

If you wish to destroy unarmed civilians, you shoot them down in the street and then shoot down the funeral mourners and then shoot down the mourners of the dead mourners - which is exactly what Assad’s gunmen have been doing - but when the resistors shoot back, the Syrian army has shown a quite different response: torture for their prisoners and fear in the face of the enemy.

But if the armed insurrection takes hold, then it is also the 11 per cent Alawi community - once the frontier force of the French mandate against the Sunnis and now the prop of Assad against the poorer Sunnis - which is at threat. So appalled is the Assad regime at its enemies that it has been encouraging Palestinians to try to cross the frontier wire on Israeli-occupied Golan. The Israelis say this is to divert world attention from the massacres in Syria - and they are absolutely right.

The Damascus government’s Tishrin newspaper has been suggesting that 600,000 Palestinians may soon try to “go home” to the lands of Palestine from which the Israelis drove them in 1948, a nightmare the Israelis would prefer not to think about - but not as great a nightmare as that now facing the people and

their oppressors in Syria itself.

13th June 2011

REFUGEES TAKE FLIGHT AS TROOPS LAUNCH ATTACKS ON REBEL STRONGHOLD

By Kim Sengupta and Justin Vela

SYRIAN FORCES stormed a city yesterday which had become a symbol of militant opposition after an intense artillery and tank bombardment. But defiant protests, and the regime's violent response to them, continued with helicopter gunships opening fire on demonstrators and troops setting homes on fire in a string of towns.

The spreading strife led to a fresh exodus of terrified families seeking sanctuary. More than 5,000 were in rapidly filling camps in neighbouring Turkey, including babies, the elderly and the ill.

Another 10,000 were stranded on the Syrian side of the border with little food and water and no shelter. Some who had been carried injured to the border, and with no access to medical treatment, did not survive. Funerals were held for a dozen of the dead in the "no man's land" yesterday.

By nightfall regime forces were in control of Jisr al-Shughour. The streets were deserted, the vast majority of the 40,000 residents had fled and around 200 who had stayed behind had either been killed or taken away under arrest. Many of the buildings had been destroyed by shell fire, the troops parked their tanks and armoured cars beside burnt-out cars.

Four decapitated and uniformed bodies were found in the ruins of the military police head- quarters, the grim aftermath of a mutiny by security forces in the city and evidence of the greatest threat to Bashar al-Assad's rule since the start of the uprising. The regime had claimed that "armed gangs" had killed 120 members of the security forces at Jisr al-Shughour, necessitating the assault. Yesterday state-controlled TV stated that forces had uncovered mass graves of security men and the corpses bore marks of atrocities carried out by extremist groups.

Residents and human rights groups give a different account, saying the dead were victims of loyalist forces who had executed those who had refused to shoot civilians. "We were not involved in any fighting, it was the soldiers who had been killing people for simply going out to demand justice," said Abu Hatin, who had fled the city three days ago. "They had been shooting at us from rooftops and windows. I saw a young man dragged out of his home, they shot him as they were putting him in their car.

"The fighting was between the soldiers, some were for the people and some

against," he said. "Some of the police and soldiers tried to protect us."

There were fierce clashes at Jisr al-Shughour yesterday following the two-pronged attack. Locals claimed the fighting was due to former security force members turning their guns on forces still loyal to Assad. About 60 policemen had stayed behind to defend the city.

There had been previous instances of defections since the start of the three-month long uprising. But the current offensive, in Idlib province in the north-west, appeared to have been a catalyst for defections by discontented military in a region with a long history of dissent. Many policemen and conscript soldiers from the area had taken up arms to defend their communities.

The operations in Jisr al-Shughour, Mirat al-Numan and villages surrounding the Jabl al-Zawiya mountains are said to have been led by an unit commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Maher al-Assad, a brother of the President.

They were supported by detachments of the Mukhabarat - the secret police - and the Shabbiha, a militia from the Alawite community from which the country's ruling elite are drawn.

Mustafa Osso, a senior human rights activist, said advancing troops were meeting resistance from former members of the military. "This is the biggest and most dangerous wave of defections. They are having to fight hundreds of army defectors," he said. Some who had left the military were attempting to leave the country. "We cannot stay. If they capture some protesters, they will go to prison. If they capture us, we shall be shot," said Ibrahim Hassan as he made his way to the Turkish border with a comrade. "A lot of us, even some officers, did not want to have anything to do with what was going on."

Others who have managed to escape came with tales of brutalities committed by Lt Col Maher al-Assad's troops. Bassam, a roofer, had mobile telephone footage of a young man, dead with bullet wounds to his stomach and legs; another young man had been killed with a shot to the head. Both had died, he said, just outside Jisr al-Shughour. "There are only a few people left. I escaped on my motorcycle through dirt tracks in the hills," he said.

Mehmoud, a 39-year-old farm labourer, said: "The problem really started because one of the soldiers killed, Basil el Masri, was very popular. Ten thousand people turned up at his funeral.

"They like killing. I shall stay in Turkey until things get better. My family will join me here."

But there is apprehension that the upheavals in Syria may lead to destabilisation in Turkey, where parliamentary elections took place yesterday in a fractious political landscape. The area adjacent to the Syrian border has a mixed population of Sunnis, Alavis who are a Shia offshoot, and Christians.

Most of the Syrian refugees are Sunnis.

The Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, who had established cordial links in the past with President Assad, had called the actions of the Syrian forces “barbaric”. Ankara is said to be considering establishing a buffer zone inside Syrian territory if refugee numbers exceed 10,000.

The Syrian regime had said that 500 members of the security forces have died since the start of the uprising, including 120 last week in Jisr al-Shughour. The opposition estimates that 1,400 have died and 10,000 have been detained.

Last night there was growing international calls for the violence to end. The United States called on the Syrian regime to halt its offensive and allow immediate access for the International Committee of the Red Cross to help refugees, detainees and the wounded.

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, said “I’m deeply concerned and saddened (that) so many people have been killed in the course of peaceful demonstrations.”

In Damascus, however, a regime spokesman insisted that the action at Jisr al-Shughour, to “protect the population from armed groups which had been intimidating them”, and similar military operations would continue.

The opposition too maintain that they have no intention of backing down.

14th June 2011

‘THEY SHOT PEOPLE WHO WERE TRYING TO GET AWAY’

By Kim Sengupta and Justin Vela

THE HAUNTING memories of savage violence and loss are fresh in their minds. Now, with the vengeful forces of the regime closing in, the terrified and exhausted stream of the dispossessed fleeing Syria’s strife await an uncertain fate. More than 10,000 people have headed for the Turkish border in an attempt to escape the onslaught unleashed by Bashar al-Assad. They were living in squalor with little food and water and no shelter. But they were prepared to suffer that to reach a place of relative safety away from the tanks, artillery and helicopter gunships, and the death they bring.

It is not known just how long this respite will last. The regime’s forces are less than 15km away, and yesterday Damascus announced that the current offensive in Idlib province, which saw the storming of Jisr al-Shughour - a city which had become a symbol of militant opposition - will continue to roll on until the “criminal gangs” are crushed.

The Independent met some of these victims of a war waged on them by their own state by crossing over from Turkey across valleys and ridges on a smugglers’ route. Our guides were young men carrying in meagre supplies by hand: bottles of water and loaves of bread. This is the only aid of any kind getting through to a humanitarian crisis which worsens by the day.

The tales we heard were harrowing - of indiscriminate shootings and casual killings, of hurried burials and burning houses. One needs to be cautious of these accounts because they can be embellished. But there was a sense of bewilderment among those huddled together about what has happened. There was also the sight of the very young and elderly swathed in bandages. On a sloping hillside were a series of graves of those who, lacking medical help, had succumbed to their injuries.

Among the crowd were soldiers who had changed sides. They acknowledged serving a repressive regime without question. But they had stopped doing so, they insisted, because of the vicious nature of the current military operations. Surrounded by people who have suffered at the hands of their fellow troops, the soldiers were nervous. Ismail Sher Saleh, a 25-year-old former sergeant of infantry, had deserted just before troops of the 4th Armoured Division led by the President’s brother, Lt-Colonel Maher al-Assad, had launched their attack on Jisr al-Shughour.

“They could kill me if they caught me,” he said, twisting a black-and-white

checked keffiyeh [scarf] in his fingers. “It could be the Mukhabarat [secret police] or even people I had served with. Some terrible things are being done: I have seen people getting shot for no reason. They would kill me because they would consider me a traitor and because I know what they had done.”

Cradling three-year-old Sabia in her arms, Halima Um Qais traced her finger along the three sticking plasters on her daughter’s forehead. “Something large exploded near our house and she was cut by metal which came through the air. We are poor people, farmers - I do not know why they wanted to bomb us,” she said. “We are going to try to take her to a hospital. We are worried because it is in the head and it could be serious.”

The family is among the hundreds who are crossing into Turkey every day. Officials have put the figure so far at around 6,000, although many more have slipped in. The wounded are taken for treatment, but the rest are sent immediately to holding centres. The number of these camps has increased from one to three in seven days, with a fourth one under construction, away from contact with local people and, more specifically, the media.

Turkey’s Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose party won national elections held two days ago, has watched the chaos in Syria with growing alarm. He has called on President Assad, with whom he had built up strong links, to rein in his troops, and has denounced the “barbaric” actions still being taken.

On Sunday evening, while receiving a congratulatory telephone call from David Cameron, he gave his backing to a proposed Anglo-French resolution at the United Nations condemning the actions of the Syrian regime.

Meanwhile, Turkish troops at the border have stopped the media from venturing into Syria - The Independent had to take a detour to avoid patrols and reach families strung out along a river valley. There was suspicion in the camp, rumours of intelligence agents sent to collect information and seek out targets for future reckoning. A tall man with a bulge under his blue jacket scrutinised the identity card of our Turkish guide and questioned me about our journey. “Please excuse us,” he said. “We have to be careful about spies. The [regime’s] soldiers are not very far back. They may come this way; I am looking after security.”

There had been reports that some of the “refugees” had come armed with Kalashnikov rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, which would give credence to claims from Damascus of armed groups moving among the protesters. “No, we are just ordinary people,” said the security man. Was he carrying a pistol? “No absolutely not,” he shook his head.

The vast majority of those present were sleeping under trees offering scant cover from the rain; a few have managed to drive pick-up trucks cross-country and use the trailer to sleep; others have built makeshift tents out of rags and

plastic sheeting. A small well could not cope with the demands of the growing numbers. A pond with floating rubbish and the waters of the river, with animals wallowing in the shallows, was being used for washing and drinking.

“I know this is bad, but we are alive” said Siraz Abdullah, a 19-year-old student from a village near Jisra al-Shughour. “We have nothing left there. We had big guns used [against us] and then there were helicopters. They were flying low, so they could see they were shooting at people. They shot people who were not fighting but trying to get away. I saw two men getting hit as they were running away.”

There were repeated claims that fighters from the Shabiha, a militia from the Alawite community to which the Assad family and country’s élite belong, had taken part in atrocities. Mohammed Hafiz, a carpenter from a hamlet south of Jisra al-Shughour, said: “They were not the army, but they came just afterwards. These men were very aggressive: they enjoyed shooting people.

“They went up on rooftops and shot at demonstrations. No one knew who sent them. We found out that they were this militia everyone was frightened of. It was they who started the real trouble by firing on a funeral.” Ahmed ibn Abdurrahman was too tired to carry on. Sitting with his wife and brother on a rug laid on the dust, he sighed, “I need to go home. I have a house and I want to go back to that.” Mr Abdurrahman’s home was in Maarat al-Numan. A military spokesman in Damascus announced that city will be “dealt with” in the next few days.

16th June 2011

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS, ASSAD'S ENEMIES TAKE UP ARMS AS THEIR FOE CLOSES IN

By Kim Sengupta

THE KALASHNIKOV was held in nervous, shaking hands. The face above peering into the gathering darkness was drawn and tense. The guard for the refugees, barely past his teens, was on anxious alert for the pursuing forces of the regime.

Sitting and lying in huddles behind Fouad Al-Habsi, with only the branches of trees and clumps of bushes for cover, were the most recently dispossessed in Syria's bloody conflict. Exhausted and fearful, uncertain of the future, they were trying to reach the relative safety of the Turkish border.

The Independent had chanced across the group north of Ghassaniye after going into Syria through a smugglers' route from Turkey.

More than 12,000 people are now camped in a state of squalor and degradation on this side of the frontier. Another 8,500 had made it across only to be herded into camps and locked away with no access to the outside world, by the authorities in Ankara. Yesterday, these inmates held a protest demonstration during a visit by foreign minister Ahmet Davoutoglu to one of the holding centres.

But, for the desperate travellers on this dusty road, anything was better than the savage retribution they were seeking to escape. The violence, however, was never very far behind. The journey had been a perilous one with gunmen of the secret police, the Mukhabarat, and the Alawite militia, the Shabbia, tracking them and carrying out attacks.

"They had looted all they could and they had burnt our homes. But still they were not satisfied, they want blood," Issa Abdullah shook his head. "These men like killing, they are like wild dogs."

Ahmad al-Arabi, 49, came forward, his bandaged right hand thrust out. "I was shot as I was walking along the road away from our village, the bullet came from far. Other bullets went over our heads, but one hit Abu Haitham in the back, he had to be carried back to his home by his sons. We don't know what has happened to them. We hope Allah will protect them."

Most of the group of around 40 on the road north of Ghassaniya were children, women and the elderly, families of farmers from villages around the city of Jisr al-Shughour, which had been stormed by the troops of Bashar Al-Assad 48 hours earlier. The Syrian regime had announced that "army units had restored security and tranquillity to the city of Jisr al-Shughour". The state-run SANA news agency gave progress reports on "eliminating armed terrorist groups" who carried out a "massacre" in the city.

Suppression of protests, with claims that military action was only being

directed against violent Islamists, has been a common feature of the Arab Spring. The opposition in Syria, as with protest movements in other countries in the region, vehemently denies allegations of terrorist links.

The families trying to get away could hardly be called the face of al-Qa'ida. Apart from Fouad Al-Habsi only one other among the dozen men carried arms - a shotgun used for hunting said the owner. But half an hour later, moving further on, we came across a band of eight men on a bend in the road with Kalashnikovs and ammunition belts strung across their shoulders.

The watchful man who appeared to be their leader, denied they were members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist organisation, which has strong roots in this region. He said: "We are protecting these routes because the [regime's] troops and the Mukhabarat had been carrying out ambushes. They are using snipers. We need to get our people away safely and that is what we are trying to do."

Two of the men wore green bandanas with inscriptions from the Koran. Another man pulled open his gray shirt to show an olive green vest with regimental markings.

"I am a soldier. I used to fight for Bashar Assad, now I fight for the people. There are many of us and more are joining us. But we are soldiers and we are Syrians, we are not terrorists.

"We are prepared to continue fighting, but we all want a settlement. We want peace."

17th June 2011

REFUGEES FEAR A MASSACRE AS SYRIAN TANKS ADVANCE ON BORDER

By Kim Sengupta

FORCES OF the Syrian regime are reported to have attacked and occupied villages near the Turkish border, just three kilometres from encampments where 12,000 refugees have fled in a bid to escape President Bashar al-Assad's crackdown.

Troops supported by tanks and artillery moved into the area as other units closed the circle around Maarat al-Numan, an opposition town in the north. Human rights groups said that at least 300 people had been arrested in a sweep of surrounding villages.

Families fleeing to the frontier with Turkey said the villages of Cenudi, Sigir, Badama and Qalaat Al-Shighour had been damaged by shellfire at dawn, which preceded the arrival of troops, secret police and the feared Shabbia militia. Local people blame the Mukhabarat secret police and the Shabbia militia - which is drawn from the Alawaite community, to which President Assad and many of the Syrian elite belong - for carrying out the worst excesses in the ferocious punitive response to the three-month uprising.

"They've really tried to destroy the village," said Somar Ali, a 20-year-old farmer who had fled Badama. "Most of my family came out with me, but my grandfather said 'I am too old to run away, I'll die here'. We phoned to make sure he was all right and we could hear shooting in the background. He said they were burning the fields and pulling down houses."

About 12,000 people are living in squalid temporary shelters on the Syrian side of the frontier, while a further 8,500 have made it to Turkey. Amid the chaos of the refugee encampments, accounts of what is unfolding on the ground are often confused and contradictory. The outskirts of Badama, seen by a visitor, did not support the claims of widespread destruction. Most of the population had fled, doors and windows of houses were shuttered, but the scale of damage was limited.

There is, nevertheless, fear among the refugees that regime forces would hunt them down. Groups seeking a way out to the relative safety of Turkey have come under sniper fire. Mukhabarat gunmen in civilian cars are said to have carried out ambushes.

Nasr al-Baidi, a farmer from Sigir, said: "We did not think the [regime's] troops would move so near to the border. Everyone is now very worried that they will move to the camps and start arresting people, maybe even killing them. What would the Turks do? They cannot allow a massacre to take place."

Reports of violence have heightened the sense of trepidation. A woman was alleged to have been gang raped by soldiers at Jisr Al-Shughour, a town stormed

by regime forces earlier this week. Three women were reportedly paraded naked at the same place.

Ibrahim, who did not want his surname published, said: “The poor woman who was raped was married and had children. She telephoned my wife and told her what had happened and told her not to go home. What happened to her and the three other women was a punishment because their husbands had joined demonstrations.”

Thousands of people from Maarat al-Numan, just east of Jisr Al-Shughour, have left the town and are reportedly heading for the border. A villager in Maarshamsa, on the outskirts of the town, said indiscriminate shooting by Damascus forces killed one man, Mohammad al-Abdallah, who had to be buried in his garden because the intensity of the attack made it impossible to take his body to the cemetery.

Yaquub Abdurrahman, moving his wife and six children from Maarat al-Numan, said: “We have been told an attack is coming and we do not want to wait around to see what happens. We do not want to leave Syria and we will return when the fighting finishes.”

The regime, which insists the violence is down to ill-defined “terrorist gangs”, has asked refugees to return home. Hassan Turkmani, a special envoy of the Syrian president in Ankara for talks with the Turkish government, stated the refugees would only stay in Turkey for a “short period of time”. “Soon they will be returning,” he said. “We’ve prepared everything for them.”

But at Guvecci, a Turkish town on the Syrian border, people were fearful of what awaited them. “We have heard that names of people who have gone back are checked against a list. If a name comes up the person is dragged away. There is a very good reason for not going back, we will get killed,” said Abdel Yusuf Mohammed, who had fled from Jisr al-Shighour.

The Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who had visited a refugee camp in Hatay province adjoining Syria, met Mr Turkmani yesterday. Afterwards he said the countries remained the “closest friends”, but added: “We want a strong, stable, prosperous Syria. To achieve this, the violence must stop immediately. I clearly saw the fear in the eyes of people in the place I visited.”

18th June 2011

THOUSANDS OF SYRIANS MARCH WHILE MILITARY CONTINUES TO ATTACK

By Khalid Ali and Kim Sengupta

TENS OF thousands of Syrians took to the streets yesterday for a renewed push to unseat the government, uncowed by a military assault in the north-west and unconvinced by the latest moves by the regime to quell the uprising with gestures of reform.

At least 16 people were reported killed as fresh protests were met by machine-gun fire, while troops backed-up by tanks and helicopter gunships continued their assault - an operation that has sent up to 22,000 people fleeing from their homes.

The protests came despite an unexpected announcement by the tycoon cousin of President Bashar al-Assad that he would be relinquishing his business interests and donating some of his massive profits to charity. Rami Makhlouf, who controls Syria's main telecoms firm, is reviled by many in Syria for alleged corruption.

But the announcement did little to stem the tide of protest and security forces again responded with force.

The United States continued to push for a UN resolution yesterday, as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, met with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, to try to forge an agreement between Security Council members. In a letter circulated yesterday, Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Moualem, said he hoped the Council would not hastily adopt a resolution he says will help the "extremists and terrorists" he blames for the country's violence.

Syrian human rights groups say more than 1,400 civilians have been killed since the uprising began. In the north-west, there were stories of troops and members of the security services carrying out summary executions and torturing suspected activists. About 22,000 people have fled assaults on towns in the area, with 10,000 now in refugee camps in Turkey and another 12,000 living in squalor on the Syrian side of the border. Those who made it to the relative safety of Turkey were yesterday treated to a visit by the American actress, Angelina Jolie, a goodwill ambassador for the UN.

Meanwhile, journalists and groups such as Amnesty International have been refused entry to the camps, with refugees not allowed to leave.

19th June 2011

THEY CAME AT DAWN, AND KILLED IN COLD BLOOD

By Kim Sengupta

THE HOUSES looked abandoned, windows and doors locked, a broken shutter clattering in the wind. Then, one by one, they began to appear from their hiding places, mainly women and children, a few elderly people. The residents of this village had learned to their cost that being caught unawares in this violent conflict could have lethal consequences.

The raid by the secret police - the Mukhabarat - and the Shabbiha militia had come at dawn. The killings had been cold-blooded and quick, three men shot dead as, barely awake, they tried desperately to get away. A search for others had proved fruitless; they had fled the day before. The damage to homes vented the frustration of the gunmen at missing their quarries.

“They were working from a list. But they made mistakes. One of them was the wrong person. They did not even have the right name of the man they killed,” said Qais al-Baidi, gesturing towards the graves on a sloping hillside. “But none of them deserved this. They were not terrorists. They had just taken part in some demonstrations. These Assad people are vicious. They have no pity. They like killing.”

The three killings were among the many that had followed the ferocious onslaught launched by Bashar al-Assad against the uprising. Two centres of opposition in the north of the country had been taken after bloody clashes, Jisr al-Shughour early in the week, Maaret al-Numan falling on Friday. This village was among a cluster that had been subjected, according to a regime commander, to a “cleaning-up” operation.

The offensive had led to a terrified exodus of much of the local population, with 12,000 huddled in squalid conditions on the Syrian side of the border. Another 10,000 had made it across to Turkey, only to be herded into holding centres, locked away from the outside world, the government in Ankara making it clear that these people will be sent back at an opportune time.

The locals in the Turkish province of Hatay and the international media have been kept away from the dispossessed families. The Turkish government insists they are “guests”, as accepting they are refugees could lead to legal obligations towards them. But Angelina Jolie, Hollywood actress and UN goodwill ambassador, was taken to see one of the centres after expressing a wish to help to alleviate the suffering of Syria. A banner put up by the Turkish authorities at the entrance to the camp read “Goodness Angel of the World, Welcome”.

Away from the focus of celebrity attention, there is little help for those stuck at the frontier. The vast majority sleep under trees; a few have managed to drive pick-up trucks cross-country and sleep in the trailer; others have built makeshift

tents out of rags and plastic sheeting. A pond with floating rubbish and water from the river were being used for washing and drinking. Some of the injured had perished without adequate medical help, and their funerals were held where they had died.

The only “aid” for a humanitarian crisis worsening by the day had been meagre supplies such as bottles of water and bread smuggled in by groups of young men travelling on foot across steep ridges, along the same path taken by The IoS. Relief organisations have not been allowed access by either the Syrians or the Turks. But the border camp offer relative safety from the savagery of a state waging war on its own people.

Hania Um Jaffar, whose 22-year-old nephew, Khalid Abdullah, was one of those killed, was convinced that the journey there was the only choice. “We had hidden in the fields the day before when we saw helicopters flying over us. But they went away and we thought it had passed. But then they came later on foot. They did not come into our home, but went to others, to the one where Khalid was staying. He was shot many times.

“I don’t want anyone else in my family to die. Surely that is what will happen if we stay here. My sons have gone to the mountains, and another nephew has done the same. They cannot come back to take us to Turkey. That is too dangerous for them. We have to make our own way there.”

The tiny community remaining in the dozen houses were running out of food. Bassem Mohammed Ibrahim, a 68-year-old farmer, spread his hands. “[The regime forces] did not burn the crops here like they have done in other places. But the only men left here now are old ones like me. We cannot work the fields by ourselves. Our farms will be ruined. But if we stay here, I don’t think we will survive.”

The journey to the border, however, is fraught with risk. The secret police and the Shabbiha, drawn from the community to which President Assad and the Syrian elite belong, had ambushed families, forcing some to turn back. A small group of opposition fighters provide protection along the route. “But we only have a few of these,” said Habib Ali Hussein, holding up his Kalashnikov assault rifle. “Assad has tanks, artillery, helicopters.”

Until two weeks ago Mr Hussein was part of those forces as a lieutenant in the army. He deserted, he said, sickened by the violence meted out to unarmed civilians.

“They were shooting people who were refusing to follow orders. That is what happened at Jisr al-Shughour. I am from that area, and my people were being attacked. So I got my family away and then I left. We haven’t got the weapons to go forward. All we are doing is defending.”

At the border camp, Isha al-Diri, a medical assistant from Jisr al-Shughour, had been administering treatment as best he could. “The seriously injured have been taken to Turkey. But some died before that could happen. The problem here is that we haven’t got enough medicine.”

Rawat Khalifa had come seeking cough medicine for his six-year-old daughter. “It is the damp; a lot of the young ones are ill. We shall have to go to Turkey if they get any worse. We cannot take risks with their lives.

“We have not crossed over so far because we are Syrians. We want to stay in our own country. But we are afraid to go back home. We are afraid that our own leaders will try to kill us.”

Yesterday, Syrian troops arrived with tanks at Bdama, 12 miles from the Turkish border. Dozens were arrested and houses burned, according to eyewitnesses. The area had been considered key for passing food and supplies to people who have fled the violence in their villages, but have yet to cross the border into Turkey.

21st June 2011

‘NO WONDER THEY WERE RIOTING IN DAMASCUS. THIS WAS INSULTING BOTH TO THE LIVING AND TO THE DEAD’

By Robert Fisk

IT WAS sad. It was ridiculous. It was totally out of touch. The thousand Syrian dead (and counting) were, according to President Bashar al-Assad, victims of that well-known Arab animal: the plot, the conspiracy, the “foreign hand”, the same dastardly enemy that confronted Mubarak (before he was chucked out) and Ben Ali (before he was chucked out) and Saleh (before he was driven out, wounded, like an animal) and which still supposedly confronts Gaddafi and the Khalifas and, well, Bashar al-Assad.

The idea that the thousands of mourners, the tens of thousands of bereaved Syrians whose sons and brothers and fathers and uncles - and, yes, wives and daughters and mothers - have been gunned down by Assad’s Alawi armed gangs and his brother Maher’s special forces, are going to be assuaged with a “national dialogue”, “consultative meetings” for “a few days”, chats between a hundred “personalities” to discuss “mechanisms” after which “dialogue will begin immediately”, is not only patronising. It is a sign of just how far the “sea of quietness” in which all dictators live has cut Assad off from the lives of the people he claims to rule.

Assad tells Syrians to be of good cheer. Trust the army. They are your brothers, he tells them. Trust the government. Yes, Assad will rid Syria of corruption - as he and his father promised to do approximately 22 times in their rule. The young Bashar has already undertaken five anti-corruption campaigns - and only last week did his own outrageous cousin agree to give up his billion-dollar business dealings and devote himself to charity. Charity! No wonder the protesters rioted again in Damascus. This wasn’t just incredible - in the literal sense of the word - it was insulting to the living and to the dead.

Then came the threats. Those who had spilled blood would be chased down - as if the people of Syrian cities and towns and villages don’t know what that means. They were encouraged by the Caliph Bashar to return to their homes where those kindly gunmen and torturers would protect them from the “saboteurs and extremists” who were upsetting their lives by attacking the brave members of the security forces (when they weren’t torturing civilians, although that is not what Assad said).

And then there was that wonderful line, that the protesters were suckers, taken in by extremists, used as a “shroud” - a grimly suitable expression, though Assad apparently did not realise it - for the gunmen and murderers who represented a dark hangover of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising of 1982 (another rebellion met with staggering cruelty by Syrian troops loyal to Assad’s uncle Rifaat, still happily residing in London of course).

Odd, this. For the “gunman” in the crowd, the “terrorist” using civilians as “human shields” is a myth propagated for decades by the Israeli army when they kill civilians, by the French army in Algeria, by the British Army in Northern Ireland, by Nato forces in Afghanistan. By God, our Bashar is in good company!

It was the same old game. The people are the children, innocent, unaware, taken in by the foreign saboteur’s hand while the worldly-wise Assad wants only to save Syria from its enemies. And we are supposed to be surprised when the unarmed men and women of Syria march in the streets yet again to reject this nonsense.

6th July 2011

THE NEW FOCUS OF SYRIA'S CRACKDOWN HAS SEEN SIMILAR BLOODSHED BEFORE

By Robert Fisk

HISTORY COMES full circle in Syria. In February 1982, President Hafez al-Assad's army stormed into the ancient cities to end an Islamist uprising. They killed at least 10,000 men, women and children, possibly 20,000. Some of the men were members of the armed Muslim Brotherhood.

Almost all the dead were Sunni Muslims, although even senior members of the Baath party were executed if they had the fatal word Hamwi - a citizen from Hama - on their identity cards. "Death a thousand times to the hired Muslim Brothers, who linked themselves to the enemies of the homeland," Assad said after the slaughter.

Years later a retired Dutch diplomat, Nikolaos Van Dam, wrote a detailed study of the Baath party and its Alawi leadership, The Struggle for Power in Syria, and stated presciently of the Hama massacre, that "the massive repression... may very well have sown the seeds of future strife and revenge". Never a truer word - and if the activists' estimate that there were 250,000 citizens on the streets of Hama at the weekend to demand the end of the Assad family's rule is correct, then the seeds of future strife were indeed planted in the historic city's soil 29 years ago.

I remember Hama's first siege, when I managed to enter the city by driving down the international highway and getting right in among the Syrian tanks - which were shelling the most beautiful mosque in Hama - because two army officers asked my driver to drop them off beside the river Orontes, where their units were fighting the brotherhood. The soldiers gave me and my driver tea as we took in this terrible scene.

The fighting had gone on for 16 days; girl suicide killers were taking military lives by exploding hand grenades next to them when they were taken prisoner. I only had a few minutes to see all this. Rifaat al-Assad's defence forces in their drab pink uniforms sat on their tanks. Some of them had been badly wounded - they had bandages on their arms. A woman refugee got into my car with her child, but when I tried to give it food, she snatched it and scoffed the lot. She was starving. These, of course, were the parents of the weekend's demonstrators. Perhaps the hungry child was on the streets of Hama three days ago.

The situation was similar yesterday, after 500 troops surged into the city, wounding at least 20 after opening fire. But it's not an Islamic uprising this time - the insurgents of Hama were killing the families of Baath party members in 1982 - but the very name of the city sounds like a tolling bell in the history of the Assads' rule. In those days, Assad let the press into Damascus - which is how I drove to see friends in Aleppo and return via Hama - but this time the regime has

simply closed the frontier to almost all reporters.

In 1982, there was no YouTube, no Twitter, there were no mobile phones. Not a single photograph of the dead was ever published. Some of Syria's tanks now appear to be brand new imports from Russia. The problem is that the people's technology is new too.

9th August 2011

THIS SLAUGHTER WILL END ONLY WHEN WORDS OF CONDEMNATION ARE ACTED ON

By Robert Fisk

WORDS, WORDS, words. Bashar al-Assad knows his Hamlet, and he is not impressed. Yes, his isolation grows daily. A day after King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia pulled his ambassador out of Damascus, the Kuwaitis and Bahrainis - we shall naturally ignore, here, Bahrain's own bloody internal suppression - have dutifully followed his example.

The Arab League believes that Bashar should "immediately stop" the violence. The UN has roared, though it managed to smear Syria's protesters by calling for both sides "to exercise restraint" - as if the demonstrators had tanks - and Mr Medvedev, the Russian President, has talked grimly of Bashar's "fate". Even Turkey, according to the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has "run out of patience". A Turkish "safe haven" in the north of Syria, anyone?

The trouble is that everyone has been running out of patience with Syria since the spring, and no one has done more than turn up the rhetoric as the statistics of innocent dead ticked up from 500 to 1,000, to more than 2,000. And of course the absence of journalists inside Syria means that the full story is not known. Syrian television has shown gunmen among demonstrators in Hama, while nightly I watch Syrian state television recording the funerals of dozens - now perhaps 300 - soldiers. Who killed them? Who are the gunmen? YouTube is a dodgy witness to history but there can be little doubt that, faced with state violence on such a scale, civilians have armed themselves to protect their families, to take revenge on the regime, to keep the Syrian militias out of their cities.

And the Assad family, cynical as it is, enacting legislative reform while killing those who might benefit from the new laws, fully understands the hypocrisy of the Arab and European reaction to the Syrian bloodbath. Had Messrs Cameron, Sarkozy and Obama stopped short after they saved Benghazi - had they reined in their juvenile enthusiasm for destroying Gaddafi - they may have had the spittle (I use Sir Thomas More's word for courage) and the munitions to destroy some of Assad's 8,000 tanks. That massive fleet of armour, one should add, was paid for by the Syrian people in order to be protect Syria from Israel - not to protect the regime from the Syrians themselves.

William Hague - he who once childishly believed Gaddafi was en route to Venezuela - has been waffling on about how little the West can do to stop Assad. This is rubbish. Britain's RAF bases in Cyprus are infinitely closer to Syria than to Libya. Had we prevented the bloodbath in Benghazi and left the Libyans to their civil war, we might have found a public opinion strong enough to stomach an assault on the Assad legions. But no, Libya has oil, Syria has little and -

despite all the roaring from the Arabs - most of the dictators, in Saudi Arabia, in Bahrain, in the rest of the Middle East, would still prefer a “reformed” Assad to freedom, dignity and liberty for his people. The Israelis don’t want regime change in Damascus. Do the Americans?

You only have to compare Obama’s reaction to the massacre in Norway and to the infinitely larger blood-shedding in Syria. Obama described how the Norwegian killings “broke his heart”. Yet the slaughter of far more innocents in Syria merely elicits the idea that the United States can live without Assad if he goes. There are plenty of Breiviks among the Syrian Shabiha murderers in Syria - but no Western leaders to mourn their handiwork. Bashar Assad knows this. And don’t be fooled by the tears pouring forth from the Keeper of the Three Holy Places.

Any sane Arab, Muslim - “or anyone who knows that this has nothing to do with religion, ethics or morals”, in the words of King Abdullah - knows that spilling innocent blood leads to hopelessness. We might be more impressed were it not for the fact the Saudis and their tame imams remained resolutely silent when a million and a half Muslims were slaughtered on the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war battlefields. Back then, of course, the Saudis - and the West - were on the side of that nice Sunni Muslim dictator Saddam Hussein against the horrible Shia theocrat Khomeini. Now the Sunnis of Syria are fighting the Shia - for which read Alawite - dictator of Damascus. Having convinced themselves that his survival would only embolden Shia Iran, however, the monarch of Riyadh has come down on the side of the Syrian people - for now, at least.

Assad is almost certainly doomed. But he’s more like Macbeth, “in blood stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go’er”.

19th August 2011

IT'S HIS FAST-DISAPPEARING BILLIONS THAT WILL WORRY ASSAD, NOT WORDS FROM WASHINGTON

By Robert Fisk

OBAMA ROARS. World trembles. If only.

Obama says Assad must “step aside”. Do we really think Damascus trembles? Or is going to? Indeed, the titan of the White House only dared to go this far after condemnation of Bashar al-Assad by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Turkey, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, the EU and Uncle Tom Cobley and all (except, of course, Israel - another story). The terrible triplets - Cameron, Sarkozy and Merkel - did their mimicking act a few minutes later.

But truly, are new sanctions against Assad “and his cronies” - I enjoyed the “cronies” bit, a good old 1665 word as I’m sure Madame Clinton realised, although she was principally referring to Bashar’s businessman cousin Rami Makhlouf - anything more than the usual Obama hogwash? If “strong economic sanctions” mean a mere freeze on petroleum products of Syrian origin, the fact remains that Syria can scarcely produce enough oil for itself, let alone for export. A Swedish government agency recently concluded that Syria was largely unaffected by the world economic crisis - because it didn’t really have an economy.

Of course, in the fantasy of Damascus - where Bashar appears to live in the same “sea of quietness” in which the Egyptian writer Mohamed Heikel believes all dictators breathe - the world goes on as usual. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon - another earth-trembler if ever there was one - no sooner demands an “immediate” end to “all military operations and mass arrests”, than dear old Bashar tells him that “military and police action” has stopped.

Well, blow me down, as the Syrian population must now be saying. So what were all those reports coming in yesterday from Syria, of widespread gunfire in Latakia, of troops looting private property in the city, of a man arrested in his hospital bed in Zabadani, of snipers still on the rooftops of government buildings in Deir el-Zour? Crimes against humanity? Needless to say, the Syrian government knows nothing about this.

Besides, hasn’t Gaddafi been accused of “crimes against humanity”? Wasn’t he supposed to have “stepped aside” six months ago? And isn’t Gaddafi - a little more fragile now, of course - still in Tripoli? And this is after months of Nato bombardment, something that Bashar has nothing to worry about. Well, well, well.

Bashar will also have noticed a weird mantra adopted by the Great Roarer of Washington. Repeatedly, Assad was told by Obama to “step aside” - never “step down” - and to “get out of the way”, whatever that means. Intriguingly, Madame Clinton used the phrase “step down” yesterday afternoon - and then immediately

corrected herself to “step aside”.

The Great and the Good don’t use these phrases by chance. The implication still seems to be that “step aside” might allow Bashar to stay in Syria but let others take over, rather go on the run with a war crimes tribunal hanging over his head. Which is what, I suspect, yesterday’s roaring was all about.

The real fear for Bashar is not oil sanctions but banks - especially the £12bn in foreign reserves that existed in Syria’s Central Bank in February, a sum which is now being depleted by around £50m a week. In May, Syria’s foreign minister - the mighty (physically) Walid Moallem - asked Baghdad for cheap Iraqi oil. Nearly 10 per cent of Syria’s banking deposits disappeared in the first four months of 2011; £1.8bn was withdrawn, some of it ending up in Lebanese banks.

All in all, then, a nasty economic climate in which to go on bashing your own people. So who cares what Obama says? Certainly not the Syrians, which is why they are now trying to set up a “High Commission for Leading the Revolution” to co-ordinate protesters in the country’s provinces.

This will indeed also worry Assad, who will have to send his spooks out to identify members of this “high commission” (which sounds unhappily like a colonial name) so they can spend some rest-and-recreation in the Latakia sports stadium under friendly interrogation from the state security police.

26th October 2011

‘WE ARE ALL READY TO BE MARTYRED FOR SYRIA AND OUR PRESIDENT’

By Robert Fisk

SERGEANT JASSEM Abdul-Raheem Shehadi and Private Ahmed Khalaf Adalli of the Syrian Army were sent to their graves yesterday with the send-off their families would have wished for; coffins draped with the Syrian flag, trumpets and drums and wreaths held by their comrades, and the presence of their commanding officer. There was a Last Post, Chopin's funeral march - mixed with ululating staff at the Tishreen Hospital to which their remains had been transferred - and then the nine-hour journey by ambulance to their hometown, Raka. Shehadi was 19, Adalli was 20. And their uncles swore they had died for President Bashar al-Assad.

They were shot dead in Deraa - by snipers, according to their commanding officer, Major Walid Hatim. "By terrorists," he said several times. Assad's opponents might have no sympathy with these dead soldiers - nor Amnesty, nor Human Rights Watch, nor the United Nations, who say 3,000 civilians have been killed by Syrian security forces, nor the Americans, nor the British et al - but those two coffins suggested that there is more than one story to the Syrian Revolution. Syrian officers told me yesterday that 1,150 soldiers have been killed in Syria in the past seven months, an extraordinary death toll for regular Syrian troops if correct. On Zawi mountain near Idlib, Major Hatim said, 30 Syrian soldiers had been killed in an ambush. Mazjera was the word he used. A massacre.

Shehadi and Adalli were based in Deraa, where the opposition to Assad began. Shehadi was there for six months, Adalli for four. It was a sign of the times that Major Hatim arrived at the Damascus funeral in civilian clothes. Why was he not wearing his uniform, I asked? "It is easier," he replied. Because of the dangers driving from Deraa? "Maybe," he replied. That, too, told its own story. Both the dead soldiers had lost their fathers years ago and their two uncles had travelled here from Raka to escort the bodies home. They were from poor families, they said. The boys and their uncles had been looking after their mothers.

Shehadi's uncle, Salim Abdullah, in a brown abaya and drawing heavily on a cigarette, was on the edge of tears. "My nephew had three brothers and two sisters, and they are very poor," he said. "His mother Arash will now have to be looked after by us. Those killers have killed the hope of our family. He was the youngest boy."

Behind Salim Shehadi, Syrian troops stood in full battledress as the coffins were brought from the hospital mortuary. All Syria's military dead leave from the gloomy portals of the Tishreen Hospital, a vast concrete building in the

suburbs of Damascus. Even the ambulance driver prostrated himself in tears over his vehicle.

Syrian television had a crew at the hospital, along with the ever loyal Syrian Arab News Agency, but it was highly unusual for a foreign reporter to be invited to this ceremony, let alone to speak to Syrian officers. Major Hatim explained to me that the two soldiers were killed in a planned ambush; the sniper was firing from between two houses. There was a strange confluence in this description. Opponents of Assad often claim that it is they that are fired on by snipers using the cover of buildings.

But few people in Syria now doubt that, however peaceful - and yet bloody - the anti-government demonstrations in Homs and Hama are, the Syrian Army has become a major target. Needless to say, Major Hatim, a 25-year army veteran, was also a supporter of the President.

Hatim talked of Syria's "resistance" on the part of the Palestinians, that soldiers sometimes had to die for their country, that their enemy is Israel. There is much talk in Damascus of a "foreign hand" behind the killings in Syria, although the Major admitted that, in this case, "unfortunately the killers are Syrian".

But Salim Shehadi wanted to say more. "I hope you will be honest and tell the truth," he said. "Tell the truth about the killing of Syrian people. The hand of terrorists took my nephew. We are all ready to be martyred for Syria and for our President Assad." It sounded too pat, this little speech from a grieving man, and a reporter must ask if this was a set-up. Yet the military had only four minutes before I arrived for the funeral, and I doubt if they could have coaxed this poor man to say these words.

Perhaps, up in distant Raka, they believe these words of loyalty - Abdullah Hilmi, Adalli's uncle, an older man in a brown robe, said much the same - and certainly Major Hatim believed what he said. But what of those YouTube pictures, of the shooting of demonstrators and mourners at funerals - no danger of that at this funeral yesterday - and the 3,000 civilian dead of which the UN now talks?

I suppose that, until we Western journalists can investigate without government restrictions, it's a YouTube picture against the word of two poor men in peasants' clothes.

27th October 2011

SYRIA SLIPS TOWARDS SECTARIAN WAR

By Robert Fisk

SO THERE was the reporter from Syrian television asking what I thought of the situation in Syria, and there was I saying that you can no longer infantilise Arabs, that the uprisings/revolts/revolutions/unrest in the Arab world were all different; but that dictatorship didn't work, that if there were - if - a serious new constitution, pluralist political parties and real and genuine free elections, Syria might just climb out of its tragedy but that the government was running out of time, fast.

We shall see if this gets on air on Saturday (readers will be kept informed) but outside in the street another pro-Assad demonstration was starting, 10,000 then 50,000 - it might have reached 200,000 by midday - and there was no Saddam-style trucking of the people to the Omayad Square, no mukhabarat intelligence presence and the only soldiers were standing with their families. How does one report a pro-government demo during the Arab Awakening? There were veiled women, old men, thousands of children with "Syria" written on their faces. Most held Syrian flags, some held the flags of Russia and China.

Were they coerced? I don't think so - not by the Assad government, at least. Some played football games in the parks round the square. Others signed their names - Muslim and Christian - on a banner decorated with the branches of a massive Syrian tree. But if they were coerced, it was by stories from further north. I spoke to 12 men and women. Five spoke of relatives in the army killed in Homs. And the news from Homs was very bad. I had dinner on Tuesday night with an old friend. His 62-year-old cousin, a retired engineer, had given water to some soldiers in Homs. Next morning, armed men knocked at his front door and shot him dead. He was a Christian.

Of course, the Assad government had been warning of a sectarian war. Of course, the Assad government has set itself up as the only sure protector of minorities. Of course, the Assad government had claimed that Islamists and "terrorists" were behind the street opposition to the regime. It's also clear that the brutality of the Syrian security forces in Deraa and Homs and other cities against unarmed protesters has been a scandal, which those in the government privately acknowledge.

But it's also transparent that the struggle in Syria now cuts through the centre of the country and that many armed men now oppose the army. Indeed, I have been told that Homs slips - for hours at a time - out of government control.

Damascenes travelling to the northern city of Aleppo can take the bus. But now more than ever, they are flying to avoid the dangerous road between Hama and Aleppo. These are the reasons, I suspect, why so many thousands came to demonstrate in Damascus yesterday. They are frightened.

Foreign journalists are not allowed to travel to Homs - a serious error by the regime - where Sunnis, Alawites and Christians live close together amid Armenians, Circassians and other groups. A sectarian war may well be in the cynical interests of any regime fighting for its life. But unless everyone I've met is lying (which I don't believe), this is now a growing reality in central Syria. Against this, no Russian or Chinese vetoes in the United Nations are of any use.

A delegation from the Arab League - that pathetic and most useless of Arab institutions - was due to arrive in Damascus yesterday afternoon. To what effect? Are they supposed to send a "peace" force? Two days ago, Mohamed Kadour, the Dean of the Petrochemicals Faculty at Homs University, was kidnapped in return for the freeing of detainees. He was released a day later. Whether imprisoned men were released, we don't know. But it has happened before. In Idlib, so they say, everyone is armed. And the weapons - so they say - are coming from Lebanon.

Ask who the armed men are in central Syria and you receive a spread of replies: Bedouin who smuggle drugs to Saudi Arabia, army defectors, "Islamists" from Iraq, "people who just think there is no other way to get rid of the regime". Damascus is safe; bright lights and late-night shopping and restaurants and thousands wandering the streets. But Damascus is not the rest of Syria. It lives in a kind of bubble.

I got up yesterday after only an hour and a half of sleep - because outside my hotel, government workers were testing the deafening sound system for the demonstration. All night there were bursts of taped cheering and drums and cheers and trumpets. But did those crowds yesterday really need this false applause and fraudulent additions to their own demonstration? Officially, things are getting better in Syria. I doubt it.

If the UN figure of more than 3,000 civilian dead is correct and if the Syrian statistic of 1,150 military deaths are correct and if the deaths of the last three days - perhaps another 50 - are true, then up to 4,200 Syrians have been killed in seven months. And that's enough to frighten anyone.

28th October 2011

‘THE ARMY WAS TOLD NOT TO FIRE AT PROTESTERS’

By Robert Fisk

BOUTHAINA SHAABAN is one of only six Syrians on America's personal sanction list against the Assad regime. She is political adviser to the President. A middle-aged mother and author who speaks perfect English, as much at home in Paris as in Cairo. And all those assets of hers, frozen in America. Wow.

So I sit in her Damascus office and ask the obvious question: what does it feel like to be on the sanctions list of the most powerful nation on earth? "Nothing really," she says, quick as a flash. "I have no assets - except the assets of the love for my people. The Americans understand 'assets' only as dollars. I don't have dollars anywhere in the world."

The "assets of my people" is a bit of a cliche. But touché. She isn't on a European sanctions list - yet - and thinks she can go to Europe if she wishes. "It's a bit ironic, really, to be on an American sanction list when my books are on sale all over the USA. At present my only travel plan is a possible trip to Saudi Arabia."

It's one of those frequent Syrian interviews - Shaaban prefers an off-the-record chat. I insist we are on the record. Once in full-flow, however, I can't stop her, and she confirms what every other Syrian in Damascus says: that the security situation in Homs is terrible, that the army is being attacked all over the country. Anyone with a military registration plate on their car is a target. Shaaban herself is from Homs. "Today is the second anniversary of the death of my mother. And you know we like to go to the grave of our family on the anniversary of their death. But I can't go to my mother's grave - I am afraid of being killed in Homs. Everyone is suffering.

"The other day, I went to the woman who is the best baker in Damascus - she works on the road to the airport, I always buy my bread from her but she was crying. She told me that some bearded men came to her and said: 'You are a Christian and you are putting whiskey in your bread.' So she had to close her bakery. These are the kind of people who want to destroy Syria. Now people, for the first time, are interested in the religion of their neighbours. This has never happened before. You know, Syria is one of those countries where people have the names of jobs - like Najr (carpenter) and Haddad (blacksmith). Now people are asking about what their religion is."

The political narrative is, of course, familiar. Violence is being directed at the army. "It is being directed at our public buildings and cities. This has nothing to do with peaceful demonstrations. This violence is the most dangerous thing happening now in Syria. Syrians all want to live in peace, to press ahead with pluralism and reforms. This violence is not the introduction to democracy. There

is obviously a sector which is interested in conflict and not in reforms. They are all given money to shoot at demonstrators and the security forces - or they are extremist fundamentalists."

I have been down this path before. Surely - surely - I said to Shaaban, those original, terrible YouTube pictures of demonstrators being fired at in Deraa and Homs and Hama were real. One even shows Syrian soldiers turning and firing on the man filming them with his mobile camera. We all know how brutal the intelligence services can be. I remember - but do not mention - walking past the "muhabarrat" headquarters not far from my own hotel and commenting to a friend the same night that they must be hard at work on "interrogations". "They are done in the basements," he replied. "You wouldn't want to know what happens there."

"I think you have to know both sides of the story," comes the reply. "I would not be able to tell you the other side of the story. There are always now two sides of the story - I will not be defending anybody. Early in the crisis, our army and police and security services paid terrible sacrifices but they were told not to shoot at demonstrators. I really don't know why people should make things up. The Syrian civilians who went to Turkey - they returned and said the Turks had promised them passports, all kinds of things which turned out to be untrue. Why would a person wanting to flee Idlib go to Turkey? They would go to Aleppo."

I tell Shaaban that I have spent hours talking to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, poor farming people who told terrible stories of the "shabiha" militia and the brutality of the intelligence services in their village of Tel Khalak. Surely she doesn't believe these people were all making these things up? She talks about the "armed groups "playing with these people" and about how weapons are coming across the borders. "In Deraa, we found weapons that were Israeli. I told our people they should show these weapons to the media..."

So how come Syria's former best friends - Turkey and Qatar - are now among its fiercest critics, I ask? "I find the stand of Turkey a mystery. When you have a good friend - and it was Syria which opened for the Turks the front gate of the Arabs, we allowed Turks to come here without visas, Syria was flooded with Turkish products - we do not expect to have to abide by other people's policies. I think there are bigger, larger reasons. There is to be an anti-missile shield in Turkey, Turkey is a member of Nato - I don't know what is in the cake for Turkey. When I heard yesterday some statements by a Turkish official about us, I felt like he was supposed to be the teacher and we the students. We did not do anything to provoke this stand from Turkey."

There is puzzlement over Qatar's fierce condemnation of Syria but apparent relief that Wednesday's Arab League meeting with the Syrians went well. "I

thought they came with a positive attitude. They said that Syria was a very important country in the Arab world, that anything that happens to Syria will affect all of the Arabs. Of course, a lot of their questions were based on the reports of Al Jazeera and Arabia [TV channels].”

I bet they were. Al Jazeera is banned in Syria.

29th October 2011

WHAT THE KILLING OF GADDAFI MEANS TO SYRIA

By Robert Fisk

TWO DAYS before Gaddafi was murdered, I was reading the morning newspapers in Beirut and discovered a remarkable story on most front pages. At the time, the mad ex-emperor of Libya was still hiding in Sirte, but there was this quotation by the US Secretary of State, La Clinton, speaking in Tripoli itself. “We hope he can be captured or killed soon,” she said, “so that you don’t have to fear him any longer.” This was so extraordinary that I underlined La Clinton’s words and clipped the article from one of the front pages. (My archives are on paper.) “We hope he can be captured or killed soon.” Then bingo. Nato bombs his runaway convoy and the old boy is hauled wounded from a sewage pipe and done away with.

Now in an age when America routinely assassinates its enemies, La Clinton’s words were remarkable because they at last acknowledged the truth. Normally, the State Department or the White House churned out the usual nonsense about how Gaddafi or Bin Laden or whoever must be “brought to justice” - and we all know what that means. But this week, the whole business turned much darker. Asked about his personal reaction, Obama the Good said that no one wanted to meet such an end, but that Gaddafi’s death should be a lesson “to all dictators around the world”. And we all knew what that meant. Principally, the message was to Bashar al-Assad of Syria. Maybe, ran the subtext, they would meet the same sticky end.

So now here I am in Damascus and I’ve been asking Syrians what they made of the whole business. Whenever I said Gaddafi was a crackpot, they would wholeheartedly agree. But when I spoke to a very senior government official who works directly for the Syrian leadership, he spoke in slightly different terms. “We don’t accept any comparisons,” he said. “But the seriousness of Gaddafi’s killing is that in the West in the future, they are going to say: ‘See how the Libyans behave? See how the Arabs behave? See how Muslims behave?’ This will be used against Islam. It was humiliating for the Libyans more than it was for Gaddafi, and that is why I fear it will be used against all of us. This is my real concern.”

On Syrian television this week, I made the point that Gaddafi was insane and that - whatever else you thought of him - Assad was not. This was met (naturally) by vigorous agreement from the presenter. But wait. I promised to tell readers what happened to the programme. Well, two days ago, quite by chance, I bumped into the journalist who had interviewed me. Alas, he said, he thought the translation and subtitles wouldn’t be ready for Saturday night’s broadcast. Maybe we could do another interview later. Back to that old saw, I guess: we

shall see.

In any event, I was made very much aware by her own personal assistant how “deeply hurt” Bashar al-Assad’s wife Asma was at a report in The Independent a couple of weeks ago which suggested that she was indifferent to the plight of civilian opponents of the regime killed by the security forces. The story - not by me - quoted an aid official in Damascus who was present at a meeting with the First Lady, saying that - when asked about the casualties - “there was no reaction”.

Needless to say, this report was gobbled up by the Arab media, including al-Jazeera, Assad’s most hated TV station. Now Asma al-Assad’s assistant has just given me the Syrian Arab Red Crescent’s own official Arabic-language account of the meeting. It makes interesting reading. SARC volunteers told the president’s wife that they received better treatment from the army “which has a clear leadership” than they did from the intelligence services at the checkpoints across Syria - they said the “muhabarrat” intelligence “enjoys no leadership or clear principles, at least from our point of view” - and that vehicles from the Ministry of Health are sometimes misused by “parties without control and this has created a situation of fear among citizens”. Mrs Assad was told how difficult it was for the SARC to work in dangerous areas and to move the wounded.

“Mrs Asma [sic] showed her understanding of the difficulties our volunteers are going through,” the SARC report says, “and expressed her deep admiration for their efforts in serving humanity and individual people... and promised to convey some of their demands to the authorities.” Mrs Assad’s visit was “informal” and the discussions “friendly”.

In the days that followed, the SARC report continued, the behaviour of “security checkpoints” towards their volunteers improved. A subsequent report in the weekly Syria Today quotes Mrs Assad as telling the Red Crescent volunteers that they “must remain neutral and independent during this time, focusing solely on humanitarian needs”.

So there you have it. Certainly not indifferent - but hardly a ringing condemnation of human rights abuses. Of course, I can see Asma al-Assad’s problem. Had she spoken out directly against the killing of protesters, of course, the world’s press and television would not have said that Mrs Assad stood up for human rights. The headlines would have been political, and would have read: “Syrian President attacked by wife.” The truth, I fear, is that once war begins, you just can’t win. Even if you are the wife of the president.

16th November 2011

ASSAD WILL ONLY GO IF HIS OWN TANKS TURN AGAINST HIM

By Robert Fisk

IN DAMASCUS earlier this month, Syrian state television asked me for an interview on events in Syria. With much trepidation, I accepted, promising the presenter he would not like all I said, but warning - a bit of Fisk blackmail, this - that any censored words would be relayed to readers of The Independent. The interview went ahead and I said that President Bashar al-Assad was “running out of time - fast”. The Arab people, I added, could no longer be infantilised; there was clearly an armed insurgency under way in Syria to overthrow the regime - foreign correspondents must be allowed to visit Homs and other areas where a host of YouTube pictures show protesters being shot down. When I was told later that the translation had not been finished in time, I smiled with my usual cynicism.

But almost incredibly, the interview duly aired on Syrian state television - and to my utter astonishment, they ran the lot (they used near-perfect subtitling), including the remarks about Assad “running out of time - fast”.

What happened? Did this have the President’s approval? Or was the government - or some part of the dictatorship - trying to show that they were in no doubt about how serious the near-civil war had become? I don’t know. And my Middle Eastern crystal ball broke many years ago. But I’ll hazard a dangerous prediction: Assad’s time is running out, fast - but don’t believe the State Department and the Washington “tink thanks” (as I call them) and the EU or the Arab League. He ain’t going yet.

Even the words of Jordan’s King Abdullah this week were slightly bent by the press and television coverage when he supposedly told the BBC that Assad should “step down”. What he actually said was that “if I was in his [Assad’s] shoes, I would step down”. Which is not quite the same thing. Far more important was that section of the interview - one of his best, by the way, and I’m not his majesty’s fan - in which he said that if Assad stepped down, only to be replaced by the same “system” (ie the Baath party), the problem would not be ended. Too true. And running alongside King Abdullah’s words, I thought, was the faint hope that perhaps Assad could still take the initiative and honour all his fine words (new constitution, political pluralism, real democracy, etc). Certainly, the West’s pompous predictions of Assad’s imminent demise - based more on YouTube than the reality on the ground - are hopelessly optimistic. True, there are deserters from the Syrian army. But you don’t win revolutions with Kalashnikov AK-47s. Only the desertion of a tank unit or two plus generals - Libya-style - could have any chance of that. And so far, there is none. Assad is not Gaddafi.

Furthermore, Russia's military support is not going to end. Only nine days after Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria, the joint director-general of the federal Russian service of military cooperation, Viatcheslav Djirkaln, said that there would be "no restrictions at all on arms deliveries to Syria". The Russians talk, of course, of "contractual obligations".

Nor is that surprising. The truth is that Russia was once Libya's only arms supplier; it was selling combat jets, frigates, tanks and anti-aircraft systems to Colonel Gaddafi after the West's 1974 arms embargo and had 3,500 advisers in the country. Its ships could refuel at the Tripoli naval base. Now it is associated with the dead and hated regime. Russia was 73rd on the list of nations to recognise the Libyan National Transitional Council.

So now the Syrian city of Tartous contains the only 24-hour port open to the Russian navy in the Mediterranean. Without Tartous, every Russian naval vessel in the sea would have to return through the Bosphorous to Odessa for every nut, screw and cigarette packet it needs. Friends, as they say, need each other.

Does the Arab League's threat of suspension really matter? I suspect not - but clearly the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem thinks very differently. He said that the league had taken "an extremely dangerous step" in threatening Syria and that US support for the league's decision was "incitement". Armour had already left Syrian cities, prisoners were being released, armed insurgents were being offered an amnesty. YouTube bounced back with video of a Russian-made armoured vehicle firing thousands of rounds down a Homs street and a photograph of a half-naked murdered Syrian, hands tied behind his back, lying in a Homs street. But murdered by whom?

One thing is now clear. Quite apart from the massive civilian casualties, even opponents of the regime now admit that Assad faces an armed insurgency. This may originally have been a myth promoted by the regime, but the monster has now been born. Anti-Assad activists now openly speak of "armed insurgents". Sixteen civilians were killed in Deraa three days ago. But 15 soldiers were killed on the same day in the same city. Who killed them? That's what we need to know.

16th November 2011

AT LEAST 70 DIE IN UPRISING AS VIOLENCE ESCALATES

By Kim Sengupta

MORE THAN 70 people have been killed over the last two days in some of the most violent scenes seen so far in the Syrian uprising. The deaths come amid claims that Qatar is supplying money and arms to the opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

According to activists, many of the latest to die were defectors from the military who had been targeted in an attack by government forces in the southern province of Daraa. The morgue in the city of Homs, one of the focal points of the resistance, received 20 corpses of people who have been shot.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded to the continued violence yesterday, saying the crackdown threatened to place Assad on a list of leaders who "feed on blood." The strong words came as Turkey warned it could cut electricity supplies to the country after a spate of attacks by Assad supporters on its diplomatic missions.

Qatar, with its tiny population and huge natural resources wealth, was one of the most ardent supporters and the leading supplier of arms to the rebels in Libya. The Emirate now wields enormous influence in the country and has been accused of spending vast sums of money to back Islamist factions in the post-Gaddafi political scene. Qatar has also been a driving force in the Arab League's critical stance towards the Assad regime, which has led to Syria's suspension from the organisation. Now, however, officials in Damascus as well as Middle-Eastern diplomats say that it has taken the further step of secretly sending funds and weapons to the rebels.

The Qatari government denies that it is arming the Syrian revolutionaries as well as rejecting charges that it is interfering with Libyan politics.

The opponents of the Damascus regime say they are grateful for the support received from the Emirate in contrast to some other Arab countries.

Bassma Koudrami, an exiled opposition leader, said: "Qatar played a very important role in the Arab League decision [to suspend Syria] and expose the atrocities being carried out. They are doing what other countries should be doing." Analyst Ramzi al-Ridwani said: "One gets the impression that Qatar wants to do it all - host Al-Jazeera, get the World Cup, be important in this changing scene in North Africa and West Asia."

17th November 2011

PLEA TO THE WEST: SYRIA NEEDS LIBYA-STYLE INTERVENTION

By Patrick Cockburn

AS VIOLENCE in Syria intensifies with an attack by anti-government forces on an air defence intelligence complex near Damascus, a senior Arab diplomat in London says Middle Eastern states opposing the Syrian government need West European leadership similar to that seen in the Libyan war.

He said that what was needed was “a team captain” to co-ordinate moves to put pressure on Syria, and only the Europeans could do this. The US is preoccupied by domestic politics and “in the Middle East everybody is driven by ego. How can you have a regional policy when they [local rulers] can’t talk to each other?”

The diplomat added that a crucial turning point would come in Syria if the anti-government forces succeeded in establishing an independent enclave like Benghazi in Libya. He thought this was more likely to happen in the north on the Turkish border rather than around Deraa, north of the Jordanian frontier, where the protests began. The existence of such an enclave would raise the possibility of setting up a no-fly zone.

The crisis has reached a crucial stage inside and outside Syria. Inside the country, the Syrian opposition claim that fighting has escalated with 71 people killed on Monday, including 34 government soldiers and that army defectors using automatic rifles and rocket propelled grenade launchers attacked an air force intelligence base near Damascus yesterday. The attack on the Harasta facility is the first such reported assault on a major security facility in the eight-month uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which purports to be a band of army deserters set on ending President Assad’s rule. Speaking to Al Jazeera, Ammar al-Wawi, a commander in the FSA, said: “Our only goal is to liberate Syria from Bashar Assad’s regime. To put it simply, we carry out military operations against anyone who targets the peaceful protesters.”

Their claims cannot be independently verified because the government has excluded most foreign journalists.

President Assad is increasingly isolated as the 22-member Arab League yesterday confirmed the suspension of Syria from the organization and gave its government three days to halt the violence and accept an observer mission or face economic sanctions

The protocol agreed upon yesterday calls for an observer mission of 30-50 members under the auspices of the Arab League to ensure that Syria is following the Arab plan, an end to attacks on protesters, pull tanks and armoured vehicles

out of cities, release political prisoners, and allow journalists and rights groups into the country.

The extent of Syria's isolation is underlined by the presence at the meeting of the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu for a meeting on Arab-Turkish ties. He said: "We denounce the mass murder of the Syrian people. It is all of our responsibility to end the bloodshed in Syria."

Of Syria's neighbours, Turkey is the one best placed to move decisively against the government in Damascus. It could declare a wide buffer zone on the Turkish-Syrian frontier which would become an enclave for the opposition.

In another move last night France withdrew its ambassador. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said: "The vice is tightening" around the Syrian regime. Middle East leaders are concluding that President Assad cannot survive for, at most, more than a year or two because the loyal units in his army will be worn down by constant use in suppressing protests.

But the difficulty facing Middle East states eager to see the end of the Baathist government in Damascus is that the Syrian opposition is disunited and different groups are of uncertain strength.

Despite this, there is a growing consensus - that may prove self-fulfilling - among states in the Middle East that the regime will be overthrown. The support of Russia and China may prove to be largely rhetorical and Iranian leaders have shifted away from publicly claiming that the survival of Iran depends on the present Syrian government staying in power.

19th November 2011

BRITAIN IN SECRET TALKS WITH SYRIAN REBELS

By Kim Sengupta and Catrina Stewart

BRITAIN HAS formally opened talks with the Syrian opposition movement as international pressure continues to mount against the beleaguered regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Frances Guy, a former ambassador to Lebanon, met members of the exiled opposition in Paris yesterday. The Foreign Secretary, William Hague, is to meet members of the Syrian opposition in London next week when they will also hold talks with senior officials in Downing Street.

Although the UK, along with other Western states like France - which appealed to the United Nations yesterday to impose tougher sanctions - has been in informal contact with the opposition for the last three months, the progression of the working relationship opens up the prospect of the rebels eventually being recognised as the country's representatives and supplanting the Assad regime.

The West's Libyan mission started in a similar fashion with the country's revolutionaries, but senior diplomatic sources warned against drawing parallels. "This is not about recognition of them as the government - that is not the case," said a senior diplomatic source. "The difference with the Libyan situation was that the Libyan National Transitional Council controlled swathes of the country. We are asking the Syrian opposition to present a coherent set of policies and organise themselves." The Syrian National Council and the National Co-ordination Committee for Democratic Change are among the groups whose leaders have been involved in the talks.

The development comes as France said that it, too, was ready to work with the Syrian opposition, maintaining that it is too late for the Assad regime to save itself by carrying out reforms.

Opposition from the veto-wielding members Russia and China has largely prevented the UN's Security Council from responding to Assad's crackdown on an eight-month uprising against his rule. But, following talks yesterday in Turkey, the French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé said the situation was "no longer sustainable" and that the UN must act.

"It is not normal that the Security Council has not made any decision so far," Mr Juppé told reporters. "I hope those blocking any resolution will be aware of the reality of the situation."

Turkey also called for action, with its Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, saying more must be done to stop the "massacre".

As international pressure on Syria builds, Damascus made a tentative gesture to the Arab League, agreeing in principle to allow observers to enter the country for the first time to oversee the implementation of a peace plan to end the bloodshed.

But there were few signs yesterday that the violence was abating following reports that at least 12 civilians, including two children, were killed when security forces fired on protesters following Friday prayers.

Syria's apparent concession came after the Arab League suspended Syria and gave it until the end of this week to implement a peace plan that calls for the regime to withdraw its forces from towns and end the violence. Hundreds of people have been killed since Syria accepted, and then largely ignored, the peace plan three weeks ago.

Syrian officials were yesterday quoted as saying that they would accept foreign observers in the country, but that they had outlined their reservations to the Arab League. The body, which has threatened Damascus with sanctions, said it was studying the suggestions.

But Mr Juppé expressed scepticism that Syria was ready to stop the violence. "We believe the regime was not willing to implement a reform programme and now it is too late," he said.

The UN estimates that at least 3,500 people have been killed since the government began its crackdown against an anti-regime uprising in March. Assad's regime has accused foreign-backed "armed terrorist gangs" of killing 1,000 of its security personnel.

The soaring death toll has pushed some to demand the international community put greater pressure on the embattled regime. In what could be a preliminary push towards sanctions, Germany, France and Britain are planning to ask the UN General Assembly to adopt a non-binding resolution condemning the violence in Syria.

The European Union has already imposed sanctions on Syria, but Russia, a close ally of Syria, and China have blocked any wider international measures under a UN umbrella.

Some protesters have responded to the regime's crackdown by taking up arms to defend themselves. In the past week, the Syrian Free Army, a rebel force formed in July from military defectors, has mounted deadly attacks on regime targets, including the air force's intelligence directorate. The attacks are the most potent fightback so far, and have exacerbated fears that the country is sliding towards armed insurrection.

20th November 2011

COMPARED WITH SYRIA, THE FALL OF LIBYA WAS A PIECE OF CAKE

By Patrick Cockburn

PRESIDENT BASHAR al-Assad's enemies are closing in for the kill. The Arab League is suspending Syria, and Turkey, once a close ally, is leading the pack in seeking to displace the government that has ruled for 40 years. Arab leaders are talking to West European states about deploying the same mix of political, military and economic sanctions against Syria that was used in Libya.

This final assault is already producing convulsions across the Middle East and beyond, because the outcome of the struggle will have an explosive impact on the entire region. By comparison, the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was a marginal event. Complex though these developments are, the media's coverage has been misleadingly simple-minded and one-dimensional, giving the impression that all we are witnessing is a heroic uprising by the Syrian masses against a brutal Baathist police state.

This is certainly one aspect of the crisis. Brutal repression is continuous. Death squads roam the streets. Foreign journalists, banned from Syria and reliant on information from the opposition, report this. But manipulation of the media by the opposition is also made easy by the lack of information from the country. Opposition claims, such as one last week that an air force intelligence centre near Damascus had been stormed, are credulously accepted and published, although other accounts suggest that all that happened was that the building was hit by rocket-propelled grenades that scorched its paintwork.

The line-up of the Syrian government's opponents should make it clear to anybody that there is more at stake here than Arab and international concern for human rights. The lead is being taken by Saudi Arabia - its repressive regime one of the few absolute monarchies left on the planet. In March, it sent 1,500 troops into Bahrain to crush protests very similar to those in Syria. Unstinting support was given by the Saudis to the Bahraini authorities as they tortured distinguished hospital consultants whose only crime was to treat injured protesters. Is it really conceivable that Saudi Arabia should be primarily motivated by humanitarian concerns?

A more convincing motive for international involvement is the decades-old but escalating struggle against Iran by the US, its Nato allies, Israel and the Sunni states of the Middle East. But the last few years have shown the limits of effective action against Iran, short of war, which, for all the bluster from Washington and Tel Aviv, they are wary of fighting. But Syria is a different matter. "If you can't beat Iran, the second best option is to break Syria," says the Iraqi political scientist Ghassan Attiyah, who points out the absurdity of Saudi Arabia presenting itself as a defender of human and democratic rights in the

Middle East.

The US has been carefully keeping in the background, although one senior Arab official says that Damascus had sent emissaries to talk to the Americans to see if Washington would ease up on the campaign against it. The US price was that Syria must break with Iran, but the Syrians were dubious about what exactly they would get in return for giving up their sole ally. “We are being asked to jump into a swimming pool with no water in it,” they said.

The struggle for Syria is the latest arena for the sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia. Its modern origins lie in the Iranian revolution of 1979, deepened during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, and reached new depths of hatred in Iraq during the Shia-Sunni civil war in 2005-07.

In 2005, Iraq became the first Arab state since the Fatimids in Egypt in the 12th century to have a predominantly Shia government. In Lebanon, the Shia political-military Hezbollah movement became the leading political player and withstood an Israeli military assault in 2006. In post- Taliban Afghanistan, the Hazara, a Shia ethnic group which was once oppressed as virtual serfs, grew in political and economic strength.

The Arab Spring at first seemed to work in favour of the Shia and Iran by deposing some of their most notable opponents, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. The 70 per cent Shia majority in Bahrain demanded democratic rights in February and March, only to be brutally repressed. Those tortured say their torturers continually demanded they confess to links to Iran. Underlining the sectarian nature of the repression, the Bahraini authorities demolished Shia mosques and desecrated the graves of Shia holy men.

The gathering alliance against the Assad government is both anti-Iranian and anti-Shia. It is based on the correct assumption that the fall of the present regime will be a blow to both. The Alawites, the heteredox Shia sect to which 12 per cent of Syrians belong, dominate the ruling elite. A senior Middle East diplomat says: “The Alawites have decided they must do or die with Assad.” The Christians and Druze likewise do not expect much mercy from a triumphant Sunni regime, while Hezbollah will be weakened in Lebanon and Syria’s 30-year alliance with Iran will end. Not surprisingly, the Iranians see the assault on Syria primarily as an anti-Shia and anti-Iranian counter-revolution wearing a human rights mask.

How will Iran and Iraq, the two most important Shia states, respond to the growing likelihood of the fall of the government in Damascus? The Iranians will do all they can to prop it up, but already suspect this may not be enough. Consequently, they will respond to the loss of their Syrian ally by increasing their influence in Iraq. “They will do everything to hold Iraq as their last line of

defence," Dr Attiyah says, "but the country will become a battleground."

Baghdad has its own reasons for fearing the outcome of the crisis in Syria. The Sunni minority in Iraq, politically marginalised by the Shia and Kurds, will be strengthened if a Sunni regime takes over next door in Damascus. The withdrawal of the last US troops at the end of the year means that Washington has less reason to defend the Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki. The Iraqi leader should be under no illusion about the hostility of his Sunni neighbours.

The fall of the government in Syria will not be confined to one country, as happened in Libya. It will throw the whole Middle East into turmoil. Turkish leaders say privately they have been given a free hand by the US and Britain to do what they want. But the Saudis have no wish to see Turkey become the champions of the Muslim world. The battle for Syria is already producing fresh rivalries and the seeds of future conflicts.

23rd *November* 2011

AS ONE REBELLION REIGNITES, ASSAD WILL SENSE A CHANCE TO SET HIS HOUSE IN ORDER

By Robert Fisk

EGYPT IS the best thing to happen to Syria for a long time. Just when Western leaders - and Qatar - were hounding President Bashar al-Assad for his brutal suppression of opposition demonstrations, along comes the latest crisis in Egyptian cities where security men brutally suppress opposition demonstrators who want the army to obey the orders of a real democratic parliament and to stop posing as the “guardians” of a new constitution.

Of course, Syria is not Egypt, which accounts for the mouse-like silence of the Obamas, Clintons, Camerons, Sarkozys and the Emir of Qatar over events in Cairo.

This gives yet more time for Damascus to talk about democracy, reform, pluralistic politics and a new constitution while its army fights the armed insurgency that has spread from Homs - a city that is now the centre of a vicious sectarian war. Is it still possible, conceivably, that President Assad will use this tiny bottle of oxygen from Egypt to prove that he really - really - means what he says about democracy, pluralism, etc?

Dr Faisal Mokdad, Assad’s Deputy Foreign Minister, is a believer. “Syria is changing and the old Syria will never come back,” he told me. “It will be a country free for the press. The ballot box will decide.” The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq set back early plans for reform, Dr Mokdad insists. I have my doubts about this, but take note of the minister’s conviction that Obama made the right decision in withdrawing from Iraq.

“Today, I heard that the number of young American soldiers killed in Iraq - quite apart from the huge civilian casualties - was 4,600. This is a question the American people should ask themselves. Saddam Hussein has gone - but was it worth $400bn? In Libya, I’m told the cost was 30,000 dead.” I turned to the little matter of civilian casualties in Syria and the UN’s claim that 3,500 had died. Was it worth it?

Dr Mokdad is the right man to ask, for he was the official chosen by President Assad to face the bereaved families of Deraa when two teenagers died under torture by police after writing anti-Assad graffiti in the city last February.

“What happened should never have happened,” Dr Mokdad says. “I was sent to Deraa to give condolences for the dead. I faced angry people. I told them the President did not want this to happen, that the President had nothing to do with it. I gave them the President’s condolences and they said they knew mistakes were made, that the President had nothing to do with this. He fired the governor and he established an independent judicial committee to investigate. What I do know is that armed groups are killing demonstrators.”

But demonstrators killed by “armed groups” is not what the YouTube pictures from Homs suggest; today, however, these “armed groups” are certainly killing Assad’s soldiers in very large numbers; opposition groups deny they are behind the insurgency, though they express enough frustration to make anyone suspect they are.

Dr Mokdad believes foreign journalists should be in Syria, but tells me he does not want me to risk my life in Homs and that “the British Government will blame us if you are killed”.

25th November 2011

EXILE DREAMS OF A BLOODLESS RETURN AFTER A LIFE SPENT STANDING UP TO ASSAD REGIME

By Robert Fisk

“IF BASHAR al-Assad is caught in Damascus, he will not be treated like Gaddafi. But what if he was caught in Homs? We don’t want Mr Bashar al-Assad to face this end. But, as Mr Erdogan says, he has to think what happened to Gaddafi and to Saddam Hussein. The youth now are crazy. All revolutions are created by crazy men, not by wise men.”

Khaled Khoja sits back - we are in one of Istanbul’s ancient hotels, the 15th-century Malatya Tower looming over us in the city that has been Khoja’s home-in-exile these past 29 years - and he watches me, I think, to see if I admire his grasp of English.

Khaled Khoja, a family doctor in his forties, is one of the most senior representatives of the exiled Syrian National Council, recognised only by Libya as the representative of Syria, constantly urged by Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan - and most recently by William Hague - to end its feuds with other Syrian opposition groups, an institution that is a danger and a pest to President Assad’s regime. Like all exiles, Khoja basks in a strange mixture of fantasy and reality.

“We don’t have another chance,” Khoja says. “Otherwise it will be a sectarian conflict. If the civilians arm themselves, it will be a disaster. Al-Assad? I give him six months to a year.”

The chaos in the central city of Homs is already a sectarian conflict, a miniature civil war. Civilians have clearly already armed themselves. Yet Khoja’s prediction of the President’s political life - six months to a year - is infinitely more realistic than the nonsense peddled by the Gulf Arabs and the The Wall Street Journal, who suggest Assad will be gone in weeks, if not days.

Khaled Khoja has the kind of CV every Syrian opposition leader craves. For his refusal to countenance Bashar’s father, Hafez, Khoja’s father was imprisoned for 14 years, his mother sentenced to five years, the 15-year-old Khaled for two years - one in the cells of the intelligence headquarters in Damascus. Of his three uncles, one was hanged; two, according to Khoja, were shot in the street.

Khoja admits he met the armed insurgents of Syria in the Turkish city of Antakya. “They said they were organising themselves and that the rebellion started in Jisr al-Shughour in Idlib. They trained the youth there. They are getting guns from Lebanon - and somehow guns from Iraq. [A] ‘buffer zone’... will be the next step if Bashar al-Assad continues killing people. Most refugees will try to evacuate to a buffer zone. A no-fly zone would help the Free Syrian Army to organise themselves in the buffer zone without any military intervention.”

So there you have it. A Turkish army buffer zone - three miles into Syria, if the Turks are to be believed - would give the armed rebels territory inside Syria (just as the Libyan rebels possessed in Tobruk and Benghazi). Khoja, a member of the SNC's "foreign affairs committee", was urged by fellow exiles from the US, Canada and the Gulf to visit Tripoli; he arrived the day after Gaddafi was murdered. But the SNC's ambitions do not end with mere political support.

"Co-ordinating with King Abdullah of Jordan, there could be another buffer zone in Deraa [in southern Syria] so that the Syrian regime will be stuck like Saddam Hussein in 1990 - with buffer zones in north and south. But there could be a solution without any military intervention. The Syrian army can reorganise itself.

"In the early days of the Syrian uprising, the Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates visited Syria - just as he visited Saddam Hussein before the 2003 invasion and visited Hosni Mubarak before he was overthrown. And when the UAE is involved, it means there is an offer to the Assad family... and I think that if allowed to flee Syria with a guarantee, the Assad family could go to Saudi Arabia, the Emirates or to Malta - the safest area - and it would be a good solution. We don't want to take revenge on the Assad family, especially if this will help avoid a civil war."

Khoja has no illusions about Russia's support for Syria. "The Russians talk to us," he says. "They are trying to convince us to have a compromise with Bashar al-Assad and give him a chance. This will not change - they will support Bashar to the end. The Russian regime is no different from the Syrian regime. The Russian military have interests in [the Syrian naval port] Tartous. But the most benefit the Russians get from the Syrian crisis is that the Russian economy is enjoying an extra cash flow by selling energy during Middle East crises. This works for the benefit of Russia."

I suggest that exile, especially after almost three decades, can lead Khoja into mythology rather than history. No, he says. "I can think very clearly, even in exile - but I'm not facing the tanks. I'm not facing the bullets of the regime."

8th December 2011

ONLY A CRAZY LEADER KILLS HIS OWN PEOPLE, SAYS ASSAD

By Kim Sengupta

PRESIDENT BASHAR al-Assad has declared that only a “crazy” leader kills citizens of his own country and those who have died in Syria since the start of the protests were supporters, rather than opponents, of his regime.

Around 4,000 people have died since the start of the protests and Syria faces the threat of sanctions from the Arab League and punitive measures from the wider international community. But Assad insisted yesterday his loyal followers were the real victims.

“We don’t kill our people,” he said in an interview on ABC, above. “No government in the world kills its people, unless it’s led by a crazy person. Most of the people that have been killed are supporters of the government, not the vice versa... There is a difference between having a policy to crack down and having some mistakes committed by some officials.” Asked whether he regretted the strife which has engulfed Syria, he said he had done his best to “protect the people”.

US Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman dismissed the Syrian leader’s claims, stating: “Assad and his clique should stop the killing, stop the torture, stop the jailing. We want to use all of the tools that are available to the international community to change what is happening in Syria by peaceful means.”

But a senior western European diplomat warned yesterday that the absence of senior government defection so far meant Western countries pushing for change “could be in it for the long haul”.

24th December 2011

SYRIA BLAMES AL-QA'IDA AS TWO SUICIDE BLASTS KILL 40

By Kim Sengupta

TWO CAR bomb attacks in Damascus yesterday led to immediate accusations and recriminations between the government and opposition activists yesterday after Bashar al-Assad's regime seized upon the attacks as proof that it was facing an organised terrorist campaign involving al-Qa'ida.

More than 40 people were killed and 150 were injured in the two blasts, which came within minutes of each other and are the first large-scale suicide bombings of the Arab Spring.

As the government pointed the finger of blame at terrorists, the opposition countered that the explosions had taken place at a highly opportune time for the regime - just after the arrival of a team of observers from the Arab League to the Syrian capital.

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi had repeatedly claimed Libya's revolution was driven by al-Qa'ida and its allies.

Holding up the supposed threat of Islamist terror has been a common trait among dictators trying to cling to power during the popular revolts in North Africa and the Middle East.

Although senior figures in Syria's protest movement stopped short of directly accusing the regime of being responsible for the two bombs, many activists are convinced this is the case.

Some residents in Damascus claimed roads near the scene of the attacks in the Kafar Sousah district were shut off before the explosions took place.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman maintained the regime had received information about an impending attack.

"The Lebanese authorities warned us two days ago that an al-Qa'ida group infiltrated to Syria from [the northern Lebanese town of] Ersal," he said.

"Today's suicide bombers have caused many deaths. Freedom seekers should know that this is not the way to achieve democracy."

The Arab League delegation was taken to the blast site. There, pointing out a gouged-out crater, deputy foreign minister Faysel Mekdad said: "We said it from the beginning, didn't we? This is terrorism. They are killing the army and ordinary people."

Standing beside him, the head of an advance team of the observers, Saif el-Yazal, responded: "We are here to see the facts on the ground. What we are seeing today is regretful. The important thing is for things to calm down."

Omar Idilbi, a member of the Syrian National Council, an umbrella opposition group, said the explosions were "very mysterious".

"They happened in heavily guarded areas that are difficult to be penetrated by

a car," he said. "The presence of the Arab League advance team of observers pushed the regime to give this story in order to scare the committee from moving around Syria.

"The second message is an attempt to make the Arab League and international public opinion believe that Syria is being subjected to acts of terrorism by members of al-Qai'da."

One resident in the area of the attack said he was deeply sceptical of the official version of events.

Daoud, who declined to give his surname, said: "People had been told that there may be bombings. In that case how did these bombers get through?

"This is a very secure area and there had been further security with roads blocked off, which makes one think someone inside was responsible."

However, others felt the blasts were an attempt to introduce sectarian strife of the type seen in Iraq.

Haifa Nashar,45, blamed Qatar, the Sunni state that has become the leading supporter of the rebels in the Arab League. Wailing outside a damaged building, she shouted: "May God curse their souls!"

2012

11th January 2012

ASSAD FACES HIS PEOPLE'S HATRED - BUT AS THEIR ANGER GROWS, HIS EXCUSES ARE STILL JUST THE SAME

By Robert Fisk

IT WAS the Assad Speech of the Year. There was an international conspiracy against Syria. True. Arab states opposed to Syria were under “outside pressure”. True, up to a point. Nobody could deny the seriousness of these plots. True. After all, the Syrian government itself registers 2,000 dead soldiers, while the UN estimates civilian dead at 5,000. And when Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan warned that the violence in Syria was “heading towards a sectarian, religious war”, there were few supporters of President Assad who would disagree with him.

As for foreign plots, who doubts that weapons are pouring into Syria from Assad’s enemies in Lebanon? Syria’s Defence Minister, Fayez Ghosn, has stated that al-Qa’ida had infiltrated the northern Lebanese town of Arsal - a dodgy claim since the only death there appears to have been caused by Syrian troops. The Lebanese Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, still nominally an Assad ally, suggested officials should not use such all-encompassing words that mean anything to anyone. True again. Jumblatt said the recent explosions in Damascus that killed at least 25 Syrians raised “many questions” - because they coincided with the Arab League monitors’ visit.

So far, then, so good. Assad also promised a referendum on the constitution around March and elections mid-year. The problem, of course, is two-fold. Although President Assad was giving his first public address in six months, it contained little new. The foreign plotters, the Arab states under foreign pressure, the threat to hit the regime’s armed enemies with “an iron fist”, are statements that we have all heard before.

What has changed, however, is the extent and speed of the deterioration in Syria, an ever more blood-curdling battle in which Assad’s opponents are ever more heavily armed and readier to assault the regime’s forces. The “Free Syria Army” or the “Free Army” is steadily growing in size, although it will not be taken seriously by its armourers unless whole Syrian military units defect.

Assad’s government, however, has still found itself unable to deal with the news side of the crisis. By allowing few international journalists to enter the country, officials have allowed the stunning YouTube images of the opposition to lead public opinion. When Al Jazeera can broadcast a Muslim imam in a crowded mosque shouting “Assad’s soldiers - God curse them - say Assad is their God; if that doesn’t make you angry, what will?” and then give specific details of protesters’ demonstration tactics in a suburb of Damascus, the Syrian Ministry of Information has a real problem.

The President can say - as he did yesterday - that “according to the law,

nobody should open fire - only in self-defence or in a battle with an armed person", but dozens of YouTube phone videos on Al Jazeera suggest that such laws are widely ignored by the regime.

Of course, Al Jazeera is funded by the Emir of Qatar, and the Qatari royal family's influence has now reached its zenith in the Arab League - which has threatened to allow the whole bloody business to go to the UN Security Council. It's not difficult to see how - from a sparse Baathist drawing room - this looks more like conspiracy than coincidence. The League has been boasting of its sense of resolution, while Assad believes it was his idea to bring the League's monitors to Syria. And that's exactly what he told us all yesterday. The Kuwaitis, meanwhile, said that two of their League military monitors in Syria had been slightly wounded by "unidentified protesters". It would be interesting to know whom the protesters were protesting against.

1st February 2012

SYRIA IS USED TO THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OF FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

By Robert Fisk

THE VIOLENCE grows worse. The Arab League throws up its hands in despair. Madame Clinton may huff and puff at the United Nations. But the Syrian regime and the stalwarts of the old Baath party don't budge. Only the Arabs are unsurprised. For Syria - the "Um al-Arabia wahida", the Mother of One Arab People, as the Baathists would have it - is a tough creature, its rulers among the most tenacious in the Middle East, used to the slings and arrows of their friends as well as their enemies. Syria's "No" to anything but total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in return for peace is almost as famous as De Gaulle's "No" to British entry to the European Union.

True, the Syrian regime has never confronted opposition on such a scale. If the fatalities do not yet come close to the 10 or 20 thousand dead of the 1982 Hama uprising, which old Hafez al-Assad crushed with his customary ruthlessness, the widespread nature of today's rebellion, the defections from the Syrian army, the loss of all but one Arab ally - little Lebanon, of course - and the slow growth of a civil war make this the most dangerous moment in Syria's post-independence history. How can Bashar al-Assad hang on?

Well, there's Russia, of course, and the Putin-Medvedev determination not to be caught out by the West at the United Nations as they were when they failed to oppose the no-fly zones over Libya that led directly to Gaddafi's collapse. And there's Iran, for which Syria remains the Arab bridgehead. And Iranian suspicion that Syria is under international attack principally because of this alliance may well be correct. Strike down Baathist Syria and its Alawi-Shia President, and you cut deep into the soul of Iran itself. And there's Israel, which utters scarcely a word about Syria because it fears that a far more intransigent regime might take its place.

But Syria is also a symbol. In Arab eyes, it alone defied the West in refusing an unjust peace in the Middle East. Alone, it refused Anwar Sadat's peace with Israel. Alone, it turned its back on Yasser Arafat after his doomed agreement for "peace" with Israel. And historically, Syria alone defied its French occupiers in 1920 and then again in 1946 until its Damascus parliament was burned down over the heads of its defenders. And while many Lebanese choose to forget their own history, it remains a fact that after the First World War, most Lebanese wished their land to remain part of Syria - see the results of the King-Crane commission - rather than live in a separate nation under French patronage.

And far from being a state based on expansion, as America likes to claim, Syria has steadily lost territory. It lost Lebanon to French machinations. It lost Alexandretta in 1939 when the French handed it over to Turkey after a

fraudulent referendum in the vain hope that the Turks would join the Allied alliance against Hitler. And it lost Golan to Israel in 1967. For Syria as a nation - rather than a regime - there is much sympathy as well as respect in the Arab world. Bashar al-Assad - neither a toady like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak nor mad like Libya's Gaddafi - knows all this.

But Baathism is not "Arabism", however much its supporters may claim the opposite. Decades of stability did not rid Syria of corruption. It fostered dictatorship along the same, dull rules which the Arabs tolerated for so many years: better autocracy than anarchy, better peace than freedom, albeit controlled by a Shia minority, better secular than sectarian. Why, if any Syrian wanted to see the results of a confessional state, they had only to look at the civil war in Lebanon.

With embarrassment, I look back now to that terrible conflict and the cruel words I wrote so many years ago; that one day, after years of Syrian military "peacekeepers" in Lebanon, the Lebanese army may be asked to fulfil the role of "peacekeepers" in Syria. At the time, it was a wicked joke. Not now, perhaps. Indeed, a Lebanese peace force in Syria - where all of Lebanon's communities (Sunni, Shia, Christian Maronite, Orthodox, Druze, Armenian) are represented - might just be one way of damping down the civil conflict there. A supreme irony, perhaps, after the 1976-2005 Syrian army's presence in Lebanon. An impossibility, of course. But it shows the nature of political change in the Middle East.

In reality, the Syrian government is likely to fight on alone. It always has. The Assad father-and-son doctrine has always been one of patience. Hold on tight - however great the condemnation by the rest of the world, however terrible the threats from Israel or America - and eventually the wheel of fortune will turn once more in your favour.

The awful carnage in Homs and the rest of Syria, the beheadings and the torture, however, suggest that Assad rule really is running out of time. Syria's people are dying just as the people of Egypt and Libya and Yemen have died, because they want the dignity of governing themselves. Their own battle is already infecting the sectarian divisions in northern Lebanon and they exist inside the Lebanese parliament, although this will not be the Syrian government's primary concern.

The battle for survival is a terrible thing and Bashar al-Assad still appears to believe that he can squeeze through his mass of proposed reforms before the disintegration of Syria. No one outside Syria appears to believe he will be successful. But there is one unasked question. Just suppose the regime did survive. Over what kind of Syria would it rule?

7th February 2012

FROM WASHINGTON THIS LOOKS LIKE SYRIA'S 'BENGHAZI MOMENT'. BUT NOT FROM HERE

By Robert Fisk

PRESIDENT BASHAR al-Assad is not about to go. Not yet. Not, maybe, for quite a long time. Newspapers in the Middle East are filled with stories about whether or not this is Assad's "Benghazi moment" - these reports are almost invariably written from Washington or London or Paris - but few in the region understand how we Westerners can get it so wrong. The old saw has to be repeated and repeated: Egypt was not Tunisia; Bahrain was not Egypt; Yemen was not Bahrain; Libya was not Yemen. And Syria is very definitely not Libya.

It's not difficult to see how the opposite plays in the West. The barrage of horrifying Facebook images from Homs, and statements from the "Free Syrian Army", and the huffing of La Clinton and the amazement that Russia can be so blind to the suffering of Syrians - as if America was anything but blind to the suffering of Palestinians when, say, more than 1,300 were killed in Israel's onslaught on Gaza - doesn't gel with reality on the ground. Why should the Russians care about Homs? Did they care about the dead of Chechnya?

Look at it the other way round. Yes, we all know that Syria's intelligence service has committed human rights abuses. They did that in Lebanon. Yes, we all know this is a regime in Damascus, not an elected government. Yes, we all know about corruption. Yes, we watched the UN's humiliation at the weekend - although why La Clinton should expect the Russians to click their heels after the "no-fly zone" in Libya turned into "regime change" is a bit of a mystery.

The destruction of the Alawite-led government in Syria - which means in effect, a Shia regime - will be a sword in the soul of Shia Iran. And look at the Middle East now from the windows of the massive presidential palace that overlooks the old city of Damascus. True, the Gulf has turned against Syria. True, Turkey has turned against Syria (while generously offering Bashar exile in the old Ottoman empire).

But look east, and what does Bashar see? Loyal Iran standing with him. Loyal Iraq - Iran's new best friend in the Arab world - refusing to impose sanctions. And to the west, loyal little Lebanon refusing to impose sanctions. Thus from the border of Afghanistan to the Mediterranean, Assad has a straight line of alliances which should prevent, at least, his economic collapse.

The trouble is that the West has been so deluged with stories and lectures and think-tank nonsense about the ghastly Iran and the unfaithful Iraq and the vicious Syria and the frightened Lebanon that it is almost impossible to snap off these delusional pictures and realise that Assad is not alone. That is not to praise Assad or to support his continuation. But it's real.

The Turks, after much Clinton-style huffing and puffing, did not follow

through on their “cordon sanitaire” in northern Syria. Nor did King Abdullah II follow through on the Syrian opposition’s call for a Jordanian “cordon sanitaire” in the south. Oddly, I repeat yet again, only Israel has remained silent.

As long as Syria can trade with Iraq, it can trade with Iran and, of course, it can trade with Lebanon. The Shia of Iran and the Shia majority in Iraq and the Shia leadership (though not majority) in Syria and the Shia (the largest community, but not a majority) in Lebanon will be on Assad’s side, however reluctantly. That, I’m afraid, is the way the cookie crumbles. Crazed Gaddafi had real enemies with firepower and Nato. Assad’s enemies have Kalashnikovs and no Nato.

Assad has Damascus and Aleppo, and those cities matter. His principal military units have not defected to the opposition.

The “good guys” also contain “bad guys” - a fact we forgot in Libya, even when the “good guys” murdered their defected army commander and tortured prisoners to death. Oh yes, and the Royal Navy was able to put into Benghazi. It cannot put into Tartous because the Russian Navy is still there.

9th February 2012

ASSAD IS NOT FIRING ARTILLERY AT CIVILIANS, CLAIMS RUSSIA

By Kim Sengupta

THERE IS no proof that Bashar al-Assad's regime is using its heavy weapons to bombard Homs, the Russian Foreign Minister is said to have declared yesterday. Sergei Lavrov's comments on the besieged city came during a telephone conversation with the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, as the Syrian opposition reported dozens more dead and injured.

During the half-hour conversation, Mr Lavrov - according to senior diplomatic sources - stated that Mr Assad had assured him he was not using heavy weapons in urban conflict zones like Homs and had no intention of doing so. The television images of killings and destruction showed just one side of the story, Mr Lavrov held.

Mr Hague is said to have assured Mr Lavrov that "Syria was not Libya" and that the UK has no intention of a military entanglement. He raised the issue of continuing arms sales by Moscow to the Assad regime, which drew the riposte from Mr Lavrov that this was not illegal.

Mr Lavrov, who visited Damascus on Tuesday, defended the use of the veto, along with China, to block a UN resolution calling on Mr Assad to stop attacks on his own people and step down. The Foreign Minister insisted that the removal of the Syrian President cannot be a precondition for a negotiated end to the strife.

In the Commons, David Cameron was dismissive of Russia's unilateral attempt at a diplomatic intervention, saying he had "very little confidence" it would end the fighting. He told MPs the international community had now to work with Syrian opposition groups to co-ordinate a response to the Assad regime.

11th February 2012

BRITAIN COMPILES DOSSIER OF RIGHTS ABUSES IN SYRIA

By Kim Sengupta

THE BRITISH Government is funding a number of organisations to compile details of human-rights abuses by the Syrian regime, which could be used as evidence in future war-crimes trials.

Britain is also pressing to add to a list of Syrian officials who will be subjected to the full rigours of European Union sanctions. These names could be used to track down and target those culpable of tortures and killings, diplomatic sources said.

A senior Western diplomatic source said: “Britain is funding some organisations to document abuses. We have also got designated names for EU sanctions. These are travel bans and assets freezes at the moment, but they may be something else in the future.”

With diplomatic options narrowing after Russia and China vetoed an Arab League-sponsored UN Security Council resolution asking for a transition of power, Britain will join the “Friends of Syria”, which will pursue punitive measures against the Syrian regime. The group will comprise Middle Eastern and Western European states and the US. But the UK would like to see a wider field with countries like Japan and India invited to join.

France and Turkey have offered to hold the first meeting of the Group with Washington pressing for it to take place as early as next week.

11th February 2012

COULD THERE BE SOME BAD GUYS AMONG THE REBELS TOO?

By Robert Fisk

JOHN MCCAIN backed the good guys in Libya, who are now keenly torturing their opponents to death. The same John McCain now backs the good guys in Syria - no “boots on the ground”, mind you, for this is war without death for America - and it all seems OK, until I sit opposite a guy over coffee in Beirut who kind of makes the whole story a bit more complicated. We back surrounded minorities, fighting bravely for their rights against overwhelming odds - Homs, for example. We did the same when the Kosovo Liberation Army - not exactly the squeaky-clean outfit that Nato would have us believe until Slobodan Milosevic surrendered - fought against overwhelming Serbian odds in 1998.

Maybe it goes back to the Paris Commune of 1871 - French versus French, but let’s forget that bit - or the Warsaw Uprising, or the 1944 Liberation of Paris. The French used to talk about les tireurs des toits - the roof marksmen - who assaulted even Charles de Gaulle when he entered Notre Dame on the day of liberation. Homs, of course, has its own tireurs des toits: Syrian government snipers on the roofs - Iranians according to the Syrian opposition. As if the Syrian military needs to be taught how to shoot by the slightly decrepit Revolutionary Guards of Tehran. Stories of the brutality and cruelty of Syrian officials are true. Let’s repeat that: stories, reports, images, YouTube, real recordings of these cruelties, are all true. But then there’s the shocked face of my friend, neither Syrian nor a journalist, drinking coffee with me, who agrees with much of the story. Snipers, yes. “Most of the shooting victims are hit in the head or chest. If you are hit by a sniper, you are in a serious way.” There has been shelling - of homes and of at least one clinic - and there are graves in gardens. But then there are the other little comments, almost forgettable but still disturbing. The habit of “Free Syrian Army” soldiers of playing Islamic music before crossing roads under sniper fire and of praying before pressing their foot on the gas. Well, nothing wrong in that, for heaven’s sake.

Then the large number of FSA men who appear to be Islamist rather than Islamic - this subtle difference is initially hard to spot, says my friend. And then the boasts of “armed activists” in Homs - there now seems to be a gentle difference between activists (armed) and protesters (unarmed) - who are executing their Alawite and Christian neighbours.

Could it be that the brave defenders of Homs include some very bad guys? Well, you may say, who can blame them? What resistance force, defending its people, has not admitted that “there may have been some excesses”?

My friend (no acolyte of the Baath party) expresses his absolute belief that if the FSA breaks out of Homs, there will be “massacres”. The ethnic cleansing of

the Christians, then, the nightmare that Assad evokes? And the rumours that Syrian tanks use heavy machine guns in cities but growl around without shells for their barrels - just in case they, too, defect? Could it be that shelling Homs is one thing, but levelling it to the ground a much more painful gamble of “will the tank-crews defect or not”?

12th February 2012

ALL THE EVIDENCE POINTS TO SECTARIAN CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA, BUT NO ONE WANTS TO ADMIT IT

By Patrick Cockburn

AS SYRIAN army tanks mass around Homs and its artillery pounds Sunni districts of the city, Syria is slipping into the first stages of a sectarian civil war. This conflict could be as bloody as anything seen in Iraq between 2006 and 2007 or as long as the civil war in Lebanon (1975-90). The two words that best describe the current process in Syria are “Lebanisation” and “militarisation”; neither bodes well for Syria’s people.

In Homs, death squads from the Sunni and Alawi, the Shia sect that dominates Syria’s ruling elite, are starting to seek out victims from each other’s communities. Sunni say they are being massacred by shellfire; Alawi demand that their Sunni neighbours be bombarded even more heavily. Syria was never a homogenous country and is becoming less so by the day.

But that alone will not bring down the government of President Bashar al-Assad, so anti-government forces are concluding that the only way to do this is by militarising the resistance. In practice, this is unlikely to do more than increase sectarian blood-letting. Untrained militias and Syrian army deserters cannot stop armoured columns. Most probably insurgent leaders know this and their real intention is to do enough militarily to provide political cover for creeping international intervention on their side. This might be sold as a Nato-protected safe haven for insurgents and refugees in north-west Syria, but in fact would be a declaration of war.

Short of a serious split in the Syrian army, the opposition forces’ best chance of success is to lure outside powers into such a venture. They want a repeat performance of what happened in Libya. The rag-tag militiamen who finally captured Tripoli would have been beaten in a few days without close air support from Nato. But Syria is not Libya, its powerful armed forces have not yet disintegrated, and, most importantly, it is not isolated internationally to anything like the same degree as Gaddafi was.

Of course, international leaders know this. Their foreign and intelligence services will have told them how different the two countries are. Yet the example of Libya may have misled them into writing off Assad prematurely. Months ago, the Israeli Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, was saying Syria’s regime would go within weeks. King Abdullah II of Jordan said that, if he was Assad, he would step down, but later sounded as if regretted his outspokenness. By December, the US State Department was saying that Assad was “a dead man walking”.

But it hasn’t happened. By any realistic calculation, Assad might well last into 2014. Glib references to his isolation are exaggerated. The vote on 4 February in the UN Security Council condemning him and asking him to turn over power to

his deputy was vetoed by Russia and China. Moscow feels that it was swindled last year when the Security Council vote on protecting the civilians of Benghazi turned into permission for Nato to wage all-out war to overthrow Gaddafi.

What makes the crisis in Syria so intractable is that three crises are wrapped into one. At one level, it is a popular uprising against a brutal, corrupt police state that started in March when security forces tortured children painting anti-regime slogans on a wall in Deraa in the south. The state disastrously misjudged its moment and an atrocity, intended to intimidate would-be protesters into silence, instead provoked them to revolt. Hatred of a despotic regime and fury at repeated massacres still impels great numbers of Syrians to go into the streets to demonstrate despite the dangers.

There is no doubting their courage, but the struggle in which they are taking part has two other dimensions: it is part of the escalating conflict between Sunni and Shia and the 33-year-old battle between Iran and its enemies. The sectarianism of the Syrian opposition is persistently played down by the international media, but power in Syria is distributed along sectarian lines, just as it was in the recent past in Iraq, Lebanon and Ireland. Even supposing an anti-sectarian opposition, democracy in Syria means a loss of power for the Alawites and their allies and a gain for the Sunni.

Given that Sunni make up three-quarters of Syria's 24 million population, their enfranchisement might appear to be no bad thing. Unfortunately, many of the government's most committed opponents evidently have more fundamental changes in mind than a fairer distribution of power between communities. Core areas of the insurgency, where the Sunni are in the overwhelming majority, increasingly see Alawites, Shia and Christians as heretics to be eliminated.

Television reporting and much print journalism is skewed towards portraying an evil government oppressing a heroic people. Evidence that other forces may be at work is ignored. An example of this came on Friday when two suicide bombers struck security compounds in Aleppo, killing 28 people and wounding 235 others. The obvious explanation was that Sunni suicide bombers, mostly operating through al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia, who have been attacking Shia-dominated security forces in Iraq, are now doing the same in Syria. But, fearing their moderate image might be tarnished, spokesmen for the opposition swiftly said that the suicide bombings were a cunning attempt by the Syrian security forces to discredit the opposition by blowing themselves up. The BBC, Al Jazeera and most newspapers happily gave uncritical coverage to opposition denials of responsibility or said it was an open question as to who was behind the bombings.

As in Libya last year, the rebels invariably get a positive press. The

increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict is understated. Syria is rushing headlong into a conflict that will tear the country's communities apart.

20th February 2012

SYRIA'S SECTARIAN WAR GOES INTERNATIONAL AS FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND ARMS POUR INTO COUNTRY

By Kim Sengupta

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

Mr Husseini got his combat experience in Iraq, fighting first against American forces and then as a member of the "Anbar Awakening", when Sunni nationalists turned their guns against foreign fighters affiliated with al-Qa'ida.

His presence inside Syria, where an overwhelmingly Sunni uprising is taking place against Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-dominated establishment, can be interpreted as an example of the country's civil war turning into an international sectarian conflict, a source of great unease in the region. Or it could be, as the 36-year-old engineer from the Iraqi city of Ramadi insisted, an expression of solidarity with oppressed brethren sharing a common heritage.

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

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

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

Speaking to The Independent inside Syria, he said: "Our Syrian brothers are fighting their own war. I am not involved. But it is the duty of all true Muslims to help people in this struggle. We are just trying to work out what help is needed. People in Iraq and other countries are seeing the suffering that is taking place and I am working with a group that is giving support - but it is all peaceful."

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

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

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

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

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

22nd February 2012

ASSAD TROOPS TRY TO BLOCK REBELS' SUPPLY LINE TO TURKEY

By Kim Sengupta

SYRIAN FORCES launched a sustained assault close to the border with Turkey yesterday in an attempt to cut off areas where the rebels have established de facto control.

The fiercest attack focused on the town of Darkush which has become a pocket of resistance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Around 18 people are reported to have been killed and 30 injured when troops moved in during the morning. The city of Idlib, the largest in the region, was also hit by shellfire, reportedly leaving around 10 dead.

The routes from Turkey into Syria have been used to ferry in supplies for the revolutionaries and the fighting blocked a number of the routes. Mobile regime columns were carrying out operations further along the frontier, according to rebels.

The opposition maintained that a counter-attack in Kfar Tkharim, in the same area, had killed five soldiers and two more were captured, with clashes continuing into the evening.

The Syrian capital, Damascus, was also the scene of violence with live ammunition used on demonstrators yesterday, according to activists. Syrian forces, they added, had opened fire with live ammunition on demonstrators in the early hours of Tuesday, wounding at least four people.

“There were hundreds of demonstrators at the main square of Hajar al-Aswad, and suddenly buses of security police and shabbiha [pro-regime militia] turned up and started firing into the crowd,” Abu Abdallah, an activist, said. Footage posted on YouTube, purportedly taken before the shooting, showed a crowd marching in the Hajar al-Aswad neighbourhood, carrying placards in support of the besieged city of Homs and singing: “Eyes are shedding tears for the martyrs among Syria’s youth.”

Seven people had been killed in government shelling of Homs’s Baba Amr district on Monday, adding to a reported death toll of several hundred since the military operation began there in the first week of February. Activists in Hama said troops, police and militias had set up dozens of roadblocks, cutting off neighbourhoods. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said three children and a woman were among those dead.

The opposition Syrian National Council, meanwhile, called on the “Arab League and the Security Council to adopt procedural measures to end the barbaric attack on Homs, and to take necessary action to protect civilians, provide aid and treat the wounded”.

23rd February 2012

JOURNALISTS KILLED IN SYRIA ROCKET STRIKE ‘WERE TARGETED’

By Kim Sengupta

MARIE COLVIN, one of the pre-eminent war correspondents of her generation, was killed yesterday, along with an award-winning French photographer, Remi Ochlik, as they covered the siege of the Syrian city of Homs.

Two other journalists, including Paul Conroy, a photographer who also worked for The Sunday Times with Colvin, were injured when the house in which they were staying was hit by rockets. Fellow journalists, human rights activists and politicians condemned the killings amid claims that the regime of President Bashar al-Assad knew the building was being used by foreign media.

Colvin, 55, had written a powerful and poignant dispatch for her newspaper in which she described the suffering inflicted on the population of Homs, which has become a symbol of resistance during the Syrian uprising.

She had also appeared on a number of international broadcast networks, including the BBC and CNN, to accuse President Assad's forces of murder. She said the regime was peddling "complete and utter lies that they are only targeting terrorists". Describing what was happening as "absolutely sickening", she declared: "The Syrian army is simply shelling a city of cold, starving civilians." She also gave a charged description of watching a two-year-old die from a shrapnel wound.

Jean-Pierre Perrin, a reporter with the French newspaper Libération, was with Colvin in Homs last week. He claimed they were told that the Syrian army was "deliberately" planning to shell their makeshift press centre. There were also unconfirmed reports that intercepted radio traffic between Syrian army officers contained threats to kill foreign journalists.

The Syrian ambassador to London, Dr Sami Khiyami, was summoned to the Foreign Office to be told the UK expects prompt arrangements to be made for the repatriation of the journalists' bodies and for the injured British photographer to be given medical treatment.

Colvin, an American who had worked for The Sunday Times since 1985, seamlessly used both steeliness and charm in pursuit of stories. She lost her left eye to shrapnel in 2001 while working in Sri Lanka.

When she was stopped at a checkpoint after the fall of Tripoli in Libya last year, she got past a particularly obdurate militia commander by browbeating him. But she won him over enough to have him ask for his picture to be taken with her. "You never know, we might need him on the way back," she pointed out.

She was fiercely proud of what the best kind of journalism could achieve.

“You hear all this talk about the meaning of the media, the need for integrity etc,” she said while discussing the Leveson Inquiry. “But isn’t it quite simple? You just try to find out the truth of what’s going on and report it the best way you can. And because we are kind of romantic, our sympathy goes towards the underdog.”

Colvin was adamant, however, that it was necessary to relax at times on tough assignments. One night in Tunis, at the start of the Arab Spring, her reaction to journalists being refused a late drink was to tell the waiter: “If you don’t serve us I warn you I will take off my eye patch.” We were served with alacrity.

She could organise a party anywhere. I have fond memories of a dinner at the BBC house in Kabul, when she decided everyone was being far too serious. She got the furniture pulled back, the carpet lifted and got everyone up for not very refined but highly enthusiastic dancing.

As tributes poured in, Simon Kelner, chief executive of the Journalism Foundation and former editor of The Independent, said: “Marie Colvin embodied all the qualities required of a great journalist: bravery, integrity and a fearless desire to seek the truth. At a time when newspapers are under intense scrutiny, her work is a reminder of the fundamental purpose of journalism, and her death, along with the French photographer Remi Ochlik, represents a dark day indeed.”

23rd February 2012

ASSAD OPENS NEW FRONT IN WAR ON HIS PEOPLE

By Kim Sengupta

SYRIAN REGIME forces came in four pick-up trucks, some in uniform and others in civilian clothing - but all carrying guns. They found the man they sought working on a farm, there was shouting and then they shot him in the head.

“They dragged his body away and threw it into the back of one of the cars. One of the soldiers said they would have to dump it somewhere. They were so casual, it was as if they had just killed a stray dog,” said 19-year-old Mohammed Hani. “This was not the first time this had happened, we have seen lots of people killed around here but now it’s getting even worse.”

This was just one death among many in this area during a violent and vengeful operation by the troops of Bashar al-Assad. Villages along the border between Syria and Turkey have been systematically cleansed in an apparent attempt to destroy supply routes vital for opposition safe havens.

With a death toll of around 80, Idlib province has experienced more people killed in the last 48 hours than Homs, the pre-eminent centre of resistance. That city has been subjected to continuous bombardment, which claimed the lives, among others, of journalists Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik. In this region, many of the fatalities have been targeted executions, with the seeming aim of exterminating activists and crushing resistance.

Wassim Sabbagh, who is directing communications for the rebels in the Idlib border area, said: “What we saw in these attacks is the total disregard with which Bashar al-Assad holds the people of Syria. Regime forces have gone into these villages and killed people and destroyed homes just as a punishment for carrying out protests.”

The Turkish hamlet of Hacipasa, straddling the frontier, is one of the bases used by the rebels. Bullets regularly stray from fire fights in adjoining fields and hills. Swirls of smoke rose yesterday from mortar rounds which, the revolutionaries claimed, were aimed at a community centre used by protesters in the Syrian village of Asmarin.

Mr Hani, who is Turkish, said: “We have families on both sides of the border and see what is happening. I was working in Libya and got stranded during the revolution. Terrible things happened there and now the same is happening here. We don’t know how many were killed in the last two days.”

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 32 men, mostly young, were killed at the villages of Idita, Iblin and Bashon. Another dozen died at Darcush when an attack by regime troops began on Tuesday morning following a demonstration. A convoy including five members of the local campaign group

who were arrested and being taken to nearby Jar Ash Shaghur was ambushed by revolutionaries.

“We failed to get the men free, but we have to rescue them, they are leaders of the revolution in this area,” said Izzedin Hihano, the rebel commander in charge of defending the villages in this stretch of the border. “But, more than that, they will be killed. They will not die quickly, they will be tortured.”

Commander Hihano, a former marble craftsman, is the head of the Martyr Hisham Haboub Group, named after a fallen rebel which has about 300 fighters in its ranks. “There are another 700 in this area. But we are very short of ammunition... that is the main problem.”

Yesterday, Commander Hihano went back into Turkey, where he stays in a refugee camp, with the mission of buying ammunition.

The revolutionaries were able to bring their own injured, as well as some civilians, towards the border, thanks to subterfuge of the residents in one village. “Some of the wounded were saved. They pretended to hold a march in honour of Bashar al-Assad. The soldiers were surprised, but they went away to fight the revolutionaries,” said Haitham al-Baid, who lives in Iblin.

“That created a passage and they could take wounded people out.”

Commander Hihano said: “The fight will continue - we have no choice. But the priority is to get medical help. Assad has declared war on his own population, you have seen that, so it is up to us to protect the welfare of people.”

25th February 2012

‘WE ARE NOT AFRAID OF ASSAD ANY LONGER. BUT WHY MUST MORE PEOPLE DIE?’

By Kim Sengupta

THE BODIES were in a field, dumped during the night. They were men who had been arrested and taken away for interrogation after the forces of the Syrian regime began a vicious and vengeful sweep through this region.

The families in the village of Kurin have not been able to collect and bury their dead because they would be walking into a trap; any approach so far, they say, has been met with sniper fire. A force of rebel fighters who went to carry out the task twice had to retreat under fire from mortars.

Their commander, Abdul Haq, spread his hands in apology. “If we went any further there would be more killed, more for us to try and bring back. We feel we are failing our people, but we cannot match the weapons of the enemy.”

Yesterday, as the savage strife continued, the Friends of Syria - America, Western Europe and the Arab countries - meeting in Tunis issued yet another ultimatum to Bashar al-Assad and announced that the opposition group, the Syrian National Council, would be recognised as the legitimate government by a number of states, including the UK.

None of this brings much relief in these killing grounds. The estimate of fatalities varies: according to the United Nations it is around 5,400, while activists say it is around 7,300. But it is a figure rising daily and, to those who have borne the losses, it seems little is being done to stop the murderous campaign.

Nor is there much enthusiasm for the Syrian National Council. Few in the rural areas have heard of it and many among those who have, including rebel fighters, view them as preaching revolution from a comfortable exile.

Here in Idlib province, in north-western Syria, The Independent found the reality is of troops and armour backed by the Alawite militia, the Shabiha, systematically going through the area, killing more people in the last four days than have fallen victim even in the terrible bombardment of Homs.

Almost every village and township has tales of being visited by organised violence. On the day that the eight bodies were found at Kurin, activists were being held at Azmarin, Idita, Iblin and Bashon, on occasions after being identified by informers.

Six were arrested at Darkush, including a 13-year-old boy and a schoolteacher. There “they had a list, they knew the ones they wanted” said Issa Mohammed, 22. “No one could go to help them because there were so many roadblocks. If anyone said anything they would be captured as well.”

One needs to be cautious of these accounts in such a bloody conflict in which hurt and anger, as well as political expediency, can lead to embellished tales.

But here residents would come forward with names of those killed and detained, albeit with requests that the names of those still thought to be alive should not be made public because this may expedite their deaths and put relations and friends in harm's way.

Abd Jibilawe, from al-Janoudiyah, described how three friends have lost their lives so far, before adding quietly "and there was Ahmed Jibilawe who was my cousin and my best friend".

At a hamlet near Darkush, Hasina Um Samin was mourning her brother, Abu Khalid. "We are just poor people, we have not done anything bad," she said, huddled under a thin blanket at her home, unheated because of a lack of fuel. "Still they came and took him. We thought it must be a mistake, but we don't know where he is. We fear will not see him again."

There is little defence in Idlib against a state which is clearly waging a war on its own people. The revolutionaries here are mainly local men, with courage but no military training and woefully short of anything like adequate arms and ammunition. Witnessing their plight, one had wry memories of rebels in Libya firing thousands of rounds into the air, often in celebration of imaginary victories.

The Libyan revolution was, of course, facilitated by months of Nato bombing. The constant question here is why no military action has followed grandiose statements by the West. For the time being, however, the rebels would be grateful for supplies which would go some way towards enabling them to take on the regime.

Commander Haq, a 34-year-old mechanic, has around 50 fighters under his command, but not even one semi-automatic rifle between them. Instead they pass around 20 hunting rifles, shotguns and handguns and one set of body armour brought over by a soldier who defected.

As we sat at his base, a farm building in the hills above Darkush, pinned down by a burst of machine-gun fire flying overhead, he opened a rucksack containing cartridges. "This is what I've been sent. Perhaps the Syrian National Council can send us some proper guns and ammunition from all the international money they are getting. Look at these, how old they are. Some of these are rusting. Some of these are not even the right type for the guns we have."

At this point a Remington pump-action shotgun one of his men was using simply fell apart, possibly due to metal fatigue. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the men were keen to show other examples of their antiquated armoury - a Soviet Star pistol proudly bearing the place of manufacture, CCCP, and the date, 1948. Britain, too had provided a little help for the Syrian revolution - a Webley revolver, circa the 1930s.

Later in the afternoon, during a break in the shooting, another commander, Abu Staif, came in proudly bearing the favoured tool of revolutionaries the world over, a Kalashnikov AK-47.

This one, the first for the group, was a regime-issue weapon. It had not been captured but bought from a member of the Shabiha. “It cost us $2,000 - even then we had to wait for almost two months,” said Commander Staif. “The man who sold it to us stole it from another person from the Shabiha so the registration would not get back to him if Bashar’s people capture it back.

“The Shabiha and the army are both corrupt, just like the rotten regime they serve. The soldiers are more corrupt. One officer offered to sell us his entire checkpoint with tanks, but he wanted more money than we could ever have. The Shabiha are more difficult because they are Alawites and they hate us.”

The price of a Kalashnikov of similar vintage would probably be around $300 in places like Afghanistan. The Syrian rebels insist paying so much is not an illustration of being flush with Qatari or Saudi largesse, but rather of having to turn to wherever they can.

Most of their funding, they claimed, came from donations raised by local communities. This, however, has suffered a setback because one of their main fund-raisers had been killed that morning at Jisr al-Shughour.

“They used an agent. He was sent to find out who were the organisers, and they came and shot him in front of his family,” said Izzedin Hihano, a revolutionary from the town.

“For years, the Assads controlled us by fear. We are not afraid any longer. People would rather die than go back to that. But why must that happen? Why must more die? We need help quickly - we are desperate.”

27th February 2012

‘THERE ARE CHECKPOINTS NEAR THE POLLS. THAT’S HOW THEY FIND YOU’

By Kim Sengupta

THEY CAME for Ismail Abu Jabar at three in the morning, the secret police, the soldiers and an informer in a balaclava. The home was ransacked; there was a ritual beating in front of his terrified, weeping wife and young children and then he was dragged off, never to see his family again.

The treatment received during the next two months in captivity left the 34-year-old farmer with injuries to his head, broken ribs and seared burns to his back and stomach. There was little questioning: “They just enjoyed giving pain,” he recalled. “They accused me of a lot of things, of being a traitor, my guilt was already decided.”

Mr Jabar had been guilty of asking for reform: “We weren’t calling for a revolution, for Assad to be hanged, not at that time. All we wanted was that the people, especially poor people, should be heard. But that was enough for them. You criticised and you became the enemy.”

The vote that Mr Jabar and other activists called for was supposedly taking place in Syria yesterday in a referendum on a new constitution. This has been hailed by the Russian and Chinese governments as evidence of the regime’s sincere desire for peace and democratic change. Bashar al-Assad declared in Damascus that it will “take the country to a new era of co-operation with the full spectrum of Syrians and draw a brilliant future for next generations”.

But here in Idlib province the referendum is seen as a grotesque joke. It is not just the dead and the disappeared who have been disenfranchised; even if anyone did want to vote in this region fiercely resistant to the regime, they would have found it hard to find any of the 14,000 polling stations that the Interior Minister, Lt Gen Mohammed al-Shaar, claimed has been set up around the country.

“Is Bashar going to give up power? The voting room must be over there,” Mr Jabar said, pointing in a direction where steady machine-gun fire and occasional mortar rounds were coming from troops attacking a rebel base on a hillside near Darkush, where we were meeting. “If you are trying to find somewhere to vote, you will have to go past checkpoints. A good way to catch [the] people they are after.”

Mr Jabar was freed after his family raised 100,000 Syrian pounds (about £1,250) to pay a member of the Shabiha, the militia from the Alawite community to which the Assad family and the country’s ruling elite belongs.

But he returned to his home in Qarqur to find his wife, Rahima, and four daughters, aged between four months and 11 years, missing. Friends had moved them soon after his arrest: it was felt they were vulnerable because he was a political detainee. The car they were travelling in was stopped at a roadblock and

they have not been seen since.

“Of course I have tried to look for them, but I cannot move around freely because I might get caught, I know they are looking for me again. They showed no pity in prison. I saw terrible things, there was one man, a doctor they killed. ‘Are you still breathing, you bastard,’ the guard was shouting as he was kicking him. I try not to think about what they did to me in prison, I just worry about what has happened to my wife and daughters, but I feel helpless that I cannot protect my family.”

For Obeida um Khalifa the dreadful uncertainty is over, all that is left is grief. Contemplating President Assad’s pledge of a “brilliant future for next generations” would only bring more bitter tears. Her 19-year-old-son, Hamza, is now buried in the village cemetery, where his mother leaves wildflowers on his grave every day.

Hamza, a carpenter, was stopped at a checkpoint near the village of Basanqut a month ago, the troops were suspicious because of his full beard, indicating that he may be an Islamist. There was an argument, he was hit with rifle butts, thrown into a car and driven away, according to a cousin who was with him, but who managed to escape by running into a field. “They took him and tortured him,” said Ms Um Khalifa. “I went with my brother to the police station but they knew nothing about it. We went to three other police stations. Then, I think it was eight days later, we found his body. They had killed my boy with a gun and left him in a ditch as if his life meant nothing, as if he was worthless.” The security forces have visited the family home since to look for Hamza’s older brother, Ahmed.

He, however, had already left for Turkey as a precaution 48 hours previously. “My husband is dead and I only have a daughter left with me now. My sons were looking after us, now we have to depend on our neighbours. But even if I don’t see Ahmed for many years now, maybe never, I thank Allah he has gone, he is safe. But I do not know what we have done to deserve such suffering,” whispered the mother, a woman in her early 50s, but prematurely aged with worry and sadness, as she sat on a threadbare rug on a cold floor.

Even if Ms Um Khalifa had her sons to support her, the situation would be desperate. A sweep by regime forces has cut off many of the supply routes from Turkey, making it difficult and dangerous to bring in food. The price of bread has risen by 500 per cent and items such as eggs by 300 per cent. Residents are foraging in the countryside to supplement their meagre diet.

But there are strong community ties and people share. And, in a conflict where the sectarian divide has widened with the bloodshed, there are examples here of Sunnis and Alawites helping each other out.

Commander Abdul Haq, the leader of the rebel group, acknowledged: “Yes, we have had Alawites who have been giving food to the other villagers. The regime gave them everything they need, so they can spare for the others.”

This does not mean an end to acrimony. “There are Alawites in places like Shtarbak who have joined the Shabiha, they are given weapons and they attack us, they are treacherous, we have to look out for them.”

There are persistent accusations that the regime is exploiting religious differences and trying to enshrine this in the new constitution. Article 3 states that Syria’s president must be Muslim, over 40 years of age and someone who had lived in the country for more than 10 years. Wasim Sabagh, a revolutionary fighter from Homs and a Christian, said: “The last two points are to make sure that many in the opposition, who had been forced to live abroad would not qualify. But the first point shows how he divides and rules. He tells the world he is protecting minority communities like Christians and then he makes sure in the constitution that we are second-class citizens.

“Christians are being murdered in my home city and the regime says it is the Sunnis doing it. But we know what is going on; it is the agents of the regime who are the killers.”

28th February 2012

STATISTICS SHOWING STRONG SUPPORT FOR ASSAD REGIME DAMNED BY THE TRUTH

By Kim Sengupta

THE FIGURES showed that Bashar al-Assad had far more support than had been portrayed by the opposition. No less than 55 per cent of the people of Syria, according to an opinion poll, wanted him to continue leading the country.

The results of the YouGov Siraj survey, commissioned by the Doha Debates television show, were widely publicised and used by some, including journalists, to argue that the true situation in Syria was being misrepresented by a Western media deliberately masking the popularity of the President. But a bit of digging by the BBC puts the striking figure into perspective.

It discovered that the internet survey was of 1,000 people in 18 countries in the Middle East. Moreover, when asked, “In your opinion, should Syria’s President Assad resign?” some 81 per cent answered “yes”. Only 98 respondents were from Syria and 55 per cent of them backed Assad. To add further context, only 18 per cent of the people in Syria have access to the internet and very few of these are in the centres of opposition.

YouGov Siraj, the Dubai arm of the UK polling firm, admits that the sample was too low and there was little internet access inside Syria. That is, it says, the reason it has referred to “respondents from Syria” rather than “Syrians”. The company said: “To the laymen, there seems very little difference between the two expressions but for researchers the difference is huge. We should have stressed the difference... Or not shown the Syria data as there was always a chance it might be misinterpreted.”

28th February 2012

I HAVE TO HELP MY FAMILY, BUT I DID NOT WANT TO SHOOT MY OWN PEOPLE''

By Kim Sengupta

THE PROTESTERS were unarmed, posing no threat, offering no provocation. When the order came to open fire, many among the security forces were shocked, a few refused. One of those was dragged out of the ranks, made to kneel on the roadside, and shot.

“His name was Abdullah al-Zinat, he was a young guy. He was picked out because he had been arguing the most with the officers, saying what was happening was wrong. That’s what killed him,” said Mohammed Zidan.

“I did not fire, we could fire up to 100 rounds without having to get permission. I did not do that, but I did not say anything either. I was afraid, others were afraid as well.”

Four days after Mr Zinat’s execution, Mr Zidan deserted from the police. Initially, he returned to his post after threats to his family and was briefly imprisoned, before finally escaping. Now he is with the revolutionaries. The 23-year-old is, however, one of a relatively small number of security personnel to defect so far, a handicap for the rebels who suffer acutely from a lack of military experience and weaponry. Furthermore, the ones who have gone over to the other side are often divided. The Free Syrian Army, for instance, operates separately from the Free Officers Group. Both bodies, in turn, are often disparaging of the hierarchy of the Syrian National Council, the opposition’s main political organisation.

Mr Zidan did not want to speak to me at first at the rebel base in Idlib province. But then he decided that it was necessary to discuss the mentality and motivation of the soldiers and policemen engaged in this vicious conflict.

“They are saying that these men are killers and doing terrible things, this is what they are saying especially in other countries,” he said. “But for most this was just a job, how could they know that all these things will happen when they started. They did not know that they would be told to attack fellow Syrians.”

The quietly spoken young man with an anxious face, hastily covered up later with a checked keffiyeh (scarf) for the photograph, seemed to have had some worries about what may lie ahead when he joined the police a year ago.

“I joined the homicide branch because I thought I would not have to deal with things like demonstrations,” he said. “We had seen on television what was going on in Egypt, things were starting in Libya, things starting here. I wanted the job because it was good money and I have to help my family, but I did not want to shoot my own people.”

Mr Zidan left his home in Idlib City for a nine-month course in Aleppo. “They wanted us out on duty as soon as possible, I was concerned but I still

thought I could be a detective."

However, after graduating, Mr Zidan was told he would have to defend the country against terrorists. He was posted to the town of Al-Qamishli near the Iraqi border, an area which was being used, said his superiors, to smuggle arms into the country.

"I don't know if that was happening. We were immediately put into units and sent out to arrest opposition people, some of them women, some of them old," he stated. "They were hurt when they were questioned. They were taken away to other places where even worse things happened, especially to the women. We were also told that we must break up any kind of marches. We were told we could open fire any time, a hundred rounds and then get permission for more, which was always given. Some people enjoyed that but many of us were very upset, some officers were upset as well."

Mr Zidan's first defection ended after the police in Idlib City told his family that they would suffer unless he gave himself up. "I was beaten, but it was not as bad as I thought it was going to be. I think at the time they were trying to keep as many of us as possible."

But the increasingly brutal treatment of protesters and the shooting of Mr Zinat convinced him that he could no longer serve the regime. He organised a call from home to say his mother was very ill and was given compassionate leave. "But after three days they said I must return. I had no choice but to run away and join the freedom fighters."

The security forces carried out their threat against his relations. "My father has now been arrested many times, he is an old man, but they have no respect," Mr Zidan shook his head. "I feel very worried, guilty. But I have made my choice, I have joined the people."

29th February 2012

THE SIEGE-BREAKERS WHO PROVIDE A LIFELINE IN THE PROVINCE OF DEATH

By Kim Sengupta

THE FARMER had serious injuries to his legs sustained in one of the minefields recently laid along the border by forces of the Syrian regime. He was steadily losing blood and unlikely to survive without urgent medical attention. The only way of getting this treatment was by reaching Turkey through a difficult and dangerous smugglers' route.

Murad al-Baidi's journey was by car and a tractor as well as being carried on a makeshift stretcher. It was during the last stretch, crossing a river, that the old and narrow wooden boat he was on suddenly tilted and he fell into the water. Amid shouts of alarm, Issa Mohammed was the first to act, diving into the swirling Orentes to grab the drowning man and then, with the help of others, drag him to safety.

Mr Mohammed, 20, is among a group in Idlib Province who are keeping a vital lifeline flowing amid the vicious strife. They take in supplies, food, medicine and, at times, ammunition, and then bring out the wounded to the edge of the frontier from where the Turkish authorities take them to hospitals in Antakya.

Sometimes the routes are blocked off by the Syrian military or, as happened recently, bad weather conditions. This means lost lives and hasty burials at the hillside as it is often too problematic to take the patients back to their home villages. Mr Mohammed went on the regime's wanted list after he rejected a call-up for the army. He has not joined the rebel fighters but wanted to help the revolution in other ways. Abdul Haq, the commander for the area, said: "It is better that he keeps doing what he does. We have had too many young men killed already. As you can see we haven't even got enough guns to go around for all our warriors and the ones we have are old. When we have proper weapons we can start recruiting again."

Mr Mohammed said: "I did not have to think about what to do when that man dropped from the boat. I am a strong swimmer and I knew that I would be able to get to him. It was difficult to hold on and the water was very, very cold. The injured man was not very old, otherwise he could have died. We got him into Turkey. We know the routes and so it was not too bad to move around here. But now the soldiers have a lot of checkpoints. Also the landmines are problems. We can see them putting in the mines and try to remember where they are, but, it means we have to try new paths and that makes this risky."

The rescuers are currently trying to get around a dozen injured out of the Jabal al-Zawiyah area where regime forces have been carrying out operations. Commander Haq said: "Each time we try to send a team there, they come under

attack. In the past we have had some communi-cations with the soldiers and they have sometimes allowed people who have been hurt to be taken out if they were civilians. But now they have sent some different soldiers, and these men are much more brutal. They are the ones doing a lot of the killings and you cannot deal with them. But the good thing is that because they are not from this area they do not have knowledge [of this area] and so they are finding it very difficult to find us."

As well as transporting goods and people, the local volunteers are a vital source of information for the rebel fighters whose own freedom of movement has been restricted by army checkpoints and patrols. Yusuf, 22, in the rescue team, who did not want his family name mentioned, said: "We don't carry guns and many of us are not actually wanted by the government, so we can go into the villages and take messages and find out what they need.

"It is better we do this because if the soldiers find revolutionaries going to the villages they could open fire or go in and punish the people. We don't want people around here to suffer any more than they are doing already."

1st March 2012

THE REGIME CALLS IT ‘CLEANING’, BUT THE DIRTY TRUTH IS PLAIN TO SEE

By Robert Fisk

SO IT'S the "cleaning" of Baba Amr now, is it? "Tingheef" in Arabic. Did that anonymous Syrian government official really use that word to the AP yesterday? It's a chilling expression, one that always precedes a lot of killing. And the UN says it's 7,600 so far. The Israelis used the same word in English when they stormed into Lebanon in 1982 (total dead about 17,500). Five months earlier, when the Syrians were finishing off the Muslim insurgents of Hama, just north of Homs (more than 10,000, possibly 15,000 dead), they said they were "researching" the area, "searching", "investigating". The word they used was "bahagh".

It's a honey of a word for all armies when they're going to abandon human rights. The Brits used to like "mopping up" in the Second World War (approximately 60 million dead). So did the Russians. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the Germans referred to the "cleansing" of Jewish streets in 1944. The word was that of SS Major General Jürgen Stroop in his "police" report (50,000 dead). Cleaning, searching, mopping up, cleansing; massed killing washed of all responsibility. After you "clean" something, it doesn't smell any more.

No, the Syrians are not the Israelis, the Israelis are not the Brits and Russians, and the Syrians, Israelis, Brits and Russians are not the SS. But words do have an unhappy way of reflecting real intentions. The more you polish, search, wash, clean, cleanse, the less blood there should be on the ground. The defence brigades who crushed Hama 30 years ago were led by "Uncle" Rifaat Assad, his nephew, Bashar, is now President of Syria, his other nephew, Maher, is reputedly leading his 4th Brigade into Baba Amr.

Anyway, the tanks bombarded the Sunni district of Homs first, then the infantry - according to residents on the phone yesterday - started to move in. The "decisive month" had begun, according to another "anonymous" Syrian official. Every month in Syria, of course, has been a "decisive month". It's been that way for a year now. In September 1980, I remember, Saddam's gombeen men talked about the "decisive month" in the "Whirlwind War" - the invasion of Iran. The war lasted eight years (about 1.5 million dead).

Anyway, we'll see what Assad's squadrons are made of. Will his infantry defect when they have to batter their way into Homs? A real worry. Will the Free Syria Army fight to the death or run away to fight another day? And civilian casualties in Baba Amr?

If Assad's men win, we might hear a figure. The Assad version won't include Sunni "enemy" dead, any more than his antagonists are going to tell us how many Alawite and Christian "enemies" they've killed. Assad says he's fighting

“terrorists”. Rifaat said the same at Hama. The Israelis used the word a thousand times about the Palestinians. The Russians said the same about the Germans. Stroop said the same about the Jews.

Alas, all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten these little hands.

4th March 2012

THE FEARFUL REALITIES KEEPING THE ASSAD REGIME IN POWER

By Robert Fisk

IN MY 1912 Baedeker guide to Syria, a page and a half is devoted to the city of Homs. In tiny print, it says that, “in the plain to the south-east, you come across the village of Baba Amr. A visit to the arcaded bazaar is worthwhile - here you will find beautiful silks. To the north of Homs, on a square, there is an artillery barracks...” The bazaar has long since been demolished, though the barracks inevitably passed from Ottoman into French and ultimately into Baathist hands; for 27 days last month, this bastion has been visiting hell on what was once the village of Baba Amr.

Once a Roman city, where the crusaders committed their first act of cannibalism - eating their dead Muslim opponents - Homs was captured by Saladin in 1174. Under post-First World War French rule, the settlement became a centre of insurrection and, after independence, the very kernel of Baathist resistance to the first Syrian governments. By early 1964, there were battles in Homs between Sunnis and Alawi Shia. A year later, the young Baathist army commander of Homs, Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Tlas, was arresting his pro-regime comrades. Is the city’s history becoming a little clearer now?

As one of the Sunni nouveaux riches who would support the Alawi regime, Tlas became defence minister in Hafez al-Assad’s Baathist government. Under their post-1919 mandate, the French had created a unit of “Special Forces” in which the Alawis were given privileged positions; one of their strongholds was the military academy in Homs. One of the academy’s most illustrious students under Hafez al-Assad’s rule - graduating in 1994 - was his son Bashar. Bashar’s uncle, Adnan Makhlouf, graduated second to him; Makhlouf is today regarded as the corrupting element in the Assad regime.

Later, Bashar would become a doctor at the military Tishreen Hospital in Damascus (where today most of the Syrian army’s thousands of victims are taken for post-mortem examination before their funerals). Bashar did not forget Homs; his British-born Sunni wife came from a Homs family. One of his closest advisers, Bouthaina Shabaan, comes from Homs; even last year the city was too dangerous for her to visit her mother’s grave on the anniversary of her death. Homs lies deep in the heart of all Syrians, Sunni and Alawite alike. Is it surprising that it should have been the Golgotha of the uprising? Or that the Syrian authorities should have determined that its recapture would break the back of the revolution? To the north, 30 years ago, Hafez Assad created more than 10,000 “martyrs” in Hama; last week, Homs became a little Hama, the city’s martyrdom predicted by its past.

So why were we so surprised when the “Free Syrian Army” fled the city? Did

we really expect the Assad regime to close up shop and run because a few hundred men with Kalashnikovs wanted to stage a miniature Warsaw uprising in Homs? Did we really believe that the deaths of women and children - and journalists - would prevent those who still claim the mantle of Arab nationalism from crushing the city? When the West happily adopted the illusions of Nicolas Sarkozy, David Cameron and Hillary Clinton - and the Arab Gulf states whose demands for Syrian “democracy” are matched by their refusal to give this same democracy to their own people - the Syrians understood the hypocrisy.

Were the Saudis, now so keen to arm Syria’s Sunni insurgents - along with Sunni Qatar - planning to surrender their feudal, princely Sunni power to their own citizens and to their Shia minority? Was the Emir of Qatar contemplating resignation? Among the lobbyists of Washington, among the illusionists at the Brookings Institution and the Rand Corporation and the Council on Foreign Relations and all the other US outfits that peddle New York Times editorials, Homs had become the new Benghazi, the start-line for the advance on Damascus.

It was the same old American dream: if a police state was ruthless, cynical and corrupt - and let us have no illusions about the Baathist apparatus and its panjandrum - then its opponents, however poorly armed, would win; because they were the good guys. The old clichés clanked into focus. The Baathists were Nazis; Bashar a mere cipher in the hands of his family; his wife, Asma, variously an Eva Braun, Marie Antoinette or Lady Macbeth. Upon this nonsense, the West and the Arabs built their hopes.

The more Sarkozy, Cameron and Clinton raged against Syria’s atrocities, the more forceful they were in refusing all military help to the rebels. There were conditions to be met. The Syrian opposition had to unite before they could expect help. They had to speak with one voice - as if Gaddafi’s opponents did anything like this before Nato decided to bomb him out of power. Sarkozy’s hypocrisy was all too obvious to the Syrians. So anxious was he to boost his chances in the French presidential election that he deployed hundreds of diplomats and “experts” to “rescue” the French freelance journalist Edith Bouvier, hampering all the efforts of NGOs to bring her to safety. Not many months ago, this wretched man was cynically denouncing two male French journalists - foolhardy, he called them -- who had spent months in Taliban custody in Afghanistan.

French elections, Russian elections, Iranian elections, Syrian referendums - and, of course, US elections: it’s amazing how much “democracy” can derail sane policies in the Middle East. Putin supports an Arab leader (Assad) who announces that he has done his best “to protect my people, so I don’t feel I have

anything to be blamed for... you don't feel you're to blame when you don't kill your own people". I suppose that would be Putin's excuse after his army butchered the Chechens. As it happens, I don't remember Britain's PM saying this about Irish Catholics on Bloody Sunday in 1972 - but perhaps Northern Ireland's Catholics didn't count as Britain's "people"?

No, I'm not comparing like with like. Grozny, with which the wounded photographer Paul Conroy drew a memorable parallel on Friday, has more in common with Baba Amr than Derry. But there is a distressing habit of denouncing anyone who tries to talk reality. Those who claimed that the IRA would eventually find their way into politics and government in Northern Ireland - I was one - were routinely denounced as being "in cahoots with terrorists". When I said in a talk in Istanbul just before Christmas that the Assad regime would not collapse with the speed of other Arab dictatorships - that Christian and Alawite civilians were also being murdered - a young Syrian began shrieking at me, demanding to know "how much you are being paid by Assad's secret police"? Untrue, but understandable. The young man came from Deraa and had been tortured by Syria's mukhabarat.

The truth is that the Syrians occupied Lebanon for almost 30 years and, long after they left in 2005, we were still finding their political claws deep inside the red soil of Beirut. Their intelligence services were still in full operation, their power to kill undiminished, their Lebanese allies in the Beirut parliament. And if the Baathists could smother Lebanon in so powerful a sisterly embrace for so long, what makes anyone think they will relinquish Syria itself easily? As long as Assad can keep Damascus and Aleppo, he can survive.

After all, the sadistic ex-secret police boss Najibullah clung on as leader of Afghanistan for years when all he could do was fly between Kabul and Kandahar. It might be said that, with all Obama's horses and all Obama's men on his side, this is pretty much all Hamid Karzai - with his cruel secret police, his regime's corruption, his bogus elections - can do today. But that is not a comparison to commend itself to Washington, Paris, London, Doha or Riyadh, or even Istanbul.

So what of Bashar Assad? There are those who believe that he really still wants to go down in history as the man who gave Syria its freedom. Preposterous, of course. The problem is that even if this is true, there are those for whom any profound political change becomes a threat to their power and to their lives. The security police generals and the Baathist paramilitaries will fight to the death for Assad, loyal to a man, because - even if they don't admire him - they know that his overthrow means their own deaths. But if Assad were to indicate that he intended to "overthrow" himself - if the referendum and the new

constitution and all the “democratic” changes he talks about became real - these notorious men would feel both fear and fury. Why, in this case, should they any longer remain loyal?

No, Bashar Assad is not a cipher. He is taking the decisions. But his father, Hafez, came to power in 1970 in a “corrective” revolution; “corrections” can always be made again. In the name of Baathism. In the name of Arab nationalism. In the name of crushing the al-Qa’ida-Zionist-Islamist-terrorist enemy. In the name of history.

8th March 2012

UNITED AGAINST A COMMON ENEMY?

By Kim Sengupta

AS THE uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime got under way, the political voice leading the dissent supposedly came from the Syrian National Council. But then came the National Co- ordination Committee with its own agenda. And last week saw the emergence of another breakaway faction, the Syrian Patriotic Group.

Relations between the military factions are equally fraught: first it was the Free Syria Army, with the Free Officers Movement in competition. Now the Syrian Liberation Army is declaring that its members are the ones doing the real fighting.

As Assad's vengeful forces sweep through centres of resistance and wreak retribution, Syria's opposition appears more fractured than ever.

With this disunity apparently holding up international recognition and the cash and weapons that come with it, representatives of the groups are meeting to fashion something resembling a common platform. But the confidential, low-profile discussions held in Amman, Paris and Brussels have themselves at times been beset by acrimony and recriminations.

"We have made a little progress, but there have also been disagreements," said Qais al-Baidi, one activist who has taken part. "It has sometimes been reduced to shouts about who betrayed whose father to whom in the regime. The people on the ground are being tortured and massacred, it is urgent that the leadership outside the country organise themselves properly."

The most glaring division is between the leadership of the civilian wing of the revolution and the rebel fighters. The Syrian National Council (SNC) in particular has been repeatedly charged with turning into a cosy club of people staying outside Syria who are averse to danger and swan around various international conferences paid for by the Qataris and the Saudis.

Abu Bakr, the nom de guerre of an activist from Homs, explained why the latest splinter group, which includes 20 former leading figures of the SNC, came into being. "The Syrian Patriotic Group was formed because the Syrian National Council do not represent the people in the street. We hope that they will learn to work together for the revolution, not work behind it the way they do now. We have had too many words, very little action."

One of the main points of contention has been who would control the weapons coming from outside the country. The SNC leader, Burhan Ghalioun, recently announced the setting up of a Military Council, which he said had been approved by the armed factions. "We will be like a defence ministry," he said. "We will look at the military needs of each force and supply them with what is

needed."

But this has been contradicted by the head of the Free Syria Army (FSA), Colonel Riad al-Assad, who claims he has not been consulted.

"I really don't know the objective of this body," he said. "They say it is the Military Council, but the military men are not properly asked about their views. Our talks with the SNC on this have not been satisfactory."

But some rebel factions are themselves dissatisfied with the FSA. Mohammed Mifsud Abdullah, an officer with the Syrian Liberation Army (SLA), who has been fighting in Idlib, a city in northern Syria, expressed this view: "Our area has received the most government attacks after Homs. So where were the FSA? We are protecting the people here and we certainly do not recognise the FSA as being over us. There are lots of organisations outside the country who say they represent the people. But what are they doing?"

Kamal al-Labwani, one of those who left to form the Syrian Patriotic Group, emphasised that the new organisation did not want a confrontation with the SNC. But he added: "We cannot have the constant infighting which has gone on. Also, we believe that the Muslim Brotherhood has too powerful a role [in the SNC]. It is important that all opinion is heard."

Another high-level defector from the SNC is Haitham al-Maleh, a lawyer and former judge who has been repeatedly jailed by the regime.

"A lot of people need to send weapons to the Free Syrian Army, maybe from Jordan, from Lebanon, from Turkey; a lot of people know they can take the weapons through the border," he said. "We need to support the Free Syrian Army by medium weapons, because we cannot bring tanks, or helicopter or something like this; with medium weapons they can finish this regime."

Travelling with rebel fighters inside Idlib province in northern Syria, The Independent witnessed how much they indeed lacked in terms of modern weapons. One group of around 50 fighters was armed with old hunting rifles and shotguns. A Kalashnikov AK-47 which they acquired one day was regime issue - not captured, but purchased from a member of the Shabiha, the Alawite militia fighting for the regime, for about £1,300.

But even with "medium weapons" it is highly unlikely that the rebels will be able to fulfil Mr al-Maleh's expectation of finishing the regime, at least in the short term. The main reason is that none of the various forces - the FSA, the Free Officers Movement or the SLA - have a recognisable command and control structure. Instead, they consist of autonomous groups with little co- ordination between them.

The groups operating in Idlib province alone include the Martyr Hisham Brigade; the Ibn Malik Martyrs Brigade; the Maarratt al-Numan Martyrs

Brigade; the Salhauddin [Saladin] Brigade and the Fallujah Brigade.

Ayham al-Kurdy, a captain with the FSA, insisted that such a variety of splinter groups did not mean that the rebel group was dysfunctional: “We have new brigades all the time. They are named after famous people: if we were American, we would have a Michael Jackson Brigade.”

Hanging over the revolution is the dark cloud of sectarianism. There are no Alawites, the community from which Assad and the country’s elite are drawn, in prominent positions in the SNC. Some of the rebel “brigades” openly espouse hardline Sunni and anti-Shia sentiments. The Alawites are a Shia offshoot. Three bombings, in Damascus and Aleppo, are widely suspected to have been the work of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, which in the past waged a virulent religious war.

Hania, from an Alawite family in exile opposed to Assad, does not want her full name made public. She is apprehensive about the future: “Of course the regime is exploiting the divisions. They say that if the revolution succeeds then the minorities will suffer. But my relations have heard marchers shout ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to graves’. So yes, there is a worry, a big worry.”

The religious strife triggered by the Syrian revolution is not confined to the country. Shia Iran, according to American officials, is stepping up its support for the Assad regime with arms and technical assistance. The same sources claim that the head of the al-Quds unit of the Revolutionary Guards, Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani, has visited Damascus from Tehran.

Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia, whose foreign minister held that it would be an “excellent idea” to arm the Syrian rebels, have yet to send significant amounts of weaponry. This is partly because Turkey and Lebanon, the states which would act as conduits, have so far refused permission. Another reason is the divided nature of the opposition to Assad.

The rebels do have some money for arms, either raised locally or brought in from abroad. But supply remains a problem. Last week Izzadine Hihano, a rebel commander fighting in Idlib, slipped across the border into the Turkish city of Antakaya to buy ammunition. All he could find available was around 300 bullets.

“How long would that last?” he exclaimed in frustration. “Some of the other groups have more money and so they are getting weapons by paying higher prices. But they are also extremists. In our brigade one of the most senior officers is a Christian, and we have Alawites helping us across the border. But if we don’t get help it is the extremists who will succeed.”

13th March 2012

NEITHER SIDE IS WINNING, NO END IS IN SIGHT

By Patrick Cockburn

FOUR MONTHS ago many international leaders were hoping that the Syrian government was going to fall in the not-too-distant future. Perhaps they were over-influenced by the fate of Muammar Gaddafi, but it has since become clear that President Bashar al-Assad is not going to be overthrown soon.

Many countries are prepared for somebody to take action to promote a political transition in Syria - just so long as that somebody is somebody else. One suggestion, seeking to emulate what happened in Benghazi, was for safe havens or no-fly zones to be established close to the Jordanian or Turkish borders. But Jordan and Turkey understandably balked at being sucked into a messy ground war with the Syrian army. For now there is a stalemate and no immediate reason why it should be broken. The regime's forces have largely held together without the defection of whole units. They can crush the uprising in single cities like Homs and exact revenge on their people, but they cannot stamp out the rebellion everywhere at the same time.

What could break the present uneasy balance of power? If the Syrian regime staged a massacre on the scale of Hama in 1982 when at least 10,000 died, this might provoke the mass defection of Sunni soldiers or a greater likelihood of foreign intervention. Mr Assad may depend on the Alawites as the core of his regime, but he needs the support of at least part of the Sunni community if he is to continue in power.

In the longer term, the prospects for Mr Assad are grimmer as the Syrian economy buckles under the strain of economic sanctions and worsening disorder. But, as Saddam Hussein once showed, an authoritarian regime can always commandeer what it needs.

25th March 2012

THE ATTEMPT TO TOPPLE PRESIDENT ASSAD HAS FAILED

By Patrick Cockburn

THE YEAR-LONG effort to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad and his government has failed. Two or three months ago, it seemed to come close to succeeding, as insurgents took over enclaves in cities such as Homs and Deir el-Zour. There was talk of no-fly zones and foreign military intervention.

Severe economic sanctions were slapped on Syria's already faltering economy. Every day brought news of fresh pressure on Assad (below) and the momentum seemed to build inexorably for a change of rule in Damascus.

It has not happened. Syria will not be like Libya. The latest international action has been an EU ban on Assad's wife, Asma, and his mother travelling to EU countries (though, as a UK citizen, Asma can still travel to Britain). As damp squibs go, this is of the dampest. The Foreign Secretary, William Hague, claims this increases the pressure on the Syrian government but, on the contrary, it relieves it. Curtailing Asma's shopping trips to Paris or Rome, supposing she ever intended to go there, shows the extent to which the US, EU and their allies in the Middle East are running out of options when it comes to dealing with Damascus.

"Nobody is discussing military operations," the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, said last week. The insurgent Free Syrian Army has been driven out of strongholds in the central city of Homs, Idlib province in the north and, most recently, Deir el-Zour, in the east. Last Tuesday, Syrian soldiers supported by tanks rolled from four sides into Deir el-Zour, which is about 60 miles from the Iraqi border, forcing the rebels to flee and take shelter in homes and apartments after a short gun battle. Their retreat may make it more difficult to bring guns across the Iraq border from the overwhelmingly Sunni Anbar province. The swift Syrian army advance was in contrast with the month-long siege of the Baba Amr district of Homs which killed hundreds of people and left much of the area in ruins. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have blithely advised arming the insurgents, but there is little sign of them doing so.

What went wrong for the advocates of regime change? In general, they overplayed their hand and believed too much of their own propaganda. By this January, everything they did was predicated on international military intervention, or a convincing threat of it. But this ceased to be an option on 4 February when Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution, backed by the Arab League, calling on Assad to step down. The experience of the US, EU, Nato and the Arab Gulf states in overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi turned out to be misleading when it came to Syria.

This has been the experience of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries

throughout the ages. What succeeds in one country proves a recipe for disaster in another. There was also a misreading of what had happened in Libya. Watching al-Jazeera television, it might appear that heroic rebel militiamen - and at times they were heroic - had overthrown a tyrant but, in reality, military victory was almost wholly due to the Nato air assault. The militiamen were a mopping-up force who occupied territory after air strikes had cleared the way (this was also the pattern in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2003).

Conditions are very different in Syria. The regime has a radicalised core based on the Alawite community, a powerful army and security forces. There have been few high-level defections or military units changing sides. Regime loyalists feel they have no alternative but to fight to the end, and are quite prepared to kill anybody who gets in their way. Economic sanctions do not worry Assad loyalists because a dictatorship can always commandeer resources even when they are reduced in quantity. Assad has already lost the support of most of the Syrian business community. Militarisation of the conflict does not pose a threat to the government at this stage; it is more of an irritant, though this could change if guerrilla warfare develops.

In the second half of last year Assad appeared to be facing an all-powerful international coalition. It included Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the US, EU and Turkey. It emerged, however, that everybody was in favour of somebody doing something to bring him down - so long as that somebody was somebody else. There was talk of “safe havens” being established on the Jordanian or Turkish borders, but neither Jordan nor Turkey showed any enthusiasm for an act that would lead immediately to armed conflict with Syria. King Abdullah of Jordan said ruefully that he had nothing against “safe havens” so long as they were a long way from Jordan. Turkey cooled on the idea as it became apparent that it was becoming embroiled in a regional Shia-Sunni conflict that would lead to Iran retaliating against Turkey in defence of its Syrian ally.

The Syrian protesters did everything they could to give the impression that what happened in Libya could be repeated in Syria. They are now being criticised for their divisions and lack of leadership, but probably they felt they had no choice. The uprising had begun among the under-class of Syrians, but by last summer had spread to the middle class. But the use of snipers and death squads by the regime made street protests highly dangerous and they have got smaller in recent months (one of the benefits of the Arab League monitoring team was that it opened the door again to street demonstrations). Protesters now seldom wave olive branches and chant “Peaceful, Peaceful”. Militarisation of the protest movement and the increased sectarianism played to the strengths of the regime. Sectarianism not only weakens the opposition inside Syria, it helps

divide the coalition facing it abroad. In a presidential election year, US voters do not care much who rules Syria, but they care a lot about al-Qa'ida.

One of Barack Obama's themes in the presidential campaign will be that it was his administration that killed Osama bin Laden and focused, unlike President Bush, on eliminating the perpetrators of 9/11. The White House does not want al-Qa'ida to show signs of life, so it has been nervous of its increasing role in Syria. For instance, only last week an al-Qa'ida-inspired group called the Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant claimed responsibility for two recent suicide bombings in Damascus that killed more than two dozen people. "We tell the [Syrian] regime to stop the massacres against the Sunnis, otherwise, you will bear the sin of the Alawites," said the Al-Nusra Front statement. "What is coming is more bitter and painful, with God's will."

The Syrian regime will not fall without a radical change in the balance of forces. The appointment of the former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan as a UN-Arab League peace envoy is a face-saver to mask the failure so far of the regime's opponents. This is bad news for the Syrian people, who face a prolonged and vicious civil war like Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s.

30th March 2012

ON LEBANON'S BORDER, SILENT SYRIANS ARE FLOCKING TO AN UNKNOWN FUTURE

By Robert Fisk

A POSTER of the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, smiling at each other hangs over the highway to Al-Qaa. But you know this is no ordinary Lebanese village when you arrive at the custom station.

A truckload of soldiers (big, burly guys in heavy, black flak jackets, with Kalashnikovs), pulls up and watches silently as flocks of Syrian refugees, fleeing the bloody government crackdown in their nation, plead to enter Lebanon. Lebanese Red Cross ambulances - Syrian wounded lying inside - are waved through. But for the sad, pathetic creatures walking down the road with neither bags nor documents, there is no easy passage.

To enter Lebanon, a Syrian must hold his papers and documents showing his father's name. "I can't get them - they are on the other side of the border, please," says a thin man in a long black coat too big for him, a small boy at his side. "No - back," says the security man. "I told you, back." He pushes the man and the boy, not roughly but with determination, away from the custom house.

Many come by yellow and white Syrian taxis and, when they get out, they run to the custom house for a stamp as if their lives depend on it. A few trucks turn up, the drivers asking for a man who is known to have wasta ("influence") and supposedly works here. "He has left," the Lebanese security man says coldly.

It's a frightening little place, Al-Qaa, just down the road from the houses which the Syrian army fired into four days ago in an attempt to root out Syrian rebels thought to be sheltering in the area. Everyone looks like - or is - an intelligence officer. Even the Syrian "civilians" could be from the Damascus Mukhabarat. No one talks to each other.

The trucks are searched with some vigour in both directions. Only three days ago, the Lebanese army supposedly stopped two lorryloads of guns heading for the border, though the source - Hezbollah's television news - suggests that the report should be taken with a grain of salt. All is not quite as it seems in Al-Qaa. A few hundred metres from the custom house are a cluster of homes and a rock and mud path that runs low behind an olive grove. A woman and her husband, who live beside it, welcome us cautiously and ask us not to print even their first names.

"At night, they all come this way, along the path," she says. "Nobody stops them. They are [Syrian] opposition moving into Lebanon and Syrian refugees. Whoever they are, we don't ask and we just say 'God help them'. Many civilians are Christians running away." Al-Qaa is a Christian village.

The mud-covered path beside the olive grove involves climbs of two feet of

rock. Broken shoes and boots with their soles ripped off and filthy, torn socks line the path. These desperate people walk into Lebanon at night and cannot see and must fall on the unseen rocks and slither in the mud. A silent people, armed or not, making their way into an unknown future.

10th April 2012

SYRIA IS TOO FAR STEEPED IN BLOOD FOR RESOLUTION BY NEGOTIATION

By Patrick Cockburn

IN NORTHERN Ireland it used to be called “the politics of the last atrocity”, when the latest act of violence and the retaliation it provoked dictated the direction of day-to-day politics. Syria has travelled far in this direction, its towns convulsed by mini-civil wars too bitter and bloodstained to end by mediation.

It is this which is making it so difficult for Kofi Annan, joint envoy for the UN and Arab League, to succeed in his mission. The Syrian government has demanded guarantees from the militiamen it is fighting that they will abide by a ceasefire. This is unlikely to happen given the total distrust between the two sides and with the insurgents fearful of risking torture and execution.

The skirmish on the Syrian-Turkish border is an example of the problems facing any attempt to end the fighting. Anti-government forces attacked a Syrian government checkpoint near the frontier, killed six soldiers and were then shot at as they retreated across the frontier, with bullets hitting dwellings in a nearby refugee camp.

Could this provoke Turkish intervention in the shape of a safe haven for refugees? Ankara has so far been unwilling to risk an all-out conflict. Both sides are playing to the gallery, the insurgents trying to publicise any action by the Syrian army that might goad foreign powers into action. Mr Assad needs to make a show of moderation to keep Russia and China on side.

So far it is the differences between Libya and Syria which are most striking. In Syria, Nato countries want an excuse not to do anything radical, while in Libya they were looking for a justification to intervene. And without direct action by foreign powers, the only alternative for the Free Syrian Army is to wage an escalating guerrilla war against Bashar al-Assad’s government which is unlikely to bring about a collapse of the regime.

Mr Assad’s options are also limited. He and his government have survived a year of pressure. During fighting in and around Homs, the Syrian army showed that it could crush any insurgent band.

But the government’s brutality, including torture, summary executions and artillery bombardments of civilian areas, means it is always creating fresh enemies.

Diplomats say Mr Assad’s senior officials are in a confident, and possibly an over-confident, mood. They may have stopped the tide of insurgency, but they will be unable to reverse it. Concessions made last spring might have had an impact, but since then too much blood has been spilled.

11th April 2012

WORLD LEADERS ACCUSE SYRIAN REGIME OF STALLING AS FRAGILE PEACE PLAN CRUMBLES

By Loveday Morris and Kim Sengupta

SYRIA'S WANTON disregard of the deadline for a ceasefire sparked international outrage yesterday, with pressure mounting for tougher measures to end the bloodshed.

The six-point peace plan drawn up by the UN-Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, appeared doomed as Syria's Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, added further stipulations to Syria's compliance and 65 more deaths were reported across the country despite yesterday morning's troop withdrawal deadline.

Adding another caveat that was viewed as yet more stalling, Mr Muallem said that the ceasefire should only fully begin with the deployment of an international observer mission, but maintained that Syria was committed to the plan and said some pullbacks had already begun.

The disparity between his words and the violence on the ground resulted in outright condemnation. In Paris, the French foreign ministry spokesman, Bernard Valero, accused Mr Muallem of "a blatant and unacceptable lie" in saying implementation had begun.

The British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said Damascus had used the deadline as "a cover for intensified military efforts" adding that Britain was prepared to offer further support to the opposition if the peace plan derails. After visiting refugee camps in Turkey, Mr Annan yesterday insisted that it was too early to say the plan has failed.

The six-point roadmap is the only initiative tabled so far that has achieved the backing of Syria's allies Russia and China - veto holders at the UN Security Council - and its failure will leave the international community scrambling to come up with an alternative.

The Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, had threatened to impose "further steps" if Mr Assad ignored the ceasefire and yesterday slammed his "merciless" killings. Tensions have mounted after Syrian security forces fired into a refugee camp on the Turkish side of the border on Monday, and there is speculation Turkey may set up a buffer zone on the border. Mr Erdogan will later this week fly to Saudi Arabia, one of Mr Assad's most forceful critics, for talks.

However, senior Western diplomats said it was unlikely that the Turks would take direct action. "There is deep apprehension that the Syrians will retaliate by arming the Kurds" said an American official.

Mr Hague called on Syria's allies to assert pressure. "All those with influence over the Syrian leadership, including Russia, have a duty to back efforts to stop the violence," he said. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, said that he had asked Mr Muallem during meetings yesterday to act "more decisively" to implement the terms of Mr Annan's plan during their meeting, but there are doubts that Moscow is putting any real pressure on the regime.

"Unless we see real force behind that statement I don't see how we are going to see the Syrians changing tact," said Salman Shaikh, an expert at the Brookings Doha Centre. A Syrian diplomatic source said that the withdrawals had begun in Homs, Idlib and the Damascus suburbs, however activists reported little let-up in the campaign of violence yesterday, with the Local Coordination Committees reporting that 28 were killed in Homs and another 20 in Hama, which it also said came under heavy shelling.

Saif al Arabe, a Homs resident, said the shelling in the city began at around 6am, the time regime forces were supposed to begin their pull back. "You cannot trust anything the Assad regime says," he said. "The firing and bombing is still ongoing."

Another said the neighbourhood of Bayada had been under fire. "They are attacking with mortars from three different locations," said Abu Yassar. "People have taken refuge in schools and now some of the schools were hit. We have at least 20 martyrs and 70 wounded, most of them women and children."

20th April 2012

HAGUE HINTS AT HARDER LINE IF REGIME SHUNS SYRIA PEACE PLAN

By Kim Sengupta

BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S regime is flouting the Kofi Annan plan for ending the violence in Syria and punitive action can be taken if it is in breach of the United Nations resolution on the crisis, William Hague declared yesterday amid rising calls for intervention in the country.

As an international meeting of the "Friends of Syria" states took place in Paris, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon accused the regime, which yesterday agreed a deal outlining rules for the deployment of observers to monitor Mr Annan's ceasefire plan, of failing to show it was committed to peace. He also called for an expanded mission of at least 300 observers - 50 more than the regime has said it will accept - to monitor violations of the ceasefire. Only a small advance team of observers is currently in the country.

At the same time, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, claimed that a humanitarian corridor was now imperative. He accused President Assad of "lying shamelessly" and "trying to wipe Homs off the map just like Gaddafi wanted to raze Benghazi from the map".

Speaking at a Nato meeting in Brussels, Mr Hague said that "for the first time in 15 months we have a security resolution that sets out what they need to do to implement the Annan plan, which includes a real ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops and heavy weapons from populated areas.

"So if they [the regime] are in breach of that resolution, the UN Security Council is entitled to consider what further measures can be taken. I don't want at this stage to speculate about those measures but we and many others would want to return to this very vigorously," he said.

Russia and China have refused to back repeated attempts to involve the UN in the Syrian uprising, pointing out that a resolution on Libya to establish a no-fly zone and protect civilians was used to mount an air campaign which ensured regime change. However, Moscow and Beijing did vote for Security Council resolution 2042 putting the peace plan brokered by Mr Annan into effect.

The UK will "intensify" support for the Syrian opposition and provide an additional £4m in aid for refugees. A UN-sponsored survey by the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre found that the numbers of civilians uprooted since the uprising began had risen to 230,000.

Mr Hague pointed out the dire humanitarian situation and said he had asked the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, to press President Assad to end hostilities. He continued: "Russia did help last week to put pressure on the Assad regime to ostensibly accept the Annan plan, to accept a ceasefire. And that is why we look to Russia to continue to be helpful in saying to the Assad regime,

‘look if this breaks down, the whole world will be able to see who’s responsible’.”

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Nato Secretary-General, has maintained during this summit that Nato does not want to get involved in Syria, particularly as there is no legal mandate to do so. However, the crisis has been discussed by delegates. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said the US had been sending a significant amount of non-lethal supplies, including communications equipment.

Mr Lavrov, speaking at the Nato conference, accused the West of turning a blind eye to attacks by rebels, while pillorying the regime. “There are armed groups which are being supplied with weapons by outside countries, there have been terrorist bombings in Damascus and Aleppo. But we are supposed to believe that all that is happening is the Syrian government [is] using tanks to shoot down demonstrators,” he said.

He claimed that the “so-called ‘Friends of Syria’” group - which includes the US and Britain - was being “unhelpful” in promoting the peace process, saying that its uncritical support was encouraging the opposition not to compromise.

“It is up to everyone to help the Kofi Annan plan,” he said.

26th May 2012

SYRIANS ON EDGE AS UN TEAMS BRING PRECARIOUS PEACE - UNTIL NIGHT FALLS

By Patrick Cockburn

SOLDIERS GUARD earth barricades surrounding Douma on the outskirts of Damascus, while tough-looking militants control the streets. It is a stalemate that neither side, for the moment, is willing to break.

On seeing UN vehicles, passers-by shout anti-government slogans amid chants of “God is great”. A boy rips open his shirt to reveal white bandages on his chest which he also tries to remove, to show what look like burns underneath. “It may look safe in the daytime, but after 7pm snipers in high buildings shoot people walking in the streets,” says a man riding a red motor scooter. “They shot two children and three young men last night.”

A crying woman, veiled and in the black robes worn by most women in this conservative Muslim district, says her son was arrested six weeks earlier and she had not seen him since.

For all their complaints of snipers, arbitrary arrests and disappearances, the crowd of 100 people in the centre of Douma do not appear frightened that they will be attacked by government forces. About a third of the shops are open. Mobile phones do not work but somebody has collected the rubbish, unlike in the embattled city of Homs where it lies in rotting heaps. Local militants are well-organised, with disciplined young men in black shirts and trousers guarding the door of a mosque that serves as their headquarters. “The Muslim Brotherhood has always been strong in Douma,” a Christian observer says. An official from the mosque says: “This struggle goes back a long way.” He offers to show us the outside of a house belonging to a militant that was sealed in 1980 during the last Sunni Muslim rebellion and had never been reopened.

Inside the mosque, a team from the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (Unsmis), which has 300 monitors in the country, is seeking to mediate between local militant leaders and the government. Discussion revolves around immediate issues such as detainees, sniping, access to hospitals and the restoration of services.

Although people in Douma vocally claim the UN is doing them no good, they want more UN monitors, particularly if they can be stationed in Douma at night. Martin Griffiths, the deputy head of Unsmis, says: “Where they are present violence tends to reduce. If we had four brave [UN] observers staying overnight in Douma it would make a difference.” He adds that until there is a reduction of violence, there can be no real political dialogue.

Douma, a suburb of at least 180,000 people, shows few signs of physical damage aside from some buildings pock-marked with bullet holes. Local people complain of killings, disappearances and destructive searches, but not of

buildings being destroyed. Nevertheless, perceptions of the violence within Syria are very much determined by rumour and YouTube postings by the opposition. Many people six miles away in central Damascus are convinced that Douma, which they dare not visit, has been pounded into ruins. “Maybe the government did not let you see all the city,” a politically moderate businessman says disbelievingly, but there had been no government officials with us on our visit to Douma.

The violence is much worse further north. Taxi and bus drivers will often refuse to risk the road to Aleppo, which passes through rebel-held territory around Homs and Hama. The UN confirms that this week there has been heavy fighting at Rastan on the main road north of Homs. “There are many defectors from the Syrian army fighting there,” a UN official says.

While the Syrian army is meant to withdraw heavy weapons from city centres under the terms of the Kofi Annan ceasefire agreement on 12 April, it can keep them to guard main roads.

Although some international diplomats outside Syria say Mr Annan’s ceasefire has failed, many Syrians believe the violence could get much worse. The Syrian army could launch more assaults backed by heavy armour and artillery on insurgent held areas. Reflecting this, a popular saying in Damascus is that “the Minister of Defence has not yet got out of his pyjamas”. According to a statement by Unsmis, over the past six weeks, since the Annan ceasefire, the “level of offensive military operations by government forces decreased significantly” while there has been “an increase in militant attacks and targeted killings”. A report published this week by another UN team, which has not been allowed to enter Syria, said both sides were carrying out human rights violations, but blamed the majority of them on the government.

Greater Damascus is mostly quiet, with Douma its most violent area. The capital’s population of five million has been swollen by at least 400,000 refugees from Homs. The banking system has been paralysed by sanctions.

But the degree of economic calamity has been exaggerated, economists say. Nabil Sukkar, the managing director of the Syrian Consulting Bureau for Development and Investment who is also a former World Bank official, says: “The economy is hurting but it is not collapsing.”

He points out that the biggest sector is agriculture and rains have been good, tourism is not as important as in Egypt or Lebanon and what has been worst affected is oil exports.

Even in Douma the vegetable market is open and in Damascus there is a minor building boom as people illegally add several stories to apartment buildings on the grounds that the government is too preoccupied to enforce

regulations.

27th May 2012

I FEAR THIS TERRIBLE MASSACRE WILL BE THE BEGINNING OF A LONG CIVIL WAR

By Patrick Cockburn

PARTS OF Syria are convulsed by civil war, while in other areas life continues almost as normal. At the same moment as more than 30 children had their throats cut and dozens of civilians were killed by shelling in Houla in central Syria on Friday, people in Damascus were picnicking on the slopes of Mount Qassioun, overlooking the capital.

Fighting can be intense, but it is also sporadic, even in highly contested areas. Over the past week, insurgents, many of them defectors from the army, have been fighting to capture Rastan, a strategically placed town on the road running north from Homs. During the same period, militants in the small city of Douma, an opposition stronghold on the outskirts of Damascus, were involved in UN mediation over access to hospitals, the release of detainees and the restoration of services. Soldiers manning sand-bagged checkpoints surrounding Douma's narrow streets, where shops and markets were reopening, looked bored and relaxed.

Kofi Annan, the UN-Arab League envoy, returns to Damascus in the next couple of days to attempt to give more substance to the so-called ceasefire that began on 12 April. This now looks like a critical visit, as the Houla slaughter makes Syria once again the centre of international attention and a possible target for some form of foreign intervention.

The ceasefire was only sporadically implemented from the beginning. The government has always had more interest in its successful implementation, which would stabilise its authority, than the insurgents, who need to keep the pot of rebellion boiling. The UN monitoring team says that during the ceasefire "the level of offensive military operations by the government significantly decreased" while there has been "an increase in militant attacks and targeted killings". But any credit the Syrian government might be hoping for in showing restraint will disappear if the latest atrocities are confirmed.

Not that anybody in Syria expects a quick solution to the crisis in which a mosaic of different interests and factions are battling to control the country. "My picture of Syrian society is that 30 per cent of people are militantly against the government, 30 per cent are for them, and 40 per cent don't like anybody very much," said a Christian in Damascus. A diplomat said people are much more polarised than six months ago into pro-government, anti-government and "what I term the anti-anti government, the people who dislike the regime, but equally fear the opposition". The government has been exploiting this by targeting its non-violent opponents "so they can say it is a choice between us and guys with long beards. People want change, but they are frightened it might be for the

worse".

Conversations with liberally minded critics of the regime in Damascus reflect these differences. "If I made even the most peaceful protest I would be immediately arrested," said one woman in frustration. "The exiled opposition leaders have not developed a serious plan to reassure the minorities [Alawites, Christians, Druze, Kurds], though they are the main supporters of the government," added a businessman whose business is collapsing, forcing him to live off his savings.

Could the present stalemate change as a result of the death of all those people in Houla on Friday? Internationally, the atrocity, if confirmed in detail, will increase pressure for foreign support for the insurgency and tighter sanctions on Syria. Weapons from Saudi Arabia are now reportedly reaching the rebels and their degree of co-ordination in the fighting at Rastan is greater than a few months ago.

The Syrian government says its has been abiding by the ceasefire except where it comes under attack. Speaking before the Houla killings, Jihad Makdissi, the spokesman for the Syrian Foreign Affairs Ministry, said: "Since we signed the ceasefire on 12 April, we have documented 3,500 violations of it by the opposition." But the bombardment of civilian areas, with the gory consequences at Houla showing on every television screen in the world, will confirm Syria's status as a pariah, from which it had been starting to emerge.

Mr Makdissi said that an earlier monitoring mission by the Arab League had been "binned" by Arab leaders because it showed that the opposition was armed and on the offensive. There is no doubt that the opposition has become militarised, but this is not surprising given the repression of peaceful protest. "What Syria needs is gradual evolution, not armed confrontation," said Mr Makdissi. "You want Syria to reform, but you impose sanctions, so there is no gas for people to cook on."

The Syrian government has been growing stronger over the past seven weeks, because the Kofi Annan plan reduced calls for international intervention. The killings at Houla have put this in doubt and will put pressure on Annan for a more substantive ceasefire plan than the present one, which saw each side abide by it only when it was militarily convenient for them to do so.

Will the latest killings have an impact on how Syrians see the struggle for power? The indiscriminate and excessive nature of government violence over the past 14 months has alienated swathes of Syrians not naturally sympathetic to revolution. "It is not just that 10,000 people have died, but the bestial way in which they died," said one well-off and secular woman in Damascus.

For all the criticism of the Annan peace mission and the 300 monitors from

the UN Supervision Mission in Syria, they appear to be the only way of abating the violence. Even with an increased flow of weapons to the opposition, the government still has a great superiority in armed force. Indeed, this turns into political weakness because, as with the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, or Israel in Lebanon and Gaza, excessive use of heavy weaponry against civilians leads to a furious reaction at home and political isolation abroad.

A better-armed opposition will be too strong to be suppressed by the government, but the outcome is most likely to be prolonged civil war rather than a clear victory by either side. Sanctions have already wrecked the Syrian banking sector and are hurting the country, but they are not leading to economic collapse. Syrians feel it is a collective punishment on them all which causes little harm to the government. There is plenty of food because Syrian agriculture, the largest sector of the economy, is benefiting from two years of heavy rain after three years of severe drought. There is no tourism and hotels are empty, but this was never as important as in Lebanon or Egypt. The biggest blow has been the fall in oil exports as foreign oil companies cease operating here.

Both the government and the armed opposition have become stronger in the past six months and neither side sees much reason to compromise. It feels like the beginning of a long war.

27th May 2012

ASSAD BLAMED FOR MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

By Patrick Cockburn

IN A massacre of unprecedented savagery that brings Syria close to civil war, some 32 children and 60 adults have been slaughtered in villages in the Houla area of central Syria. Anti-government militants blame pro-regime gunmen for carrying out the butchery in which children and their parents were hacked and shot to death.

The figure for the number of children and adults killed was confirmed in an interview with The Independent on Sunday by General Robert Mood, the head of the team of 300 UN observers which is seeking to reduce the level of violence. “My patrols went into the village,” he said. “I can verify that they counted 32 children under 10 killed. In addition, there were more than 60 adults dead.”

General Mood would not explain how the villagers died, but horrific pictures posted on YouTube appear to show that they were shot or knifed to death, some having their throats cut. The small bodies of the children were covered in sheets as they were taken by survivors screaming in grief and disbelief from the houses where they had been murdered.

The massacre is the worst single incident in Syria’s 14-month crisis because it involved the deliberate murder of children as well as adults. Militants say the perpetrators were pro-regime gunmen, known as the shabiya, who had captured Houla. If true, the shabiya may have been members of the Alawite sect, which is supportive of the government. Alawites inhabit a string of villages south of Houla, which is 25km north-west of Homs. The Syrian leadership is largely drawn from the Alawite sect.

General Mood said that fighting around Houla started on Friday evening with the use of “tanks, artillery, rocket-propelled grenades, and heavy machine guns”. This implied an attack by government forces since the insurgent Free Syrian Army does not have heavy weapons. This confirms the militants’ story that there had been big anti-government protests on Friday in Houla, where there have previously been many anti-government demonstrations.

The calculated slaughter of Sunni villagers and their children by Alawites brings a new level of violence to Syria and propels it towards sectarian civil war. Yesterday, Damascus was quiet aside from one protest in an outlying district, but fighting has intensified at Rastan, north of Homs. Observers from the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMS) have mediated a ceasefire there, leaving insurgents in control of the town. But this straddles the main highway linking Damascus and Aleppo, so the government is unlikely to allow the Free Syrian Army to hold the town for long.

The Houla massacre could mark a crucial stage in the war in Syria because it will energise the insurgents inside and outside the country. It will make it more difficult for any compromise or new ceasefire to be arranged between President Bashar Assad and his opponents. It will increase hatred between Sunni and Alawites, a heterodox branch of Shia Islam. This has already been seen in the past week, with 11 Shia pilgrims kidnapped by insurgents in Syria and 10 people killed in associated violence in Lebanon. Houla is not far from the Lebanese border, and the latest atrocity is similar to what happened in the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, when different communities repeatedly massacred each other.

The pictures of the dead children of Houla are likely to create an international outcry and underline that the ceasefire arranged by the UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan is foundering. General Mood confirmed yesterday that there was no real ceasefire in Syria and said that there could not be an effective one until the combatants themselves implemented it. He emphasised that unarmed UN monitors cannot impose a truce, though in some areas, such as Homs, they have succeeded in "calming" the situation. He said: "The solution to the Syria crisis lies in the hands of the Syrian government, the fragmented opposition, and those outside fuelling the crisis by supplying arms and explosives."

Mr Annan is due in Damascus in the next few days to try to patch up a new ceasefire, but neither the government nor its opponents have carried through on past agreements. The government suppression of peaceful protest with gunfire and mass detentions has continued. At the same time, the Islamicisation and militarisation of the opposition is frightening minorities, such as the Alawites, Christians and Druze. The government is targeting moderate and secular opposition in order to present a stark choice to Syrians, and the world, between itself and Islamic fundamentalists.

Last night, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said: "There are credible and horrific reports that a large number of civilians have been massacred, including children. Our urgent priority is to ensure those responsible are held to account. We will be calling for an urgent session of the UN Security Council in the coming days. The Assad regime must cease all military operations."

28th May 2012

SYRIA FACES BACKLASH FOR MASSACRE OF INNOCENTS

By Patrick Cockburn and Nigel Morris

AMID WIDESPREAD condemnation of the massacre in Houla, the UN Security Council last night attempted to find an effective response to the escalating bloodshed in Syria.

As it issued a condemnation "in the strongest possible terms" of the shelling of civilians, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, was expected to ask Russia, Syria's only remaining major foreign ally, to put pressure on the regime to stop the killings. Kofi Annan, the UN-Arab League envoy, was also due for talks in Damascus.

Mr Hague said he was "absolutely sickened" by the recent deaths in Syria. "It is a familiar tactic of the Assad regime to blame others for what's happening in their country to try to get out of responsibility for the scale of the destruction," he said. The deaths "illuminate the type of tyranny that the people in Syria have been experiencing".

Mr Hague is due in Moscow today and is expected to urge the Russian Foreign Minister to take a much tougher stance over the human-rights abuses committed by the Assad regime. Russia and China have been the main opponents of stronger action against the Syrian government.

"It isn't in the interests of Russia, it's not in anyone's interests, for Syria to descend into an even bloodier situation and into a full-scale civil war, and that's now the danger," Mr Hague said.

Diplomats say Britain and France had proposed issuing a press statement condemning the killings, but Russia told Council members it could not agree and wanted to be briefed first by Major-General Robert Mood, who is heading the UN observer mission in Syria. Syria is once more facing diplomatic isolation. Mr Annan is due back in Damascus today for talks aimed at rescuing his foundering peace plan, which was agreed seven weeks ago.

The Syrian government denies its forces were responsible for the killings at Houla. But it has not produced a credible alternative explanation of what happened there to cast doubt on the claims of the opposition, largely confirmed by UN-ceasefire monitors, that the slaughter of at least 34 children and their parents was carried out by pro-government forces.

To survive, President Bashar al-Assad needs to avoid the international isolation which befell Libya. He also needs to prevent Syrians, and the world,

from believing the fall of his regime is inevitable and they should avoid betting on a loser.

"How will Russia respond to this?" asked one foreign diplomat in Damascus yesterday. "That is the crucial question." Russia remains Syria's most important friend. It was Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN Security Council in February that relieved Syria from the danger of foreign intervention similar to that which overthrew Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

But Russia is paying a price for backing Syria, and this price will have been raised by the Houla killings. It may not want to be allied to a regime in a permanent state of crisis.

President Assad can look for longer-term support to Iran and, to a lesser extent, Iraq, both Shia powers. They see Syria as being targeted by the Sunni rulers of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The Iranians have been giving some economic aid to reduce the impact of sanctions. Hezbollah in Lebanon will also be loath to see its long-term ally in Syria go down. But the Iranians, whose foreign policy is normally cautious and devious, will not want to depend on the survival of President Assad. They will look for an accommodation with any successor government, though Iran still faces a serious strategic defeat. It will be losing its one important ally in the Arab world. It will lose much of its ability to play a role as a regional power.

The Syrian chargé d'affaires will be summoned to the Foreign Office today to hear Britain's condemnation of the Houla massacre, which the Syrian government denies.

Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, said: "The scenes of savagery that we have seen on our television screens are revolting, stomach-churning." Mr Clegg and Alistair Burt, the Foreign Office minister, warned that Syrian officials may not be allowed into London for the Olympics.

Mowaffak Joumma, the chairman of the Syrian Olympic committee, last night said the Olympic charter forbade host nations from banning athletes. "Authority of any host country is limited to organising and offering all necessary facilities to all participating athletes," he said.

28th May 2012

ASSAD REGIME BLAMES MURDEROUS ONSLAUGHT ON HOULA'S REBEL ARMY

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIA YESTERDAY denied that its forces had carried out a massacre of 108 people including dozens of children in the central Syrian town of Houla, claiming that the slaughter was the work of rebels.

But it did not give a detailed account of what had happened that would convincingly refute allegations by insurgents, largely supported by UN monitors, that military units and militia men loyal to the government had carried out the killings.

Sources in Damascus told The Independent yesterday that they believed the attack had been carried out by regime forces in revenge for the killing of a government informant in the nearby Alawite village of Kabou a month earlier.

The claims and counterclaims came as shelling of neighbourhoods in the central Syrian city of Hama, the rebel-held town of Rastan north of Homs, and areas of the Damascus suburbs were reported by the Local Coordination Committees and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is based in Britain.

The government in Damascus yesterday appeared to be somewhat leaderless and seemed slow to take on board the impact of an outrage in which people across the world are blaming the Syrian authorities for the murder and mutilation of children. “I get the impression that there is nobody in firm control of Syrian policy and the Syrian armed forces,” said a diplomat yesterday.

The Syrian government is claiming that the massacre happened after 100 heavily armed men attacked government checkpoints around Houla early on Saturday morning and then butchered the inhabitants of Houla over a nine-hour period. Blaming “terrorists” for the massacre, Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi told reporters in Damascus that “women, children and old men were shot dead. This is not the hallmark of the heroic Syrian army.”

The opposition gave a more detailed account of what happened, saying that Houla was first shelled on Thursday after street protests by villagers. This has been confirmed by UN ceasefire monitors, who later found large-calibre shell casing. Anti-government militants say that “shabibah” militia men from the Alawite community loyal to President Bashar al-Assad entered Houla and hacked or shot its people to death.

An opposition eyewitness, named by news agencies as Maysara al-Alhawi, said he saw the bodies of six children and their parents in a looted house in the town.

He told a news agency: “The children’s corpses were piled on top of each other, either with their throats cut or shot at close range.

“I helped collect more than 100 bodies in the last two days, mostly women and children. The last were six members of the al-Kurdi family. A father and his five kids. The mother is missing,” he said.

Alawite villagers in the area of Houla were said to be frightened of retaliation for the massacre and have been donating blood for the wounded, the number of which is believed to be between 300-400.

28th May 2012

AS THE BODIES CONTINUE TO MOUNT UP, A PEOPLE ON EDGE PREPARE FOR CIVIL WAR

By Patrick Cockburn

IN DAMASCUS there are small but menacing signs of abnormality. Soldiers prevent all but military and security personnel entering certain streets. Heavy goods vehicles are being stopped on the outskirts of the capital because of fear of suicide bombs.

The massacre of the children of Houla and their parents has deepened the sense of crisis here, though many Syrians are becoming inured to violence. Unlike the rest of the world, which focuses on Syria only intermittently when there is some particularly gruesome outrage, people here may be losing their sense of shock after seeing 13,000 die in the last 15 months, according to the latest estimates.

But the most frightening indication that something is wrong is the emptiness, the absence of people and vehicles in previously crowded streets. Many stay at home fixated by a crisis they largely see unfolding on television and online. In the hotel where I am staying in Damascus, I am the only guest.

The government itself often feels curiously absent, perhaps because its attention is elsewhere. Decision-making in Syria was always slow because so many decisions had to be taken at the top but now it is worse.

“I sense that lower-ranking officials do not want to take decisions themselves because they might be countermanded by harder-line officials above them,” said a diplomat. At the same time, massacres like Houla, if carried out by Alawite militia men, suggest a leadership not quite in control of its own forces.

The mood is edgy. One person, in the space of a few minutes, shifted from claiming he had total confidence in the happy future of the Syrian people to expressing grim forbodings about the possibility of civil war.

“Why do you foreigners harp on about differences between our minorities?” an anti-government human rights activist asked me in exasperation yesterday. “The French said we would fight each other when they left Syria, but nothing happened. We Syrians stick together whatever governments say about our divisions.”

A quarter of an hour later, the same man, a Christian from the city of Hama in central Syria, not far from where the Houla massacre took place, was gloomily wondering about the prospect of sectarian conflict. He explained that Houla is “on a tongue of land where the people are Sunni, but the villages around it are Alawite and Christian. I know it well because my wife comes from a village near there.” He said he was very worried that if it turned out that the Sunni villagers, including 34 children, had been murdered by militia men from neighbouring Alawite villages then “I do not know what will happen”.

Damascus is deeply affected by the crisis, though this is not always visible. The banks have been cut off from the rest of the world. “All the banks in Lebanon are terrified of doing business with Syria,” said one wealthy businesswoman. “My bank manager in Beirut did not want to take a deposit I made even though the cheque was drawn on a British bank.” Many in Damascus know first-hand about the physical destruction wrought by the fighting in the centre of the country. There are some 400,000 Syrians displaced by the turmoil, mostly from Homs, who have taken refuge in the capital. Often they move into apartments previously occupied by Iraqi refugees who have returned home, some claiming that for them, Baghdad is now safer than Damascus.

29th May 2012

THE WEST IS HORRIFIED BY CHILDREN'S SLAUGHTER NOW. SOON WE'LL FORGET

By Robert Fisk

BASHAR AL-ASSAD will get away with it. He got away with Deraa. He got away with Homs. And he'll get away with Houla. So will the armed opposition to the regime, along with al-Qa'ida and any other outfits joining in Syria's tragedy. Yes, this may be the critical moment, the "tipping point" of horror, when Baathist collapse becomes inevitable rather than probable. And dear Mr Hague may be "absolutely" appalled. The UN, too. We all are.

But the Middle East is littered with a hundred Houlas, their dead children piled among the statistics, with knives and ropes as well as guns among the murder weapons. And what if Assad's soldiers let their Alawite militia do their dirty work? Didn't the Algerian FLN regime use "home guard" units to murder its opponents in the 1990s? Didn't Gaddafi have his loyalist militias last year, and Mubarak his jailbird drugged-up ex-cops, the baltagi, to bash opponents of his regime? Didn't Israel use its Lebanese Phalangist proxies to intimidate and kill its opponents in Lebanon? Wasn't this, too, "rule by murder"? And come to think of it, wasn't it Bashar al-Assad's uncle Rifaat's Special Forces who massacred the insurgents of Hama in 1982 - speak this not too loudly, for Rifaat lives now between Paris and London - and so who thinks Bashar can't get away with Houla? The Algerian parallel is a frightening one. The FLN's corrupt leadership wanted a "democracy", even held elections. But once it was clear that the Islamist opposition - the luckless Islamic Salvation Front - would win, the government declared war on the "terrorists" trying to destroy Algeria. Villages were besieged, towns were shelled - all in the name of fighting "terror" - until the opposition took to slaughtering civilians around Blida, thousands of them, babies with their throats cut, women raped. And then it turned out the Algerian army was also involved in massacres. For Houla, read Bentalha, a place we have all forgotten; as we will forget Houla.

And we Westerners, we huffed and puffed, and called upon both sides in Algeria to exercise "restraint", but wanted stability in France's former colony - and let's not forget that Syria is a former French "mandate" territory - and were very worried about al-Qa'ida-style insurgents taking over Algeria and, in the end, the US supported the Algerian military just as the Russians are supporting Syria's military today. And the FLN got away with it, after 200,000 dead - compared to the mere 10,000 killed so far in Syria's war.

And it's worth remembering that, faced with their 1990s insurrection, the Algerians cast around desperately for countries from which they could take advice. They chose Hafez al-Assad's Syria and sent a military delegation to Damascus to learn how the regime destroyed Hama in 1982. Now the Americans

- who six months ago were characteristically casting Bashar as a “dead man walking” - prefer a Yemen-type ending to the Syrian war, as if Yemen’s crisis wasn’t bloody enough. But replacing Assad with a thug from the same patch (the Sanaa “solution”) is not what the Syrians will settle for.

Yes, it’s a civil war. And yes, Houla may be the turning point. And yes, now the UN are witnesses. But the Baath party has roots that go deeper than blood - ask any Lebanese - and we in the West will soon forget Houla when another YouTube image of death flicks on to our screens from the Syrian countryside. Or from Yemen. Or from the next revolution.

29th May 2012

HAGUE SENT PACKING BY RUSSIA AS ANNAN PEACE PLAN CRUMBLES

By Shaun Walker and Patrick Cockburn

KOFI ANNAN arrived in Damascus in a desperate bid to rescue his peace plan and prevent Syria from sinking deeper into civil war, but hopes of a united international front were dashed when Russia refused to condemn Bashar al-Assad's regime for the Houla massacre.

Mr Annan held talks with the Syrian President while the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, sat through a tense press conference in Moscow in which his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, insisted all sides shared the blame for the recent atrocities.

Russia's backing of a UN Security Council statement condemning the deaths on Friday of more than 100 civilians in Houla had raised hopes that Moscow may finally relax its opposition to putting real pressure on Mr Assad's regime. Mr Lavrov conceded that government forces bore the main responsibility for the massacre, but insisted the presence of knife and bullet wounds on some corpses meant the opposition was also involved. Mr Lavrov also suggested recent bombings in Syria bore "all the hallmarks of al-Qa'ida". He said: "We are dealing with a situation in which both sides evidently had a hand in the deaths of innocent people." Mr Lavrov also repeatedly accused other nations of egging the rebels on and pushing them to break the ceasefire and provoke a response from Mr Assad's forces, in the hope of forcing international intervention. He said: "We should be attempting to implement the peace plan and not trying to change the regime. It's time to choose between pursuing geopolitical goals and saving lives."

The contrast to the language coming out of the US was stark, with Pentagon chief General Martin Dempsey saying there "is always a military option" in dealing with such regimes, adding that "it may come to a point with Syria because of the atrocities".

However, Gen Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, added that "diplomatic pressure should always precede any discussions about military options".

As Mr Annan arrived in Syria there were reports of escalating fighting in the central city of Hama, where the opposition says Syrian army artillery barrages have killed 41 people.

"I am personally shocked and horrified by the tragic incident in Houla two

days ago," Mr Annan said, before entering talks with Mr Assad and other officials.

The UN's peace envoy said that all sides of the conflict had to end the bloodshed, insisting that "this message of peace is not only for the government, but for everyone with a gun".

The Syrian government continues to blame the Houla massacre on "terrorists" and Sunni fundamentalists, but has not spelt out in convincing detail how it believes the killings occurred.

Anti-government opposition sources in Damascus said they have been told by survivors of Houla that, after fighting between the Free Syrian Army and regular government forces last Friday, Alawite militiamen began the massacre, saying they were acting in retaliation for the killing of a government informant in their village a month ago, but this could not be independently confirmed.

The mood in Damascus is becoming increasingly tense as people absorb the shock of the atrocity at Houla. There is the sound of sporadic shooting in some parts of the capital and the explosion of a bomb near a school in one suburb sent parents racing to pick up their children. Government control is tight and there are many more checkpoints at night.

Mr Annan's original plan envisioned a ceasefire beginning on 12 April, but it is now being broken on a daily basis, according to the UN monitoring team. Few Syrians expect Mr Assad or the leadership of the regime he represents to consider giving up or even sharing power unless they face the prospect of losing their last allies. They also look for support to Iran, allied with Syria for 30 years, and, to a lesser extent, Iraq.

Mr Annan faces a difficult task to get either the Syrian government or the rebels to implement his six-point peace plan signed seven week ago.

A national dialogue now looks unlikely because of the hatred and distrust between the two sides.

And the government does not feel strong enough to allow the release of detainees or a withdrawal of heavy weapons from cities as it promised.

30th May 2012

MOVE PUSHES SYRIA - AND RUSSIA - FURTHER OUT INTO THE COLD

By Patrick Cockburn

THE EXPULSION of diplomats always looks like a weedy response to an atrocity, particularly one as outrageous as the murder of children at Houla. Unsurprisingly, news reports about kicking out the diplomats yesterday often concluded mournfully that the move wouldn't do much good.

This is true, but the presence or absence of diplomats is always symbolic. It increases the isolation of Syria, which will not in itself lead to the overthrow of the regime but will weaken it. Probably its most significant impact will be to sow doubts in the minds of Russian, Chinese and Iranian leaders about how much more political capital they want to spend to protect President Bashar al-Assad.

Before Houla, Syria was making some progress in persuading other powers that it was going to survive at least for the moment. The accusation that the ceasefire agreement reached by Kofi Annan was a smokescreen for doing nothing very effective in Syria was largely true. The Syrian authorities blithely ignored provisions about releasing detainees and allowing peaceful protests, but a military ceasefire left President Assad in control of much of the country.

It was in his interest to avoid any atrocity that would draw international attention. It is a measure of the lack of effective decision-making within the regime that they could not restrain their own forces. "Within the regime, there are divisions between the civilians, military and security," believes one commentator in Damascus. "There is not a single authority ruling the state but clusters of authority within the leadership."

Expulsion of diplomats ratchets up Syria's pariah status. It may persuade Syrians and the rest of the region that President Assad is not going to last beyond the short term. The lack of diplomatic representation will not doom the leadership. But certain changes will take place. De-legitimisation at home and abroad will be greater; it be will easier for Saudi Arabia and others to arm the opposition.

Russia, meanwhile, is visibly uncomfortable at being portrayed as the crucial support of child killers. Opponents of President Assad hope that the Houla massacre will be the turning point, but this is not wholly certain.

30th May 2012

SYRIA ISOLATED AS WESTERN CAPITALS EXPEL DIPLOMATS

By Kim Sengupta

BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S regime was facing increasing isolation yesterday with nearly a dozen Western states expelling Syrian envoys in retaliation for the Houla massacre, and with renewed calls for the United Nations to impose far-reaching sanctions.

In a day of intense diplomatic activity, 11 countries including Britain and the United States threw out senior embassy staff. The co-ordinated moves came as the UN representative, Kofi Annan, met President Assad in Damascus in an attempt to rescue what was left of his peace plan and stress the "grave concern of the international community" at the violence, which shows no signs of abating. "We are at a tipping point," Mr Annan said after a meeting Assad yesterday. "The Syrian people do not want the future to be one of bloodshed and division. Yet the killings continue and the abuses are still with us today."

President Assad, however, reiterated his claim that the killing of 108 civilians in Houla on Friday was the work of "terrorists". Armed gangs had stepped up bombings and shootings as well as carrying out abductions while his own forces were exercising restraint, he insisted. Regime officials maintained that the outside world was being subjected to a propaganda offensive in tandem with the insurgent offensive in Syria.

Overall there appears to be a growing feeling that Mr Annan's six-point plan to end the strife was failing and the deaths of more than 100 civilians, including women and children, in the Houla region may become the catalyst for more direct action against the Syrian regime by the countries supporting the opposition.

By yesterday evening, Britain, the US, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Bulgaria and Switzerland had all announced the expulsion of Syrian diplomats, with pledges that other measures would follow.

France was first to take diplomatic action, asking the Syrian ambassador Lamia Shakkour to leave within 48 hours. "Bashar al-Assad is the murderer of his people," said France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius. "He must relinquish power. The sooner the better." President François Hollande said he held discussions with David Cameron and the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon before announcing the step as part "of a certain number of pressure tactics".

The US administration gave Syrian chargé d'affaires, Zuheir Jabbor, three days to leave the country. The State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said of the Houla attack: "We hold the Syrian government responsible for this slaughter of innocent lives."

In London, William Hague stated that the chargé d'affaires, Ghassan Dalla, and two other diplomats had been told to leave the country within seven days as "an expression of horror" at the actions of the regime. Mr Dalla confirmed the news. It is believed a small caretaker staff will remain in London.

One nation in which Syrian diplomats remain firmly entrenched, however, is Russia, which has proved to be Assad's firmest ally during the 14-month crisis. Mr Hague visited the country on Monday, but failed to persuade Moscow to support stronger action against Syria through the UN. Mr Hague acknowledged that Russia "had a different attitude to the Assad regime" but said Western nations would continue to urge Moscow to use its leverage with Assad.

In Germany, the Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, said his government would push for the UN Security Council to consider further sanctions against the regime. "They bear responsibility for the terrible events in Houla," he said. "Those who use heavy weapons against their own people must expect serious diplomatic and political consequences."

3rd June 2012

WHY WAR IS MARCHING ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

By Patrick Cockburn

DAMASCUS FEELS like a city expecting the worst to happen and seeing no way to avoid it. War is spreading across the country and is unlikely to spare the capital. Rebels speak of stepping up attacks in the city and could easily do so in the next few weeks.

I spent the last week in Damascus and the atmosphere reminds me of Beirut in 1975 at the start of the 15-year civil war. Again and again in conversations, people realistically laid out for me the nasty things that are all too likely to happen, but few were able to produce plausible ideas on how disaster might be averted.

“I wish people abroad would stop talking about a civil war starting here because it is still the people against the government,” said one committed member of the opposition as we sat in a café in Damascus (everybody I spoke to has to be nameless, for obvious reasons). She believed that it was only the heavy presence of the security forces that were suppressing mass popular protest in the days after the Houla massacre.

She may have been right, but in practice not a lot was happening. There was less traffic on the streets and foreign TV stations made much play of YouTube postings showing merchants shutting their shops in protest at the Houla slaughter. But, driving around Damascus, the strike’s success was difficult to judge since so many shops and restaurants are shut anyway because of the lack of tourists and the impact of sanctions.

The rebels could probably start a campaign of bombings and selective assassinations fairly easily in Damascus. This is not a sign that they are militarily strong, but it would be easy for a movement lacking arms and experienced fighters to spread instability by these means. The rebels can do this using as bases strongholds in and around the city such as Douma, which they more or less control.

None of this is good news for the people of Damascus since government retaliation and collective punishments are likely to be savage and sustained. It is depressing that Damascus, one of the more beautiful cities in the world, is on the edge of becoming the victim of the same sort of hatred, fear and destruction that have convulsed Beirut, Baghdad and Belfast over the past 50 years.

Sectarianism is deepening. Christians are fearful and are all too aware of what happened to their co-religionists in Iraq after 2003. Opposition members in Damascus often blandly blame the rise in sectarian fears on the authorities. “The government is just trying to frighten people,” said one Christian human rights activist. “People here have never had a problem with each other.” He pointed out

that the French had tried to secure their imperial rule by exploiting communal and religious differences, but they had failed.

Unfortunately for Syria, the activist had got his history wrong. In 1860 Muslim mobs burst into the Christian quarter of Damascus and slaughtered between 5,000 and 10,000 people (the Ottoman authorities restored order - a hint here, perhaps, on how other governments might deter official connivance in sectarian murder - by hanging their own governor and 56 of his officials for dereliction of duty and shooting a hundred of their soldiers who had taken part in the massacre).

The present Syrian government may be trying to stir up sectarian strife in order to ensure that the minorities - Alawite, Christian, Druze and Kurd - remain on its side. But it did not invent these communal differences, though the opposition has been trying to play them down. I asked one diplomat long resident in Damascus what he thought of the picture of the Syrian crisis presented to the outside world by YouTube pictures posted by the opposition. “They are deceptive,” he answered dryly. “For instance, when they show anti-government demonstrations, the activists always edit out the bit where the crowd shouts ‘death to the Alawites!’”

The government probably does have a core constituency that will fight to the death. How big it is, nobody knows. One opposition militant, released from jail last year, believed the majority of Syrians are prepared to pay any price to overthrow the regime. “People want their freedom even if there is an earthquake,” he said. “Things will get worse, but the struggle will not be long, and Assad will go.” He denied that the opposition wanted revenge, saying “I was in Hama in 1982 when the government killed 40,000 people [the usual figure given is 10,000] over 27 days, but nobody is looking for revenge today.”

Sincere though my friend in Damascus was about the government’s lack of support - “five per cent of Syrians fight for the regime and 10 per cent support them” - he appeared consumed by bitterness and rage about the treatment of himself and his family, who between them have spent 65 years in jail. It was difficult to believe that the regime’s past crimes would be as easily forgiven as he claimed.

At the heart of the Syrian crisis is a revolution against the police state run by the Assad family for 40 years. But there are two parallel struggles going on that taint and complicate this popular uprising. One is the struggle of the Sunni Arab powers, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, against the Shia. The other is the US and Saudi-led confrontation with Iran, whose most important ally in the Arab world is Syria. Weapons from Saudi Arabia are now reported to be reaching the insurgents. Iraqi officials say that al-Qa’ida fighters in Diyala province north-

east of Baghdad, notorious for massacring Shia villagers and travellers, have headed back to Syria.

Understandable self-deception by activists in Damascus is matched by less justifiable self-deception outside the country. Recent suggestions, such as the establishment of a humanitarian “safe haven” on the Syrian side of the Turkish border, are a recipe for war (and will terrify Armenians in Aleppo and Kurds in Qamishli, both communities having dark memories of Turkish rule). Alternatively, pumping in weapons paid for by the Saudi absolute monarchy whose motives are primarily sectarian and anti-Iranian, will only exacerbate the violence.

President Bashar al-Assad will not go quietly and believes he does not have to go at all. Here lies the problem at the heart of the Syrian crisis, where Russia has some right on its side and President Putin’s critics are mistaken. Mr Assad’s regime is being asked to reform itself and, at the same time, to drop dead politically and pass out of existence. These aims are contradictory. Why should the Syrian government modify its behaviour if the true purpose of international pressure is regime change?

Regimes changed in Iraq and Libya because they were defeated in war by the Western powers (the Libyan rebels would not have lasted a week without Nato support).

If the Western powers are not going to go to war in Syria, and can’t get the Turks to do their dirty work for them, then they should push for reform and power-sharing that leaves a modified version of the Assad regime in place. This would be difficult for the Russians to oppose and would relieve the fears of Iran. The alternative may be a long war that will tear Syria apart.

5th June 2012

AS EU AND RUSSIA TALK, SYRIA SLIDES EVER CLOSER TO CIVIL WAR

By Patrick Cockburn

EVIDENCE OF an escalation in the bloody conflict engulfing Syria gave added urgency to talks yesterday between the EU and Russia - a key ally of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

In an upsurge in fighting, Syrian insurgents claim to have killed at least 80 government troops in the north of the country at the weekend as an international stalemate persists over new measures directed against the Syrian government. The Syrian state news agency confirmed the burial of 30 soldiers, giving credibility to the account of increasing rebel attacks particularly around the northern city of Idlib, which is a centre of insurgent activity.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) said yesterday that it would no longer abide by the UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan because President Assad had failed to observe their Friday deadline to implement the ceasefire. "We have decided to end our commitment to this [ceasefire]," said Free Syrian Army spokesman Major Sami al-Kurdi. "We have resumed our attacks but we are doing defensive attacks, which means we are only attacking checkpoints in the cities."

Speaking in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia yesterday, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, said the Annan plan remained central to resolving the Syrian conflict. He urged Syria's President Assad to stop the violence and start a political dialogue with his enemies.

Russia and China have continued to block harsher measures against Syria by the UN Security Council that might open the way to foreign military intervention. At a summit in St Petersburg with EU officials, including the European Council President, Herman Van Rompuy, and the European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso, President Vladimir Putin has reiterated that the rebels are responsible for much of the violence, criticising sanctions and saying a political settlement could not be imposed from outside.

On the ground in Damascus, UN officials say that unless the violence is reduced then political dialogue has no chance of getting off the ground. The Syrian government has failed to apply terms of the peace plan, which was meant to come into force on 12 April. But the UN monitoring group in Damascus says that the FSA and other armed rebel groups have stepped up their armed attacks over the past seven weeks, while the government had reduced its offensive operations.

The Houla massacre on 25 May of more than 100 Sunni villagers led to outrage inside and outside Syria. But the atrocity has so far failed to produce a radical change in the balance of power in Syria. President Assad has denied any

involvement of the army in the massacre, though he has not spoken about the suspected role of pro-government Alawite militiamen.

China’s most important newspaper, the People’s Daily, warned yesterday any Western-backed military intervention would create even bloodier chaos and abandoning the Annan plan could push Syria into the “abyss”.

The Syrian government, meanwhile, continues to limit the access of foreign journalists by rationing visas, which has led to the rebel groups largely controlling the flow of information about events on the ground in Syria.

The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an anti-government organisation, says it has confirmed the names of 80 dead soldiers with local doctors alleging they were killed when four to six checkpoints were overrun by rebels near Idlib.

26th June 2012

THE REBELS ARE BECOMING MORE VIABLE

By Kim Sengupta

AMID THE latest rounds of killings and destruction, the further ratcheting up of international tensions and Nato's meeting over the shooting down of a Turkish warplane, a development has taken place which will have a significant impact on the course of Syria's civil war.

A group of 224 middle-ranking military officers and their families have followed two brigadier-generals and two colonels in defecting from the Syrian armed forces. Around 35,000 have fled from Syria into Turkey since the rebellion started last year. But this is the first time that there a steady and growing flow of desertions from forces which have hitherto remained loyal to Bashar al-Assad.

Which side the military takes has been of pivotal importance in the Arab Spring. Large numbers joined the rebels in Libya from the early days of the revolution and it was a decision of the armies in respective countries to withdraw support which led to demise of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia.

The numbers of ex-servicemen have been rising recently. The public reason given by these men is that they had been forced to fight for the regime and left when they could no longer stand the slaughter of fellow citizens.

This may be true, but Addurrahman Razaq, an artillery sergeant from Maarat al-Numan in Idlib province, went to the hills to join the rebels because of the killings he witnessed but there were other killings after the regime's gunmen left - of those suspected of collaborating by the opposition. Rebels have stepped up the assassinations of soldiers.

And the opposition can now offer better arms. The group I was with on one of my last trips across the border was armed with shotguns and hunting rifles and there was celebration when they got their first Kalashnikov from a soldier for $2,500 (£1,600). Courtesy of money coming in from abroad, the same band now has enough Kalashnikovs to go around.

28th June 2012

REBELS ACCUSED OF MASSACRE AFTER SEVEN DIE IN ATTACK ON TV STATION

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SYRIAN regime accused opponents of staging a massacre yesterday after insurgents attacked a pro-government television station near Damascus and killed seven employees.

The assault came as United Nations investigators warned that the violence in Syria had “reached or even surpassed” the levels seen before the UN-backed ceasefire agreed in April, as they presented a report into the massacre at Houla last month in which more than 100 civilians were killed.

As rebels intensify attacks on the regime and its supporters, the UN and Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, has called a meeting of permanent members of the UN Security Council. It pointedly excludes Saudi Arabia, which supports the insurgents, and Iran, which backs the government.

The al-Ikhbariya TV station, 15 miles south of Damascus, was stormed by gunmen at about 4am, hours after President Bashar al-Assad said his country was in “a real state of war”.

A photographer who visited the remains of the station said five buildings used for offices and studios had collapsed. The newsroom was burned out. The walls of a two-storey building had been sprayed with bullets, there was blood on the floor and wooden partitions were still on fire.

Accurate information about fighting in Syria was already difficult to obtain and is likely to become more so if rebels target journalists and news organisations they regard as hostile.

Al-Ikhbariya is privately-owned but is strongly supportive of the government, as is the rest of the Syrian media. However, many Syrians get their news from satellite television channels highly critical of the state.

An employee at the television station told a news agency that several staff were wounded in the assault on its compound in the town of Drousha.

He was driven 200 yards from station by the rebels before they blew it up. He said: “I was terrified when they blindfolded me and took me away.” They released him soon afterwards, but kidnapped the station’s guards.

The Information Minister, Omran al-Zoebi, called the killings “a massacre against the freedom of the press”.

The UN report on last month’s massacre at Houla, near the northern city of Homs, does not name those responsible, saying only that forces loyal to the government “may have been responsible” for many of the deaths.

It does not name the Alawite militia - the Shabiha - as being responsible, as has been widely reported, but said they had easiest access to Houla.

29th June 2012

WESTERN AGREEMENT 'COULD LEAVE SYRIA IN ASSAD'S HANDS FOR TWO MORE YEARS'

By Robert Fisk

PRESIDENT BASHAR al-Assad of Syria may last longer than his opponents believe - and with the tacit acceptance of Western leaders anxious to secure new oil routes to Europe via Syria before the fall of the regime. According to a source closely involved in the possible transition from Ba'ath party power, the Americans, Russians and Europeans are also putting together a deal that would permit Assad to remain leader for at least another two years in return for political concessions to Iran and Saudi Arabia in both Lebanon and Iraq.

For its part, Russia would be assured of its continued military base at Tartous in Syria and a relationship with whatever government in Damascus eventually emerges with the support of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russia's recent concession - that Assad may not be essential in a future Syrian power structure - is part of an understanding in the West which may accept Assad's presidency in return for an agreement that stops a further slide into civil war.

Information from Syria suggests that Assad's army is now "taking a beating" from armed rebels, who include Islamist as well as nationalist forces; at least 6,000 soldiers are believed to have been killed in action since the rebellion against Assad began 17 months ago. There are unconfirmed reports that during any one week up to a thousand Syrian fighters are being trained by mercenaries in Jordan at a base used by Western authorities for personnel seeking "anti-terrorist" security exercises.

The US-Russian negotiations - easy to deny, and somewhat cynically hidden behind the mutual accusations of Hillary Clinton and her Russian opposite number, Sergei Lavrov - would mean the superpowers would acknowledge Iran's influence over Iraq and its relationship with its Hezbollah allies in Lebanon, while Saudi Arabia - and Qatar - would be encouraged to guarantee Sunni Muslim rights in Lebanon and in Iraq. Baghdad's emergence as a centre of Shia power has caused much anguish in Saudi Arabia whose support for the Sunni minority in Iraq has led to political division.

But the real object of talks between the world powers revolves around the West's determination to secure oil and gas from the Gulf states without relying upon supplies from Moscow. "Russia can turn off the spigot to Europe whenever it wants - and this gives it tremendous political power," the source says. "We are talking about two fundamental oil routes to the West - one from Qatar and Saudi Arabia via Jordan and Syria and the Mediterranean to Europe, another from Iran via Shia southern Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean and Europe. This is what matters. This is why they will be prepared to let Assad last another two years. They would be perfectly content with that. And Russia will have a place in the

new Syria."

Diplomats who are still discussing these plans should, of course, be treated with some scepticism. It is one thing to hear political leaders excoriating the Syrian regime for its abuse of human rights and massacres - another to realise that Western diplomats are prepared to put this to one side for the "bigger picture" which, as usual in the Middle East, means oil and gas. They are prepared to tolerate Assad's presence until the end of the crisis, rather than insisting his departure is the start of the end. The Americans apparently say the same. Now Russia believes that stability is more important than Assad himself.

It is clear that Assad should have gone ahead with extensive reforms when his father Hafez died in 2000. At that stage, say Syrian officials, Syria's economy was in a better state than Greece is today. And the saner voices influencing Assad's leadership were slowly deprived of their power. An official close to the president called him during the height of last year's fighting to say that "Homs is burning". Assad's reaction was to refuse all personal conversation with the official in future, insisting on only text messages. "Assad no longer has power over all that happens in Syria," the informant says. "Not because he doesn't want to - there's just too much going on across the country."

What Assad is still hoping for, according to Arab military veterans, is an Algerian solution. After the cancellation of democratic elections in Algeria, its army and generals fought a merciless war against rebels and Islamist guerrillas across the country throughout the 1990s, using torture and massacre to retain government power but leaving an estimated 200,000 dead.

Amid this crisis, the Algerian military sent a delegation to Damascus to learn from Hafez al-Assad's Syrian army how it destroyed the Islamist rebellion in Hama - at a cost of up to 20,000 dead - in 1982. The Algerian civil war - remarkably similar to that now afflicting Assad's regime - displayed many of the characteristics of the current tragedy in Syria: babies with their throats cut, families slaughtered by mysterious semi-military "armed groups", whole towns shelled by government forces.

And, more interesting to Assad's men, the West continued to support the Algerian regime with weapons and political encouragement during the 1990s while huffing and puffing about human rights. Algeria's oil and gas reserves proved more important than civilian deaths - just as the Damascus regime now hopes to rely upon the West's desire for via-Syria oil and gas to tolerate further killings. Syrians say Jamil Hassan, the head of Air Force intelligence in Syria is now the "killer" leader for the regime - not so much Bashar's brother Maher whose 4th Division is perhaps being given too much credit for suppressing the revolt. It has certainly failed to crush it.

The West, meanwhile has to deal with Syria's contact man, Mohamed Nassif, perhaps Assad's closest political adviser. The question remains as to whether Assad - however much he fails to control military events on the ground - really grasps the epic political importance of what is going on in his country. Prior to the rebellion, European and Turkish leaders were astonished to hear from him that Sunni forces in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli were trying "to create a Salafist state" that would threaten Syria. How this extraordinary assertion - based, presumably on the tittle-tattle of an intelligence agent - could have formulated itself in Assad's mind, remained a mystery.

19th July 2012

ASSASSINATIONS ON AN EPIC SCALE - BUT REBELS WILL NOT CLAIM THEIR GREATEST PRIZE

By Robert Fisk

THEY HAVE gone for the jugular now. The brother-in-law of the President, the Defence Minister, a massive bomb close to - or in - the headquarters of the military apparatus run by the President's own brother. Assassinations take time to plan, but this was on an epic scale, to match the bloodbath across Syria.

Bashar al-Assad's own sister, Bushra, one of the pillars of the Baath party, loses her husband in a massive explosion in the very centre of Damascus. No wonder the Russians talk about the "decisive battle".

It won't be a replay of Stalingrad, but the tentacles of the rebellion have now moved towards the heart. And, of course, there are massacres to come. Why else would thousands of Syria's citizens flee to the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp yesterday, to seek protection from the most betrayed citizens of the Arab world?

And there is hatred enough to maintain this savage strike at the Syrian government. Eight months ago, during one of the massive pro-regime demonstrations in the Rawda district, I walked past the very intelligence-security establishment which was bombed yesterday.

At the time, a Syrian friend of mine looked at it bleakly. The torture goes on below ground, he said. "You don't even want to know what happens there." But whoever emerged from there would be happy to kill his tormentors, let alone the chief torturers.

The people's anger will embrace a duke or two. It was typical that, in their desperation to fill the vacuum left by yesterday's assassinations, the regime chose a nonentity, Fahd Jassim al-Furayj, to fill the job of Defence Minister - a man who comes from Hama, the centre of every major uprising against Syria's rulers.

We have a habit, we Westerners, of always looking at the Middle East through our own cartography - the Middle East is "east" of "us", isn't it? - but tip the map on end and you realise how close Syria is to Chechen Muslim irredentists. No wonder Moscow fears the rebellion in Syria.

And old Hafez al-Assad, father of Bashar - he used to worry in his last years that a rebellion in Syria would take the form of the terrible conflict which he followed daily on television: the break-up of "secular" Yugoslavia, whose sectarian divisions were then remarkably similar to Syria's today. And weirdly, although the throat-cutting, the militia massacres of civilians and the slaughter of children parallel the 1990s war in Syria's Algerian ally, the appalling scenes from Syria do now begin to reflect the barbarism of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia.

What can Bashar do now? Another Syrian friend put an interesting question

to me the other day. Suppose the Alawite Shia President Bashar decides to flee, he said. “He will be driven to the airport by an Alawite colonel. Will the colonel let him go? I doubt it.”

So two gloomy predictions. Yes, Bashar may still hang on longer than we think. And he won’t leave; his brother Maher, who runs the so-called 4th Brigade, may be a different matter. But tanks in the streets of Damascus, the oldest inhabited city in the world, and the shooting can be heard from the presidential palace; these are unprecedented days. Why, a few times yesterday, even Syrian television was forced to tell the truth. The verdict? Going, but not yet gone.

19th July 2012

ARCHITECTS OF REGIME'S BRUTAL CRACKDOWN PAY THE ULTIMATE PRICE

By Kim Sengupta and Richard Hall

THE DAMASCUS bombing killed or severely injured four out of about eight of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle, who have been responsible for directing the bloody crackdown since the start of the uprising.

One of the dead - Assef Shawkat, the President's brother-in-law and head of his crisis team - had been blamed for some of the most brutal episodes of repression. Born in 1950 to a middle-class Alawite family, Shawkat studied law in Damascus before joining the military in the late 1970s. He rose quickly through the ranks and was described by colleagues as an ambitious man. His marriage to Bushra, daughter of the then-President Hafez al-Assad, helped him to rise further still and allowed him to form a close relationship with Bashar al-Assad.

When Assad became President, Shawkat was appointed the de facto chief of military intelligence, a title he officially acquired in 2005, making him a key member of the regime's inner circle and a pillar of the Assad family's rule.

The Interior Minister, Mohammad Ibrahim al-Shaar, who, according to differing reports was either killed or critically wounded, and Hisham Ikhtiyar, the injured national security chief, were said to have been in charge of compiling lists of opposition figures. Shaar, an Alawite, was appointed Interior Minister in a cabinet reshuffle in April last year. He previously held a number of security posts, including head of the military police. He was among members of Assad's inner circle who were targeted by EU sanctions in May 2011.

Also killed was Dawoud Rajha, the Defence Minister, a Greek Orthodox Christian whose presence in the cabinet was meant to show inclusiveness in Syria's Alawite-dominated hierarchy. Appointed in August 2011 after serving as army chief of staff for two years, he had also become an important conduit to the Russian government.

The third fatality was General Hassan Turkmani, a former Defence Minister and current assistant to the Vice-President. He was not regarded as being among Assad's close confidants.

Those surviving members of the President's close-knit circle include his brother Maher, commander of the army's 4th Division, whose troops have been accused of abuses and arbitrary killings. He was briefly reined in by Assad, but has risen in influence with the surge in violence.

General Ali Mamlouk, the chief of general intelligence, Abdel-Fattah Qudsiyeh, the head of military intelligence, and Mohammed Nassif Kheyrbek, a security adviser, are the others who can be expected to play leading roles for however long the regime continues to last.

General Fahd Jassim al-Furayj was appointed Defence Minister within hours of the bombing.

22nd July 2012

SECTARIANISM BITES INTO SYRIA'S REBELS

By Robert Fisk

A YOUNG Syrian turned up just over a week ago at a smart office block in Beirut with a terrifying message. Without giving his name, he said he wanted to speak to another Syrian who worked in the office, a well-educated man who left his country months ago. The visitor was taken upstairs and introduced himself. “I was sent to you by the shebab,” he said - shebab might be translated as “the youth” or “the guys” and it meant he worked for the armed Syrian opposition - “and we need your help.”

His story was as revealing as it was frightening. Damascus was about to be attacked. But the fighters were out of control. There were drug addicts among them. “Some of our people are on drugs,” the visitor said. “They will take anyone out. We can’t guarantee what some of these men will do. If they went into Malki [a mixed, middle-class area of central Damascus], we couldn’t protect any of the people who live there. We are against the Salafists who are fighting - there are good Syrians, Druze and Ishmaeilis [Alawites] who are with us. But if we capture Damascus, we don’t know how to run a small town, let alone a country.”

It was a true civil war story. There were bad guys among the good guys and good guys among the bad. But sectarianism is biting into the Syrian revolution. At the end of last week, one Syrian told me that “they are bayoneting people in the villages around Damascus”. Women, they say, have been raped outside the city of Homs - one estimate puts the number of victims as high as 200 - and the rapists are on both sides. The Syrian in Beirut knew all this and gave his visitor the following advice.

“Organise neighbourhood committees, well-dressed men who must be clearly identified and who must protect everyone, Christians, Druze, Sunnis, Alawites, everyone.”

Five days later, the same Syrian received a phone call from an unidentified man in Damascus. “Boss, take your family out of Damascus. Give my phone number to your mum - she can call me if she has trouble on the way to the Lebanese border.”

Up to 50,000 Syrians are believed to have fled into Lebanon last week. The man’s mother was not among them; she could find no one to take her the 40 miles to safety.

The stories coming out of Syria now are of suspicion, chaos and death. President Bashar al-Assad’s personal jet left Damascus on Wednesday night for the coastal town of Lattakia. Was Bashar fleeing his capital? No. It transpired the plane was carrying the body of his murdered brother-in-law, Assaf Shawkat, for

burial near his native city of Tartous. In Lebanon, Sunni Muslims were already wildly celebrating his death. For it is Shawkat - his name actually appeared in a UN report that was later censored - who is widely believed to have planned and ordered the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, whose convoy was bombed in Beirut on 14 February 2005. Hariri, a Sunni, had fallen out with Assad over Syria's role in Lebanon. Shawkat was the hatchet-man. Now the bomber had been bombed to death himself.

Two months ago, it is said in Damascus, there was an attempt to poison Shawkat and the two other men who were assassinated with him last week, General Daoud Rajha, the Christian defence minister, and the Sunni general, Hassan Turkmani, head of Assad's "crisis cell". But the cook put 15 poison tablets into their food rather than the prescribed five - such was his enthusiasm - and the men could taste the food was bad. The cook escaped. This is the most accurate of several "poisoning" stories, but there is no reason to disbelieve it. There is nothing new in treachery in the regime. Bashar's uncle Rifaat - now residing in Mayfair - twice tried to stage a military coup against Bashar's father, Hafez.

Bashar Assad received some advice last month from a Syrian with whom he is acquainted: if he ended his strikes against civilians, the Europeans would be content to let him remain in power for at least two more years - because the west wanted direct oil pipelines from Qatar and Saudi Arabia via Jordan and Syria to the Mediterranean in order to end Russia's stranglehold on Europe's gas and oil. Assad's reply came in his last speech. "There are people with patriotic intentions," he said. "But they don't know the nature of the conflict." All the evidence suggests that it is Assad himself who has not grasped the "nature" of this conflict.

Two of his relatives, however, do apparently understand it. Mohamed Makhlouf, the president's uncle on his mother's side, and his son Rami, Assad's first cousin, have been seeking a deal with the French government to allow them to live in exile in Paris if the regime collapses. The Makhloufs have been at the centre of the government's corruption in Syria and they are one of the reasons for the revolt and its 17,000 fatalities. For despite the dictatorship and its secret police apparatus, corruption was the glue that held the regime together.

Northern Syria, for example, has always been a vast smuggling zone, a place where every man in almost every family owned a rifle - this was one reason why the Assads always appointed tough former military men as provincial governors in the Aleppo region - and goods flowed from Turkey through Syria to Jordan and the Gulf. But once Syria's economy began to slide, the mutual corruption of state and banditry, and between a minority Alawite-led regime and its favourites

in the Christian and majority Sunni communities, meant that the glue began to melt.

If this initially took the form of unarmed demonstrations across the country - provoked by the torture and murder of a 13-year-old boy by secret policemen in Deraa in March last year - armed men did appear rapidly on the streets of some towns. There is video footage of gunmen on the streets of Deraa that same month and al-Jazeera footage of armed men fighting Syrian troops just across the northern border of Lebanon in April 2011. Mysteriously, al-Jazeera chose not to broadcast it.

Now, of course, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where al-Jazeera is based, make no secret of the funds and weapons they are running into Turkey and Lebanon for the resistance - without apparently caring very much who the “resisters” are. The Lebanese army managed to stop one out of five shiploads of guns, but the others, carried on Sierra Leone-registered vessels, were able to unload.

One of the two organisations that claimed responsibility for last week’s Damascus bombing, Liwa Islam - the Islam Brigade - raises again the Salafist element in Syria’s armed opposition. One newly arrived refugee from Syria told me last week that they have forbidden alcohol and openly say they intend to die fighting in Damascus. Given the savage response of the Syrian regime, they may get their last wish.

23rd July 2012

IF ALAWITES ARE TURNING AGAINST ASSAD THEN HIS FATE IS SEALED

By Robert Fisk

‘HER HUSBAND’S to Aleppo gone, master o’ th’ Tiger,” Macbeth’s First Witch announces, but Shakespeare got his geography a bit wrong. Aleppo is 70 miles from the Mediterranean. It’s certainly ancient; Aleppo was mentioned in the cuneiform tablets of Ebla in the third millennium BC and belonged to the Hittites and the Emperor Justinian, its 14th-century citadel walls still lowering today over the revolutionary capital of northern Syria.

And that’s the point. While the drama of last week’s assault on Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Damascus stunned the Arab world, the sudden outbreak of violence in Aleppo this weekend was in one way far more important. For Aleppo is the richest city in Syria - infinitely more so than Damascus - and if the revolution has now touched this centre of wealth, then the tacit agreement between the Alawite-controlled government and the Sunni middle classes must truly be cracking.

As the birthplace of agriculture - the Euphrates is only 70 miles to the east - Aleppo is also the headquarters of the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (Icarda), one of the finest institutions of its kind in the world. It increases food production in Asia and Africa in an area containing a billion people, 50 per cent of whom earn their living from agriculture. Donors include Britain, Canada, the US, Germany, Holland, the World Bank - you name it. And its 500 employees are still operating in Aleppo.

Alas, its principal research station at Tel Hadya, 20 miles from Aleppo, was raided by gunmen who stole vehicles - to use them as “technicals” mounted with machine guns - along with farm machinery and computers. Mercifully, Icarda’s gene bank is safe and has been duplicated outside Syria. The Syrian government moved a military checkpoint closer to Icarda’s property at Tel Hadya - the Syrian ministry of agriculture was always one of the more progressive offices in Damascus - but what use this will be in the coming days, we shall see.

Across all of Syria, the revolution has spread. Tragically, there now seems to be a Baathist pattern of destroying Sunni villages on the edge of the Alawite heartland, the “frontier” of Alawi-stan in the great agricultural plain of Hama province, below the mountains where the Assad home town of Qardaha stands.

Last Wednesday, for example, two Syrian helicopters attacked the small Sunni town of Haouch, forcing its 7,000 population to run for their lives. For two weeks, Haouch and other small Sunni towns have been shelled; they do indeed contain rebels but there is a growing suspicion - no evidence, mark you - that this is a deliberate policy of the Baath to prepare Syria for partition if Damascus falls. Ominously, this “frontier” of fire matches almost precisely the “State of the

Alawites" temporarily created by the post-First World War French mandate which chopped Syria up into mini-nations partly on sectarian lines.

There are equal suspicions, I should add, that the first great Syrian massacre of throat-cutting and executions in the Sunni village of Houla on 25 May might have been a reprisal for the attempted poisoning of Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law Asef Shawkat, whom the rebels at last cut down in the bombing in Damascus last Wednesday. Others say the attempted poisoning was more recent; but everything that happened - and happens - in Syria is connected.

Take the faint outline of the old French mini-state of the Hauran where Syria's Druze communities now live in growing disharmony with the Assad regime. This month, there was a dangerous outbreak of kidnapping in the region - resolved only after Walid Jumblatt, the Lebanese Druze leader, made a series of phone calls to prominent Druze in Syria. Jumblatt himself has had a friendly-hostile-friendly-hostile-relationship with the Assad family - I may have left out a couple of 'friendlys' and 'hostiles' there - but there is no doubt where he now stands.

Last week, he urged the Druze as well as the Alawites in Syria to join the revolt against the Assad regime. He has even attacked his allies in Moscow, calling Russia's support for Assad "no longer acceptable, morally or politically."

And not without reason does he speak thus. Three Syrian Druze have died in the revolution this month. Majd Zein, a Druze Free Syrian Army member, was killed during an attack on Rastan. Shafiq Shuqayr and Yasser Awwad were executed by the Syrian army when they were discovered to be helping government soldiers to defect in the area of Lajat. Now Jumblatt is calling upon all Alawites to join the rebellion instead of allowing themselves to remain a minority dependent on Assad for their survival. "I say to them that they must say they are Syrians before they are Alawites."

And a final statistic to explain the revolution outside Damascus. Latest figures show that 58 per cent of Syrian's population under 24 years old are unemployed (higher, even, than Egypt), while 48 per cent of the 18-29 year-old age range - a statistic only beaten by Yemen - have no jobs. They do now, of course. Most have joined the Syrian revolt.

25th July 2012

REBELS PROMISE 'FIREWORKS' FOR ASSAD, USING AFGHAN METHODS

By Kim Sengupta

THE PACKAGES were in a farmhouse, laid out in neat rows on the floor of beaten earth, wrapped in bits of tattered clothing and old newspapers; many of them had been tagged with numbers.

“Presents for Bashar al-Assad, we are holding a party for him here and in Aleppo,” Emed Ali Akhdar said. “It will be like the party in Damascus, lots of fireworks.”

The homemade Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) will not have the devastating impact of last week’s bombing in the Syrian capital, which killed four of the most senior members of the security apparatus. But they are having a significant say as opposition fighters take over more of Idlib province and prepare to launch an assault on Aleppo, until recently considered a loyalist stronghold of the regime.

What is also significant is that they are being put together in an area which was until a few weeks ago under the control of the Syrian military and the Shabiha, the militia of the Alawite community from which the country’s elite are drawn.

The Independent had visited these parts four months ago in the company of rebels who were apprehensive of venturing down from the hills and wooded pathways into the villages and towns. Conversations with local people were hurried affairs, which had to be abruptly terminated at the approach of the military.

“We had to run very fast, remember, we could not face them, there was no choice. But now we are more comfortable. If they try to come back we are prepared. These are very good,” Issa Mohammed Saif said.

“They can even stop tanks; they will be no good against chemical weapons, but Assad has promised he will not use that against us,” he added, chuckling.

Mr Akhdar was one of those who has recently become a proficient supplier of IEDs. “Some people have had courses on it, but I learned to make them on Google,” the 22-year-old student said with some pride. “It is easy and cheap. We use nitrate fertilizer, metal, blasting caps. We used to make them in Turkey and bring them here, but now we are making more here. We learned a lot from the internet, but we also have our own special method of making them that is a secret.”

In reality, the bombs were rudimentary versions of the “pressure plate” and “command wire” types used in Afghanistan, where, as in other guerrilla wars, they have been something of a game changer.

As we spoke, there was a series of loud explosions to the south. “Our bombs,”

Mr Akhdar said happily. Evidence that the IEDs had indeed been effective came in the disabled and damaged shapes of trucks and armoured personnel carriers on the road to Salaqin, a town that had changed hands several times and where another round of fighting was taking place.

Yet it is not just IEDs that the rebels have added to their armoury. Back in March, the revolutionaries The Independent was with, part of a wider group of around 50, were armed with old hunting rifles and shotguns.

A Kalashnikov AK-47 they had acquired was regime issue - not captured, but purchased from a member of the Shabiha for $2,500 (£1,600), around six times the going rate in Libya, the arena of the last civil war of the Arab Spring.

The prices have not gone down much, but now there were many more Kalashnikovs, as well as rocket-propelled grenade launchers and even some mortars. Mr Saif, an engineer who is now a revolutionary, acknowledged that he and his comrades were much better armed than before, but stressed that they suffered in comparison to the fighters with the real money, the Islamists, who were getting the lion's share of their funding from Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

"The rest of us are raising our own money, getting donations from supporters who may have good jobs. Where is the help we were promised by the SNC [Syrian National Council], the funds they are getting from all over the world?" he asked.

"I know some of my friends pretend to be very religious so that they can get some of the weapons. They grow their beards long and some of them wear short trousers like the Salafists. But we are going to have a struggle with the Salafists when the regime falls.

"They have got their ideas and we have got ours. We want the Alawites, despite all they are doing now, and the Christians to be part of the new Syria. The Islamists want to drive them all out."

The real Salafists we met a little later near Qurqanya, a band of around 15, were taciturn and suspicious. Two were said to be from Turkmenistan; they declined, politely, to talk.

The leader, who said his name was Abu Obeid, said in response to questions: "We are here to fight for Syria, we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves. Where do we get our money from? That is our business, but it is not money stolen from the people like Assad's.

"We have our views about the Americans and what they have done but now we are concentrating on defeating the regime. We are prepared to help all our fellow fighters because we have a common goal, after that we all have views about what Syria will be like, but of course we are Muslims and most people would want Sharia."

Residents of this part of the country, who have known little else but unrelenting violence for the last 16 months, want peace more than anything. Mana Um Khalif, who lost her 19-year-old son Burhan eight months ago to a stray shell, wiped her eyes and said: “There is not a day when I don’t think of him. He was a sweet boy and he was going to look after me. I don’t want any more mothers to suffer like we are doing. We just want to be free, but we also need more food, medicine, education. I hope all this will come when there is peace; we need peace.”

As we left, there was more shelling near the border with Turkey, rebel fighters were withdrawing from some of the positions they had taken in the last few days. The regime still had fight left in it and peace, it seemed, was some distance away.

26th July 2012

YES, THERE'S VIOLENCE, BUT SOME SYRIANS THINK IT'S TIME TO RETURN

By Robert Fisk

A SYRIAN friend calls me early. “Just to let you know we’re going back - things are OK now in the Mezzeh area.” I wonder. Then a Lebanese colleague tells me that three Syrian friends of hers have just called to say goodbye, they’re going back to Damascus with their families now that the fighting has died down.

Then the same woman calls to tell me that she spoke to a friend in Aleppo on Tuesday night to check on his welfare. “He was in a packed restaurant in the centre of the city - it was difficult to hear what he was saying over the noise.” The lines of posh Syrian cars outside Beirut restaurants last weekend - belonging to supporters of the regime taking a brief “holiday” from Syria - have suddenly vanished from the streets.

A body blow to the Baath party last week, of course. But could Bashar now be winning - however briefly - against all the odds? Of the rebellion’s capacity to survive, there is no doubt; the BBC’s extraordinary and brave report from the fighting in Aleppo proves that. But calls to Damascus tell the same story. No gunfire in many areas last night.

I call a Syrian lady - well educated, middle class - who fled to Damascus on Thursday. She muses on how Bashar might have got away with it if he had responded well to the first violence in Deraa after a 13-year-old was tortured to death.

“You know, we were prepared to give him a chance,” she said. “Before all this, he was young, different, maybe kind, he said he was a reformist - he was goofy, sure, but he wasn’t bad. We did think that in 2005 [after the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri] there was a conspiracy against Syria. Then in his first speech after Deraa in March last year, after a lot of people thought things might still be different, he started talking about a ‘conspiracy’ again, that he would not be ‘hurried into reforms’. He started almost laughing at one point. Nothing indicated a sense of responsibility. That was when the regime’s opportunity was squandered.”

But it was an error to think Bashar ran Syria, this woman told me. Syria is run by an oligarchy - all for one and one for all - and an oligarchy gives no freedom to its leader, she said. “I never expected to see helicopter gunships hovering over my balcony for six hours. We had all said that the regime would never behave in Damascus as it behaved in other towns. But there were 20 dead in my area - and Syrian television showed a government soldier kicking a dead man’s head. I don’t see how any regime can continue after this…”

How long would the President last, then? “Bashar will not run away from Damascus - this is rubbish in Western newspapers.” Then came the killer line.

“A month or two, maybe…”

27th July 2012

‘OUR MEN SAY THEY ARE GOING TO FIGHT TO SAVE OUR COUNTRY’

By Kim Sengupta

THE TANKS and troops of the regime were leaving in swirls of dust and so were the revolutionaries in their pick-up trucks and cars; implacable enemies heading for their rendezvous in Aleppo. Left behind were the families of the opposition fighters, helping their men prepare for the battles ahead and then waving goodbye without knowing whether they would ever see them again.

“It is so hard when you wait and do not know what is going to happen. We cannot go with our husbands and sons, so all we can do is worry,” Hania Um Khazali sighed. “But I also tell my friends, my daughters, that we must be strong, it is all in Allah’s hands.”

Convoys of regime forces have been moving towards Syria’s largest city for the latest bloody showdown in this long and bitter struggle to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad. As a result the shelling in the areas near the border with Turkey has died down, there seemed to be fewer checkpoints and military patrols.

The rebels have attempted to ambush regime forces on the move; but, it appeared, with only limited effect. The most successful operation was claimed to have been at Jabal al-Zawiya, where a convoy was forced to turn back with around half dozen soldiers killed or injured.

For the residents in this region of northern Syria, the prevailing mood was one of uncertainty. They had heard about air strikes on Aleppo and wild rumours circulated of chemical weapons being used. There was also the fear, which both they and the fighters hesitated to express, that the regime was still too strong, and may prevail as it has done in Damascus, despite the bombing that killed four of Assad’s closest advisers and despite the rebels taking over districts in the capital.

If the government does win this latest round of fighting, the fear is that retribution will be visited on the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib. Hania Um Khazali, 56, lost a cousin and a brother-in-law at the hands of the Shabiha, the militia of the Alawite community from which the country’s elite is drawn, and which has been blamed for some of the most vicious atrocities in the conflict. Her concern now is for her husband Abdulbakr and son Abdusalem, 22, who were both heading for the frontline.

Speaking at her home in Bishmarun, Mrs Um Khazali said: “How could I stop them? They said they are going to free the country. I hope they will be back soon in case something happens here. We had the military and the Shabiha come through here in the past, they shot people, arrested people. I hope they never come back, but we have to be prepared in case they do.”

Mrs Um Khazali and her three daughters will move in with relations at a nearby village if there is an emergency. The traditional support system of the extended family and community has proved to be so useful in this time of strife. They were looking after Manu Mohammed Qasim, in her mid-20s, left widowed with a little boy of four and a girl aged six.

Mrs Qasim's immediate family had already gone to a refugee camp in Turkey when her husband Zaied was killed. Sitting with the hem of her hijab pulled down over her face, the young woman said she did not know when she would see her family again: "After this is over, maybe they will come back. We have spoken about me going over there, but the road is too hard and dangerous, I cannot risk it with the children. They have been very upset by their father's death, they get scared very easily now. Last night they were crying so much because of the noise [of shelling]."

There is no shortage of families damaged by the conflict in this region. The village of Basheria was shelled by tanks and then, according to local people, a gang of the Shabiha came in firing indiscriminately, looting and burning homes.

One woman, Salma, had a gun held to the head of her young boy as they demanded to know the whereabouts of her husband. After they fled to the home of her brother in another village; she returned a little late to find her home had been burnt down.

Amira and Abdul Khader lost their 15-year-old son, Ali Ismael, in the same raid, shot in the neck as, frightened of being arrested, he tried to run up a hill to a wood. For the next 70 days the family stayed in the village, worried that any movement may provoke soldiers from a nearby military base to open fire. "I do not know why they killed him," said Mrs Khader, "he was not a soldier, surely everyone could see that."

A mother sits outside her house at Basheria which was half destroyed by mortar rounds, day after day, holding a photograph of her dead son. Like the others, her sadness and shock is mixed with incomprehension as to why the attack took place. The family has refused to leave, staying in the few rooms which have not suffered too much damage. They will rebuild, they said, when the fighting ends.

28th July 2012

‘WE SHALL BE FREE OR WE SHALL SUFFER’

By Kim Sengupta

REGIME WAR planes were in action yesterday in what appeared to be yet another significant escalation in the Syrian civil war.

The Independent witnessed two fighter-bombers repeatedly appearing low overhead during the battle at the town of Al-Bab near Aleppo and, on at least two occasions, the aircraft appeared to be firing at the ground during the fighting.

This is the second time that Bashar Al-Assad's regime has been accused of using war planes against its own people. During most of the sorties early yesterday evening, the pilots appeared to be carrying out what is known as "show of force" to intimidate the enemy by their presence without opening fire.

But several rebel fighters claimed they had been fired on directly from the air while they were attacking a military base on the outskirts of the town. Halid Al-Khaldi said: "I am not imagining this, there was a streak from the sky and then an explosion about 30 metres in front of us. We started running for cover, and we were shot at again by the plane."

Fahad Abdullah added: "At first they were circling, but when the regime forces in the camp got into trouble the planes opened up."

Fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who The Independent has accompanied on a number of occasions, opened fire with their Kalashnikov rifles at the aircraft in gestures of defiance, which were militarily futile and only served to draw attention to us. The aircraft may also have been directing sniper fire which came at a steady pace towards the rebel position.

The war planes also marked an escalation on a day that began with violence. The shelling had started at 5.35am: mortar rounds followed by artillery, a deadly dawn chorus which has become only too familiar to the residents of Al-Bab. After a mid-morning break the attacks continued in the afternoon and the evening, salvoes fired at random into the town, tearing into homes and forcing people to flee as helicopter gunships flew overhead. This satellite town acts as a shield for the revolutionaries locked in combat with the regime's forces in Aleppo, Syria's biggest city and commercial centre which has become such a symbolic and strategic prize in the bloody civil war.

The regime has repeatedly tried to push through reinforcements from the east for what the pro-regime Al-Watan newspaper in Damascus declared would be "the mother of all battles". The fighters of Al-Bab are on the way and have blocked the troops. But the rebels are being restricted from sending in men and desperately needed ammunition by the steady and lethal bombardment from a military post on the outskirts. The salvoes appear to be aimed at random: a

mortar round landed on the street where we were staying, a neighbourhood with no obvious military targets.

Al-Bab is paying a heavy price for its defiance, with more than 100 people killed and a quarter of its population of 200,000 now refugees, either in outlying villages or across the border in Turkey. Among the latest to join them were Mohamed Attari and his family of 10, who left yesterday. Nine-year-old Muna and her brother, Abdul Khadar, 11, had been put to bed in the hallway of their home for reasons of safety. This was what saved them after a shell crashed through the ceiling into their bedroom. They have both grown used to the sound of explosions, but what happened yesterday morning was “very frightening”, whispered Muna, helping to carry out a mattress. “I started crying for my mother.”

Her father, a poultry farmer, had no doubt who was to blame. “It was the regime. They are doing this deliberately. You have seen what they have done! They are not hitting military targets, they are just trying to kill people. We have to fight them off; there is no other way,” he said. “We have to help each other, trust each other and also trust God.”

The people Mr Attari would not be expecting any help from, and certainly would not trust, are Western politicians. The Obama administration declared yesterday that the regime of Bashar al-Assad was planning to carry out a massacre in Aleppo, a similar sort of warning to the one given about the former Libyan dictator Colonel Gaddafi and the city of Benghazi. But that is where the similarity ends. No one expects a military intervention from the US or Europe. “Those in the West are just lying. They say these words, but they secretly support [the regime]. They will do nothing to help us, even if thousands more are killed,” said Mr Attari, shaking his head with contempt. His neighbour Ismail Ahmed Dosh, a 24-year-old student, looking at a hole created by a mortar round at his own home, added: “We expected more from the people in the West. They must know what is going on here.”

The uprising came late to Aleppo, a relatively prosperous part of the country. A common refrain from protesters in other parts of the country used to be: “Aleppo, where are you?” Demonstrations which started early in the year were initially peaceful, with little sign of the FSA, now the main fighting arm of the resistance.

That changed with the vicious reaction of the regime. In Al-Bab, the catalyst was the shooting by Assad’s troops on a demonstration on 20 April. The town’s first martyr was Amar Kamal Najar, a post-graduate engineering student who was shot dead after he complained about troops firing at the minaret of a mosque from which anti-Assad sermons were being broadcast. Two more protesters were

shot dead, and four more died when their funeral came under fire. That was the catalyst which spread the flames of revolt in the region and has made Al-Bab integral to the struggle for Aleppo. Amar's mother, Amira, said she was proud that her son was hailed as the "First Martyr" but the pain and suffering of her loss were still hard to bear.

"On that morning Amar said to me that he has had a dream in which he went to pray and then he was shot dead. I said to him, 'my son, do not go out today', but he told me it would be all right," she recalled. "We later went to pray and we were told what had happened to him. My heart broke, but what could we do? He was gone."

Amar's father, Kamal Najar, started to cry each time he spoke of his son. Holding up a mobile telephone, he said: "This was the only weapon he was carrying when they killed him. It is their action which has started all this violence." As he spoke, more shells landed near by. "What is going on is terrible, but even this is better than Assad. It is too late to stop the war now. We shall either be free or we shall all suffer."

Last night, Commander Zaher Sharkat, the chief of the FSA detachment at Al-Bab, was preparing to carry out an ambush on a couple of tanks. "We are on the way to help our comrades in Aleppo, but we must take care of the regime forces over here first. Once we have taken care of the armour and the military base we shall be on our way."

29th July 2012

SYRIAN WAR OF LIES AND HYPOCRISY

By Robert Fisk

HAS THERE ever been a Middle Eastern war of such hypocrisy? A war of such cowardice and such mean morality, of such false rhetoric and such public humiliation? I'm not talking about the physical victims of the Syrian tragedy. I'm referring to the utter lies and mendacity of our masters and our own public opinion - eastern as well as western - in response to the slaughter, a vicious pantomime more worthy of Swiftian satire than Tolstoy or Shakespeare.

While Qatar and Saudi Arabia arm and fund the rebels of Syria to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's Alawite/Shia-Baathist dictatorship, Washington mutters not a word of criticism against them. President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, say they want a democracy in Syria. But Qatar is an autocracy and Saudi Arabia is among the most pernicious of caliphate-kingly-dictatorships in the Arab world. Rulers of both states inherit power from their families - just as Bashar has done - and Saudi Arabia is an ally of the Salafist-Wahabi rebels in Syria, just as it was the most fervent supporter of the medieval Taliban during Afghanistan's dark ages.

Indeed, 15 of the 19 hijacker-mass murderers of 11 September, 2001, came from Saudi Arabia - after which, of course, we bombed Afghanistan. The Saudis are repressing their own Shia minority just as they now wish to destroy the Alawite-Shia minority of Syria. And we believe Saudi Arabia wants to set up a democracy in Syria?

Then we have the Shia Hezbollah party/militia in Lebanon, right hand of Shia Iran and supporter of Bashar al-Assad's regime. For 30 years, Hezbollah has defended the oppressed Shias of southern Lebanon against Israeli aggression. They have presented themselves as the defenders of Palestinian rights in the West Bank and Gaza. But faced with the slow collapse of their ruthless ally in Syria, they have lost their tongue. Not a word have they uttered - nor their princely Sayed Hassan Nasrallah - about the rape and mass murder of Syrian civilians by Bashar's soldiers and "Shabiha" militia.

Then we have the heroes of America - La Clinton, the Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, and Obama himself. Clinton issues a "stern warning" to Assad. Panetta - the same man who repeated to the last US forces in Iraq that old lie about Saddam's connection to 9/11 - announces that things are "spiralling out of control" in Syria. They have been doing that for at least six months. Has he just realised? And then Obama told us last week that "given the regime's stockpile of nuclear weapons, we will continue to make it clear to Assad … that the world is watching". Now, was it not a County Cork newspaper called the Skibbereen Eagle, fearful of Russia's designs on China, which declared that it was "keeping

an eye … on the Tsar of Russia"? Now it is Obama's turn to emphasise how little clout he has in the mighty conflicts of the world. How Bashar must be shaking in his boots.

But what US administration would really want to see Bashar's atrocious archives of torture opened to our gaze? Why, only a few years ago, the Bush administration was sending Muslims to Damascus for Bashar's torturers to tear their fingernails out for information, imprisoned at the US government's request in the very hell-hole which Syrian rebels blew to bits last week. Western embassies dutifully supplied the prisoners' tormentors with questions for the victims. Bashar, you see, was our baby.

Then there's that neighbouring country which owes us so much gratitude: Iraq. Last week, it suffered in one day 29 bombing attacks in 19 cities, killing 111 civilian and wounding another 235. The same day, Syria's bloodbath consumed about the same number of innocents. But Iraq was "down the page" from Syria, buried "below the fold", as we journalists say; because, of course, we gave freedom to Iraq, Jeffersonian democracy, etc, etc, didn't we? So this slaughter to the east of Syria didn't have quite the same impact, did it? Nothing we did in 2003 led to Iraq's suffering today. Right?

And talking of journalism, who in BBC World News decided that even the preparations for the Olympics should take precedence all last week over Syrian outrages? British newspapers and the BBC in Britain will naturally lead with the Olympics as a local story. But in a lamentable decision, the BBC - broadcasting "world" news to the world - also decided that the passage of the Olympic flame was more important than dying Syrian children, even when it has its own courageous reporter sending his despatches directly from Aleppo.

Then, of course, there's us, our dear liberal selves who are so quick to fill the streets of London in protest at the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians. Rightly so, of course. When our political leaders are happy to condemn Arabs for their savagery but too timid to utter a word of the mildest criticism when the Israeli army commits crimes against humanity - or watches its allies do it in Lebanon - ordinary people have to remind the world that they are not as timid as the politicians. But when the scorecard of death in Syria reaches 15,000 or 19,000 - perhaps 14 times as many fatalities as in Israel's savage 2008-2009 onslaught on Gaza - scarcely a single protester, save for Syrian expatriates abroad, walks the streets to condemn these crimes against humanity. Israel's crimes have not been on this scale since 1948. Rightly or wrongly, the message that goes out is simple: we demand justice and the right to life for Arabs if they are butchered by the West and its Israeli allies; but not when they are being butchered by their fellow Arabs.

And all the while, we forget the “big” truth. That this is an attempt to crush the Syrian dictatorship not because of our love for Syrians or our hatred of our former friend Bashar al-Assad, or because of our outrage at Russia, whose place in the pantheon of hypocrites is clear when we watch its reaction to all the little Stalingrads across Syria. No, this is all about Iran and our desire to crush the Islamic Republic and its infernal nuclear plans - if they exist - and has nothing to do with human rights or the right to life or the death of Syrian babies. Quelle horreur!

29th July 2012

‘THEY FEAR THE REGIME WILL TAKE REVENGE’

By Kim Sengupta

AMAR MOHAMMED Yusuf was reaching for the last remaining clip of ammunition for his Kalashnikov when he was hit on the leg by shrapnel. As his comrades tried to move him to safety, a warplane dived down above them, before banking and veering off. Just as they had breathed sighs of relief, a helicopter gunship opened fire, the blast flinging the fighters head first into a ditch.

The impending “mother of all battles”, as the pro-regime newspapers in Damascus has declared, with dire warnings from the US administration that a “massacre” will follow, appeared to be taking place incrementally rather than in one massive assault by Bashar al-Assad’s forces. Troops were moving into rebel-held areas, with attack helicopters used to blast through defences. The heaviest fighting was in the Salaheddine district.

The bloody struggle for Syria’s largest city, a hugely important strategic and symbolic prize in this vicious civil war, has spread into the surrounding areas. The aircraft Mr Yusuf and fellow rebels came across were in Al-Bab, 15 miles to the east, which had become the focal point of a struggle between the opposing sides to open up supply routes.

The satellite town is being bombarded daily from a military base on the outskirts. The sustained barrage is also preventing about 700 fighters from the rebels’ Free Syria Army from joining their comrades inside Aleppo where regime troops were forcing back revolutionaries who appear to be running short of ammunition and have had to retreat.

Two days previously, the rebels had attacked a main security checkpoint at Bustan al-Joz in an attempt to take over the business district. This, they believed, would have been a psychological blow to the regime and may finally convinced its supporters in the trading community that they were backing the wrong side.But the rebels had not been able to hold the position and the regime had begun to shell residential neighbourhoods being held by the revolutionaries.

By the afternoon, soldiers had moved into the Hamdaniyeh area in the centre of the city, where the rebels put up strong resistance. “People are frightened. We have had thousands of them, whole families who have gone. Others can see that the rebels are falling back, and they are worried because they fear the regime will take revenge,” said Khalid al- Mussa, an opposition activist.

“It is a strategic move. We cannot fight tanks and helicopters. There is no point in dying needlessly,” said Rahim Ali Qubuddin, a former architect.

It is a sign of the importance the regime in placing on the revolutionaries being denied reinforcements that warplanes were deployed over Al-Bab. The

opposition, too, is desperate for a breakthrough, trying to charge its way into the military camp. The Independent on Sunday accompanied a group of fighters who destroyed two tanks and three trucks during the assault.

Two soldiers who had fled from the base on Friday claimed that morale inside was extremely low. Omar Mukhdaid and Khalid Yusuf, both 20, conscripts of 11 months' service, had been waiting for a chance to defect which they took on Friday from the Al-Bab base.

A major in the opposition's Free Syria Army, Yusuf Al-Hadeed , said: "We can't leave the people of this place undefended. The regime is trying to keep us tied up here, but as soon as we take care of the military base, we'll be moving in there in the next few days."

30th July 2012

JUBILATION AS REBELS FORCE ASSAD TROOPS TO FLEE BASE

By Kim Sengupta

THREE OF the bodies were stuffed in a meat refrigerator which had been without power for over a week; one had his hands tied in what looked like an execution position; another had almost made it to the door to escape when he was shot through the chest. These were soldiers of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, killed as they tried to flee from a base under siege from rebel fighters.

The break out by the troops, abandoning their camp early yesterday, gave precious advantage to the revolutionary fighters in Aleppo being battered by artillery, tanks and helicopter-gunships for the past 48 hours. The fall of the camp in the suburb of Al-Bab removed one of the main obstacles to reinforcement and supplies desperately needed in the city.

Inside Aleppo, rebel fighters appeared to have partly stemmed the advances by regime forces after falling back from the first wave of assaults directed against their positions. The response was more shelling in Salaheddin district, in the south-west, which had been controlled by the opposition, and fresh clashes in Bab al-Nasr, Bab al-Hadid and the Old City.

Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Oqaidi of the opposition's Free Syria Army (FSA) claimed: "We have destroyed eight tanks and some armoured vehicles and around a hundred soldiers. But there have been a lot of civilians killed, mainly due to air attacks. We want the UN to impose a no-fly zone, we don't need ground intervention, brother fighters will be going to Aleppo. We need protection for civilians."

Abdelbasset Sida, the exiled head of the Syrian National Council (SNC) opposition alliance, called for foreign powers to arms the rebels with heavy weapons to fight Assad's "killing machine", which claimed victory in a fierce battle for the Syrian capital, Damascus, yesterday. He said the SNC would also soon begin talks on forming a transitional government.

Iran's Foreign Minister described the idea of a managed transition of power as an "illusion" at a joint press conference with his Syrian counterpart, Walid al-Moualem, who said Damascus was committed to the Kofi Annan peace plan.

The retreat of the regime forces from Al-Bab has provided an element of protection for the town, which has been pounded by shelling and air strikes. Residents celebrated their deliverance; large crowds made their way to the former agricultural school which had been commandeered, to gaze at the hastily abandoned meals, uniforms discarded by soldiers who had changed into civilian clothes in an effort to escape if their convoy was halted by ambush. The departure of the troops did not bring an immediate end to attacks.

Captured soldiers had said that, as well as the bodies, some injured had been left behind by the military. As opposition officials, accompanied by The Independent, went to look for them, a warplane which had been overhead opened up with machine-gun and cannon fire into the camp. Later it fired a missile into a residential area, injuring three people. “I wish I found some anti-aircraft missiles among these, I would love to shoot down that damn plane before more people are killed, “ said Abu Osaid, an FSA officer, as he surveyed the array of weapons left by the enemy: machine-guns, mortar and rocket-propelled grenade rounds, a rifle, body armour and bucketloads of ammunition.

Now some of these can be sent to Aleppo along with volunteers from 1,200 revolutionary fighters in al-Bab and surrounding areas. Major Yusuf al-Hadeed, who commands all but a handful of them, said: “We already have men fighting in Aleppo and I know that many more want to join them. We have always said that we would need to take care of this military base first and then we will go to Aleppo. Obviously we need to reinforce the fighters there, we know the regime is doing the same, but they are not finding it as easy as they thought.” The force which left Al-Bab, around 130 men, along with three tanks and a small number of armoured personnel carriers had tried to head into Aleppo, but had to divert after coming under fire.

Not all the regime troops managed to get away - around 20 were captured. “We were woken up at three in the morning and told to hurry, we were leaving the camp” said Sergeant Alla Abu Warda, one of the prisoners. “The officers were in the tanks and armoured cars in the front. We were in pick-ups right at the back. The officers had given us no leadership, they just told us to save ourselves if we could.” The detainees said they had not been ill-treated, but felt apprehensive about the future. They will face trial, the revolutionaries have stated, although what the precise charges will be remain unclear. The soldiers, who were all Sunnis, blamed the officers at the camp, who happened to be from the Alawite community from which the regime is drawn, for responsibility for any abuse.

Their rebel jailers were unimpressed. “ You,” said one, pointing at 19-year-old Mohammed Mussa Shibli, “are from Al-Bab, you were firing on your own people, civilians, there is no one to blame for that but yourself.” Mustapha Agel recognised another soldier as one who had fired at a mosque where he had gone to pray with his elderly mother: “You will face judgement for all you have done... you will not get away from justice.”

30th July 2012

FOR THE MINORITIES, EVEN NEUTRALITY IS UNSAFE

By Robert Fisk

SO TODAY, amid Aleppo's torment, let us remember minorities. The Palestinians of Syria, more than half a million of them, and the 1.5 million Christians - the largest number of whom live in Aleppo - who are Syrian citizens and who now sit on the edge of the volcano.

Neither wish to "collaborate" with Bashar al-Assad's regime. But remaining neutral, you end up with no friends at all. You didn't have to sell a loaf of bread to a Nazi in occupied France to be a collaborator. But you were, to use an old German expression, "helping to give the wheel a shove". No, Bashar al-Assad is not Hitler, but God spare the Palestinians and the Christians of Syria during these terrible times.

Lessons to be learned. The half million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon fought on the Muslim-leftist side in the 1975-90 civil war. They were rewarded with hatred, mass murder and final imprisonment in their own camp hovels. Palestinian refugees in Kuwait supported Saddam's invasion in 1990; hundreds of thousands were evicted to Jordan in 1991. Palestinians housed in Iraq since 1948 were slaughtered or driven from the country by the Iraqi "resistance" after America's 2003 invasion.

So neutrality in Syria is the Palestinians' only hope of salvation as another civil war engulfs them. Yet their camps are visited regularly by the Free Syrian Army. Fight for us, they are told. And their camps are infested with the Syrian government's "muhabarrat". Fight for us, they are told. Alas, two military Palestinian units, Saiqa - one of the most venal militias after Syria's military intervention in Lebanon in 1976 - and the Palestine Liberation Army, are under the direct control of the regime. Two months ago, 17 of these Syrian-trained PLA soldiers were assassinated. Then last week, in Damascus, another 17 PLA were murdered.

"Some say the Free Syrian Army killed them to warn them away from the regime," a middle-aged Palestinian cadre from the DFLP tells me. "Others claim the regime murdered them to warn them off the Free Syrian Army. All we can do is cling to our neutrality. And you have to remember that some Palestinians in the Syrian camps are themselves 'muhabarrat' intelligence men for the Syrian government. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command have themselves said they would fight for the regime."

Most of the Palestinians in Syria are Sunni Muslims - like the majority of the Syrian population and most of the resistance.

The Christians are citizens of Syria whose religion certainly does not reflect a majority in any anti-Assad force. Bashar's stability - somewhat at doubt just

now, to be sure - is preferable to the ghastly unknowns of a post-Assad regime. There are 47 churches and cathedrals in the Aleppo region alone. The Christians believe that Salafists fight amid the rebels. They are right.

Lessons for them, too. When that famous born-again Christian George W. Bush sent his legions into Iraq in 2003, the savage aftermath smashed one of the oldest Christian communities in the Middle East - the Iraqi Christians - to pieces. The Christian Coptic Pope Shenouda of Egypt supported his protector Mubarak until just two days before the dictator's downfall; Egypt's Muslims remember this. So what can the Christians of Syria do?

When the Maronite patriarch of Lebanon, the uninspiring Bechara Rai, said after the start of the Syrian uprising that Bashar should be given "more time", he enraged his country's Sunni Muslims.

But watch Syrian television and it's easy to cringe at the Christian performance.

Last week, it was the turn of the Maronite Bishop of Damascus to address Syrians. His first words? He wished to thank Syrian state television for allowing him to speak. He said how much Christians honoured Ramadan, how they learned to reinvigorate their own faith from that of Muslims in their holy month - a perfectly reasonable statement, though one clearly made when most of the good bishop's flock stand in fear of those very same Muslims.

And then came the killer line. At the end of his sermon, the bishop gave his blessing to all Syria's "civilians, officials and soldiers". The "officials", of course, were Bashar's officials. And the soldiers were the regime's soldiers. I suppose we might turn to the old Christian advice of rendering unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. Another reminder: Bashar al-Assad is not Caesar.

But a Lebanese Christian writer got it right when he suggested that Syria's Christians were probably following the advice of Saint Paul (1 Timothy 2:1): "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made to all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life…" And who but Bashar, for now, is the "authority" in Syria?

31st July 2012

THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE HERE HAVE FLED. ONLY THE FIGHTERS REMAIN

By Kim Sengupta

THERE WAS a strange quietness to Salaheddine in between the bursts of ferocious fighting. The strips of cloth that curtain off the narrow, twisting alleys from the sight of the regime's tanks and guns rustled in the wind, there was a faint noise of traffic in the distance. The only human voices, however, were hurried conversations in doorways between fighters; the people who lived here have gone.

The calm was shattered by a few shots, snipers at work. This was followed immediately by deafening rifle fire and then the deep boom of shells and mortars crashing into buildings in neighbouring streets. There were roars of "Allah hu Akbar" from the rebels as ambulances went careering by, playing religious and protest songs in full volume.

Defiance is the theme in the most violent battleground in Syria's civil war at present, the Salaheddine district of Aleppo, the bloody focal point in the struggle for the country's largest city and commercial capital, a symbolic and strategic prize craved by both sides.

"F*** you, sniper!" shouted an opposition activist in the car that we were travelling in, crouching low in our seats to avoid shots supposedly coming our way. What we got, instead, was a rocket-propelled grenade, sailing far overhead to hit the ground floor of a house, adding to the pock-marked and burnt architecture of the area.

The Independent was the first international news organisation to enter Salaheddine since Bashar al-Assad's regime began its offensive to clear the main opposition stronghold in the city. Standing on the road where most of the fighting was taking place, Sheikh Taufik Shiabuddin, the district's rebel commander, said he welcomed a chance to refute "Assad's lies". He counted off the triumphs so far on the fingers of his hand. "We have destroyed two tanks, seven armoured carriers and killed 200 of their soldiers. They had attacked us with a force of 3,000 and they cannot get in. We shall be going forward to them soon, the enemy is suffering," he said to chants of "Takhbir" (call to God) from his followers, who gathered around him.

The regime's forces may be suffering, but they still appeared to have a lot left in reserve, judging by the regularity with which mortar and light-artillery rounds came whizzing over. A helicopter gunship made several passes overhead, but it would have been difficult for the pilot to pick out targets in such confined quarters and it flew off to attack elsewhere.

Looking from the fourth-floor balcony of an abandoned flat, curtained like almost every other balcony in the area, one could see a row of eight green Syrian

army tanks, possibly Russian made T-55s, with their barrels pointed towards the streets of Salaheddine. “They have been firing from the tanks, but all they are hitting are empty buildings” said the Sheikh’s brother, Ahmed. “We have lost some people for sure, 15 martyrs and 40 wounded. They have tried to bring their tanks in here and we’ve hit them hard. Assad’s people know we are waiting.”

All the stores in street were shuttered apart from one with a “special offer” on display - trays of Molotov cocktails. Standing among the bottles, 19-year-old Amir Mohammed Hasif explained how they were made and added: “My three sisters helped make them. They cannot join in the fight, but they want to contribute as much as possible in other ways.”

The revolutionaries in Salaheddine came from a number of different battalions, with the Abu-Bakr detachment from the town of Al-Bab among the first volunteers for this extremely dangerous front line. “We are taking only the best ones who offer to come,” Abdul Fawzi Hussein said. “We are winning, but Assad is like a wounded snake, he will keep striking. We don’t want brave boys to come and then go back to their mothers as martyrs.”

It is difficult to ascertain the gains of each side in Aleppo, although some are obviously false - such as Syrian state TV’s assertion of “complete control of Salaheddine”. The opposition claims to control around 45 per cent of the area and said it will be taking over the remainder in the coming days. The Independent travelled through parts of eastern and south-eastern parts with the rebels seemingly firmly in control.

The revolutionaries were not totally united. One base flew the black flag with gold Koranic inscriptions favoured by extreme Islamists and the fighters there polite but suspicious of strangers. “We know about them, but they keep to themselves,” Abdul Fawzi Hussein said. “We shall have to deal with them in the future, but for now our focus is on Salaheddine and Aleppo. If we hold Salaheddine, I am sure, Inshallah, if we lose Salaheddine then we shall have difficulty holding on to other areas we have in Aleppo. We must liberate Aleppo.”

Mohammed Numer, who lived in an adjoining area, one of the very few families to stay on there, wondered what will be left. “Salaheddine is the worst, but other places are getting affected as well. We have so little food because the shops are shut, there is no electricity and no water and no medicine. The fighters can live... among all that, but what about the rest of us? Who will look after us? We just wish all this will end,” he said.

1st August 2012

REBELS OVERRUN ALEPPO'S POLICE STATIONS IN ALEPPO

By Kim Sengupta

AMBUSHES AND air strikes, sieges and executions were the bloody order of the day in Aleppo yesterday as rebel and regime forces fought street by street to gain possession of Syria's largest city. The violence, and expectation of more destructive strife to come, added to the sense of fear and the growing stream of refugees fleeing their homes.

While continuing their resistance against armour and artillery in the districts of Salaheddine and Hamdaniyeh, opposition fighters took the offensive in other areas; police stations and posts were overrun with the defenders captured in some cases, but also a large number shot dead, and caches of arms and ammunition were seized.

The rebels, too, were in the gun sights of the enemy, as Bashar al-Assad's troops sent salvoes of mortar rounds and missile strikes from helicopter gunships and a warplane. A new dynamic was also introduced into a conflict already deeply divisive and sectarian, with a militia from the Al-Barre tribe, chanting their loyalty to Assad, carrying out an assault near the city's airport which killed 16 revolutionary fighters and cleared, for the time being, a road through which soldiers and supplies can be brought in from Damascus.

However, the capture of the security stations at Bab Al-Nerab, Al-Miersa and Salhain and, with that, the control of the adjoining neighbourhoods meant that the rebels were making incremental territorial gains. On each occasion, helicopter gunships appeared later to carry out strafing, but there was no sign of ground forces coming in to retake the positions.

None of the bases were taken easily, and the defenders fought hard. They were not just police officers, but members of the Mukhabarat secret police and also the Shabiha, the paramilitary drawn from regime loyalists. Both groups have been accused of carrying out abuses, including torture and rape, in the campaign to suppress the uprising. Summary justice appeared to have been meted out in some instances, with corpses showing bullet wounds to the backs of their heads.

Asked at Bab Al-Nerab whether any of the officials had been shot after surrendering, a grinning young rebel said: "They did not surrender, they were caught." This was disputed by an annoyed older fighter, Syed Abdul-Qadar, who insisted that all the deaths took place in the course of combat. "But at the airport, the Barre killed people who had their hands tied behind their back," he added.

The bodies of the 20 officials lay at various parts of one police station which caught fire when Kalashnikov shots set alight flammable liquid inside. The head of the rebel unit which carried out the attack, Omar Abdel Aziz Hatteh, said:

“We offered them the chance many times to surrender. But the colonel in charge here refused to let any of his men come out and stay alive. He kept screaming at us on the telephone, using disgusting language.”

The body of Lieutenant-Colonel Maklesh El-Ali was later put on the back of a pick-up truck and taken for a little tour around the city. “He was an evil man. He treated us like we were dogs,” said Nouri Hassan al-Batme. Apartments in the building where he lived with his family, facing the station, had been commandeered by the security officials to position snipers during the shoot-out.

“They didn’t care what could have happened to us,” said Mr Batme, a 47 year old contractor. “This regime does not care for its people. I have a brother, Faisal, who was arrested 32 years ago, we haven’t seen him since. This colonel was a brutal man, he arrested me over a family matter 10 days ago and beat me on the feet with a stick. He also hit me so hard on the head that I cannot hear properly in one of my ears.”

Mr Batme and his family of six are moving out of their flat for the time being because his wife is terrified of helicopter attacks. But he was apprehensive about the move, saying: “With no one here the thieves could come in and take things. We haven’t got a police station any longer. Who is supposed to be doing their job?”

The storming of the police station at al-Marju in Salhein was carried out by more than 700 fighters; the 45-strong security detachment inside resisted before a bomb made out of a water storage container and TNT was flung over the sandbags by two volunteers. Fifteen regime officials were killed and the rest arrested, except for four who got away. “They were snipers. Three of them were Iranians, the other was a Russian,” maintained Abdel Rahman Moussa, one of the rebels. “The Russian must have been valuable. Right at the end they sent 200 soldiers to get him out. We keep on hearing about Russians and Iranians. Also, we think some Hezbollah people are here as well.”

Rumours of foreign mercenaries in the pay of Assad, as well as the imminent launch of chemical weapons, were rife in the city, with no detectable evidence for either. Also absent were the hundreds of foreign Islamists who, according to some Western media reports, have descended to raise the flag of al-Qa’ida and jihad in Aleppo.

“Where are they? The Chechens, the Africans and the Pakistanis, all with so many weapons?” asked Abu Suleiman, a rebel officer, crouching in an alley as an attack on a fourth security post, near Sher Osman, predominantly manned by the Shabiha, faltered as ammunition ran out and what appeared to be a Mig-23 aircraft dropped ordnance. “We can do with them. No, not them, their weapons. That is going to be a problem very soon unless we start getting fresh supplies

coming through. That may happen. The routes in the east have opened up."

The rebels spent some of their last Kalashnikov rounds providing covering fire as families fled from the street, a little girl crying until she was reunited with her caged pet mynah bird.

As they made their way out, an elderly man hobbled over to the fighters to offer his thanks, or so they thought: "You people are destroying this country. Have you no shame? I am 83 years old and I have seen nothing like it, even when we were fighting the French. Bashar al-Assad is a great man. He is the President." With that, Mohammed Ibadullah Seif, leaning on his stick, rejoined his family.

"Can you believe that! Here we are risking our lives to free the country and that's what the man says," said Abu Suleiman, as the fighters around him laughed. He shouted: "Go with Bashar then if you love him so much, old man. But you would not wish to go the place where we are sending him."

2nd August 2012

‘WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO US?’: LOYALISTS FEAR REBEL ATTACKS

By Kim Sengupta

SITTING IN a room in his flat darkened by drawn curtains, Abdul Fawaz al-Jais flinched every time he heard shots. He almost jumped when there was loud and prolonged shouting outside. At the sound of a helicopter, however, he raised his head with a look of almost relief.

The reaction was hardly the normal one in “Free Aleppo”, where residents have been subjected to attacks from the air from the Syrian regime while at the same time facing regular salvoes of tank and artillery fire on the ground.

But Mr al-Jais, unlike his neighbours, was not looking forward to the triumph of the revolution; 20 hours earlier his brother, Ahmed, and cousin, Jassem, had been dragged away and executed by the revolutionaries.

The family are part of the Al-Barre tribe whose militia had entered the fray pledging their loyalty to President Bashar al-Assad. Their first act was an attack on opposition positions near the airport in which 15 revolutionaries were killed, some, it is claimed, shot with their hands tied behind their backs.

The reaction was an assault in the Sher Osman neighbourhood where part of the clan are based, with about a dozen killed and 20 arrested. These arrested men were accused of being members of the Shabiha, the loyalist militia accused of serial human rights abuse, and, according to video footage released, put against a wall and sprayed with Kalashnikov fire.

“They were screaming that Ahmed and Jassem were Shabiha, that is not true, not true”, Mr al-Jais, a 47-year-old businessman, insisted, furiously shaking his head.

“They only started defending our area when it came under attack. We had nothing to do with what happened at the airport. This was in the war between the government - now they are blaming us all. I am sure they have killed Ahmed and Jassem. What will happen to their families? The children? What will happen to the rest of us? Some people were saying we are Alawites, we are not, we are Sunnis.”

The Independent had been with the rebel fighters as they fought running battles with armed Al-Barre men late on Tuesday afternoon. The attack was halted due to lack of ammunition and missile strikes from a Mig-23. But later, replenished, the revolutionaries had apparently gone back and extracted their revenge.

Abu Suleiman was one of the rebel commanders in charge of the attack. “Some of the Shabiha were killed, some were arrested. We lost some martyrs as well. What happened to the arrested men I do not know. I think they are in prison and they will be tried. How do we know this video is real? No one has to fear

just because they are Al-Barre. You have seen what the regime is doing, firing heavy weapons, killing civilians. The Shabiha kill children with the knife."

These attacks continued on Tuesday night and, sporadically, through yesterday. The most intense barrages were at Salaheddine, a south-eastern district which stands between regime forces and the 45 per cent of the city the revolutionaries claim to hold. Tanks which had been lined up shielding a regime-held district, Hamdaniyeh, came forward launching a number of rounds accompanied by artillery fire. "They are using a bigger type of artillery; look at the damage it is causing," said Abdul Razak Hadi, a music teacher who has taken up the gun, pointing at a metre-wide hole on the side of a building which was not there the previous day.

Three mortar rounds landed in quick succession to the east. "That was useless, they are wasting their ammunition," a fighter shouted. Mr Hadi told him to calm down: "They have ammunition to waste, we don't."

The advancing tanks stopped for the time being. The rebel fighters, who had fired back with rocket propelled grenades, waited in an alleyway shielded by curtains, as more grenade rounds and trays of Molotov cocktails were brought by a baker's van.

Had they heard that the opposition had supposedly received a consignment of heavy weapons and anti-aircraft guns through Turkey?

Sheikh Taufik Shiabuddin, the rebel commander in the area, shrugged. "No one has brought them to me. We don't need anti-aircraft guns here, but if we had some anti-tank weapons we can take out more of these tanks. We have taken care of three so far. We shall hold the regime here. There are other plans for the city."

Whether planned or not, the rebels have continued to make incremental gains, taking another police post yesterday towards the centre of the city to add to three captured the day before. As has been the pattern so far, the area was hit a little later with fire from a helicopter-gunship, but no attempt had been made by the evening at recapture.

Amid the violence, normality of sorts prevails in a number of districts, with shops open and men milling around.

"We want this to be finished one way or another as soon as possible, this city is dying around us," said Mohammed Qassem Ali, the owner of a stationery store. "We are struggling to get enough food for our families. We have to wait in the bread queue for two, three hours."

The United Nations was sending in relief. "That is good, but why don't they come in and stop the fighting? Isn't that what they are supposed to do?" Mr Qassem Ali asked.

3rd August 2012

A YOUNG BOY WHO FELT THE FULL FORCE OF ASSAD'S AIR ASSAULT ON ALEPPO

By Kim Sengupta

ABED AL-RAHMAN ran out to see what had happened after hearing the sound of an aircraft overhead followed by a loud blast. He hesitated briefly as he remembered his mother's warnings against venturing outside, but the sheer excitement overcame caution. He had just reached a crowd of about 30 people staring at a crater when shrapnel from a second missile tore into his legs. "I knew something really bad had happened, I could not feel my left leg at all, I just kept screaming for someone to come and help me. It was so painful."

Abed al-Rahman, 11, was not a combatant in Syria's civil war. There was no military target in the street where he lived with his family in Al-Bab, just outside Aleppo. No rebel fighters were present when the two missiles were fired. But there were regime warplanes and helicopter gunships flying and firing overhead. The regime's use of warplanes against its own people was first recorded in Aleppo about a week ago, although it was unclear then whether it had actually been bombing or flying low and fast enough to break the sound barrier in a show of force to intimidate the rebels. There is no such ambiguity about the increasingly frequent attacks since then.

Opposition activists trying to bring out dead and injured rebel soldiers from a former regime military base in Al-Bab came under repeated machine-gun and missile attack on Sunday. The pilot of the jet - possibly a Czech-made L-39 Albatross, which the Syrian Air Force uses - appeared to deliberately target unarmed civilians. Soon after firing on the camp, it fired into a residential neighbourhood. "I saw him rush out and I was worried, we have had so many attacks. I also knew they fire one rocket, wait for people to gather and then fire another," said Omar, Abed al-Rahman's 20-year-old brother. "I went out after him, but it was already too late. They got him out in an ambulance as soon as they could. Abed al-Rahman does not remember, but he was crying 'mummy, mummy, I disobeyed you and now look what has happened'.

"After the operation he started crying 'What will I do? How will I finish my school? I won't be able to play again'. We're trying to make sure that he doesn't get too depressed, we'll do what we can for him. His other leg is badly injured, but doesn't need amputation. Why doesn't the UN impose a no-fly zone like Libya? Don't they know what's going on?"

Many of us who covered the Libya conflict noted just how few people were killed or injured by Gaddafi's air force before the imposition of the no-fly zone, which extended into months of bombing. Libyan pilots appeared to go to great effort not to hit civilians or even rebel fighters, often dropping their bombs away from large groups. That does not appear to be the case in this conflict.

Abu Taieb, a commander with the opposition's Free Syria Army, was reconciled to UN inaction. Standing at the funeral of a rebel killed when a fighter jet opened fire in the Sher Osman neighbourhood in Aleppo, he said: "There is another way: surface to air missiles… We can get hold of them, but it'll mean dealing with extremist Islamist types. Our battalion does not want to do that, but we may not have a choice, we can't keep on seeing our people killed." Abed al-Rahman's brother Omar was equally despondent about outside intervention. "We can't really depend on anyone anymore, apart from God," he said.

Abed is at home after surgery. There are no specialist hospitals nearby, and inner city Aleppo - where there are facilities that can help with his rehabilitation -- is not accessible amid fierce fighting.

"I try to think things may get better for me, but it is hard. I blame Bashar al-Assad and the pilot for what happened to me" he said. "I blame Assad for sending the pilot and the pilot because he didn't have to fire those rockets. I really hate them."

So do his brothers and sisters, his friends and their friends now. The casual brutality of those flying regime warplanes has helped to ensure that implacable bitterness and division will run from generation to generation in this town in Syria.

4th August 2012

‘YOU CAN ONLY PATCH UP PEOPLE FOR SO LONG. MOST OF THE SERIOUSLY INJURED WE CAN’T SAVE. THE ONLY WAY TO END THIS IS TO DEFEAT ASSAD’

By Kim Sengupta

“WE NEED supplies from the West, we are desperate,” the doctor said as another of the injured, covered in blood, was carried in by three men to be taken to a makeshift surgery, one of a rising number of casualties from the regime’s attacks. “We need weapons, anti-tank, anti-aircraft, anything we can get hold of.”

Later, as he scrubbed his hands in a basin stained with blood and ointment, Dr Mahmoud al- Shami continued: “This will sound strange, a medical man saying something like this. But you know you can only patch up people for so long. Most of the seriously injured we can’t save anyway. You realise that the only way to end this would be to defeat Bashar al-Assad. Civilians are being killed by the regime.”

Among those killed were doctors. The burned bodies of Basel Aslam, Moussab Barad and Hazim Batikh were found a few days after their arrest by the Mukhabarat, the secret police, at the end of June. They were all young and had been working in the poorer sections of the city. Later a pharmacist, Abdel Baset Arja, died while in detention. All had been accused of helping terrorists; their real crime, say the opposition, was to treat victims of the regime; the executions were a warning to colleagues not to make the same mistake. Many medics have taken heed. The director of a hospital near the fiercest front line of the city described to The Independent the frustration of not being able to get his staff to work at such a desperate time. Dr Mohammed Ahmed (not his full name) said: “I am not blaming them, people are very scared, for themselves, for their families. Some are too scared even to talk to me on the phone. I called 19 people and only two even answered. They do not want things like that on their record if Assad, Allah protect us, returns. Arja, the fourth man they killed, did not even come to the hospital, he was just selling us medicine.”

The conditions, even for a conflict zone, were grim. There is never enough medicine and the power supply fluctuates. In addition to coping with the medical problems, the hospital faces the danger posed by this brutal conflict. It has been targeted by missile and mortar attacks half a dozen times in the past two weeks. The background noise of explosions, helicopters and ambulances careering around on streets of rubble were reminders of how critical the situation was on the outside.

The hospital is treating about 50 patients a day, almost all of them injured in the fighting. At present, it has five doctors and two nurses working a rota. Dr Ahmed, an orthopaedic surgeon, the only specialist, said: “We really need around 12 doctors, some with specialisation, and two nurses per doctor. So you

see how difficult it is to deal with complicated cases."

One such case is brought in, a man shot in his stomach. The bullet is a hollow point "dum-dum" which has torn up his internal organs. Dr Shami (not his full name) pointed at the operating table, which had a buckled leg and a pool of blood underneath it, and said: "We shall try to send him across the border into Turkey, but I don't think he'll survive the journey. We have to concentrate on lives we can save." The patient, in his early 20s, stretched out his right hand, eyes wide open and imploring. He died the next day in the hospital.

The use of dum-dum bullets is illegal under international law. "So you think Assad's people are abiding by the law in other matters? Is the shelling of residential areas with tanks legal? The use of aircraft to bomb civilians? Do you think this regime will stop and say, 'Oh no, we must not do that, it's illegal'," Dr Shami said.

Hazem al-Halali (another adopted name) graduated from the hospital and decided to stay and help in Aleppo rather than return to his home in Damascus. He is a member of a group of doctors called Nur Al-Hayat (Light of Life) working in areas that had seen the worst violence.

The three doctors who were killed were fellow members of Nur and Dr Halali is believed to be on a Mukhabarat death list. "I am a single man and if Aleppo falls to the regime, I'll just go somewhere else in Syria. There is no question of leaving Aleppo, there are few enough doctors as it is. The government would like us to die, or if that does not happen, just go away," he said. "They have told us not to treat people here, to send them to the government hospital. But a lot of people don't want to go, they think they might be arrested or killed. We are talking about ordinary people here, not revolutionary fighters."

The opposition boasts that unlike the regime it does not mistreat its prisoners. There have been, in fact, instances of summary executions of captured officials, especially those belonging to the loyalist paramilitary, the Shabiha, and the Mukhabarat.

A field hospital had been set up by the revolutionaries further to the east of the city. Three soldiers, prisoners, arrived, all of them wounded. The two soldiers able to speak gave the familiar refrain to the one heard from others in the same situation; they were conscripts and had no choice but to serve President Assad. They said they had tried to defect in the past but never had the opportunity and pleaded they did not know just how bad things were.

A few rebel fighters heckled, calling them liars, but not in a threatening way. The soldiers continued to look scared. One repeated that the situation was calm where he came from in Damascus; he could not have known about the dreadful things happening elsewhere. A doctor cleaned his wounds and told him he would

be all right.

As the soldier was led away, the doctor said: “He comes from Kofar Batna. He said nothing was going on there. That is not true, I know of three people who were killed there; one of them was my wife’s cousin. Who knows, this man may have been among the killers.”

5th August 2012

SYRIA'S ANCIENT TREASURES PULVERISED

By Robert Fisk

THE PRICELESS treasures of Syria's history - of Crusader castles, ancient mosques and churches, Roman mosaics, the renowned "Dead Cities" of the north and museums stuffed with antiquities - have fallen prey to looters and destruction by armed rebels and government militias as fighting envelops the country. While the monuments and museums of the two great cities of Damascus and Aleppo have so far largely been spared, reports from across Syria tell of irreparable damage to heritage sites that have no equal in the Middle East. Even the magnificent castle of Krak des Chevaliers - described by Lawrence of Arabia as "perhaps the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world" and which Saladin could not capture - has been shelled by the Syrian army, damaging the Crusader chapel inside.

The destruction of Iraq's heritage in the anarchic aftermath of the Anglo-American invasion of 2003 - the looting of the national museum, the burning of the Koranic library and the wiping out of ancient Sumerian cities - may now be repeated in Syria. Reports from Syrian archeologists and from Western specialists in bronze age and Roman cities tell of an Assyrian temple destroyed at Tell Sheikh Hamad, massive destruction to the wall and towers of the citadel of al-Madiq castle - one of the most forward Crusader fortresses in the Levant which originally fell to Bohemond of Antioch in 1106 - and looting of the magnificent Roman mosaics of Apamea, where thieves have used bulldozers to rip up Roman floors and transport them from the site. Incredibly, they have managed to take two giant capitols from atop the colonnade of the "decumanus", the main east-west Roman road in the city.

In many cases, armed rebels have sought sanctuary behind the thick walls of ancient castles only to find that the Syrian military have not hesitated to blast away at these historical buildings to destroy their enemies. Pitched battles have been fought between rebels and Syrian troops amid the "Dead Cities", the hundreds of long-abandoned Graeco-Roman towns that litter the countryside outside Aleppo, which once formed the heart of ancient Syria. Syrian troops have occupied the Castle of Ibn Maan above the Roman city of Palmyra and parked tanks and armoured vehicles in the Valley of the Tombs to the west of the old city. The government army are reported to have dug a deep defensive trench within the Roman ruins.

"The situation of Syria's heritage today is catastrophic," according to Joanne Farchakh, a Lebanese archaeologist who also investigated the destruction and plundering of Iraq's historical treasures after 2003, and helped the Baghdad museum to reclaim some of its stolen artifacts. "One of the problems is that for

10 years before the war, the Syrian regime established 25 cultural museums all over the country to encourage tourism and to keep valuable objects on these sites - many placed stone monuments in outside gardens, partly to prove that the regime was strong enough to protect them. Now the Homs museum has been looted - by rebels and by government militias, who knows? - and antique dealers are telling me that the markets of Jordan and Turkey are flooded with artifacts from Syria."

There is, of course, a moral question about our concern for the destruction of the treasures of history. Common humanity suggests that the death of a single Syrian child amid the 19,000 fatalities of Syria's tragedy must surely carry more weight than the plundering and erasure of three thousand years of civilisation. True. But the pulverisation and theft of whole cities of history deprives future generations - in their millions - of their birthright and of the seeds of their own lives. Syria has always been known as "the Land of Civilisations" - Damascus and Aleppo are among the world's oldest inhabited cities and Syria is the birthplace of agrarian society - and the terrible conflict now overwhelming the country will deprive us and our descendants of this narrative for ever.

To their enormous credit, Syrian archaeologists have themselves anonymously catalogued the destruction of their native country's historical sites. They include government shelling of villages that exist within ancient cities; rebels have apparently been sheltered, for example, in the small civilian township built inside the wonderful ruins of Bosra which contains one of the best-preserved Roman theatres in the world - which did not prevent several buildings from being destroyed. Similar bombardments have smashed the fabric of Byzantine-era buildings in al-Bara, Deir Sunbel and Ain Larose in northern Syria.

In the monastery of Sednaya, apparently founded by the Emperor Justinian - the people of the village still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus - shellfire has damaged the oldest section of the building, which dates back to 574. The Umayyad Mosque in Deraa, one of the oldest Islamic-era structures in Syria, built at the request of the Caliph Omar Ibn al-Khattab, has also been damaged. Dr Bassam Jamous, the government-appointed director general of antiquities in Syria, says that "terrorists" - ironically, the Western world's own nomenclature for state enemies - have targeted historic buildings in Damascus, Aleppo, Bosra, Palmyra and the Citadel of Salah al-Din (Saladin), a crusader fortress seized by the Kurdish warrior hero in 1188, the year after he recaptured Jerusalem for the Muslims from Balian of Ibelin.

Several months ago the Syrian authorities reported the theft of the golden statue of an 8th century BC Aramaic god - still unfound, although it was

reported to Interpol - and admitted thefts at government museums at Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Maarat al-Numan and Qalaat Jaabar. Hiba Sakhel, the Syrian director of museums, has confirmed that items from the Aleppo museum have been transferred to the vaults of the central bank in Damascus for safekeeping.

"Syrian Archeological Heritage in Danger", a group of Syrian specialists who list the destruction and looting of the country's treasures on their own website, has revealed that Syria's Prime Minister, Adel Safar, wrote to fellow ministers on 11 July last year warning that "the country is threatened by armed criminal groups with hi-tech tools and specialised in the theft of manuscripts and antiquities, as well as the pillaging of museums". The archaeologists find this note "very odd" because it appears to warn of looting which had not yet occurred - and thus suggests that officials in the regime might be preparing the way for their own private theft and re-sale of the country's heritage, something which did indeed occur under President Assad's father Hafez al-Assad.

So the looting and destruction lies at the door of all sides in the Syrian conflict, along with the thieves who move in on all historic sites when the security of the state evaporates. In truth, Syria has always suffered - and the regime always tolerated - a limited amount of theft from historical sites, to boost the economy in the poor areas in the north of the country and to enrich the regime's own mafiosi. But what is happening now is on an epic and terrifying scale. "As for the old churches, old houses, old streets of Homs, you can forget it - they don't exist any more," archaeologist Joanne Farchakh says. A specialist in heritage in times of war in Lebanon, Iraq and northern Cyprus as well as Syria, she gloomily reports new information from the second millennium BC sites in which looters have dug huge holes, metres wide, to unearth the treasures of pre-history.

Much of this destruction is taking place not only in the world of ancient Rome, the Crusaders and the Muslim conquest and revival, but in the land of the original "terrorists", the Assassins whose murderous attacks on all authority a thousand years ago were led by "the Old Man of the Mountains". He once besieged Al-Madiq castle - whose bombardment by the Syrian army is now available on videotape.

6th August 2012

ASSAD'S MERCILESS ASSAULT RISKS WIPING OUT BOTH HIS COUNTRY'S FUTURE - AND ITS PAST

By Robert Fisk

WITH THE Syrian government now flaunting its total control over Damascus - the “final battle” trumpeted by the rebels having been, for the moment, won by their antagonists - Damascus may at least be spared the cultural destruction visited upon much of the rest of Syria. Krak des Chevaliers has been shelled after rebels sought sanctuary in this most glorious of Crusader castles, Syrian troops have taken over the castle at Palmyra and bombarded the Citadel of al-Mudiq, looters have used bulldozers to carry away the great Roman mosaics of Apamea. But the treasures of Damascus remain intact.

Salafists among the armed opponents of the Assad regime would presumably have no qualms about destroying the tomb of Saladin and the green silk cover bestowed upon it by Kaiser Wilhelm, nor what is said to be the headless corpse of John the Baptist beside the “built-on-air” Omayad Mosque in the Old City of Damascus. But the problem for all autocracies in the Middle East - and let us not forget the undemocratic gentlemen of the Gulf - is that they must sew their own presence into their country’s history.

No institution does this more assiduously than the Assad Library, the vast ochre-stone bunker-block above Omawiyin Square, in front of which sits a vast iron sculpture of President Hafez al-Assad - father of President Bashar al-Assad - in an equally vast iron chair and holding a very large iron book open in his right hand. The Assad Library is not exactly on the tourist trail but I have been inside its 22,000sq miles of concrete galleries and prowled around its 19,300 original manuscripts dating back to the 11th century, its 300,000 volumes, its computer centre and its state-of-the-art halls for ancient manuscript repairs. Even books banned by the regime are open for Syrian students. They include, needless to say, the works of Michel Aflaq, the secular-socialist Baath Party co-founder who died in exile in Iraq but whose memory will evoke little love among the regime’s armed opponents today.

The Assad Library has a director of “cultural activities” - a faint smell of Eastern Europe pervades this title - and when he took me round the galleries years ago, you could understand how the regime was trying to bind the Baath Party into the old caliphates, a complete collection of Hafez al-Assad’s speeches since 1970 alongside a computerised set of every Syrian and Palestinian film since 1948 and a mass of 12th and 13th-century Arabic literature. In the manuscript department, six inches from my face, was a philosophical work - in gold and blue Farsi script - by Bin al-Marzouban al-Azerbaijani, handwritten in western Iran in 1066. Just as Harold was preparing for his martyrdom at the hands of William of Normandy, Azerbaijani was finishing his text, which, nine

centuries later, would be placed on a database at the Assad Library.

I filled my notebook with these scraps of history in this most Baathist of memorials. A 1649 French translation of the Koran, a 1671 Bible in Latin and Arabic, a 500-year-old Arabic dictionary, the collected speeches of the Caliph Ali, dated 1308, and a 1466 study of how an Arab warrior should ride his horse and at the same time fight with his sword and spear. As I wrote later, the Assad Library is clearly intended to provide a continuity that connects the Caliphate with the Baath, the ancient Islamic philosophers with Hafez al-Assad and his family, as carefully as the women in the archive repair room bind together the torn pages of 15th-century books.

And we may, I suppose, reflect how the “battle for Syria’s history” - I am quoting Bashar, of course - has been fought many times before, how mass cruelty existed in a cultured and refined society, how the Arab exegesis on cavalry fighters was studied by our own kings and cavaliers. Richard I, of course, knew these lands too well, while Edward II - foully murdered at the age of 43 - might have found some ghastly relevance in the atrocities of Syria’s tragedy; Richard III and Henry VIII were no more believers in democracy and human rights than King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

But that was then, as they say, and this is now; and when the innocent die in what all the world - save the Syrian government - calls a civil war, history takes a back place, save for its usefulness in the hands of propagandists and mountebanks. And we return again to the old and painful question: how dare we fear for the treasures of history when the youth of Syria is bleeding to death, when children’s shrouded corpses are being put into the earth of Aleppo? What do the battlements of Krak des Chevaliers count against the torment of Idlib and Hama and Homs and - for a few days - Damascus?

But Syria’s heritage - our heritage, too - does matter. It will be the property of Syria’s future inhabitants, whoever wins this deplorable, slovenly, cynical battle today. Its message of cultural renewal and of theological persistence and philosophical persuasion is as relevant now as it was 900 years ago. Whoever “wins” - and civil wars rarely have clear winners - should study those manuscripts to learn about human folly. Including their own.

6th August 2012

THE CITY OVERRUN BY DEATH IS TOLD THE WORST IS YET TO COME

By Kim Sengupta

IT WAS the normality of the sound which was startling: a child's voice carried in the wind. One of the opposition fighters raised his hand and the others stopped, seemingly oblivious to the shelling or the rasping rattle of the regime's helicopter gunship overhead. Then a figure appeared around the corner, stepping through the rubble and guiding us to the house.

There are very few civilians to be seen in Salheddine, whose deserted streets are filled with fallen masonry, shattered glass and twisted metal. The dead are much more in evidence, bodies lying in the open, the rising stench from the ones buried in debris.

Despite launching a mission to reclaim Aleppo eight days ago, regime troops have so far failed to break through the opposition lines in the suburb of Salheddine or at the city's Iron Gate. There has, however, been a gathering of President Bashar al-Assad's forces, and threats from Damascus that a furious assault is impending. A senior regime official was reported as saying: "What you are seeing is the appetiser: the main course is yet to come."

Britain's Foreign Secretary, William Hague, warned yesterday of "more fighting, more bloodshed", and urged a renewed diplomatic push to force Assad to stop waging war on his own people. But with Kofi Annan's UN and Arab League-backed peace plan in tatters and Damascus largely back in regime hands, the rebels are determined to hold out in Aleppo, a key battleground which could determine the outcome of the 17-month conflict.

As the fight for Syria's largest city intensifies, there has been an exodus of the residents of Salheddine. But behind the blue tin door, living through the days and nights of bombardment, was Abu Omar's family of 10; on the second floor there was another family, of eight. They stood in huddles, the young and the elderly in the darkened hallway and stairs; frightened, hungry and bewildered, living off stale food and meagre water; making as little noise as possible so as not to attract attention.

"Now we must get them out of here," said Abdul-Karim Haddad, one of the rebel fighters who stumbled across the civilians. But cousins Abu Omar and Abu Mustapha, both unemployed labourers with 11 children between them, did not want to move their families.

"We don't have anywhere to go, not here, not in the villages, and if we leave we may lose our home," said Abu Omar, whose seven-year-old son is suffering from severe diarrhoea.

What they wanted was food and water and medicine for their children. After a little argument, Abu Mustapha agreed that his 72-year-old father could be

escorted out. But the old man would not budge: “I was born in this house, they can bury me in front of it.”

Abu Mustapha’s oldest child, 17-year-old Abdullah, is now the sole breadwinner, working as a jobbing labourer and bringing in the meagre rations the family depend on. But they have not seen him for three days. Two other civilians - Khalid Mohammed Ali and Abdullah Izzedine Mohammed - had arrived an hour earlier on their daily inspection of their homes. Mr Ali’s building was still standing but Mr Mohammed’s had been demolished overnight.

“Look at that,” he shouted. “Twenty years, 20 years we have lived there. Now what will we do? They have done this deliberately, they are criminals.”

On this occasion, it was almost certainly a shell which had landed short of its mark. A large depot of the city’s post office in the street behind had been burning for many hours. The regime forces may have thought the rebels were storing supplies there. Three members of the Bakri family came to Salheddine yesterday afternoon, checking on their home and carrying away as much as possible before the place, they believe, will be destroyed.

The youngest of them, Burhan al-Halali, is going to join the Free Syrian Army in the next few days. “I shall ask to come back to Salheddine so at least if I die I shall die defending my home,” he said. “But I do not think that the regime will be able to defeat us here. We believe in what we are fighting for, they are just being paid by Assad.”

Ahmed Yusuf Darish, meanwhile, was placing a third padlock on his front door to try to deter armed looters from taking advantage of the chaos. His family were worried about him returning to Salheddine, not just because of the shelling, but because he was a Christian.

“My brothers are worried because there are some people with the rebels who do not like Christians,” he said. By “some people” Mr Darish meant Islamist groups who are present among the revolutionaries, although not in particularly large numbers.

Most of the men are friendly, but a few are taciturn and suspicious. “One of them with a big beard found out from a neighbour that I was a Christian. He just said ‘I wish you were a Muslim’,” said Mr Darish.

There has been little obvious sign of sectarian violence in Aleppo, unlike in some other parts of the country. The opposition forces have been accused of killing loyalists, while members of the Shabiha, the regime-backed paramilitary, and the secret police known as the Mukhabarat have also been subject to summary judgment. The overwhelming majority of those killed, however, have been Sunnis, who comprise the vast majority of the opposition, rather than Alawites, from which the ruling minority is drawn, or Christians.

But it is difficult to ascertain who is carrying out which killing. Four dead bodies lie in a park, victims, it was claimed, of mortar rounds. But, on closer inspection two of the corpses were blindfolded.

So why did Mr Darish keep coming back to Salheddine despite the risks? “We are Arabs and to us our homes are precious, even if we are poor. That is why people are going back to Homs, to Dera,” he said. “But it is true there is no point in getting yourself killed over this, then there’ll be no one to look after the family.”

Waiting among patients at a mosque which acted as a first-aid centre was Khalid Mohammed Ali, his left arm in a bandage. The wound from a piece of flying shrapnel was not serious, he was lucky. But surely this would stop him continuing to check his home? No, he shook his head, he will be back. “Allah will decide what happens.”

7th August 2012

ASSAD'S PM JOINS REBELS IN 'BLESSED REVOLUTION'

By Loveday Morris and Kim Sengupta

THE FREE Syrian Army yesterday promised that more high-level defections were coming as the prime minister escaped from the country, dealing a humiliating blow to President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

In a complex and daring operation carried out by the Free Syrian Army, Riad Hijab - the most senior political official to defect so far - and the families of his nine siblings were smuggled out of the country to Jordan. Once safely out, the former prime minister, a Sunni from the Deir Ezzor region, described himself as a "soldier of this blessed revolution" and accused the regime of genocide.

While the position of prime minister wields little real power in Syria, the defection remains a coup for the opposition, and one they hope will spur further senior officials to turn.

"We are currently in contact with many officers from the army and state security who want to defect, including a senior general from the Alawite community," said FSA spokesman Fahad al-Masri. "The coming weeks will see many more."

News of the defection of Mr Hijab, a previous minister of agriculture, broke only hours after a blast ripped through the third floor of the Syrian state television offices on Umawiyeen Square in central Damascus, injuring three people. No group claimed responsibility.

And in an incident that has the potential to further destabilise the fragile region, rebels in Damascus said that three of the nearly 50 Iranian hostages they were holding on suspicion of fighting on behalf of the regime - but that Iran claims are pilgrims - had been killed in an air strike. "We will kill the rest if the army does not stop its assault. They have one hour," said the FSA's Moutassam al-Ahmad.

Mr Hijab, who is en route to Qatar, is said to have been planning his defection for two months, with the operation supposed to take place three weeks ago, but pushed back after the Damascus bombing that killed four members of Assad's inner circle. Most of Mr Hijab's brothers worked for the government, including in the ministries of oil and environment.

They were said to have been smuggled individually to the border area with armed guards, where their families were waiting, crossing early yesterday morning.

Opposition sources said Mr Hijab felt he had no choice but to take up the

position of prime minister in June.

“In the Syrian regime, when Assad chooses somebody for a position, you can’t refuse. If you refuse there are only two paths ahead for you, the first is prison, the second is your tomb,” said Mr al-Masri.

Western diplomats - deflated after the UN-backed peace plan disintegrated last week - hailed the defection as the latest blow to the regime.

“This is a sign that Assad’s grip on power is loosening,” said the White House spokesman, Jay Carney. “If he cannot maintain cohesion within his own inner circle, it reflects on his inability to maintain any following among the Syrian people that isn’t brought about at the point of a gun.”

Despite being a long-term member of the Baath Party and senior politician throughout the slaughter, Mr Hijab’s defection was welcomed in groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Syrian National Council. However, in the war-torn Aleppo district of Salheddine, hit almost without break by regime tanks, artillery, helicopter-gunships and fighter bombers, the mood was that no accommodation should be made for those abandoning the regime at this late stage.

“This man must pay for the crimes he has committed when he was in power,” said Mahmoud Ali Rahimuddin, an ambulance driver carrying injured rebel fighters. “The fact that he has at last abandoned the evil people he was with would be in his favour, but we cannot forget what he and people like him have done.” A fighter, known as Anatan, agreed: “What made him suddenly see the wrong he and his government were doing? The last 50 killings by his people or the 50 before that.”

Others saw it differently. Free Syrian Army officer Abdul Al-Ashar said he’d be celebrating “two Eids” - a reference to the Muslim celebrations at the end of Ramadan. “This will make [my men] even more determined to drive the regime from Aleppo,” he said. “This will not win us the war, and we have a big fight in Aleppo, but it is a very good sign of progress.”

7th August 2012

DEFECTION DRIVES WEDGE INTO FRACTURED PARTY

By Robert Fisk

THE HIGHEST ranking-defector yet - the Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab - deserted President Bashar al-Assad yesterday and headed for the highest-paying supporter of the country's rebels: the oil-stuffed state of Qatar.

In a brutal war that encompasses almost as much cynicism as it does blood, Hijab's departure - while a highly symbolic blow at the regime - does not constitute a body blow for the President.

Like the generals and diplomats who have preceded him into exile, the Prime Minister was a Sunni Muslim, and it is the Alawite minority within the Baath Party and the government upon which Bashar relies. They still stand loyally behind him.

Mr Hijab left it to his spokesman in Jordan to announce that he had "defected from the killing and terrorist regime" and joined "the ranks of the freedom and dignity revolution" and was henceforth "a soldier in this holy revolution".

Somehow, however, it seems unlikely - however "holy" the revolution - that the somewhat portly Mr Hijab will be firing an RPG-7 over the barricades of Aleppo. He is more likely to join the waffling hotchpotch of former regime "loyalists" who are now gathering around three separate and often antagonistic opposition "governments-in-exile", most of them grateful to the immensely wealthy emirate of Qatar, not to mention the profoundly "democratic" Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is backing the revolution.

The Syrian government itself hastily claimed that Hijab had already been dismissed from his job when he ran away - a statement likely to be accepted only by those who still believe in Father Christmas - but Bashar did immediately appoint a successor, Omar Ghalawanji from Tartous, who was already a minister in the administration.

Hijab's own roots, however, are very interesting. He comes from the town of Khirbet Ghazel in Deraa province, where the revolution began after government cops tortured to death an 11-year-old boy.

More important still, Hijab is a cousin of the Vice-President, Faroukh al-Sharaa, another Sunni but a most crucial member of the regime's decision-making cabal of ministers. A loyal and very effective Foreign Minister under Bashar's father Hafez, many have suspected that al-Sharaa himself might defect - his only recent statement was to the effect that he had not done so - but this seems unlikely.

After 20 years' service to the Baathists, al-Sharaa is regarded by Bashar as a very trustworthy man. Given recent defections, however, such sentences must be ended with the words "for the moment". Hijab's runner from Damascus does

constitute a much more severe blow to the ever-more tarnished reputation of the Baath party, founded as a secular institution embracing all religious groups by, among others, the Christian Michel Aflaq. The increasing defection of Sunni figures from the Syrian regime and its army therefore drives a wedge into an already fractured Baath.

According to Hijab's spokesman, whose rhetoric was not exactly matched by his credibility, the ex-Prime Minister had only accepted his elevation from Minister of Agriculture two months ago because he had been threatened with execution.

This seems to be a whopper. President Assad is unlikely to have appointed a premier at gunpoint since the poor man would most surely have defected; which is what, to be sure, Hijab did.

8th August 2012

THE SYRIAN JET TOOK ITS TIME TO PICK A TARGET. THE CHILDREN BORE THE BRUNT

By Kim Sengupta

THE AIR strike, on a bright sunny afternoon, was on a residential area. The missile tore through the home of the Qureyas on Mohammed Nadeem Street, collapsing the top floors on the ones below, obliterating the hastily dug shelter in the basement and starting a fire which spread swiftly.

Seven members of the family were killed, five of them children. Yusuf, Tahārid and Bara were together at the time. They were, respectively, an 18-month-old boy and girls aged seven and eight. Hatem, 15, was another to die; the dismembered remains of 14-year-old Mahmoud were found alongside those of those of his mother, Waheeda, blown on to the roof of the house next door.

The Mig-23 had already hit another house in the Bustan al-Qasr suburb of Aleppo. It took its time before launching the next salvo, flying low seemingly to fix on the target. It may have been aiming at a base used by rebel fighters or it may have been seeking a building which had seen vehicles come and go, a field hospital which did not advertise itself for fear of attack.

When the body of the Abdul Latif Qureya, the father of the family, was found, there was a desperate scramble to find others who had been at home at the time of the attack. Relatives, neighbours and friends scrabbled through the debris with shovels, pickaxes and their bare hands as others from the street fled in panic and the regime's warplane continued to circle overhead. The scale of the carnage soon became apparent. "We did everything we could, the stairway was falling, there was burning everywhere, but we went up to all the rooms," said Marouf, 26, a cousin of the children.

"I was crying when I was doing this, it was so hard thinking about what had happened, especially to the little ones. Our grandmother is sick with sadness, she wanted to come here to see what has happened, but she would not have recovered if she had seen this. We thought that because we were away from where the battles were taking place, we were safe, but with the airplanes you cannot be safe anywhere in this city." Marouf and three other cousins put body parts into a burlap sack for burial.

There are no longer any attempts to hide the fact that Bashar al-Assad's regime is using modern warplanes to bomb its own citizens. It has, instead, become a tool of intimidation and state terror. Late yesterday morning, another Mig swooped lower than it would have needed to fire its missiles, confident that it faced no threat from the ground, before banking leisurely and flying away. Fifteen minutes later a helicopter appeared on the same patch of sky along with the rasping, and increasingly familiar, sound of its machine-guns in action.

The use of aircraft is undoubtedly having a psychological effect upon the

beleaguered population of Aleppo. People look anxiously above as they gather on the pavements, and some have decided that the threat is too much to endure. Bustan al-Qasr, an unremarkable neighbourhood, had a population of 300,000. It is now around 40,000 as the exodus rises.

“The Migs and the helicopters is the reason we are leaving,” said 49-year-old Hussein Ali Abdu as he gathered his wife and five children into an ancient Toyota and tied bundles on to a roof rack. “I have not heard of Bashar using his planes so much anywhere else in Syria. He wants to punish us here in Aleppo because he thought this was one of the places which would never dare to rise against him. But why is he using it against civilians, his fight is with the Shabaab [rebel fighters].”

Mr Abdu’s brother, who is staying behind, nodded: “Why aren’t the Shabaab protecting us against the planes? They say they have rockets to shoot them down, where are they?” Some rebels insist that they do have surface-to-air missiles. “We have got them through Turkey, we shall use them at the right time, there will be a shock for the regime, they will be very afraid” said “Captain” Ali Syed Naimuddin. But around him, at the base near where the air strikes had occurred, rebel fighters did not look particularly confident discussing their anti-aircraft strategy. The unease increased as a warplane appeared overhead and dropped ordnance nearby.

It is the medics, working in secret, under extremely difficult conditions, who are having to cope with the aftermath of the air strikes. Hadil Ami, a young doctor, was on duty at a newly set up clinic when members of the Qureya family were brought in. “The worst thing is that we may have been able to save the little boy if we had the right equipment, he had head injuries, but we could have saved him” she said quietly. “I took a picture of him before they took him away, I looked at it later and felt so helpless and so angry.”

9th August 2012

ASSAD'S GUNSHIPS AND TANKS LAUNCH HEAVIEST ASSAULT ON ALEPPO REBELS

By Kim Sengupta

THE FIVE tanks covered the corners of Salaheddine Square, firing at rebel fighters trying to make their way through the side streets, desperate to try and retake the ground they had lost, their task made even more difficult by the helicopter gunships attacking overhead.

This was not the first time that regime forces had sought to break the impasse on the Aleppo frontline by sending in armour. But this time they stayed longer than ever before, seeking to open a bridgehead for troops to come in and force their way into the parts of the city held by the revolutionaries.

As dusk fell, with the sky lit by amber glows from fires and the sound of gunfire echoing through the buildings, it was unclear whether President Assad's forces would be able to gain a significant advantage in the battle for Syria's biggest city. Opposition fighters - in cars, trucks, a few on motorbikes and scooters - were pouring in from three directions to force out the enemy, fully aware of what was at stake.

The rebels used rocket-propelled grenades, which have proved to be effective against armour, and Kalashnikovs as they dashed from doorway to doorway. They appeared to have halted the tanks for the time being at least, but the general feeling was that a push may take place by the regime forces once they got more soldiers in place.

"We have the tanks in a trap - these were deliberate tactics," shouted Abu Mohammed Jaffar, a rebel commander, directing his men down an alleyway. His next words, in a tired voice, were nearer to reality: "We can't afford to let them break out: they will then cut off our guys on the front streets of Salaheddine. There will be nothing to stop them from getting in to the centre which has wide streets. It will be difficult to fight tanks at such a place."

The regime started their heaviest assault so far on Salaheddine in the morning, tanks and armoured cars moving in after artillery salvoes. It had not captured the neighbourhood within hours, as Syrian state TV had claimed. Even with their presence in the square, the forces controlled little of the district. However, the penetration of the rebel defence, which had withstood sustained attacks for 11 days, was the first indication that the troops and armour Damascus has been massing were having a telling effect.

State television also declared that "dozens of terrorists had been killed and many more captured." Rebel losses were high, although they appear to be lower than the claim from Damascus. By early evening between 14 and 19 had died, according to varying reports.

One of those killed was a doctor, a particular loss for the rebels as the medical

staff working at makeshift field hospitals are stretched to the limit. Their job is dangerous, and not just because they are working in a combat zone. The burnt bodies of three young doctors were found after they had been arrested by the Mukhabarat, the secret police, for treating “terrorists”.

The Independent met the latest doctor to die when he was treating the wounded at a mosque last week. Asked about the obvious risks he was taking, the 24-year-old trainee surgeon - whose identity cannot be disclosed, to protect his family - had said: “I have seen guys a lot younger than me dying, suffering terrible injuries. I am not even on the frontline with the ambulance drivers; we are just treating the injured, government soldiers as well as the Shabaab (rebel fighters). But this is a strange regime who think doctors are enemies.”

Sniper fire was particularly heavy yesterday and unusually accurate, leading to reports resurfacing, without evidence, of Russian and Iranian sharpshooters being brought in. “It is true, absolutely, we have intercepted their conversations in Russian, they are being paid thousands of dollars,” insisted Hussein Mohammed Abdali, a tannery worker turned revolutionary, but he could not help further. “I have not been kept informed.”

Lack of information of a more serious type was a continuing problem for the rebels yesterday. On 10th Street in Salaheddine, fighters of the Abu-Bakr Brigade, from the town of al-Bab, were engaged in their routine and ferocious firefight with the enemy, having disabled a tank by rocket-propelled grenades in a well-designed ambush just a little earlier.

They were, however, unaware of the tanks on their flanks in the Square, potentially cutting them off from the rest of the opposition force.

“Communications are not good,” Abu Amar Idlibi said, tapping his elderly walkie-talkie. “We heard there was fighting in that direction, but we do not know exactly what is going on. We have been told to hold this line and that is what we are doing.”

As he spoke, two shells in succession hit buildings 30 yards away, half-demolishing one. “As you can see we are being kept busy here; others will have to deal with the tanks behind us. We’ll help them, Insha’Allah, if we see out the night.”

10th August 2012

‘ALEPPO WILL BREAK THE REGIME’ BUT REBELS ARE FORCED TO RETREAT BY HUGE MILITARY ONSLAUGHT

By Kim Sengupta

IT BEGAN with a few of the rebel units pulling out, sleepless and disoriented after two nights of relentless shelling, fearful that they were being surrounded by regime forces. By mid-morning the departures had turned into a major retreat, with hundreds of fighters pouring out of Salaheddine, many of them then straight out of Aleppo.

The revolutionaries had abandoned the frontline - a crucial strategic point - they had held with such resilience against massive battering for the past 12 days. They have also left much of an adjoining district, Saifaldallah. The pounding they had received for hour after hour from the air and the ground had been worse than anything before; The Independent was there very much towards the end of the onslaught, but it was still daunting and, yet again, indiscriminate.

Despite repeated attempts, the rebels had failed on Wednesday night to dislodge about half a dozen tanks which had made their way to Salaheddine Square, setting up a bridgehead for troops and armoured carriers positioning themselves at the flank of the rebel fighters on 9th and 10th Streets who had borne the brunt of the attacks. At just after 3am the artillery rounds reached a new intensity and these fighters saw tanks rolling towards them through the streets of Salaheddine.

The breakthrough means that regime forces are now in the ascendancy, having broken the opposition's staunchest line of defence in the narrow, twisting streets of Salaheddine. They are now in a position to bring in additional forces through Hamdaniyah, which they hold, and aim to link up with other troops at Aleppo Castle and the city's airport. In addition, rebel fighters, unnerved by rumours, have disappeared from some of the inner-city districts they had taken in the past two weeks.

In the afternoon the opposition Free Syria Army officially acknowledged that Salaheddine had been lost. Commander Wassel Ayub said: "The FSA's brigades have staged a tactical withdrawal from Salaheddine. We had full control of the district last night, but then regime forces bombarded in an unprecedented way."

The pull-out gained momentum when the city was relatively quiet, with just a few rounds of shellfire in the distance and the odd helicopter gunship firing overhead. We found the men of the Dar al-Sabah Khatiba (battalion) frantically evacuating their headquarters, a school at Bustan al-Qasar, well outside Salaheddine. "The soldiers are on two sides of us, it is too dangerous to stay here, too dangerous," said an officer, Abdullah al-Fawzi. "We are just taking what we can carry." Later, at a nearby town, Captain Abu Khalid was adamant: "We shall go back in there, definitely, but first we must take some rest."

He had been in Salaheddine for the whole night. “The worst thing was when the tanks came in. We had destroyed them in the past, but this time there were so many of them and we were very tired. We fought along some streets, but then we had to leave, otherwise we would have all been killed.”

Ominously for the opposition, some of their best fighters from outside Aleppo, who had been at Salaheddine and the city’s second front line, the Iron Gate, were leaving, anxious that their home towns and villages were unprotected if the regime did capture the city quickly and push on. The arrival of reinforcements from other places - the opposition claimed 20,000, although the real figure may be half that - had helped to balance, to an extent, the massive build-up by the regime.

Among those going were men of the Abu-Bakr brigade from the eastern town of Al-Bab; their commander, Zahar Sherqat, widely respected in the revolutionary ranks, was driving through the deserted streets by himself in a white Toyota Corolla, ensuring that those in his charge were withdrawing in an orderly way. He also stopped in several neighbourhoods to assure the people that he and the rebels will be back.

Commander Sherqat, a slim, soft-spoken man, was at pains to explain: “There is absolutely no point in wasting lives - at the end we did not have enough heavy weapons. These will come. We can’t stop them at the moment, but we shall regroup and get back in here, not Salaheddine maybe but the rest of the city. Aleppo will break the regime, but it will take time, in the meantime we must protect our homes and families. “

By late afternoon the rebels were talking about launching a counter-offensive and even claimed to have taken back some of the ground. But streets in most areas under their control were redolent of checkpoints, with fighters without transport desperately trying to get out. We gave some of them a lift to the Sahar district, in the outskirts, where minibuses were lined up to take people out of Aleppo.

An Islamist battalion which had become noted for its unfriendliness to outsiders, including fellow rebels, and had claimed Assad’s army would be defeated quickly if only they had more fellow jihadists, were the first to run from Salaheddine. One of their getaway vehicles, a red pick- up truck, had been hit from the air, just as it had come out of the district. Remains of three bodies lay at the back. A passing fighter, Hussein Ali Motassim, gestured: “They were full of talk about their experience in Iraq and Afghanistan; bomb making and IDs [IEDs] but at the end, nothing.”

Regime troops had initially made little effort to move forward as the rebels withdrew from their positions. By early evening tanks and armoured cars had

begun to venture into these areas. But they did not stay for long, leaving after lobbing shells, although there was little by way of return fire. Later helicopter gunships strafed an area from which the rebels had already withdrawn.

The attacks resulted in civilian casualties, rising in number in the past few days, carried by neighbours and family members to a field hospital. The medics, unlike the fighters, had not left, although the punitive action they face from the regime can be brutal, three young doctors arrested were found dead, another was killed by a sniper on Salaheddine Square on Wednesday despite wearing a white coat.

Hadil Ami, a female doctor in her early twenties, treating an elderly man with deep cuts to his chest and arm from broken glass, said simply: “This is the time when our patients need us the most, we have got those who are injured and traumatised but also very afraid. We can’t send many of the injured to the government hospital, especially now, because they would be looking for Shabaab [rebel fighters] who are injured. I am not doing anything wrong here at all, I am doing my job, but that is not something which will interest the Mukhabarat [secret police] - they think we are all suspects.”

Regime forces, accompanied by the Mukhabarat and the Shabiha, the loyalist militia, were last night going through the houses in Salaheddine, searching for rebels.

“What they mean are civilians they can capture and torture and then show some dead bodies saying they are terrorists,” said a fighter, Abu Karim, with cigarette burns and deep bruises from his time in custody. “They will be disappointed - everyone has either run away or they are dead. But they will have plenty of opportunities to kill if they take back Aleppo.”

10th August 2012

ASSAD'S FURY PUTS REBELS TO FLIGHT

By Kim Sengupta

BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S forces achieved a crucial breakthrough in the bloody battle for Aleppo yesterday, storming through the main rebel defence lines and positioning themselves for further assaults to reoccupy the city.

The loss of the district of Salaheddine is a significant blow to the rebels' hopes of holding the areas they had gained in the country's largest city. There was additional pressure on the opposition with large numbers of fighters from outlying areas leaving. They fear the regime, after gaining control of the city, will take punitive action against towns in the region.

After two days regime forces, backed by air strikes, managed to force open a path for tanks and armoured cars to enter Salaheddine and build a bridgehead.

The Free Syrian Army, acknowledging the loss of the district, described it as a "tactical withdrawal". But many of the rebels retreating from the front line also left Aleppo, as well as other areas they had captured.

18th August 2012

A DESERTED CITY, A DESERTING UN, AND A STORM ABOUT TO BREAK

By Robert Fisk

“HE WILL not survive,” my Syrian friend said, and I think he was right.

The man on the state television was bearded down to his chest, a self-confessed Salafist - nom de guerre “Abu Dolha”, real name Ahmed Ali Gharibo. A Syrian - “alas,” said my friend - from the Ghouta district of Damascus. He admitted, right there in front of the cameras, that he “regretted” killing 200 people with his own hands.

What did it take to get a man like this to admit such things on television? Sitting up in this breezy villa, 16 miles from Damascus - Bashar’s brother Maher lives just round the corner - I could well believe what my friend said: Ahmed Gharibo will not survive.

Like all civil conflicts, rumours turn into facts, facts into rumours. Damascus is almost deserted, near-empty boulevards with more military checkpoints than traffic lights, some “mukhabarat” security, some army, the occasional “shabiha”, friendly to me - they would be, wouldn’t they, as I drive towards the elite mansions outside town - but a bit down-at-heel.

“How in the West, being advocates of democracy and liberty and freedom, can you support these people?” my friend asks. “Do your readers know that Her Majesty sends weapons and money to these people?”

I am about to point out that HMG claims that it doesn’t give weapons at all - the word “claim” is all-important in Syria these days, like the conspiracy theory of history.

“The first step to dismantle Iran is to dismantle Syria - we are isolated and 123 countries are against us; that was the figure of those who gathered for the so-called ‘Friends of Syria’ conference in Paris.”

I begin to think of the Serbs and their total conviction that the world was against them, that their innocence was without question. Ah, but like the old Yugoslavia, you have only to walk the streets of Damascus to realise that the storm has not yet fully broken. Behind the walls of the old French mandate barracks down from Umayyad Square, the burnt wreckage of this week’s fuel-truck bomb stands below a wizened tree. Was it aimed at the run-down “caserne” that the Syrian army still uses or a little trick for the UN officers in the Dama Rose Hotel across the road? The last 100 military observers are packing for the road journey to Beirut airport on Wednesday. The transit point of Beirut rather than Damascus airport tells its own story. “We are defunct in five days,” I heard one of the UN officers say in the lobby. Funny word, “defunct”, Latin for “dead”.

But maybe the truck bomber wanted the UN dead too? Shortly after the

explosion, several aimed shots were fired at the UN's third-floor hotel offices. Is it true that a Syrian camera crew were already on the eighth floor, ready to tape the bomb? That ambulances came within three minutes?

The UN was beginning to realise that its men were increasingly endangered in the provinces. In Aleppo, they started off within a 30-mile radius of the city and within months, their government escorts would not venture beyond the last government checkpoint on the city limits. The rebels were less friendly to the UN, and several of the international observers saw foreign fighters among the "Free Syrian Army".

Last week - the UN has not exactly advertised the fact - a security man working for the UN, a former government security agent, was kidnapped and tortured and then murdered near his home north of Damascus. They found 20 bullet wounds in his body. The UN's men are not talking - rarely have they been so uncommunicative - but they have counted the corpses in Artous, 25 miles west of Damascus, 70 bodies in all, Sunnis, in a mass grave, just two weeks ago. Killed, it seems, by the "shabiha".

The FSA has been well and truly cleared out of the centre of Damascus - the suburbs at night are a different matter - and few Damascenes seem to believe that the armed rebels are winning in Aleppo.

"The Christians are protesting," another Syrian friend tells me. "The Greek Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo has just made an appeal to the Western powers not to send weapons to the fundamentalists. The Syrian Catholic church in Aleppo has now been bombed."

How does one reply to all this? Does the Syrian government really want the UN to leave? "No!" cries my friend. "We want UN pressure here to force these 'people' into dialogue."

The Salafist told his audience today that his enemies were "Alawites [of course, for Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite] and Shiites and Christians". So is that it? War by television? An acknowledgement that the man won't live long beyond this broadcast. And the UN is indeed leaving. There is an idea of a minuscule office remaining in Damascus with a military and a political observer. But otherwise, the great, gloomy eyes of the UN donkey will close sleepily on Wednesday; it's the failure of another mission - and not a single international soldier will be left behind to watch the storm burst.

19th August 2012

UN LEAVES SYRIA TO ITS BLOODY FATE

By Robert Fisk

THE UN'S commander in Damascus bid a miserable goodbye to his mission yesterday, unconvincingly claiming that the UN would not abandon Syria, but in fact turning the country into a free-fire zone the moment his last 100 soldiers begin their retreat tomorrow. Whenever the UN withdraws its personnel from the Middle East, calamity always follows in its wake - the departure of UN weapons inspectors from Iraq in 2003 presaged the Anglo-American invasion - and, privately, the UN fears the way is now open for the West and Gulf Arabs to pour heavy weapons into Syria to assist the rebellion against the Assad regime.

As General Babacar Gaye was standing in the lobby of the luxury Damas Rose Hotel, absurdly wishing Muslims a happy Eid holiday following the fasting month of Ramadan, and insisting that "the UN will not leave Syria", his own officers were packing their bags and queuing to pay their last hotel bills on the other side of the atrium. "They couldn't even wait until Lakhdar Brahimi got here to take over as UN envoy," one of Gaye's officials grumbled. The general declined to tell journalists whether more Syrian lives might have been saved if the UN stayed on.

Outside, in the bright, hot Damascus afternoon, the often empty streets and shuttered shops spoke of lassitude rather than collapse. Bashar al-Assad's regime does not appear to be on the verge of departure - as American and French diplomats fondly believe - but the signs of dislocation are everywhere. Soldiers are billeted in the old Ottoman Haj station in central Damascus - from which no trains have left for Syrian cities in months - but the daily Syrian government-controlled press (there is no other) carries front-page stories from the war front each day. The capture of "Free Syrian Army" weapons, the assassination of civilians in and around Damascus - always attributed to "terrorists", of course - and fighting speeches by government acolytes make no secret of the nation's peril.

Perhaps for this reason, Syrians in Damascus speak with increasing freedom about the chances of the regime's survival, openly debating Bashar's victory or defeat in cafés and restaurants. All know that just a few miles outside the capital, a dark zone begins, a land - thousands of square kilometres of it - in which terrible deeds are taking place hourly. The main highways north have been cut and phone lines to Aleppo have largely collapsed; most travellers choose to fly to the city from Damascus, even though the road from Aleppo airport to the city centre is itself dangerous. Syrian Arab Airlines' main ticket office in Damascus was packed with passengers yesterday, all seeking flights out of the country or pleading for overbooked seats for relatives on planes from Aleppo.

And yet. The regime, whose history and roots go deep into the land of Syria - however brutal and corrupting its opponents believe those roots to be - seems to have more life in it than the Clintons and the Panettas and the Laurent Fabiuses of this world might believe. When French foreign minister Fabius - after listening to refugees' stories of atrocities in Syria - announces that Bashar al-Assad "doesn't deserve to be on this earth", his words appear infantile rather than threatening; indeed they sound like the kind of nonsense often spouted by Arab dictators. Damascenes are looking to their families rather than revenge; one middle-class man I have known for years told me yesterday how his wife worked for a government office but he had "moved her to home" so that she would be safe. The information ministry have produced a DVD packed with tapes of "terrorist" bomb explosions across the country - while admitting that the disk doesn't yet take in last week's truck bombing near the UN's hotel.

General Gaye's last goodbye was as bleak as it was short. After UN troops had arrived on 21 April to monitor the withdrawal of heavy weapons and a ceasefire, violence declined, he said, but "by the middle of June, it was clear that the parties were no longer committed to the ceasefire". UN observers then tried "to facilitate pauses in the fighting" to assist humanitarian work. "I call upon all parties to stop the violence which is causing such suffering to the Syrian people," General Gaye proclaimed, adding that humanitarian law must be respected.

But, needless to say, humanitarian law is not - and will not - be respected, and from tomorrow there will be no-one left to "facilitate pauses in the fighting". When I asked the good general how he personally felt about the failure of his mission, he replied that he was comforted by the fact that "the UN will stay in Syria". But this was preposterous. Save for a tiny UN office - with perhaps 10 staff - which has still not been approved, there is no UN observer mission left here, save for the post-1967 war UNTSO (UN Truce Supervision Organization) force which is fully engaged on keeping the Syrian-Israeli peace on the Golan Heights. The UN soldiers who have bravely sat through the shellfire of Aleppo and Homs will be there no longer.

Should the UN's Syrian mission have been led by a diplomat rather than a soldier - no-one here appears to understand why the Norwegian General Mood, General Gaye's predecessor, left his post - and should it have spent more time talking to opposition forces outside Syria, were questions still being debated within the UN yesterday. And why end the mission now? Because there were some in UN headquarters in New York who knew from the start that the assignment was not intended to succeed? Or because the Western nations and Gulf sponsors do not want UN observers snooping into the amount of new and

more lethal weaponry which they may be planning to send to the “Free Syrian Army” and its more bearded allies in those parts of Syria in which Bashar’s writ no longer runs?

21st August 2012

‘THEY SNIPE AT US THEN RUN AND HIDE IN SEWERS’

By Robert Fisk

MORTARS CRASHED into the middle-class streets around us and a T-72 tank baked in the heat under a road viaduct, but Bashar al-Assad's most senior operational commander in Aleppo - a 53-year-old Major-General with 33 years in the military and two bullet wounds from last month's battles in Damascus - claims he can "clean" the whole province of Aleppo from "terrorists" in 20 days. Now that is quite a boast, especially in the Saif el-Dowla suburb of the city, where sniper fire snapped down leafy streets. For the battle of Aleppo is far from over.

But this was a strange sensation, to sit in a private house, commandeered by the Syrian army - 19th-century prints still on the walls, the carpet immaculate - and talk to the Generals accused by Western leaders of being war criminals. I was, so to speak, in "the lair of the enemy", but the immensely tall, balding General - his officers adding their own impressions whenever they were asked - had much to say about the war they are fighting and the contempt with which they regard their enemies. They were "mice", the General said - he would not give his name. "They snipe at us and then they run and hide and in the sewers. Foreigners, Turks, Chechens, Afghans, Libyans, Sudanese." And Syrians, I said. "Yes, Syrians too, but smugglers and criminals," he said.

I asked about the rebels' weapons and the clutch of conscripts staggered into the room under the weight of rockets, rifles, ammunition and explosives. "Take this," the General said, grinning as he handed me a two-way radio, a Hongda-made HD668 taken two days ago off a dead Turkish fighter in Saif al-Dowla a few hundred metres from where we were sitting. "Mohamed, do you hear me?" the radio demanded. "Abul Hassan, did you hear?" The Syrian officers roared with laughter at the disembodied voice of their enemy, perhaps in the same block of buildings. We took this ID from the "terrorist", the General said. "Citizen of the Turkish Republic" was printed on the card, above a photo of a man with a thin moustache. Born - Bingol (Turkey) 1 July 1974. Name: Remziye Idris Metin Ekince. Religion: Islam.

So, suddenly, we had a name for one of the mysterious "foreigners" who - at least in popular Baathist imagination - staff the "terrorist" army the Syrian military is fighting. And a lot of other names with far larger significance. As I prowled around the weapons - all captured within the past week, according to the Syrian officers - I found sticks of Swedish explosives in plastic covers, dated February 1999 and manufactured by Hammargrens, whose office address was printed as 434-24 Kingsbacka in Sweden; the words "made in USA" was also marked on each stick.

There was: a Belgian rifle, an FN from the town of Herstal, manufacturer's code 1473224; a set of hand grenades of uncertain provenance numbered HG 85, SM8-03 1; a Russian sniper scope; a 9mm Spanish-made pistol - model 28 1A - manufactured by a Star Echeverria SA Eibar Espana; an ancient automatic rifle; a Soviet sub-machine-gun of 1948 vintage; a mass of Russian rocket-propelled grenades and launchers; and box after box of medical supplies.

"Every unit of the terrorists has a field ambulance," an intelligence officer said. "They steal medicines from our pharmacies but bring other packets with them." True, it seems. There were painkillers from Lebanon, bandages from Pakistan, much of the stuff was from Turkey. Interesting to know who the Spanish, Swedish and Belgian manufacturers originally sold their guns and explosives to. The haul went on and on, a newly out-of-date Visa card under the name of Ahed Akrama, a Syrian ID card in the name of Widad Othman - "kidnapped by the terrorists," another officer muttered - and thousands of rounds of ammunition. The General agreed that weapons may have been taken from dead Syrian troops or soldiers who had been captured. Army defectors existed, he said, but they were "drop-outs, soldiers who had failed their basic tests who were motivated only by money". This is what they say under interrogation, he said.

It wasn't difficult to work out just how the fighting in Aleppo is developing. Walking the streets for more than an hour with a Syrian army patrol, individual snipers would shoot from houses and then disappear before government soldiers arrived. The army had shot dead one man with a sniper's rifle who fired from the minaret of the El-Houda mosque. The Salaheddine district had been "liberated", the Syrian officer said, and the Saif el-Dowla district was only two blocks from a similar "liberation".

At least a dozen civilians emerged from their homes, retirees in their 70s, shopkeepers and local businessmen with their families and, unaware that a foreign journalist was watching, put their arms round Syrian troops. One told me he had stayed in his home as "foreign" fighters used his courtyard to fire on government soldiers. "I speak Turkish and most were speaking Turkish but some of the men had long beards and short trousers like the Saudis wear, and had strange Arab accents."

So many Aleppo citizens talked to me, out of earshot of soldiers, about armed "foreigners" in their streets along with Syrians "from the countryside" that the presence of considerable numbers of non-Syrian gunmen appeared to be true. While much of the city continues its life under occasional mortar fire, tens of thousands of civilians displaced by the fighting between the Free Syrian Army and what the government always calls the "Syrian Arab Army" are now housed

in vacant dormitories on the Aleppo University campus. And President Assad's enemies are never far away.

Returning to the city centre yesterday afternoon, I discovered five Syrian soldiers - exhausted, with sharp, tense eyes - walking back to their barracks with a civilian called Badriedin. He had alerted the soldiers when he saw "10 terrorists" in Al-Hattaf street and the government troops had killed several of them - their bodies taken away on motor scooters, Badriedin said - and the rest escaped. The soldiers were high on their story, how they had been outnumbered but fought off their enemies. Even the operational commander of all Aleppo told me that a major battle was beginning in an area containing a mosque and a Christian school where his men had surrounded a large number of "terrorists". "The Syrian army doesn't kill civilians - we came here to protect them, at their request," he said. "We tried to get civilians out of the area where we have to fight, with loudspeakers we give lots of warnings."

I prefer the words emblazoned on the T-shirt of young man who said he was trying to reach his apartment in the snipers' zone to see if it had survived. They read: "You see things and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were, and I say 'Why not?' - George Bernard Shaw." Not a bad motto for Aleppo these days.

22nd August 2012

‘NO POWER CAN BRING DOWN THE SYRIAN REGIME’

By Robert Fisk

YOU KNOW it's all true when the taxi driver turns off the motorway towards Aleppo. In front lies a mile of empty road, disappearing into the heat haze on its way to one of the oldest cities in the world.

But a halo of brown smoke embraces the horizon and the driver knows better than to follow the motorway signs from the airport. He turns left, gingerly bouncing over the broken median rail, then between two huge piles of rocks like a frightened cat. In front of us is a sea of burnt houses and wrecked cars, through which we drive slowly. The engine cuts out in the way my dad's car used to in France on bad post-war petrol, the accelerator cutting out nervously as we drive past two rubbish trucks upended to form a makeshift road-block.

But these are phantom check points. There are no gunmen, no militiamen, no al-Qa'ida, no "terrorists", no "gangs", no "foreign fighters" - how one grows sick of these eternal semantics - and not a civilian soul, because this battle is over - for now.

This is the suburb of Al Baz, won by the government army, we are told later, although we see neither soldiers nor policemen for miles. The army has come and gone, and the buildings are shell-smashed and bullet-scarred. We turn left onto a laneway of pulverised grey rubble, burning black garbage bags smoking on either side of us. Who set them on fire?

We drive on through these ghost streets. On our right is a spectral police station, its giant portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on its wall is intact. But above each window are the black stains of fires. The building is gutted, the fire station next door is abandoned and a fire truck has been driven into a wall. In four miles, I spot just one forlorn child in the ruins and a mother carrying a baby over an acre of dust. Only when the damaged Citadel of Aleppo appears to our right - dun-coloured ramparts remind us that history did not begin yesterday - are there families, small girls in their Eid dresses and a "shawarma" café.

"We cleaned these streets," a Syrian officer will tell me later. Well yes, insofar as you can beat street fighters with T-72 tanks and BMP troop carriers. The Syrian soldiers described to us how they have been fighting in Homs, Idlib, Hama and Deraa. President Assad has sent his battle-hardened men to fight for Aleppo but this is not, I am told, Maher al-Assad's infamous Fourth Division: "Absolutely not," a General tells me with a laugh - though I have no idea where Bashar's brother and his men are operating.

Now for the official figures - government army statistics of course, for we are on the "other side" of the Aleppo front line. Total "terrorists" dead: 700 "and many wounded". Total military deaths: 20. Wounded: 100. Internet and mobile

lines were cut by rebels near Homs, so a land circuit to Damascus offers the only phone communication with the capital. In Iraq and Afghanistan, insurgents would pay to keep the mobile system operating as they needed the phones. But here, it seems they have enough “command and control” systems - courtesy of Washington and London if we are to believe our masters - to ignore Syria’s domestic lines.

The “Free Syrian Army” can’t surround Aleppo - but they can isolate it. A miserable Eid holiday, with richer residents camping in hotels to avoid gunfire in the suburbs, no newspapers and the local news agency so bereft of lines, it has 11 days of pictures waiting for transmission to Damascus.

The senior Syrian officers wear their camouflage fatigues without badges. “In wartime,” a Maj-Gen tells me, “we take off our badges of rank for our own safety in order not to be recognised.” There are, it seems, no Horatio Nelsons in the Syrian army, bedecked in medals for the snipers in the rigging. In Aleppo, the snipers are at apartment windows. Three times yesterday, they opened fire on soldiers and then vanished. Troops in steel helmets wandered through the public gardens near the disused railway tracks in a vain search for them.

I asked one of the Syrian military elite here if he had any reaction to US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, who announced two weeks ago that Aleppo would be “a nail in Assad’s coffin” and that of the regime. This was the officer’s reply: “The Syrian regime will stay for ever. No power on earth can bring it down. All regimes will fall - but Syria will stay, because God is on the side of those who are in the right.”

Certainly - albeit infinitely smaller than the cost to Syria’s civilian victims of this awful war - the army is paying its own price. Of the four Generals I have so far met in Aleppo, three have been seriously wounded in the fighting of the past 18 months, one still nursing a sling after receiving grenade shrapnel in his shoulder.

There were television sets in the officers’ temporary quarters. I saw the anti-regime “Al Arabiya” and BBC World on the screen as well as Syrian television’s own drudge-like coverage of the war. And soldiers, the army is quick to reveal, receive a daily lecture from their officers on the state of the conflict. Comment is sacred and I suspect facts are free. Any conversation has to begin with the government line: the army defends the homeland against aggression, an international conspiracy targets Syria because it is the only Arab nation to resist Israel. Foreign enemies at first supported demonstrations against the government and then gave the demonstrators weapons. There is no admission of troops using guns against unarmed demonstrators and no explanation of how armed Syrian demonstrators turned into “foreign” fighters.

But access to the Syrian army can sometimes produce a factoid more powerful than statistics. Ahmed, a 21-year-old conscript, tells me how his brother, Private Mohammed Ibrahim Dout, was “martyred” by a sniper. His comrade says: “We are sorry for our brother soldier, but he is now in paradise.” A General tells me of a friend, a Lieutenant in the full-time Syrian army in the Damascus suburb of Douma: “He was married three months ago and was walking to his home in Douma when some men in a van greeted him and offered him a lift.” Lieutenant Assem Abbas, 23, accepted the gesture in good faith.

“We found him later,” the General says, “cut into two pieces and thrown into a sewage tank.”

23rd August 2012

‘REBEL ARMY? THEY’RE A GANG OF FOREIGNERS’

By Robert Fisk

A VICTORIOUS army? There were cartridge cases all over the ancient stone laneways, pocked windows, and bullet holes up the side of the Sharaf mosque, where a gunman had been firing from the minaret. A sniper still fired just 150 yards away – all that was left of more than a hundred rebels who had almost, but not quite, encircled the 4,000-year-old citadel of Aleppo.

"You won't believe this," Major Somar cried in excitement. "One of our prisoners told me: 'I didn't realise Palestine was as beautiful as this.' He thought he was in Palestine to fight the Israelis!"

Do I believe this? Certainly, the fighters who bashed their way into the lovely old streets west of the great citadel were, from all accounts, a ragtag bunch. Their graffiti – "We are the Brigades of 1980", the year when the first Muslim Brotherhood rising threatened the empire of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez – was still on the walls of the Syrian-Armenian hotels and silver shops. A 51-year-old general handed me one of the home-made grenades that littered the floor of the Sharaf mosque; a fluffy fuse poking from the top of a lump of shrapnel, coated in white plastic and covered in black adhesive tape.

Inside the mosque were bullets, empty tins of cheese, cigarette butts and piles of mosque carpets, which the rebels had used as bedding. The battle had so far lasted 24 hours. A live round had cut into the Bosnian-style tombstone of a Muslim imam's grave, with a delicate stone turban carved on its top. The mosque's records – lists of worshippers' complaints, Korans and financial documents – were lying across one room in what had evidently marked the last stand of several men. There was little blood. Between 10 and 15 of the defenders – all Syrians – surrendered after being offered mercy if they laid down their arms. The quality of this mercy was not, of course, disclosed to us.

The Syrian soldiers were elated, but admitted that they shared immense sadness for the history of a city whose very fabric was being torn apart, a world heritage site being smashed by rockets and high-velocity rounds. The officers shook their heads when they led us into the ramparts of the immense citadel. "The terrorists tried to capture it 20 days ago from our soldiers who were defending it," Major Somar said. "They filled gas cylinders full of explosives – 300 kilos of it – and set them off by the first entrance above the moat."

Alas, they did. The huge medieval iron and wooden gate, its ornamented hinges and supports – a defence-work that had stood for 700 years – has been literally torn apart. I clambered over carbonized wood and hunks of stone bearing delicate Koranic inscriptions. Hundreds of bullet holes have pitted the stonework of the inner gate. Below, I found a T-72 tank whose barrel had been

grazed by a sniper's bullet which was still lodged in the sheath, its armour broken by a grenade. "I was inside at the time," its driver said. "Bang! – but my tank still worked!"

So here is the official scorecard of the battle for the eastern side of the old city of Aleppo, the conflict amid narrow streets and pale, bleached stone walls that was still being fought out yesterday afternoon, the crack of every rebel bullet receiving a long burst of machine-gun fire from Major Somar's soldiers. As the army closed in on the gunmen from two sides, 30 rebels – or "Free Syrian Army" or "foreign fighters" – were killed and an undisclosed number wounded. According to Major Somar's general, an officer called Saber, Syrian government forces suffered only eight wounded. I came across three of them, one a 51-year-old officer who refused to be sent to hospital.

Many of the rebels' weapons had been taken from the scene by the military "mukhbarat" intelligence men before we arrived: they were said to include three Nato-standard sniper rifles, one mortar, eight Austrian machine-pistols and a host of Kalashnikovs, which may well have been stolen by Syrian deserters. But it is the shock of finding these pitched battles amid this world heritage site which is more terrible than the armaments of each side. To crunch over broken stone and glass with Syrian troops for mile after mile around the old city, a place of museums and Mosques – the magnificently minareted Gemaya Omayyad stands beside yesterday's battleground – is a matter of infinite sorrow.

Many of the soldiers, who were encouraged to speak to me even as they knelt at the ends of narrow streets with bullets spattering off the walls, spoke of their amazement that so many "foreign fighters" should have been in Aleppo. "Aleppo has five million people," one said to me. "If the enemy are so sure that they are going to win the battle, then surely there's no need to bring these foreigners to participate; they will lose."

Major Somar, who spoke excellent English, understood the political dimension all too well. "Our borders with Turkey are a big problem," he admitted. "The border needs to be closed. The closure of the frontier must be coordinated by the two governments. But the Turkish government is on the enemy side. Erdogan is against Syria." Of course, I asked him his religion, a question that is all innocence and all poison in Syria these days. Somar, whose father was a general, his mother a teacher, and who practices his English with Dan Brown novels, was as quick as a cat. "It's not where you are born or what is your religion," he said. "It's what's in your mind. Islam comes from this land, Christians come from this land, Jews come from this land. That is why it is our duty to protect this land."

Several soldiers believed the rebels were trying to convert the Christians of

Aleppo – “a peaceful people”, they kept calling them – and there was a popular story doing the rounds yesterday of a Christian storekeeper who was forced to wear Muslim clothing and announce his own conversion in front of a video camera. But in wartime cities, you find talkative soldiers. One of the men who recaptured the entrance to the citadel was Abul Fidar, famous for walking between Aleppo, Palmyra and Damascus over 10 days at the start of the current conflict last year to publicise the need for peace. The president, needless to say, greeted him warmly at his final destination.

And then there was Sergeant Mahmoud Dawoud from Hama, who had been fighting in Hama itself, Homs, Jebel Zawi and Idlib. “I want to be interviewed by a reporter,” he announced, and of course, he got his way. “We are sad for the civilians of this land,” he said. “They were in peace before. We promise as soldiers that we will make sure a good life returns for them, even if we lose our lives.” He does not mention all those civilians killed by army shellfire or by the “shabiha”, or those thousands who have suffered torture in this land. Dawoud has a fiancée called Hannan who is studying French in Latakia, his father is a teacher; he says he wants “to serve his homeland”.

But the thought cannot escape us that the prime purpose of men like Sergeant Dawoud – and all his fellow soldiers here – was not, surely, to liberate Aleppo but to liberate the occupied Golan Heights, right next to the land which the “jihadis” apparently thought they were “liberating” yesterday – until they discovered that Aleppo was not Jerusalem.

24th August 2012

ALEPPO'S POOR GET CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

By Robert Fisk

IN ALEPPO, the rich have already left, the middle classes stay at home and the poor suffer. You only have walk through the old French park beside Saadalah al-Jabri Square to meet them, three families of 19 souls, the women in black and sun-burnt, the children dark-skinned, mothers-in-law and nephews lying exhausted on thin carpets laid over withered grass. It is 37C. They lie under the shade of a scrawny tree, their only cover since they came here a month ago from the city suburb of Haderiyah.

There is a father in his mid-forties who refuses to give even his first name but is prepared to tell their story. “The Free Army came to our mosque and an imam told us to leave our homes - even my own home, which was owned by my father and grandfather and great-grandfather. This man kept shouting through a loudspeaker: ‘Go out of your homes’. This was his advice. And then we heard bombs and bullets, so we left our home.”

The man is a Syrian Kurd, a shoe-shine man from the slums, and he referred to those opposing Bashar al-Assad’s regime as the Free Army - albeit without much affection - but we have to strain to hear his words, nearly drowned out by a helicopter.

“Almost everyone was leaving our area - it was the beginning of Ramadan - although some families stayed in their homes,” the man shouted. There was a pop-pop-pop-pop-pop from the helicopter circling above us, followed by the crack of bullets hitting a street two blocks away. Another rebel marauder had sniped into the Kouatli Street area and the Syrian army had called for an air attack - how on Earth a chopper pilot at 1,000ft can pick up a single gunman in an apartment block escaped me - and now the helicopter was banging away with gusto, pop-pop-pop-bang-bang-bang, like a fairground soundtrack.

“The imam was from the other side of Haderiyah. We knew who he was, he wore a sheikh’s clothes; he was not a foreigner. As we were leaving, our nephew Hassan got out of the car to buy some bread. That’s when the sniper shot him, one of the ‘Free Army’ - we saw him. He had a scarf around his face - he was shooting from a roof top.”

Hassan is lying in pain on an old carpet and he looks at us with a frown, his left arm bandaged at the wrist and shoulder. “We got first aid for him, he was bandaged at the Razi Hospital in Faisal Street. The charities come and feed us but we have nowhere to stay.”

The sniper-on-the-roof has become a feature of this dirty war, the “Free Army” sniper as ferocious to the Syrian army - and apparently to Hassan - as the Syrian government snipers have become for their opponents, the unarmed as

well as the armed variety.

We could hear the latter still shooting - at soldiers or at the flea-like, pop-popping chopper, we could not tell, although a Syrian friend who had taken us to the park broke down and wept in fear at the uproar. The Syrian Kurd said he had gone back to his home a week later. The “Free Army” was still there but his home was undamaged. “If all the people went back, I would go back. The ‘Free Army’ has to leave because they are making a mess in our country. I want to go home.”

Well, here we were in the government-controlled part of Aleppo, so he would say that, wouldn’t he? Too frightened to give his name, calling insurgents the “Free Army” was as far as he would go in politics. Then a young man approached us, a 32-year-old clothes-maker who said his name was Bakri Toufnakji, his family from Idlib - a safer town than Aleppo, he claimed - but he had a home in the Bab Jnein area of the Old City and was there when the rebels arrived at the start of Ramadan.

“The families were all in the street and I went to speak to the ‘Free Army’ people,” he said. “I said, ‘We have families here and women and children and a man with a heart problem’. I said: ‘Please go away and take your guns with you’. And the ‘Free Army’ said they would go. But then the [government] army came and the fighting began.”

The helicopter was still firing - how many bullets can it carry on one sortie, I wondered? - but Toufnakji’s memories were more powerful than the sound of the guns in the air above us. “The next morning, after they finished fighting, I saw a van in the street that was on fire. There was an awful sight. The driver was almost non-existent: all that was left of him was his head and his backbone. This was a week ago. He was an innocent man. His body was left in the van. I ran away after the ‘Free Army’ burnt the police station…”

And here Toufnakji’s recollections began to break up. There had been a woman in his shop who had given birth by Caesarian surgery, he said, another pregnant woman who could not be taken to hospital, women screaming in a mosque…

On the street corners in this part of Aleppo, there are melons and boxes of grapes for sale - no one starves here, on the “other side” of the war - and there are a couple of garden cafes in Al-Ayoubi street where elderly, once-wealthy Christians drop by for tea in the evening, sitting beside a splattering fountain where a white duck observes them with disdain.

In a nearby lane, heaped with garbage, there’s a chicken stall whose owner is a half-Russian Syrian who sells sandwiches at two dollars a shot. But walking down towards the old Baron Hotel - yes, Lawrence of Arabia stayed there and

Theodore Roosevelt and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Charles Lindbergh - I hear another sniper firing from a roof top. Men run into the shadows. We skulk back to our hotel where they are pulling down the iron shutters. And a Syrian-Kurdish family, be sure, still sits beneath its scrawny tree in the French park.

25th August 2012

SYRIA'S NEWSPAPERS TRUMPET AN ARMY VICTORY BUT THE SOUND OF SHELLFIRE TELLS THE TRUE STORY

By Robert Fisk

ALL NIGHT and all day, the guns of Kassioun have been firing. At Dayara and Kfar Souseh and Qadam and Nahr Aisha, proof that the enemies of Bashar al-Assad have re-entered the suburbs of Damascus after the government's recapture of the capital last month.

The long boulevard out to Kfar Souseh, a district of new middle-class apartment buildings and old slums - some of them wooden 150-year-old Ottoman homes whose narrow alleyways are a playground for the rebels of Syria - was deserted yesterday. Only the fresh white-painted sandbags of the soldiers and militiamen controlling the highway prove that the battle has returned to Damascus.

The artillery on the mountain that towers above the city has been firing into Deraya - government soldiers have been padding the alleyways of Kfar Souseh, to little effect - but the armed fighters tormenting the army appear to have performed their usual tactic: they have fled to fight another day. The papers continue to trumpet the army's victories, but the shellfire that reverberates across the city tells a different story: that the war is not over, that the security the government promised has not been restored.

Since the Syrian air force's attacks have been largely confined to the north, France's warning that it might consider a partial no-fly zone over Syria cuts little ice in Damascus. The "last battle" for the capital, boasted by the opposition, was definitely won by the army in July but the bankrupt policy of storming the city - a sign of the Free Syrian Army's naivety - has been succeeded by the hit-and-run sniper attacks that have already taken hold in Aleppo. In such a scenario, tanks are useless, shellfire the sound of impotence.

In war, there's always a stage when the rhetoric fails to match the reality. In Aleppo, where the government claims to be winning, the battles continue. In Damascus, which the government believes it holds, the sniping continues the moment you reach the city limits. "I never thought I would see Syria turn so bad," a Syrian Christian friend told me. "We have had this kind of magical formula in Syria, to maintain a balance between all the minorities. To play up this balance is to blow up Syria."

This is not an exclusive point of view in the capital. We were passing the Derwishya Mosque - yes, home of the Whirling Dervishes - and turning right by a Syrian church, and the restaurants were packed with Christians and Muslims, prices ensuring a middle-class clientele but the customers proof that the sectarian conflict of the Syrian countryside has no more reached Damascus than it has Aleppo.

I fear that I sometimes spot these differences in embryo - a memory of the Balkan wars, perhaps, or just those random remarks from friends about the determination of Sunnis to destroy the Alawites if Assad, pictured, should fall - but they have not emerged in the big cities yet. Tartous is regarded as the safest city in Syria, Idlib the least, along with Homs. These are the realities - not the West's warnings - that Syrians live with. In the café in which I lunched yesterday, a visiting Russian imam was espousing the benefits of Islam in a secular society to his government hosts - what else would he do? - while my friend tried to explain why Assad could not be overthrown.

"Three million Alawites would be slaughtered - along with the Christians and the other minorities, it would be a bloodbath," he said. I have heard this before, of course, along with the usual praise for Syria's system of education and healthcare.

A drive around the Damascus ring-road shows how the war touches the city. Two security ministries attacked with car bombs last month have been surrounded by barbed wire and armed men. Police stations in the capital are now acquiring those 14ft protective concrete walls so familiar in Baghdad.

The car bomb is a weapon of war, alongside the aerial fighter-bomber, the sniper and the T-72. How do you win?

26th August 2012

THE BLOODY TRUTH ABOUT SYRIA'S UNCIVIL WAR

By Robert Fisk

A FEW hours after the ferocious attack on Damascus by the Free Syrian Army began last month, the new Syrian minister of information, Omran Zouhbi, turned on journalists in the capital. “What are you doing here in Damascus?” he roared. “You should be out with our soldiers!” And within a day, tired images of a primly smiling President Bashar al-Assad and pictures of Syrian troops happily kissing children were replaced by raw - and real - newsreel footage of commandos fighting their way across Baghdad Street under fire from the rebel opponents of the regime, grimy-faced, running from street corners, shooting from the cover of walls and terraces. “We’ve cleaned up here,” one tired but very angry officer said. “So now we’re going to get the rest of those bastards.” Never before - not even in the 1973 war when the Syrian army stormed Observatory Ridge on the heights of the Golan - had the Syrian public witnessed anything as real as this on their television sets.

And - despite all the mythical tales of its presence in every smashed village - the battle for Damascus really was fought by Maher al-Assad’s ruthless 4th Division. The soldiers loyal to Bashar’s younger brother gave no quarter. “It was a slaughter, a massacre,” a Syrian with expert knowledge of the military told me. “A lot of the corpses were already bloated within hours, but you could tell some of them weren’t Syrian; there were Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, one Turk, Sudanese …” He counted 70 bodies at one location, 42 of them non-Arab. The FSA said it lost only 20 men, and claimed that the Syrians emphasised the number of “foreign fighters” they found among the dead. “Syrian soldiers don’t like to think that they are shooting at fellow Syrians - they feel much more comfortable if they believe they are shooting at foreigners,” the young man said.

The statistics of the Syrian war will always be in dispute - both sides will minimise their losses while they are fighting and exaggerate the number of their “martyrs” once the conflict is over; nor will we ever know the true number of the civilian dead, nor the exact identity of their killers. Given unprecedented access last week to majors and generals whom the West accuses of war crimes, I found only one officer who would partially admit the existence of the murderous shabiha militia credited with atrocities in largely Sunni Muslim towns and villages. “The shabiha doesn’t exist,” he told me. “It is a figment of imagination. There are village ‘defenders’ who guard some areas …”

And that, of course, is exactly what the shabiha claim to be, local Syrian civilians protecting their homes from the government’s enemies. They existed in Algeria during that country’s barbaric conflict between the dictatorship in Algiers and the Islamist rebels in the 1990s, protecting their families while

committing atrocities in towns and villages believed to be used by - or sympathetic to - their “terrorist” Muslim enemies. In Algeria, too, the government’s opponents were called foreign fighters, men who had fought in the Afghan war against the Russians and who had returned to continue their holy war against the secular regime in France’s former colony. Now another former French colony’s secular - albeit Alawite-dominated - leadership says it is fighting men from Afghanistan, making no distinction between Unity Brigades or Muslim Brothers or Salafists or just plain Free Syrian Army. No one will be surprised to learn that there has always been the closest military-intelligence relationship between Algiers and Damascus.

But the government army’s battle with its Syrian and foreign antagonists has not always gone as smoothly as the regime would like the world to believe. Despite the narrative now peddled in the West, armed men were present on the streets of Syrian cities and villages since the very early days of the Syrian awakening 18 months ago. True, the Arab Spring initially took the form of demonstrations by tens of thousands of unarmed protesters in the great cities of Syria, but an Al Jazeera camera crew captured film of gunmen attacking Syrian soldiers near the village of Wadi Khallak in May 2011. That same month, Syrian television obtained tape of men armed with Kalashnikovs near crowds of unarmed Syrian protesters in Deraa, where the revolt began after secret police officers tortured to death a 13-year-old boy.

Yet when they first entered Deraa, it appears, Syrian officers and their soldiers did not themselves believe they were facing armed opponents. “Sixty per cent of the city was secured by us in just one day,” a Syrian familiar with the operation says. “We sent in only 1,100 soldiers - this would never happen now - because they did not think there were any armed groups there. But by the time we had recovered the rest of the city in the next five days, we had lost 17 of our men dead to sniper fire.” This was not the only surprise: once pitched battles began later in the year, the Syrian military was amazed by the firepower of its opponents.

“In Homs, the army was inside a building that received hundreds - literally hundreds - of rocket-propelled grenades,” a Syrian familiar with the operation says. “There were thousands of explosions, and eventually we had to evacuate the entire building because it was going to crumble. When the soldiers were out, they had to explode the whole place before it crashed to the ground.” And for an army condemned for its own cruelty in battle, the Syrians were astonished by the ruthlessness of those opposed to them.

In Andan, a heavily defended army checkpoint was wiped out last year when the Liwa Tawhid, the Unity Brigade, assaulted the position and killed all 75

soldiers and four officers. In a later ambush at Shughour, 120 soldiers were killed. Army files record nine security officers murdered at a police station at al-Hadr in Hama province, eight policemen at another office in the same province. In Salkin, another town in Hama, an ex-army civilian lorry driver employed by the Army's Vehicle Service Station 5036 was assaulted by civilian crowds. Abdul Fatah Omar Abdul Fatah was accused of being a member of the shabiha, stripped naked and hanged, then his corpse was pelted with shoes and decapitated. In Duma, a mosque leader told worshippers: "Among us, there is an Awaini," - a traitor. The man was beaten to death. His name is recorded as Abu Ahmed Akera.

When the Free Syria Army followed up its attack on Damascus with an assault on Aleppo, the authorities found that the first target of their enemies was the artillery school. More than 70 cadets managed to resist until reinforcements reached them. Word has it that all anti-aircraft missile crews at the school were hastily taken out of Aleppo to save them from capture and help protect the country's tactical missile defences from possible Israeli or Nato attack.

Syrian soldiers fighting their way through the winding, narrow streets of Aleppo's old city this week might choose to remember a young Egyptian student who spent months in Aleppo in the 1990s, working on an urban planning thesis that included the very battlefield in which the army is now fighting: Mohamed Atta, the leader of the 9/11 hijackers in the US. Some of the attacks on Syrian officials have been planned with great care; scientists at the Scientific Research Centre outside Damascus have been murdered. Long before the air force was first used in the war - the army claims this was in June - seven pilots were killed by rebels last year. The military says that it began using artillery - as opposed to mortars - only in February.

For the government, the outlook appears harsh. The army believes Idlib - reported to be an al-Qa'ida stronghold - will be one of the most critical battles in the war. There are reports of fearful conscripts seized from a civilian bus in central Syria and given an option: either their parents hand over 450,000 Syrian pounds (£7,000) to the Free Syrian Army or the young men must join the rebels. In the village of Rableh near al-Qusayr, a largely Christian population of 12,000 is said to be held hostage by rebels as human shields, although the army has apparently decided it would be too costly to take the village.

Bashar al-Assad's government faces a resourceful, well-armed and ruthless enemy whose Islamist supporters are receiving help from the West - just as the Islamist mujahedin fighters were funded and armed by the West when they fought the Russians in Afghanistan during the 1980s. With up to 50,000 men under arms and perhaps 4,000 battle tanks, the Syrian army, per se, cannot lose.

But can they win?

26th August 2012

AS THE VIOLENCE INTENSIFIES IN SYRIA, THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE WINNER: THE KURDS

By Patrick Cockburn

A FAVOURITE line of defence of embattled dictatorships is that if their rule is relaxed, their country will be torn apart by ethnic, religious or social strife. Opponents of autocracy commonly respond that these fears are exaggerated and self-serving and it is dictators themselves who foment such divisions to justify their monopoly of power. Moreover, critics of existing regimes hopefully claim that democratic elections will defuse the explosive potential for confrontations between opposing communities by giving them a non-violent path, denied under arbitrary government, to achieve their aims.

All these arguments contain elements of truth and self-deception. In Iraq under Saddam Hussein, many of his opponents genuinely believed that the divisions between Sunni, Shia and Kurd were primarily the result of his machinations. “Only get rid of Saddam,” Iraqi friends would say to me before 2003, “and just watch Iraqis settle their differences peacefully.” They chided me for naively taking at face value the self-serving propaganda of the Baathists about how they provided a necessary barrier to ethnic and religious strife.

The arguments of the regime in Baghdad were so evidently self-serving as to largely discredit them. During the great Shia and Kurdish uprisings of 1991 in the wake of defeat in the Gulf war, Saddam was able to consolidate the Sunni core of his regime in the capital by persuading the Sunni that they faced massacre by the rebels. Likewise, in Syria today, Bashar al-Assad has sought with some success to persuade the Alawites, Christians and other minorities that they face oppression, if not slaughter, at the hands of Sunni insurgents.

When I was in Damascus earlier this summer, one insurgent sympathiser insisted to me that “this is still essentially a struggle of the people against the government”. When I talked of sectarian divisions to a Christian from Hama, whose family members had cumulatively spent 60 years in prison under the Baath, he insisted with obvious sincerity that communal antagonisms in Syria “are much less significant than the outside world imagines”.

His words made my heart sink a little. I hope the Christian from Hama is right, but I started as a journalist in Belfast in 1972-75 at the height of sectarian warfare in Northern Ireland. I had many good-hearted friends who would tell me with complete conviction that they did not have a sectarian bone in their body. But, as the conversation progressed, it would emerge that they had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the sectarian geography of Belfast and they would no more knowingly intrude into the territory of the community to which they did not belong than they would walk off the edge of a cliff.

A degree of self-deception about the extent of their own divisions is common

to most cities and countries where different communities live side by side. The blindness is normally greatest on the part of the dominant community, for obvious egocentric motives. Today Bahrain is probably the country in the world most divided by sectarian differences between Sunni and Shia. The Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty has established what amounts to an apartheid state in which its minority community monopolises power. But in Bahrain I found it impossible to discover any Sunni who would admit to this even in the most private conversation.

How far do these precedents apply to Syria after a year and a half of escalating conflict? It is not just what happened in Lebanon during the civil war (1975-90) or Iraq (2003 to the present) that look ominous. The whole history of cosmopolitan and multicultural societies in Eastern Europe and the Middle East over the past century has been one of murder and expulsion.

Politicians, diplomats and journalists are aware of the dangers of communal strife in Syria. The example of Iraq after the 2003 invasion is too recent to be ignored in foreign capitals. There is also the knowledge that it is much in the interests of the Syrian insurgents to play up the example of Libya, where Nato intervention appeared to succeed, and down play Iraq when looking for foreign support. Unlike Libya, three conflicts are intertwined in Syria: the people against autocracy; the Sunni against the Shia; and the US, Israel and Saudi-led coalition against Iran and its allies.

At this stage most people who see news of fresh fighting and atrocities in Syria, and are not directly involved in the conflict, pay less and less attention to what is happening there. Syria comes across as one more murderous imbroglio, like Iraq, Somalia, eastern Congo or Lebanon used to be or remain today. Television pictures of extreme violence in such places no longer shock because they are part of the expected landscape.

These expectations have numbed the outside world and most Syrians into paying too little attention to a crucial recent development in the Syrian crisis. It is an event likely to have immense impact not just on Syria but on several of its neighbours. I do not mean the spread of inter-communal fighting pitting Sunni against Shia and Alawites in Lebanon or the strengthening of the position of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, both of which have been widely reported.

The new development is the withdrawal of almost all of the Syrian army in the north of the country along the Syrian border. The Syrian Kurds (whose total numbers are about 2.5 million or 10 per cent of the Syrian population) have achieved de facto autonomy just as the Iraqi Kurds did in 1991. Both Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian rebels are vying for Kurdish support and have to accept, at least for now, the establishment of a Kurdish enclave. For their part, the Syrian

Kurds may wish for the present civil war to continue so their shaky control of their own areas can put down roots.

The significance of what has happened is not immediately obvious until it is recalled that Kurdish nationalism is one of the great forces in Middle East politics. The position of the Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Turkey is crucially important for their stability. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) enjoys autonomy from Baghdad but, in practice, the KRG is more powerful politically, militarily and financially than most states in the UN.

If the Syrian Kurds achieve the same status of autonomy close to independence as in Iraq, how will Turkey be able to deny similar status to its own Kurdish minority in the south-east of the country? In the years since the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) started guerrilla war against the Turkish state in 1984, Ankara has failed to crush the insurgents politically or militarily. In the past couple of years, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has short-sightedly opted for repression rather than concessions.

Turkey may come to regret its intervention in Syria. Turkey threatens to invade northern Syria if the PKK gains control there, but since it has failed to eliminate the movement at home, it is unlikely to do so abroad and would be in an even bigger mess. In Washington, Ankara, Baghdad and elsewhere there is alarm that the political chessboard of the Middle East has suddenly changed in an unexpected way. “The real fear isn’t that Syria will be divided,” says Aliza Marcus, an expert on the Turkish Kurds writing in The National Interest magazine. “It’s that the Kurds are uniting.”

27th August 2012

THE SYRIAN ARMY WOULD LIKE TO APPEAR SQUEAKY CLEAN. IT ISN'T

By Robert Fisk

EVERY DAY, a new massacre is reported in Syria. Yesterday, it was Daraya. Slaughter by Syrian troops, according to those opposed to Bashar al-Assad. Slaughter by Bashar's "terrorist" opponents, the Syrian army said, producing the wife of a soldier whom they said had been shot and left for dead in a Daraya graveyard.

Of course, all armies want to stay clean. All that gold braid, all those battle honours, all that parade-ground semper fi. Thank God for Our Boys. Trouble is that when they go to war, armies ally themselves to the most unsavoury militias, gunmen, reservists, killers and mass murderers, often local vigilante groups who invariably contaminate the men in smart uniforms and high falutin' traditions, until the generals and colonels have to re-invent themselves and their history.

Take the Syrian army. It kills civilians but claims to take every care to avoid "collateral damage". The Israelis say the same. The Brits say the same, the Americans and French. And of course, when an insurgent group - the Free Syrian Army or Salafists - set up positions in the cities and towns of Syria, government forces open fire on them, kill civilians, thousands of refugees cross the border and CNN reports - as it did on Friday night - that refugees cursed Bashar al-Assad as they fled their homes.

And I cannot forget how Al Jazeera, loathed by Bashar now as it was once hated by Saddam, came back from Basra in 2003 with terrifying footage of dead and wounded Iraqi women and children who had been shredded by British artillery firing at the Iraqi army. And we don't need to mention all those Afghan wedding parties and innocent tribal villages pulverised by US gunfire and jets and drones.

The Syrian military, whether it admits it or not - and I'm not happy with the replies I got from Syrian officers on the subject last week - work with the shabiha (or "village defenders" as one soldier called them), who are a murderous, largely Alawite rabble who have slaughtered hundreds of Sunni civilians. Maybe the International Court in the Hague will one day name Syrian soldiers responsible for such crimes - be sure they won't touch the West's warriors - but it will be impossible for the Syrian army to write the shabiha out of the history of their war against the "terrorists", "armed groups", Free Syria Army and al-Qa'ida.

The attempted disconnect has already begun. Syrian troops are fighting at the request of their people to defend their country. The shabiha have nothing to do with them. And I have to say - and no, yet again, I am not comparing Bashar with Hitler or the Syrian conflict with the Second World War - that the German

Wehrmacht tried to play the same narrative game in 1944 and 1945 and, then, in a much bigger way, in post-war Europe. The disciplined lads of the Wehrmacht never indulged in war crimes or genocide against the Jews in Russia, Ukraine or the Baltic states or Poland or Yugoslavia. No, it was those damned SS criminals or the Einsatzgruppen or the Ukrainian militia or the Lithuanian paramilitary police or the proto-Nazi Ustashe who besmirched the good name of Germany. Bulls***, of course, though German historians who set out to prove the criminality of the Wehrmacht still face abuse.

The Vichy French army tried to clean its claws by claiming that all atrocities were committed by the "Milice", while the Italians blamed it all on the Germans. The Americans used the vilest criminal gangs in Vietnam, the French used colonial troops to massacre insurgents in Algeria. The Brits tolerated the B Specials in Northern Ireland until they invented the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), which got contaminated by sectarian killings and was disbanded. No, the UDR was squeaky clean compared to the Germans. But at the height of their Iraqi occupation war, the Americans were paying Sunni "neighbourhood guards" to liquidate their Shia enemies, and paying thug-like reservists - along with quite a few professionals - to torture their prisoners in Abu Ghraib. And then there is Israel - forced to grovel when their own Lebanese Phalangist militia slaughtered 1,700 Palestinians in 1982. Their equally vicious South Lebanon Army militia tortured prisoners with electricity in the Khiam prison inside Israel's occupied zone in southern Lebanon.

Of course, war stains all who take part in it. Wellington's men in the Peninsula Wars could no more prevent their Spanish guerrilla allies committing atrocities than the Brits and Americans could prevent their Soviet allies raping five million German women in 1945. Didn't the Turkish army use its own version of the SS - along with Kurdish militia - to help in the genocide of the Armenians in 1915?

The Allies of the Second World War did their share of extrajudicial executions - though on nothing like the scale of their enemies - and, thanks to YouTube, our very own beloved Free Syria Army has actually advertised its own murders in Syria. Chucking policemen off roofs and shooting shabiha to death after torturing them doesn't burnish the reputations of La Clinton or the messieurs Fabius and Hague. Keeping clean is a dirty business.

28th August 2012

‘FOREIGNERS HAVE HIJACKED THE PEACEFUL AGENDA OF THE SYRIAN PEOPLE’

By Robert Fisk

THE BATTLE for Damascus could be heard inside the Foreign Minister's office yesterday, a vibration of mortars and tank fire from the suburbs of the capital that penetrated Walid Muallem's inner sanctum, a dangerous heartbeat to match the man's words.

America was behind Syria's violence, he said, which will not end even after the battle for Aleppo is over. "I tell the Europeans: 'I don't understand your slogan about the welfare of the Syrian people when you are supporting 17 resolutions against the welfare of the Syrian people'. And I tell the Americans: 'You must read well what you did in Afghanistan and Somalia. I don't understand your slogan of fighting international terrorism when you are supporting this terrorism in Syria'."

Walid Muallem spoke in English and very slowly, either because of the disconcerting uproar outside or because this was his first interview with a Western journalist since the Syrian crisis began. At one point, the conflict between rebels and government troops in the suburbs of Douma, Jobar, Arbeen and Qaboun - where a helicopter was shot down - became so loud that even the most phlegmatic of Foreign Ministers in a region plagued by rhetoric glanced towards the window. How did he feel when he heard this, I asked him?

"Before I am a minister, I am a Syrian citizen, and I feel sad at seeing what's happening in Syria, compared with two years ago," he said. "There are many Syrians like me - eager to see Syria return to the old days when we were proud of our security."

I have my doubts about how many Syrians want a return to "the old days" but Muallem claims that perhaps 60 per cent of the country's violence comes from abroad, from Turkey, from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with the United States exercising its influence over all others.

"When the Americans say, 'We are supplying the opposition with sophisticated instruments of telecommunications', isn't this part of a military effort, when they supply the opposition with $25m - and much more from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia?"

A year ago, I told Muallem, I lunched with the Emir of Qatar, and he was enraged at what he called Bashar al-Assad's lies, claiming that the Syrian President had reneged on a deal to allow Muslim Brotherhood members to return home.

Muallem nodded. "If you met the same Emir two years ago, he was praising Assad, and considered him a dear friend. They used to have family relations, spending family holidays in Damascus and sometimes in Doha. There is an

important question: what happened? I met the Emir in Doha in, I think, November 2011, when the Arab League started their initiative [resulting in the sending of League observers to Syria] and we reached agreement … The Emir told me: 'If you agree to this initiative, I will change the attitude of Al Jazeera and I will tell [Sheikh] Qaradawi [a popular prelate with a regular slot on the television chain] to support Syria and reconciliation, and I have put down some billions of dollars to rebuild Syria…'.

Of America's power, Walid Muallem had no doubt. The Americans, he says, succeeded in frightening the Gulf countries about Iran's nuclear capabilities, persuaded them to buy arms from the US, fulfilling Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 dream of maintaining bases for oil transportation.

"We believe that the US is the major player against Syria and the rest are its instruments." But wasn't this all really about Iran? I asked, a dodgy question since it suggested a secondary role for Syria in its own tragedy. And when Muallem referred to the Brookings Institution, I groaned.

"You are laughing, but sometimes when you are Foreign Minister, you are obliged to read these things - and there was a study by the Brookings Institute [sic] called The Road to Tehran, and the result of this study was: if you want to contain Iran, you must start with Damascus…

"We were told by some Western envoy at the beginning of this crisis that relations between Syria and Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, Syria and Hamas are the major elements behind this crisis. If we settle this issue, they [the Americans] will help end the crisis. But no one told us why it is forbidden for Syria to have relations with Iran when most if not all the Gulf countries have very important relations with Iran."

For the Syrian Foreign Minister, the crisis started with "legitimate demands" subsequently addressed by "legislation and reforms and even a new constitution". Then along came "foreign elements" who used these legitimate demands "to hijack the peaceful agenda of the people".

There followed a familiar tale. "I don't accept as a citizen to return back centuries to a regime which can bring Syria backwards. In principle …no government in the world can accept an armed terrorist group, some of them coming from abroad, controlling streets and villages in the name of 'jihad'."

It was the duty of the Syrian government to "protect" its citizens. Assad represents the unity of Syria and all Syrians must participate in creating a new future for Syria. If Syria falls, its neighbour countries will fall. Muallem travels to the non-aligned summit in Iran tomorrow to burnish what he calls their "constructive efforts" to help Syria.

I asked about chemical weapons, of course. If Syria had such weapons, they

would never be used against its own people, he said. “We are fighting armed groups inside Aleppo, in the Damascus suburbs, before that in Homs and Idlib and this means fighting within Syrian cities - and our responsibility is to protect our people.”

And the infamous Shabiha militia blamed for atrocities in the countryside? Walid Muallem doesn’t believe in them. There might be local unarmed people defending their property from armed groups, he says. But pro-regime, paid militiamen? Never. No war crimes charges against the Syrian Foreign Minister, then. But the guns still thunder away outside his windows.

29th August 2012

INSIDE DARAYA: HOW A FAILED PRISONER SWAP TURNED INTO A MASSACRE

By Robert Fisk

THE MASSACRE town of Daraya is a place of ghosts and questions. It echoed with the roar of mortar explosions and the crackle of gunfire yesterday, its few returning citizens talking of death, assault, foreign “terrorists”, and its cemetery of slaughter haunted by snipers.

The men and women to whom we could talk, two of whom had lost loved ones on Daraya’s day of infamy four days ago, told a story different from the version that has been repeated around the world: theirs was a tale of hostage-taking by the Free Syria Army and desperate prisoner-exchange negotiations between the armed opponents of the regime and the Syrian army, before President Bashar al-Assad’s government forces stormed into the town to seize it back from rebel control.

Officially, no word of such talks between the enemies has been mentioned. But senior Syrian officers told The Independent how they had “exhausted all possibilities of reconciliation” with those holding the town, while residents of Daraya said there had been an attempt by both sides to arrange a swap of civilians and off-duty soldiers - apparently kidnapped by rebels because of their family ties to the government army - with prisoners in the army’s custody. When these talks broke down, the army advanced into Daraya, six miles from the centre of Damascus.

Being the first Western eyewitness into the town yesterday was as frustrating as it was dangerous. The bodies of men, women and children had been moved from the cemetery where many of them were found; and when we arrived in the company of Syrian troops at the Sunni Muslim graveyard - divided by the main road through Daraya - snipers opened fire at the soldiers, hitting the back of the ancient armoured vehicle in which we made our escape. Yet we could talk to civilians out of earshot of Syrian officials - in two cases in the security of their own homes - and their narrative of last Saturday’s mass killing of at least 245 men, women and children suggested that the atrocities were far more widespread than supposed.

One woman, who gave her name as Leena, said she was travelling through the town in a car and saw at least 10 male bodies lying on the road near her home. “We carried on driving past, we did not dare to stop, we just saw these bodies in the street,” she said, adding that Syrian troops had not yet entered Daraya.

Another man said that, although he had not seen the dead in the graveyard, he believed that most were related to the government army and included several off-duty conscripts. “One of the dead was a postman - they included him because he was a government worker,” the man said. If these stories are true, then the

armed men - wearing hoods, according to another woman who described how they broke into her home and how she kissed them in a fearful attempt to prevent them shooting her own family - were armed insurgents rather than Syrian troops.

The home of Amer Sheikh Rajab, a forklift truck driver, had been taken over, he said, by gunmen as a base for “Free Army” forces, the phrase the civilians used for the rebels. They had smashed the family crockery and burned carpets and beds - the family showed this destruction to us - but had also torn out the internal computer chip parts of laptops and television sets in the house. To use as working parts for bombs, perhaps?

On a road on the edge of Daraya, Khaled Yahya Zukari, a lorry driver, had been leaving the town on Saturday in a mini-bus with his 34-year-old wife Musreen and their seven-month-old daughter.

“We were on our way to [the neighbouring suburb of] Senaya when suddenly there was a lot of shooting at us,” he said. “I told my wife to lie on the floor but a bullet came into the bus and passed right through our baby and hit my wife. It was the same bullet. They were both dead. The shooting came from trees, from a green area. Maybe it was the militants hiding behind the soil and trees who thought we were a military bus bringing soldiers.”

Any widespread investigation of a tragedy on this scale and in these circumstances was virtually impossible yesterday. At times, in the company of armed Syrian forces, we had to run along empty streets with anti-government snipers at the intersections; many families had barricaded themselves in their homes.

Even before we set out for Daraya from the large military airbase in Damascus - which contains both Russian-made Hind attack-helicopters and T-72 tanks - a mortar round, possibly fired from Daraya itself, smashed into the runway scarcely 300 metres from us, sending a column of black smoke towering into the sky. Although Syrian troops nonchalantly continued to take their open-air showers, I began to feel some sympathy for the UN ceasefire monitors who departed Syria last week.

Perhaps the saddest account of all yesterday came from 27-year-old Hamdi Khreitem, who sat in his family home with his brother and sister, and told us of how his parents, Selim and Aisha, had set out to buy bread on Saturday. “We had already seen the pictures on the television of the massacre - the Western channels said it was the Syrian army, the state television said it was the “Free Army” - but we were short of food and Mum and Dad drove into the town. Then we got a call from their mobile and it was my Mum who just said: ‘We are dead.’ She was not.

“She was wounded in the chest and arm. My Dad was dead but I don’t know where he was hit or who killed him. We took him from the hospital, covered up

and we buried him yesterday.”

31st August 2012

MINISTER FOR INFORMATION WHO WANTS TO GO STRAIGHT

By Robert Fisk

WHEN SYRIAN gunmen stormed Damascus last month, an angry, middle-aged and bespectacled man appeared on state television with a harsh message for Syria's "enemies".

"They are calling this the last battle," he roared. "Yes, I agree it is the last battle - and they will lose!" Syrian viewers were not used to straight-talking of this kind from the voice of the regime, to be sure, but also the voice of a tough new broom at the top of the government's media operations, Omran Zoubi. The Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, appointed him the information Minister to turn Syrian state television into a credible source of information.

Want to watch Syrian troops fighting their way through the streets of the capital? Turn to state television. To witness the sacrifice of the government army - a badly wounded Syrian soldier lying in a narrow street in Aleppo, two of his comrades trying to staunch his wounds? All you have to do is turn to a young reporter - she wears a blue helmet and a flak-jacket marked "Press" like her Western colleagues - bellowing her live report down a microphone from Aleppo on the non-state (but hardly anti-Assad) Dunia television channel.

The Syrians - and Mr Zoubi, who is a political analyst of a rare if rather intense kind within the Damascus government - have learnt a lot from CNN and Al-Jazeera. "I am one of the believers in freedom and openness," Mr Zoubi tells me in the building which I always cynically referred to as the Temple of Truth. And in the days of Ahmed Iskandar Ahmed and Mohamed Salman - a ferocious information minister who forgave "errant" journalists but died of brain cancer, and a slightly pious man who helped the foreign press if he trusted them, but ended up under house arrest - "truth" was hard to find amid the surfeit of successful five-year plans which the poor old Syrians had to devour.

But in Syria's darkest hour, a little bit of real truth has bubbled to the surface. Two nights ago, Bashar al-Assad gave his most important interview in months - he would fight on, he said, and the battle for Syria was far from over - to the private Dunia station. Car bombs, body parts, screaming victims, are now a daily part of the evening news. When a Dunia journalist, interviewing a badly wounded woman after the Daraya massacre, delayed paramedics who were trying to take her to hospital, Syrian viewers were so outraged that the channel was later forced to edit the interview out of its coverage. Typically, a Western satellite channel later suggested that this censorship raised suspicions about the Syrian version of the mass killings.

"Nothing can be hidden," Mr Zoubi insists. "There is no justification to hide anything. People are used to the real facts now. Now it's all about reflecting on

the screen what happens on the street… People nowadays have a lot of options on their television channels. We want to be one of those options. I am not trying to stop people watching Al Jazeera. But I want them to be able to decide for themselves."

He has a good deal of contempt for Al Jazeera, suggesting at one point that America's fury with the station's failure to tell the truth might be one emotion he shared in common with the US.

"I make an open invitation to the Syrian opposition to appear on the Syrian screen," the minister says. "In the previous era, there was a veto about who could appear on the screen. This veto has been abolished. There have been some 'mentalities' that became very accustomed to the old rules - it took a bit of time to bring them towards more openness and freedom."

The worst thing, Mr Zoubi says, would be for the television to lie. "Thus we don't want a lying media. The difference between us and the foreign media… is that we say the truth, but in an ugly, unsophisticated way - they are so good at marketing their lies."

Well, up to a point, Lord Copper, I said to myself. You won't find Syrian state television investigating torture by "mukhabarat" intelligence men or the amount of "collateral damage" caused by its military firepower, deliberate murder according to the Free Syrian Army, every Western government and hosts of reporters. But only this week, CNN broadcast an "exclusive" report on Syria's opposition in which black-hooded gunmen were referred to as "activists" - a term previously used for unarmed protesters.

On the government "side", there are now seven television channels, one dedicated to news and another to drama, a channel which friends tell me has lost some of its appeal over recent months. With real drama on the news, who wants the theatrical version?

1st September 2012

ANOTHER WEEK IN THE VIOLENT, MURDEROUS AND DIVIDED WORLD OF SYRIA

By Robert Fisk

A WEEK is a long time in violence. It seems only yesterday - five days ago, in fact - that armed men shot Sheikh Abu Haitham al-Bortawi outside the el-Noor mosque in the Rukenadin suburb of Damascus. Went to the scene. Middle class area. Tree shaded, clean street. Ten in the morning. Turns out he was the cleric who knelt right next to Bashar al-Assad for the Eid prayers at the end of Ramadan. A dagger to the heart of the body politick.

I meet an old friend the next day at a café in Mezzeh, and he's crying. His dentist lived in Zabadani, in the hills near the Lebanese border, in Free Syria Army country. His son was warned the family home was unsafe because of incoming fire. From the army? No one's sure. But a shell hit the house and the dentist has just arrived at the French Hospital. Dead, his grieving family still at the morgue.

Then there's the two Christian guys outside town. One runs a DVD store, the other a pharmacy. Murdered. Next day, their funeral cortege is car-bombed. Twelve dead, at least 40 wounded. Turns out they had brothers in the Syrian army, apparently conscripts. Hardly a sin. But the opposition says the two men were "connected to the military".

A Syrian journalist calls me. Six Armenians have been "slaughtered with knives" in their homes. I race to the Armenian church and there is brown-robed Bishop Armesh Nalbandian next to the ancient chapel of Saint Sarkis - he has around 6,500 parishioners in Damascus - and only a few metres from the memorial to the 1915 Armenian genocide. Many of those one and a half million victims of Ottoman Turkish slaughter were put to death in the deserts north of Damascus, now the scene of another Calvary.

But the "six-dead" story is untrue, Armesh says. Good news. But no. Three Damascus Armenians have just been murdered, apparently shot. Thirty-nine-year-old Bedros Matosian died along with his younger brother Kevork and the son of one of them - the bishop isn't sure which - called Levon, who was only 22. Armed men. No identity. But the Matosians had Alawite and Sunni neighbours who were also massacred, because, so the local story goes, they refused to join the Free Syria Army.

The story depends on where you go in this divided capital. Yesterday, I take another prowl, through the Damascus suburbs; Malayha, Harasta, Zamalka, Bab Shawkeh. Thirty government checkpoints, maybe 40, but in Harasta, the Syrian Arab Republic has no sway. There are dozens of painted green, white and black FSA flags on the walls. "The free people of Harasta are denied their liberty," a slogan informs us. "Assad should go." There's a mosque so packed that the

crowds have spilled on to the boiling roadway; a guy in a pick-up tells us it’s safe to head for the motorway. An opposition man. A Syrian soldier in sunglasses waves us back to the autostrade of the Syrian Arab Republic.

We drive through the Assad Suburb, government housing, though some home-owners have rented to people from Zabadani - maybe a little security problem? - and just past the Tishreen military hospital (former student, one Bashar al-Assad), there’s an explosion and a car with headlights zipping the street dust under its shrieking tyres and a pulverised dead dog lying inside a garage.

Up to the Kassioun mountain overlooking Damascus for lunch at Al Montagna - the only guests, save for three tired Syrian officers - and we look across at the Omayad mosque and there’s a roar from the government guns on the other side of the jebel and a rumble of sound relayed mountain-to-mountain on the other side of the city. Fifteen seconds later, there’s a pop far away on the edge of the Palestinian camp at Yarmouk and a smudge of grey smoke. Then another report and another rumble and another pop a bit to the right, four miles away through the heat haze. Palestinians. I close my notebook for the week.

2nd September 2012

SYRIA'S ROAD FROM JIHAD TO PRISON

By Robert Fisk

THEY CAME into the room one by one, heads bowed, wrists crossed in front of them as if they were used to wearing handcuffs. In one of Syria's most feared military prisons, they told their extraordinary story of helping the armed opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime. One was French-Algerian, a small, stooped man in his forties with a long beard; another Turkish, with what looked like a black eye, who spoke of his training at a Taliban camp on the Afghan-Pakistan border. A Syrian prisoner described helping two suicide bombers set off a bloody explosion in central Damascus, while a mufti spoke of his vain efforts to unite the warring factions against the Syrian government.

Given the unprecedented nature of our access to the high-security Syrian prison, our meetings with the four men - their jailers had other inmates for us to interview - were a chilling, sobering experience. Two gave unmistakable hints of brutal treatment after their first arrest. It took 10 minutes to persuade the prison's military governor - a grey-haired, middle-aged general in military fatigues - and his shirt-sleeved intelligence officer to leave the room during our conversations. Incredibly, they abandoned their office so that we could speak alone to their captives. We refused later requests by the Syrian authorities for access to our tapes of the interviews.

Two of the men spoke of their recruitment by Islamist preachers, another of how Arab satellite channels had persuaded him to travel to Syria to make jihad. These were stories that the Syrian authorities obviously wanted us to hear, but the prisoners - who must have given their interrogators the same accounts - were clearly anxious to talk to us, if only to meet Westerners and alert us to their presence after months in captivity. The French-Algerian wolfed down a box of chicken and chips we gave him. One of the Syrians admitted he was kept in constant solitary confinement. We promised all four that we would give their names and details to the International Red Cross.

Mohamed Amin Ali al-Abdullah was a 26-year-old fourth-year medical student from the northern Syrian city of Deir el-Zour. The son of a "simple" farming family in Latakia, he sat in the governor's brown leather chair in a neat striped blue shirt and trousers - given to him, he said, by the authorities - and told us he had encountered "psychological problems" in his second year. He twice broke down in tears while he spoke. He said he had followed medical advice as a student but also accepted psychological help from a "sheikh" who suggested he read specific texts from the Koran.

"This was a kind of entrance to my personality and from time to time the second man gave me disks about the Salafist cause, mostly of speeches by Saudi

sheikhs such as Ibn Baz and Ibn Ottaimin. Later, he gave me videos that rejected all other sects in Islam, attacking the Sufis, attacking the Shia." The "sheikh" was imprisoned for a year but later joined Mohamed as a roommate in Damascus. "Then he used to show me videos of operations by jihadi people against Nato and the Americans in Afghanistan."

When the uprising began in Syria last year, Mohamed said, he was advised by the "sheikh" and two other men to participate in anti-regime demonstrations. "When Friday prayers were over, one of us would stand in the middle, among the crowd, to shout about injustice and the bad situation; the other four would go to the corners and shout 'Allahu Akbar' [God is great] to encourage the crowd to do the same."

Around this time, Mohamed said, he was introduced to a Salafist called "Al-Hajer" who asked him to help in his movement's "medical and logistic support - to hide men wanted by the authorities and to find safe houses". Al-Hajer began frequenting Mohamed's home, "and he offered me a kind of allegiance, where you shake hands with this man and tell him that you acknowledge him as a leader whom you will obey, and will follow jihad and will not question him". Al-Hajer brought strangers to Mohamed's home.

"They took me into their circle. I left my mind 'outside' at this period and then I recognised that this group was al-Qa'ida. On 10 April this year, one of these people asked me to go with him in a car. I went to a place where I saw cylinders 2.5m high, with cases to fill them up with explosives. There were about 10 people there. I don't know why they asked me there - maybe to drag me into involvement. There was a Palestinian and a Jordanian who were to be suicide bombers and three Iraqi citizens. We left in a car in front of the two bombers. I don't know where they were going to bomb, but 15 minutes after I arrived back home, I heard the explosion and two minutes later there was a much stronger explosion. The catastrophe came for me when I watched the television and saw the bomb had gone off in a crowded street in the Bazzaz district; there were houses crushed in the bombings and all the inhabitants [targeted] were middle class and poor people. I was so sorry."

Later, one of the Salafists asked Mohamed to visit his mother in hospital - because he was a doctor and the Salafist would be recognised - but the Syrian Mukhabarat intelligence service was waiting for him. "I said very frankly to them: 'I am happy to be arrested - better than to get involved in such a group or have a role in wasting more blood.' I don't know how I got involved with these people. I put myself in a kind of 'recycle bin'. Now I want to write a book and tell people what happened to me so that they should not do as I did. But I have not been given pencil and paper."

Mohamed saw his father, a schoolteacher, his mother and a sister two months ago. Was he mistreated, we asked him. “Just one day,” he said. “It was not torture.” We asked why there were two dark marks on one of his wrists. “I slipped in the toilet,” he said.

Jamel Amer al-Khodoud, an Algerian whose wife and children live in Marseille and who served in the French army in the 1st Transport Regiment, was a more subdued man, his 48 years and his rather pathetic tale of a search for jihad - encouraged by al-Jazeera’s coverage of Muslim suffering in Syria, he said - leaving him a somewhat disillusioned man. Born in Blida, he had emigrated to France, but though a fluent French speaker, he found only a life of odd jobs and unemployment, until, “after a long hesitation, I decided to go to Turkey and help the Syrian refugees”.

He was, he said, a “moderate Salafist”, but in the Turkish refugee camps had met a Libyan sheikh, many Tunisians and a Yemeni imam “who gave me lessons in jihad”. He crossed the Syrian border with a shotgun, and with other men had attacked military checkpoints and slept rough in abandoned houses and a mosque in the mountains above Latakia. Trained on French weapons, he had never before fired a Kalashnikov - he was allowed to fire three bullets at a stone for target practice, he said - but after several miserable weeks of discovering that a jihad in Syria was not for him, he resolved to walk back to Turkey and return to France. “What I saw on television I didn’t see in Syria.”

Captured by suspicious villagers, he was taken to a city (probably Aleppo) and then by helicopter to Damascus. Why didn’t he choose Palestine rather than Syria for his jihad, we asked. “A Palestinian friend told me his people needed money more than men,” he replied. “Besides, that is a difficult border to cross.” When I asked him if he had been treated badly in captivity, he replied: “Thank God, I am well.” To the same question, he repeated the same answer.

A Syrian imam - of the Khadija al-Khobra mosque in Damascus - with a lean, dark face, told us of his meetings this year with four Syrian “militant groups” in the city which had different nationalist and religious aims, of how he tried to unite them, but discovered that they were thieves, killers and rapists rather than jihadis. Or so Sheikh Ahmed Ghalibo said. Sprinkling the names of these men throughout his conversation, the sheikh said he had been appalled at how the groups had liquidated all who disagreed with them, merely on suspicion, “cutting the bodies up, decapitating them and throwing them in sewage”. He said he had witnessed seven such murders; indeed, the disposal of corpses in sewage has been a common occurrence in Damascus.

Knowing that he was a mufti at the al-Khobra mosque and apparently aware that he had met the four extremist leaders, the Syrian security police arrested

Ahmed Ghalibo on 15 April this year. He told us he had made a full confession because “these militants are not a ‘Free Army’”, insisted he had received “very good treatment” from his interrogators, condemned the Emir of Qatar for stirring revolution in Syria, and said he believed he would be released “because I have repented”.

Cuma Öztürk comes from the south-eastern Turkish city of Gaziantep, and crossed into Syria after months of training, he said, in a Taliban camp on the Afghan-Pakistan border. He could not speak Pashtu - or Arabic - but had left behind his pregnant wife Mayuda and their three-year old daughter in Gaziantep to travel to Damascus. He spoke only vaguely of jihad but said he had been asked to set up a “smuggling” trail from Turkey to the Syrian capital which would also involve moving men across the border. He was arrested when he visited Aleppo for his mother-in-law’s funeral. “I regret all that happened to me,” he said mournfully; he was receiving good treatment “now”. He asked us to let the Turkish authorities know of his presence in the prison.

When our four and a half hours of interviews were over, we appealed to the Syrian prison governor to give his inmates greater access to their families, a request which his tired smile suggested might be outside his remit. We also asked for a pen and paper for Mohamed al-Abdullah and we spoke - however fruitlessly - of the need for international law to be applied to those in the prison. The inmates shook hands with the governor in friendly fashion, although I noticed that little love seemed lost between them and the shirt-sleeved intelligence man. Each prisoner returned to his cell as he had arrived at the governor’s office - with his head bowed and his eyes on the floor.

3rd September 2012

IN MAALOULA, THE PAST HAS RELEVANCE TO SYRIA'S TRAGIC PRESENT

By Robert Fisk

SUNDAY IS a good day to drive to Maaloula. There are fig and olive trees and grapes by the road and, for a time, you can forget that Syria is enduring an epic tragedy. True, you mustn't turn right to Tell, where the Syrian Arab Army are having a spot of bother with the Free Syrian Army and there are 35 military checkpoints on the 100-mile round trip from Damascus; but in the cool mountains east of the Lebanese border, Christians and Muslims live together as they have for 1,300 years. History, however, does not leave them alone.

Enter the wonderful Catholic church of Saint Sarkis and you find paintings of two Roman soldiers, based at the imperial fort of Rasafa north of Palmyra, who converted to Christianity and found themselves in a rather Syrian situation. Sergius and Pixos upset the Great Leader in Rome - the empire had not yet abandoned Jupiter, Venus, Bacchus and the rest - who ordered their execution. So the two legionnaires took sanctuary in Maaloula, preaching Christianity until the long arm of Rome's intelligence service caught up with them, and they were hauled back to Rasafa to be beheaded on the orders of the emperor. I look at the old man who is recounting this story to me and we both nod in unspoken agreement of its current relevance. Sergius and Pixos were defectors.

Over the Roman temple of Maaloula was built the church, and thence came in 1942 the twice wounded General Wladyslaw Anders, who was shepherding his 75,000 emaciated Polish soldiers from Soviet imprisonment through the Holy Land to join the Second World War allies and subsequently the battle for Monte Cassino. Anders gave a beautiful icon of Christ to the church at Maaloula; I found it inside the front porch, his name written at the base, but no hint of his mission. His brave II Polish Corps was condemned by Poland's post-war Communist government as a legion of defectors.

But Maaloula, of course, is known for finer things. Its people, as every tourist knows, still speak Aramaic, the language of Christ - Damascus was part of the Aramaen kingdom - and when I asked a young woman to say the Lord's prayer in her language, it sounded a bit like Hebrew. A suspicious Fisk wonders if this is the reason why, although there is a written language, the people of Maaloula do not learn it. Did Arabic and Hebrew descend from Aramaic? Scholars - I always find that an odd word - are still undecided.

So I chat to old Father Fayez who's serving time as the local priest and he refuses to talk politics, but insists that his people, in their old, blue-painted houses, live side-by-side with their Muslim neighbours; indeed, the 20,000 Christians and Muslims living in three villages all speak Aramaic. But the sunlight and sharply-defined shade in the church courtyard reflect the darkness

that has fallen across the lives of these people. There had been three kidnappings of Christians, the priest says; all had been released after ransom was paid.

Then the owner of a Christian restaurant set off last month to collect some Muslim workers from a neighbouring village, and he'd been abducted on the way. The Free Syria Army brought the kidnapped man back to Maaloula. I drive to Seydnaya where the church is built, Peter-like, on a rock, the basilica of Seyd Naya - the Holy Virgin in Syriac - with a clutch of orphans and an off-duty Syrian army conscript cleaning the floors and bringing water for the children.

And then an angry nun approaches in her black habit, flapping like a blackbird, frameless spectacles pinned to the outside of her head covering. "You journalists want to harm this country," she chirps. "Before the war, we lived in peace. We had holidays, vacations, women and children could walk in the street at midnight." She stalked off, only to return - as I knew she would - for a second assault. She had a story to tell, for the Holy Spirit - while it may drift through the narrow cold stone corridors of Seyd Naya - cannot prevent violence from touching the church. "A boy wanted to come here to pray for his marriage because he was marrying a local girl," the nun said. "But then we heard today that his father has been killed in the massacre at Deraya…"

So I consulted Sister Stephanie Haddad who said that Seyd Naya was peaceful - she passed over the shells which hit the monastery seven months ago, supposedly fired by the Free Syria Army - and was now sheltering refugees from Homs and Hama and Tell and from Deraya itself. So I asked the obvious question. What would Jesus say if he turned up in Syria today? "If he came now, he would tell the people: don't kill, burn, shoot, kidnap or steal. All these things are mentioned in the Bible."

There are 20,000 souls in Seyd Naya, Sunni Muslims, Greek Orthodox and Catholics, 13 churches and two mosques, "at least" two Christian women married to Muslims - make of this what you will.

On the edge of town, I come across a group of civilians at a sandbagged checkpoint. Government-approved, of course. They smiled. And they were armed.

5th September 2012

‘NOW WE KNOW WE WILL GET NO HELP FROM THE WEST’

By Kim Sengupta

AHMED AL-SA'EED had been queuing for bread when the air strikes and shelling began. The dozens of people who had been waiting patiently in line for more than two hours dispersed, frantically running home through streets being hit by rocket fire to make sure their families were alright.

The house where Ahmed lived in the Syrian town of al-Bab with his family received direct hits from Bashar al-Assad's warplanes on Monday, the latest in a series of punitive and lethal assaults from air and ground. The front half collapsed into the street, flames shot out from the back. He joined neighbours frantically digging with anything at hand through the dust to try and find those buried under the rubble.

It was a futile attempt to save lives: the bodies of Adel and Amal, brothers of Ahmed and Marwa, a sister, were found three hours later along with that of a friend who had come to visit. Another house, three doors along, was also badly damaged, killing two others. Around the corner another building had collapsed leaving three more dead, including a boy aged three and a six-year-old girl.

Thirty six people were thought to have died, although the figure was later reduced to 32. I knew eight of those who were killed, including Ahmed's family, having met them during my stay in the town last month.

Of these eight, only one, Yahya Mohammed Nassar, was a rebel fighter. Another, Ibrahim al-Hamdo, an activist, had taken part in protests but had never held a gun.

There were no obvious military targets in any of the areas bombarded at the start of this week. Al-Bab is paying a hard price for its defiance; fighters from there formed the largest contingent to take part in the defence of Aleppo and the residents had withstood regular attacks from a military base on the outskirts before chasing out the soldiers.

Around 250 people have been killed since the start of the uprising and quarter of its population of 200,000 are refugees, either in outlying villages or across the border in Turkey.

Ahmed, a 36-year-old office worker, has to now look after the children of his sibling as well as his own and his elderly parents. They would be safer, he felt, outside the town. "It will be my responsibility if anything happened to them, so it is better if they go away for the time being," he said.

"We are all very sad about what has happened: my father and mother are in a state of shock. We did not think this would happen, not after the army camp went. We felt we were safe. Do you remember how happy everyone was?"

Last month the regime troops fled in the early hours of the morning after days

of attacks by the rebels. A few were captured; most fled towards Aleppo. That morning the celebrating residents streamed into the encampment, a former agricultural college, chanting slogans of the revolution. Two tanks which had been “liberated” were driven through the town, careering across the roads.

In the afternoon, I accompanied opposition activists who had gone into the camp to bring out dead and injured soldiers abandoned by regime forces when they left. A jet, a Czech-made L-39 Albatross, repeatedly strafed the base and later fired into a residential neighbourhood. An 11-year-old boy, Abed al-Rahman, lost a leg in a missile strike. It was one of the first indications that the regime was preparing to use air strikes with impunity in civilian areas.

The following weeks saw a slight respite in attacks with the regime trying to cope with rebel assaults in Aleppo. Now, with an impasse in the fighting in the city, outlying areas are once again getting hammered, with al-Bab getting special attention.

On the day that al-Bab was getting bombed and the regime carried out other attacks across the country, the French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, threatened a “massive and lightning-fast” response from the West if the Assad regime used chemical weapons. Similar noises have been made Barack Obama and David Cameron.

To the people of al-Bab such posturing just draws hollow laughter. Omar Abdullah al-Hani, whose 73-year-old father Abdullah was injured in the attack, said: “So they will let Bashar kill children, old people, as long as he does not use chemical weapons. What are they afraid of, chemical gasses getting to Europe and America? We know we are not going to get any help from West; we are alone, we don’t need their empty words.”

10th September 2012

‘NO SYRIAN LIKES VIOLENCE... BUT PEOPLE KNOW THERE IS NO GOING BACK. IF THEY RETURN HOME, THEY WILL DIE ONE BY ONE’

By Robert Fisk

THE SYRIAN general opened an envelope and emptied its contents on his desk. Out spilled his army's messages to the people of Damascus and Hama and Aleppo and Homs and Deraa. "We have a special department with analysts who write these," he told us. "We give every chance to the people."

And so the generals do, if you trust these flyers, rectangular sheets of paper - some illustrated with smiling children, others with grim-faced gunmen - dropped by helicopter over the streets of Syria. The general smiled at us. "Do you see how much trouble we take?"

I had heard of these little strips of paper - how they cascaded down on the Palestinian Yarmouk camp in Damascus and on Homs and Aleppo - but I had never seen them. Each was signed "the administration of the security forces".

They ranged from the banal - "Brother citizen, help us get rid of the criminal gangs by co-operating with the security forces" - to the sophisticated. This, for example, is the Syrian army's message to all armed men: "The security forces have the will to restore stability to all regions of our precious homeland and will not permit the wasting of innocent citizens' blood. Drop your weapons and remember the government is as merciful as a mother is to her children."

If this evocation of maternal care does not appeal to President Bashar al-Assad's opponents, Islam might. "Religion is love - religion is tolerance. Religion does not call for killing…"

And if you are approaching Syrian troops, here's a little note you might like to have to hand, a "safe passage" paper that can save your life. "When approaching a checkpoint, make sure you are not holding any kind of weapon. While doing so, approach slowly and make sure your chest is not obscured by anything suspicious. Hold this bulletin in one hand while putting the other on top of your head." "Anything suspicious" is clearly a reference to a bomb strapped to the chest. Yet other papers suggest that armed opponents of the regime "take advantage of the special treatment granted to you by the authorities".

The problem is that the violence of the present was planted long ago, and there are many in Syria who remember with great bitterness just what kind of "special treatment" has been granted to their relatives over the past years. The day after meeting the general, I sat down to tea with a middle-aged Syrian who wanted to tell me why he hated the regime. He was a mildly-spoken person who met me in a Damascus café, his voice almost drowned out by the screech of birds from an aviary attached to the wall.

"My brother was part of the [Muslim Brotherhood] revolution of 1980 and even my family didn't know this," he said. "Then one day the Mukhabarat

intelligence men came to arrest him. Nobody knows where they took him - not even till now, 32 years later. Official documents said my brother was alive, but in 1996 we got some news from ex-prisoners who said they had seen my brother, and that he had been hanged or shot in Palmyra prison. For me, the revolution started a long time ago, when my brother was arrested. Now my revolution is getting bigger."

This man's revolution, he told me, would be non-violent. "There is nobody in Syria who likes violence. If you have a balloon and keep putting air in it, it will explode. When the people started to protest last year, the government used force to stop them - and drip, drip, drip - there was an explosion."

The people, this man said, "got outside of silence" and "started to use a little bit of violence against the government". Now these people would never return to their homes, he said, "because if they go home, they will die at home, one by one. That's why they know this is the end. They have taken the decision never to return."

But would he accept a democratic parliament with real elections even if Bashar stayed, I asked? "We have known this government for 40 years. You cannot trust them to give you the correct temperature. Democracy and violence don't meet together. My reply to you is this: No. No. No. No. No. No. No." Even the army leaflets don't repeat themselves this much. But his words were as adamant as any leaflet.

27th September 2012

SYRIAN REBELS STRIKE AT HEART OF REGIME WITH TWIN BOMB ATTACK

By Kim Sengupta

TWO MASSIVE suicide bombs were detonated in Damascus yesterday with a military command centre as a target in another example of the increasing reach of the revolution into the heart of the regime.

The explosive devices, packed into cars, killed four people and injured 14 others according to official reports.

The Free Syrian Army, an umbrella group of rebel fighters claiming responsibility for the attack, maintained that “dozens of the enemy” had died in “a well-planned operation”.

The blast set the building housing the General Staff Command on fire. The main gate of the complex was charred by the flames and debris of glass and masonry filled a deep crater gouged out on the road outside. Speaking to state television, President Bashar al-Assad’s Information Minister, Omran Zoabi, said: “All our colleagues in the military leadership, the army staff command and the Defence Ministry are unhurt. It’s a terrorist act, close to an important site, but as usual they failed to achieve their goal.”

The attack took place, however, in Central Omayyad Square, one of the most secure areas of the Syrian capital since a bombing on 18 July which killed members of Assad’s inner circle, including his brother-in-law, the Defence Minister and a senior commander.

Targeted assassinations, which have become a strategy of the brutal civil war, also continued. A Swiss-born correspondent of Iran’s English-language channel, Press TV, Maya Naser, was shot dead by a rebel sniper and its Damascus bureau chief, Hussein Murtada, wounded while they covered the aftermath of the explosion.

Press TV said “foreign-based insurgents” were responsible. Meanwhile, the opposition Local Coordination Committees in Syria reported that 335 people were killed across the country yesterday, making it one of the conflict’s bloodiest days. Human rights activists from the UK-based Observatory for Human Rights claimed at least 16 people, including three children and six women, were executed by the Shabiha, the militia of the Alawite community from which the ruling elite is drawn. Residents reported continuing gunfire for two hours after the attack at the defence headquarters and the second one on the perimeter of the complex, seemingly aimed at emergency teams being sent in. Samir al-Shami, an activist, said that after the second blast “the fighters went inside and clashed with security inside, while some of the men started to torch the building”. A reporter for al-Manar television, run by the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah, allies of Assad, said he was in the building after the explosion and saw the bodies of three

armed men, indicating that there were clashes between security forces and rebels at the site.

One nearby resident, Mohammed el-Klaib, said daily life was coming to a standstill. “Until recently the really dangerous fighting has been elsewhere. But now it is here, there are so many checkpoints that it is difficult to move around, to send our children to school. The bombs are getting closer.”

Abu Osman, an officer with the rebel Farooq Brigade based in Homs, told The Independent: “They [the regime] are using tanks, artillery and jets. We are having to fight with what little we have, but what happened in Damascus proves that our mujahideen can get inside the areas from where they are planning operations against the civilians.”

Yesterday’s bombing came midway through the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, where Syria has been top of the agenda. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, called for Arab nations to intervene militarily to end an 18-month-old conflict. President Obama demanded an end to the Assad regime and the suffering of the Syrian people, but offered no plan for achieving that. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, warned the conflict had become a “regional calamity with global ramifications”.

1st October 2012

SYRIAN REBELS' BACKERS BLOCK ARMS CACHE UNTIL BICKERING FACTIONS UNITE

By Kim Sengupta

STOCKPILES OF arms, including anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, are being held in Turkey for use by rebels in Syria's civil war, but their distribution is being held up because of disunity and feuding between the different groups of fighters, The Independent has learned.

In high-level discussions, Qatari and Turkish suppliers told opposition representatives that heavy weapons would not be made available until the various factions agreed to form a coherent command structure.

After 18 months of fighting and an estimated 30,000 people dead, rebel fighters are convinced that the time for a negotiated end to the conflict is over. But they have been forced back from many areas by tanks, artillery and air strikes. The regime, meanwhile, has not faced any significant shortage of supplies, with US officials claiming that daily flights bearing arms are coming in from President Bashar al-Assad's ally, Iran.

One attempt to set up an arms supply chain took place in the Turkish capital, Ankara, in early August. Opposition representatives were seeking weapons for Aleppo where the regime forces were beginning to push forward and recapture areas held by the rebels. According to those present, the Turks were acting as facilitators while the Qataris controlled the flow of material. Both the Qataris and Turks are said to have stressed to the opposition emissaries that the revolutionaries in the main cities, starting with Aleppo, needed to form structured military councils and come up with co-ordinated operational plans.

"Instead of getting operational plans and what would be required to implement them, we were getting shopping lists from individual khatibas (battalions)," said a Turkish organiser of supplies of arms and communications equipment. "If you give to one khatiba, others get annoyed and ask why they are being left out."

It has been claimed during the Syrian uprising that a number of Gulf states, especially the Qataris and Saudis, have been funnelling arms and money to hard-line Islamist groups, favouring them over more moderate factions. The moderate militias have been increasingly alarmed at the emergence of extremist groups, many with large numbers of foreign fighters in their ranks. Their arrival had coincided with more attacks against minorities. There has been a marked rise in churches being targeted and Christian refugees fleeing across the border.

But the Qataris are said to have maintained that one reason for the request to form military councils was to ensure a more equitable distribution of weapons. They also stressed that heavier-calibre weapons needed to be returned when hostilities ended.

“They were very clear that we needed to get organised and present a proper plan,” said one opposition leader present at the talks, who gave the nom-de-guerre, Abu Mohsin.

“The Qataris were concerned because they had not been able to get back a lot they gave to the Libyan [rebels] and they did not want the same situation to happen in Syria.

“The Qataris said that the Americans were very worried about this happening again.”

The rebels have not, as yet, put in place the organisation demanded by the Qataris and Turks.

“We have tried to form the military councils as they wanted, but there are some difficulties. There are too many people who have made themselves commanders and they don’t want to give up power” said Abu Mohsin.

One reason for the failure to form a unified command in Aleppo was the refusal of two militia commanders - Haji Mari and Abu Juma - to give up their autonomy. The two men and their followers discouraged other rebel brigades from joining in their armed uprisings until an offensive by the regime made the need for reinforcements imperative.

Co-operation between the brigades was limited in Aleppo, even during the fiercest fighting. One particularly unco-operative faction was the Islamist Jubhat al-Nusra brigade which is linked to al-Qa’ida. A senior Al-Nusra operative, Abu Mohammed al-Shami al-Absi, disappeared earlier this month. His body was found at Samada near the Turkish border a few days later, with fellow rebels believed to be responsible for his execution.

Mr Al-Absi’s group has accused the Al-Farouq brigade of Homs of carrying out the killing. The group, which has publicly stated its opposition to al-Qa’ida’s involvement in the revolution, denies responsibility. But one of its officers, Amar Mohammed Abaddullah, stressed: “We are fighting for Syria to be a free country, a democracy where all our people, Muslims and Christians, have a part to play. Obviously we cannot work with those who want to impose their own [version of an] Islamist state and act against those who disagree with them.”

5th October 2012

‘THE FINAL STRAW’: TURKEY AUTHORISES ATTACK ON SYRIA

By Kim Sengupta and Justin Vela

TURKEY’S PARLIAMENT yesterday authorised the country’s military to carry out cross-border operations after clashes drew Syria’s neighbour deeper into its 18-month civil war.

Nato and the UN Security Council also held emergency meetings after a Syrian mortar strike on Wednesday killed five members of a family in the Turkish town of Akcakale, provoking retaliation from Ankara. The Turkish armed forces have been shelling Syrian positions since late on Wednesday, killing several soldiers.

Turkish officials have warned that further retaliation may take place and have been moving reinforcements and ammunition supplies up to frontier bases. “This last incident is pretty much the final straw,” said Bulent Arinc, Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister. “There has been an attack on our land and our citizens lost their lives, which surely has adequate response in international law.”

A Syrian apology did come later in the day, following pressure from Russia. Besir Atalay, a Turkish minister, announced: “Syria accepts that it did it and apologises. They said nothing like this will happen again. That’s good. The UN mediated and spoke to Syria.”

Although the apology will go some way towards defusing tensions, the Turkish government stressed there will be no immediate change to its military posture. Speaking at a press conference in Akcakale yesterday, the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said he has no intention of starting a war.

“We want peace and security and nothing else. We could never be interested in something like starting a war,” he said.

But he added: “The Turkish Republic is a state capable of defending its citizens and borders. Nobody should try and test our determination on this subject.”

In Damascus, the Information Minister, Omran Zoabi, insisted that Syria respected the sovereignty of other states and said an investigation was underway. But he appeared to hold Turkey at least partly responsible, due to its support for the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad.

“The Syrian-Turkish border is a long one and is being used for smuggling weapons and terrorists,” said Mr Zoabi. “Neighbouring countries should act wisely and rationally and responsibly, especially in cases of the presence of

armed terrorist groups who have their different agendas that are not targeting the Syrian national security but the regional security."

Akcakale was hit by four shells on Wednesday. One of the shells hit a grain mill. The others landed on a residential street just a few hundred feet from the border. Three of those who died in the blast were children who had come to the gate of their house after the first two blasts, eyewitnesses said. Two women were also killed.

Residents in Akcakale said they had been increasingly concerned that such an incident was looming. "For the last 10 days our houses have been shaking from the shelling," said Abdul Halil, 70, a farmer. Mr Halil said that many in the town were leaving. He estimated that 70 per cent of the residents had already moved away. "We do not want war, but if they attack again we want the government to attack back," he said.

There had earlier been unusual public rebuke from Russia - which has so far been a staunch supporter of Syria - with the "advice" that it needed to acknowledge that the deaths were a "tragic accident" and ensure they were not repeated. "We think it is of fundamental importance for Damascus to state that officially," said Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov.

After meeting to discuss the border clashes yesterday evening, the UN Security Council condemned "in the strongest terms" Syria's shelling.

"This incident highlighted the grave impact the crisis in Syria has on the security of its neighbours and on regional peace and stability," a statement said. The statement came after the council managed to bridge differences between the US and its Western allies who were demanding a strong text and Syria's most important ally, Russia, which tried to weaken the text.

Nato ambassadors also met yesterday and issued a statement saying the alliance "continues to stand by" Turkey, and demanding "the immediate cessation of such aggressive acts against an ally".

Turkey could theoretically invoke Article 5, under which an armed attack on any Nato member is considered an attack on all. However, Article 5 does not automatically result in collective military action.

The British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said Turkey's actions were "understandable, an outrageous act has taken place, Turkish citizens have been killed inside Turkey by forces from another country". The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton said she too was "outraged" by the mortar attack.

8th October 2012

PLUCKY LITTLE TURKEY STANDING UP TO EVIL SYRIA? IT'S NOT AS SIMPLE AS THAT

By Robert Fisk

HOW THE government howled. With the help of a neighbouring state, "terrorists" were trying to destroy the government and its army, blowing up and murdering its supporters. "Terrorists" were crossing the international border, arms were being shipped over the frontier and given to rebels fighting the government, "non-lethal" aid was being sent to the opposition. I couldn't help remembering this when I crossed that same border four days ago. Not from Turkey into Syria, but from the Irish Republic into Northern Ireland.

There, to the left of the Newry road on a plateau of rock and green grass, lay the broken wire-mesh anti-mortar screen which once guarded the fortress where British troops - so often attacked by the IRA from Dundalk in the Republic - guarded the border. When the British-supported government of Northern Ireland turned on its Catholics in 1969, thousands of Catholic refugees flooded across the border into the Republic. Sound familiar? When British paratroopers were ambushed at Warrenpoint, soldiers fired back across the border at a "terrorist". He wasn't a terrorist, but an innocent holidaymaker. The IRA gave press conferences in pleasant Dublin suburbs and, oh my, the British government howled.

Odd how these things get forgotten. Now it is plucky little Turkey, hosting the opposition to the Syrian regime, funnelling weapons and armed men across the border into Syria - encouraging the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad - which is the victim. The IRA's' "terrorism" against the occupying Brits has been transmogrified into the valiant Syrian resistance against a vile Alawite-led regime whose Baathist acolytes must be crushed in order to bring democracy to Damascus, etc, etc.

Now the usual caveat - which will be forgotten by those who wish to accuse the writer of being a member of the Syrian intelligence service: Bashar al-Assad is a despot, his regime is awful, its policemen torture on a scale that would stun the RUC thugs who beat up their Catholic prisoners in Castlereagh, and Syrian militias fill mass graves; there were no mass graves in Northern Ireland.

BUT. When it comes to international law, to moral compromise, to sheer hypocrisy, the Western powers take the biscuit. La Clinton raves on about Syrian depravity when Syrian shells slaughter a Turkish woman and her four children - which they did - but gives succour to the gunmen who torture and kill and

suicide-bomb the regime's supporters inside Syria. Clinton's predecessors at the State Department took a quite different view about Northern Ireland. William Hague rabbits on about our "non-lethal" aid to Syrian rebels; but didn't the Irish authorities give "non-lethal aid" (bandages, funds, intelligence information) to our political and military enemies in Northern Ireland?

Typically, Al-Jazeera - to which I sometimes contribute my two-pence worth of thought - was the first channel to cover the response of local Turks to the killing of the family in Akçakale: they blamed their own Turkish government for using the village as a jumping off point for rebels entering Syria - and thus turning their town into a target.

And another story that isn't being told. Syrian shells exploding in Turkey are largely landing in the province of Hatay (Akçakale is further east), but what is not being reported is that until 1939, Hatay was part of Syria - and that Syria still claims this coastal province as Syrian territory. The real story - since it involves Europe and Hitler - should be told. For hundreds of years, this territory was Syrian. Alexandretta (now Iskenderun) was the finest port in Syria. But as the power of Nazi Germany grew in the 1930s, the French, who then held the League of Nations mandate for Syria, decided to hand the whole place over to the Turks - in the hope that Turkey would join the Allied side against Hitler.

A fraudulent referendum was held and the mass of Arabs in the province - tens of thousands of them Alawites, who form the backbone of Assad's regime today - fled south, along with an almost equal number of Armenians who had survived the 1915 Turkish genocide. Today, the children and grandchildren of those Armenians tacitly support the Assad regime. Turkey, of course, chose to stay neutral until the very end of the Second World War. Visiting Turkish generals were thus hosted on the Eastern Front by the Nazi Wehrmacht and toured the West Wall before the D-Day invasion as guests of Marshal Erwin Rommel. They were treated with trust and respect, they reported back to Ankara.

Don't expect to hear any of this today. Hatay is Turkish, Hitler is dead. The Newry fortress is long abandoned. The IRA - up to a point - won. Funny thing, history. Here today. Gone tomorrow.

12th October 2012

GROUNDED IN ANKARA

By Kim Sengupta

TURKEY'S PRIME Minister insisted yesterday that a Syrian passenger plane forced to land at Ankara airport was carrying Russian-made munitions, putting him squarely at odds with Moscow which has angrily condemned Turkey's actions.

Russia demanded to know why embassy staff were prevented from talking to Russian passengers on board the Airbus A320. The plane was forced to land in Ankara by Turkish fighter jets on Wednesday night while en route from Moscow to Damascus, heightening international tensions over the bloody civil war to oust President Bashar al-Assad.

"This was munitions from the Russian equivalent of our Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation being sent to the Syrian Defence Ministry," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, referring to a state-run Turkish manufacturer that supplies the country's army.

The items, according to differing accounts, were parts for a missile and communications equipment. Officials in Moscow, however, have refuted Turkish claims that any military equipment was found on board the plane, which was allowed to continue to Damascus after its cargo was confiscated. "Neither weapons nor any systems or assembly parts for military equipment were or could have been on board the passenger plane," a senior official in Moscow said. "If it had been necessary to ship any military hardware or weapons to Syria, this would have been done through the established procedure rather than in an illegal way."

The Kremlin has criticised Turkey's conduct, with foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich saying: "We are concerned that this emergency situation had put at risk the lives and safety of passengers, who included 17 Russian citizens." Ankara's actions were, said the spokesman, "quite serious because without total certainty that there is something there, you are taking a great risk by ordering it to land".

He also warned of long-term damage to relations between the two countries. "Until recently, there was the impression that the serious differences over Syria would not influence Russian-Turkish ties. Now the situation has changed. This is linked to the fact that Turkey has become too deeply involved in Syrian domestic affairs," he said.

Turkey, while insisting that its actions were justified, warned that there may

be retaliation. At the same time there remains the threat of increased artillery strikes in response to shelling across the border by Assad's forces.

The Syrian regime attacked "piracy" by the Turks over the interception of the airliner. "This hostile and deplorable Turkish act is an additional indication of the hostile policy of Erdogan's government, considering that it trains and harbours terrorists and helps them infiltrate into and bombard Syrian territory," the foreign ministry in Damascus said.

Iraqi officials have also criticised Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict. Speaking during a visit to Moscow prior to the incident on Wednesday, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, said: "Turkey is being presumptuous, you could say, as if it were taking responsibility for solving the Syrian conflict instead of the Syrian people, and wants to impose its own solution. For this reason the international community needs to stop Turkey from intervening."

Mr Maliki, whose government has been accused by the US of allowing the transit of Iranian arms to the Syrian regime, also stressed that the Erdogan government should not try to get Nato involved in the situation, saying this would make the problem worse.

Nato has held an emergency meeting at the request of Turkey, a member state. Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said before a meeting of defence ministers in Brussels: "We have all necessary plans in place to protect and defend Turkey if necessary."

Western intervention in the Syrian conflict continues to be unlikely, but the violence has spread to neighbouring countries other than Turkey; there have been clashes in Lebanon; crossing points changing hands on the Iraqi frontier; cross border firing in Jordan; and shells coming into Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

In addition, hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, putting immense pressure on resources.

Violence continued inside Syria yesterday with clashes in Aleppo, suburbs of Damascus and Homs. The first female officer from the Alawite community, from which the ruling elite is drawn, defected yesterday. In a video posted on YouTube, Colonel Zubaidah al-Miqi said: "I declare my defection from the ranks of Assad's treacherous brigades ranks, being the first female defected officer from the Alawite sect, I'd like to direct this message.

"My people, my sect: the ongoing conflict in Syria now is a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed and that means the conflict was never between religious sects and minorities but the regime is turning it to a sectarian conflict to contain the revolution and destroy it."

26th October 2012

A CEASEFIRE FOR EID - BUT THE BATTLE FOR ALEPPO GOES ON

By Kim Sengupta

BOTH SIDES in the Syrian civil war declared yesterday that they will observe a four-day ceasefire as Eid al-Adha is celebrated.

The deal came at the end of a day of fierce fighting in Aleppo, where the rebels appeared to have made significant gains. Opposition commanders say they will use the cessation of hostilities to consolidate their hold on parts of Salaheddine, which saw bitter fighting in the past, and the Kurdish district of Ashrafieh.

Regime forces are expected to spend the time replenishing their supply lines, which have become increasingly frayed in the past few weeks.

Aleppo's airport, long a rebel target for capture, remains in regime hands. But the Kurdish PKK is said to have agreed to the demand of the revolutionaries not to contest Ashrafieh withdrawing its fighters from the fray. Mohammed Abu-Qassim, co-ordinating operations between various rebel battalions, said: "We shall be careful about not to spread too thin. We are all around the airport and, in time, that will fall."

Abdelbaset Sieda, head of the main opposition group in exile, the Syrian National Council, said he had little faith the regime would hold its fire, and that rebels would respond accordingly.

27th October 2012

HOW REBELS WERE SOLD EXPLODING RIFLES - BY A BRITON NAMED ‘EMILE’

By Kim Sengupta

TO THE Syrian rebels, the offer was enticing: Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles and ammunition at below-market price, with supplies plentiful. The dealers were convincing: two of them had European passports, one a British passport, and they claimed to have been involved in supplying arms during the Bosnia war.

Three meetings took place in Istanbul between representatives of the rebels and the dealers, including the Briton, calling himself Emile, to organise shipments. An initial payment of around $40,000 was made.

The delivery was on time, as had been a previous shipment. But it soon became apparent that something was wrong.

Rifles exploded during a firefight. There was a second such “accident”, and a third, leading to injuries. An examination of the remaining consignments revealed that propellants inside some of the cartridges had been replaced with ground explosives with three or four times design-pressure, with the aim of bursting them in the breach.

With Syria’s civil war getting increasingly vicious and dirty, the opposition has come across “abandoned” government arms that were proved to have been doctored.

But the presence of the arms traffickers, including the Briton, has led to claims that the Syrian regime is using foreign agents to undermine the opposition.

Abdurrahman Abu-Nasr, a rebel representative who attended one of the meetings with the dealers in Istanbul three weeks ago, recalled “Emile” as a man in his late 40s who was of Arab - part-Syrian - origin. “He spoke fluent English, he told us that he had lived in England. Another man had a Belgian passport, but I think his family were from somewhere like Morocco. They were giving good prices, only around $ 2.50 per round [The average price had gone up to $5 at times].

“The man with the British passport told us he had supplied the Mujahedin in Bosnia, he knew a lot about defence equipment. My friend and I asked whether they were acting on behalf of their governments. They did not admit they were, but did not deny it totally either. It was clever, it left us wondering.”

There is no evidence to suggest that the man calling himself “Emile” has any connection with the British intelligence agencies.

The UK government is supplying “non-lethal” aid to the Syrian opposition, including satellite communications equipment, and thus, say security sources, it would not have been possible for regime agents to have infiltrated such a chain.

Speaking about arms supplies, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said

recently: “I don’t rule out any option in the future because we don’t know how the situation will develop.” He denied that supplies are being “outsourced” through Qatar or Saudi Arabia.

The rebels who met “Emile” and his colleagues are investigating the role of a conduit who had acted as a referee.

Sabotaging ammunition is not new to counter-insurgency warfare. The British engineered the supply of doctored bullets in the Second Matabele War in the 1890s and the Waziristan campaign in the 1930s. The Americans used the tactic in Vietnam, and both they and the Russians have carried out such operations in Afghanistan.

2nd November 2012

‘WE LEFT HOMS BECAUSE THEY WERE TRYING TO KILL US. THEY WANTED TO KILL US BECAUSE WE ARE CHRISTIANS’

By Kim Sengupta

THE RED Mitsubishi Lancer GT with “go faster” stripes was a source of great pride to Hamlig Bedrosian. It was the only one of its kind in the city, pointed out on the streets as he roared along, an object of admiration and envy among his friends in Aleppo.

The car may have been the reason why the 23-year-old student was ambushed and taken hostage, along with a female friend, as they were travelling to a shopping complex. The revolutionary fighters with Kalashnikovs who led them away subjected Mr Bedrosian - blindfolded and tied up - to savage beatings and threats of execution before the pair was finally freed in exchange for a ransom.

Or there may have been a different reason for the attack: they were targeted by the Sunni Muslim rebels because they were Christians. Mr Bedrosian did not wait long to find out, leaving - along with his brother - for Lebanon. Others from the Syrian Armenian community followed, abandoning their homes.

The Haddad family had no doubts about why they had to escape from Homs. “We left because they were trying to kill us,” said 18-year-old Noura Haddad. She is now staying with relations in the town of Zahle in the Bekaa Valley. “They wanted to kill us because we were Christians. They were calling us Kaffirs, even little children saying these things. Those who were our neighbours turned against us.

“At the end, when we ran away, we went through balconies. We did not even dare go out on the street in front of our house. I’ve kept in touch with the few Christian friends left back home, but I cannot speak to my Muslim friends any more. I feel very sorry about that.”

Mr Bedrosian and Ms Haddad are among thousands who have left Syria as the 20 month-long civil war gets increasingly vicious and increasingly sectarian. The prospect of reconciliation between the Alawites, from which the ruling elite are drawn, and the overwhelmingly Sunni opposition, gets more remote by the day after each round of strife. But now it is the Christians, who have largely sought to remain neutral, who are on the receiving end of abuse and attacks. For many, the choice now is between leaving the country or risking an uncertain and hazardous future.

Some in the Church are adamant about who is to blame - not just those carrying out the persecution, but those who are encouraging it to happen. For Archbishop Issam John Darwish of Furrzol, Zahle and the Bekaa, the responsibility for the attacks lay with “an influx of jihadists in the rebels in the last six, seven months”. There is for him, as in so many such situations in the Middle East, the spectre of a “hidden hand”. “I think the situation is being

manipulated by the USA and maybe Israel - they want this to happen," he insisted.

The Archbishop and others like him feel there is a lack of understanding in Europe about what Christians in the area are going through. Speaking at his diocese, he continued: "I have raised this with officials in the West, they must bring peace. The jihadis will not stop here, the war will spread to Europe. What will England be like in ten or 15 years?"

Fear continues to grow. The recent bombing in Beirut was probably the work of the Syrian regime aiming to kill Brigadier General Wissam al-Hassan, the head of Lebanon's domestic intelligence. A blast in Damascus the following day killing 13 people was targeted at a police station. But both took place in Christian areas of the respective cities and this has added to the trepidation in the community in both Syria and Lebanon, as has the recent inroads made into Christian parts of Aleppo by rebel fighters.

There are now busy campaigns to publicise the plight of the Christians, with a nun from the Homs area being one of its most prominent faces. Mother Agnes-Mariam de la Croix's Greek-Melkite monastery of St James the Mutilated was blown up a few months ago. The culprits, she says, are Islamists, who tried to blame the regime for the destruction.

Mother Agnes-Mariam, who is of Palestinian and Lebanese descent, is on an international tour and is due to visit Britain. She believes that opposition fighters have driven out 80,000 Christians from the Homs region alone and that she escaped after being warned that she was the target of abduction. "Aggressive, armed gangs that wished to paralyse community life, abducting people, beheading, bringing terror even to schools," she said, maintaining that many of them are affiliated to "al-Qa'ida and with Muslim Brotherhood backgrounds".

Only one in 20 are Syrians, the rest come from a wide array of states, from Britain to Pakistan, Chechnya to North Africa, she says. Many are veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and now "their cause is being recycled to kill Syrians".

Mother Agnes-Mariam has witnessed the plight of the Syrians first hand, but some of her assertions are open to dispute. In five trips into Syria with rebels, I did not once find large numbers of foreign fighters, although the numbers of domestic jihadist groups had undoubtedly grown and is a source of concern among the more secular revolutionaries. Some groups have banned the chant "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to their graves", which started early in the uprising.

Mother Agnes-Mariam also claimed that the Houla massacre, in which more than 100 civilians died, more than half of them children, was a rebel hoax. A UN commission of inquiry has concluded that regime forces were responsible for the

killings. Unsurprisingly, she has critics among her co-religionists. A group opposed to the Assad regime, Syrian Christians for Democracy, charged: "Mother Agnes and those helping her are harming the Syrian people by disseminating negative pro-Assad propaganda and tearing at Syria's social and religious fabrics. The Christians in Syria do not need rumours and propagation of inaccurate information."

The organisation pointed out that many Christians had played a part in the protest movement against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his regime and some had paid with their lives as a result.

But there are also those like Mr Bedrosian, who had supported reform, but then found themselves being victimised by the rebels. As a student at Aleppo University in a country without a free media he had, at first, accepted the regime's propaganda that the protesters were terrorists.

"But then I saw the reports being put out by the opposition, saw what Assad's people were doing, the brutal things and began to support the protests," he said. "My friend and I were taken to a villa in the outskirts of Aleppo after we were captured [in the Anadan district]. I was being beaten with rifle butts, punched and kicked. None of the men holding us were foreigners, they were all Syrians and it was one of them who was really violent. They accused me of fighting for the regime, but I told them I was a Syrian Armenian - we didn't want to fight either side. I also told them that I had taken part in marches at university. But they said I would be killed unless money was paid for the girl and myself."

The kidnappers called Mr Bedrosdian's parents and got through to his mother's mobile phone - which had as a ringtone a song in praise of Bashar al-Assad: the regime receives, in general, more support in the older generation. That got him another beating, but the ransom was delivered by his father, bargained down to $12,000, and the couple were freed. The kidnappers kept the car. The first thing Mr Bedrosian did on returning home was to change his mother's ringtone.

Two months ago, Aleppo's 14th century covered market was burnt down. The regime and the rebels blamed each other while the Souk al-Medina, one of the finest examples of its kind in the Middle East, lay in ruins. Jiraryr Terzian, a jewellery trader, was one of dozens who lost their store that day. He is now in Beirut with his Syrian Armenian family; their locked-up home is in one of the Christian neighbourhoods overrun last week by revolutionary fighters. "The business was started by my grandfather 60 years ago and I hoped my children would take it over after me" he said.

"The history of my family is in Aleppo and we did not like leaving. I think both sides are at fault in what is happening. Our country is being destroyed. The

fact is we can only go back if Assad wins. I don't like saying this, we don't want the regime to stay as it is, but we will be safer under them."

Another Christian refugee, who wants to be known as Boutros, says he knows what happens when the revolutionaries take over. At his home town, Qusayr, the rebels were, he acknowledges, local Sunnis, not foreigners. "But they told us we must fight with them against the government. When we refused they began to threaten and insult us. They started killing Christians. Mathew Kasouha was the first they killed. He was a good man."

Local Christians took up arms after a while, said Boutros, and in March there was a "showdown". More Christians were killed and he fled to Lebanon. Two months ago at Al-Bab, a satellite town of Aleppo, I was discussing what lay in store for Syria when the bloodletting ends with a group of young activists, all Muslims but committed to democracy with the Alawites and Christians playing their parts. But they were also aware of just how difficult that was going to be to achieve. One of them, Bari, who was later shot but survived in Aleppo, said: "It is not just the fighting and the destruction, but the division between different groups that is such a big problem. We're convinced it is the regime that's responsible for creating this, but the damage has been done. I don't know if people from different communities will ever trust each other again."

5th December 2012

IF MAKDISSI HAS GONE, CHAOS REALLY IS CLOSE TO PRESIDENT'S DOOR

By Robert Fisk

“I AM not with the regime - I am a civil servant,” Jihad Makdissi told me proudly. The Syrian foreign ministry spokesman believed in the institutions of governance, convinced that - come what may in Syria - the framework of bureaucracy would continue even after the fall of Bashar al-Assad and his regime. An orderly takeover of power was what he foresaw. But no longer. We were sitting in his Damascus office late last summer when he said those words, the sounds of battle scarcely half a mile away.

Makdissi’s possible defection - and this is the most dangerous message to come from it - means that even the most educated and far-seeing of Syria’s elite fear that chaos will break out, rather than political transition, when the uprising closes in on the presidential palace in Damascus.

He appeared, when I saw him, trapped between the loyalty of a civil servant and the despair of a man who saw his nation crumbling before his eyes. Makdissi is a Christian from Syria’s minority sects. His Shia name, he told me - given him by his father - showed how irrelevant were the lines of ethnicity in Syria, although he admitted that “Syria will never be the same”. On his office wall, he had hung a black and white portrait of Bashar’s father Hafez; he had found it discarded in a corridor and thought it an imaginative portrait. “We need his wisdom now,” he told me. At the time, he dismissed the anti-Syrian policies of the Gulf states, cynically calling them “gas stations”.

The Syrian government’s claim that Makdissi was fired for no longer representing the regime was inevitable. In the summer, the United States said - as it did again this week - that it feared that Assad would “use chemical weapons against his own people”, a claim that the West made against Saddam Hussein prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq - and Saddam had indeed used chemicals against pro-Iranian Kurds. Makdissi was given a statement in July which he accurately translated, to the effect that Syria would never use its chemical armoury against Syrians - only against foreign invaders.

This was enough of a quotation for the Americans to use against the regime - so Syria admits it has such weapons in its armoury. Makdissi diplomatically added to the statement: if Syria had such weapons, they would not be used against Syrian citizens. Makdissi’s boss, Walid Moallem, repeated this same statement to me in August. But it was too late. Makdissi’s original translation - of a statement for which he was not responsible - became the new US mantra; and Syria’s excuse for supposedly dismissing him from his post.

But Makdissi had seen the end coming. He had moved his family to Beirut, and spent each weekend in the safety of the Lebanese capital, usually working

only a three-day week in Damascus. His office in the Syrian foreign ministry was so close to the suburban battle lines that he worked amid the din of shell and mortar fire. He was obviously trusted by Moallem - he would occasionally re-translate Moallem's passable English to clarify the Foreign Minister's words - but he had, after all, been a senior diplomat at the Syrian embassy in London.

No, the regime is not about to collapse. Fools are they who read such an imminent fall in a mere defection. But Makdissi is an intelligent and decent man, and if he has gone, he is Syria's loss.

8th December 2012

THE TRUTH ABOUT CHEMICAL WEAPONS AND WHO MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE THEM

By Robert Fisk

THE BIGGER the lie the more people will believe it. We all know who said that - but it still works. Bashar al-Assad has chemical weapons. He may use them against his own Syrian people. If he does, the West will respond. We heard all this stuff last year - and Assad's regime repeatedly said that if - if - it had chemical weapons, it would never use them against Syrians. But now Washington is playing the same gas-shanty all over again. Bashar has chemical weapons. He may use them against his own people. And if he does…

Well if he does, Obama and Madame Clinton and Nato will be very, very angry. But over the past week, all the usual pseudo-experts who couldn't find Syria on a map have been warning us again of the mustard gas, chemical agents, biological agents that Syria might possess - and might use. And the sources? The same fantasy specialists who didn't warn us about 9/11 but insisted that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction in 2003: "unnamed military intelligence sources". Henceforth to be acronymed as UMIS.

And now, the coup de théâtre. Someone from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation called me up this week to talk about the use of chemical weapons by Hafez al-Assad in Hama during the Sunni Muslim uprising in the city in 1982. Their sources were the same old UMIS. But I happened to have got into Hama in February 1982 - which is why the Canadian was calling me - and while Hafez's Syrian army was very definitely slaughtering its own people (who were, by the way, slaughtering regime officials and their families), no one ever used chemical weapons.

Not a single soldier I saw in Hama carried a gas mask. No civilians carried gas masks. The dangerously perfumed air which I and my colleagues smelt after chemicals were used by our (then) ally Saddam against Iranian soldiers in the 1980s was not present. And none of the dozens of civilian survivors I have interviewed in the 30 years since 1982 ever mentioned the use of gas.

But now we are to believe that it was used. And so the infantile new fairy tale has begun: Hafez al-Assad used gas against his own people in Hama 30 years ago. So his son Bashar may do the same again. And wasn't that one of the reasons we invaded Iraq in 2003 - because Saddam had used gas against his own people already and may do so again?

Yes, the bigger the lie, the better. Certainly we journos have done our duty in disseminating this bunkum. And Bashar - whose forces have committed quite enough iniquities - is about to be accused of another crime which he has not yet committed and which his father never did commit. Yup, chemical weapons are bad news, folks. That's why the US supplied Saddam with the components for

them, along with Germany (of course). That's why, when Saddam first used gas on Halabja, the UMIS told CIA officers to blame Iran. And yes, Bashar probably does have some chemicals in rusting bins somewhere in Syria. Madame Clinton has been worrying that they may "fall into the wrong hands" - as if they are presently "in the right hands". But the Russians have told Bashar not to use them. Would he piss off his only superpower ally?

And by the way, which was the first army to use gas in the Middle East? Saddam? Nope. The Brits, of course, under General Allenby, against the Turks in Sinai in 1917. And that's the truth.

8th December 2012

NO POWER, NO PEOPLE, NO HOPE: HOW DAMASCUS BECAME A CITY AT WAR

By Patrick Cockburn

IN THE heart of Damascus fear is almost tangible. A dull booming sound from distant shelling reverberates across the city at night, individual detonations merging with each other. Occasionally there is a bigger explosion as a bomb or shell bursts nearer the centre. By day the city is crowded with people who are refugees from even more dangerous parts of Syria, but by 6 or 7pm the streets become eerily empty.

The mood is one of gloom and despair. “The government says it is winning and the rebels say they are winning, but I don’t believe either of them,” said one businessman. “Out of 15 members of my family I am the only one who has not left the country.”

A Christian, possibly biased because of his fear of an Islamic fundamentalist takeover, said: “Fifteen per cent of Syrians are for the government, 15 per cent are against, and 70 per cent of us just want the fear and the killing to stop.”

In the past six months war has come to Damascus. There are checkpoints everywhere, soldiers examining drivers’ papers and looking for weapons in the boots of cars. There is a shortage of bread, possibly because of the sharply increased number of internally displaced persons, though petrol is easily available. In the past couple of weeks there have been electricity cuts for six to nine hours a day because a power station in the south of the capital was reportedly damaged.

When I was last in Damascus in early summer people here were still having picnics on the slopes of Mount Qassioun, which overlooks the city, at the same time as there was ferocious fighting in Homs which left much of it in ruins. Villagers in Houla had been bloodily massacred, allegedly by pro-government militiamen. But checkpoints were fewer and more relaxed and the international airport was still open. Yesterday the Free Syrian Army declared it a military target, but even before this few planes would have chanced a landing.

Even taking into account that yesterday was Friday and it has been raining in Damascus, the streets have a desolate and menacing feel. For once, the traffic policemen outside the magnificent Ottoman Hejaz railway station have no traffic to direct. Earlier in the year many restaurants were doing little business, but there were still smart cafés with plenty of customers. Not any more.

The situation has markedly deteriorated since mid-summer. The rebels launched an assault then that was largely beaten off by government counter-attacks. Now it has resumed with heavy fighting in the outer townships. Violence flares up and dies away, but it is never far away. People with enough money to get their families out of Syria have done so.

“I only stay because 29 people would lose their jobs if my business closed,” said one acquaintance. The journey to Beirut once took a couple of hours, but now takes far longer as thousands of people make their way past eight checkpoints on the short road between here and the Lebanese border. There is little traffic coming in the opposite direction and what drivers there are entering Syria have a tense look on their faces.

The extent of the violence is both exaggerated and understated by rumour or propaganda. For instance, last week there was a bomb outside the Red Crescent Society’s headquarters that killed one man. Damage was reported to the Red Crescent’s large yellow building. But a visit to the site of the bombing showed that somebody had put a bomb under a BMW in an attempt to kill an official which had succeeded only in killing his driver, while the Red Crescent HQ did not even lose its windows.

Some of the violence is worse than reported or is not reported at all. For instance, on 28 November a bomb went off in a car in the Christian-Druze township of Jaramana at 6.45am. A local man recalled that “many people rushed to help and then 20 minutes later they saw a second car with four people in it and smoked windows. They thought it must belong to the police but it blew up and killed 68 people and injured 125 more.”

Damascus is not quite under siege as the rebels claim, but many roads are closed in and around the capital. A diplomat said: “The government is trying to control Damascus, Aleppo and the road linking the two through Homs and Hama.” He believes that the pressure is growing “but it is always tempting to declare that a tipping point between government and opposition has been reached, but I don’t think we are there yet.” He added that, at the same time, “you get the sense that in Damascus the wolf is at the door and is not going to go away”.

It is what the wolf will do in future that causes so much alarm in Damascus. Rumours are rife. People do not visit other parts of the city unless they have to. Six months ago I drove with UN monitors to the township of Douma a few miles to the north-east of Damascus. It was under the control of the opposition and, although there had been arrests and killings, it was intact. But when I got back to central Damascus several people assured me that Douma had been flattened by artillery fire and were disbelieving when I denied it. When I asked a friend yesterday what was happening in the town he said: “I don’t know because I haven’t been there in a year and I wouldn’t let anybody working for me go there because it is too dangerous.”

Day-to-day survival absorbs most people in Damascus. Questions that attract great publicity abroad such as the possible use of chemical weapons by the

Syrian army seem academic and contrived. Conventional weapons used by both sides are quite enough to prolong the fear and slaughter.

9th December 2012

SYRIA'S REBELS REACH DAMASCUS SUBURBS, BUT CANNOT BREAK THE CIVIL-WAR DEADLOCK

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIAN REBELS defiantly announced on Friday that they regarded Damascus International Airport as a legitimate military target as it is used by the government to bring in military supplies. From afar, this sounds like a reasonable tactic, but a visit to the area reveals that this simply means that rebel gunmen shoot at any car, civilian or military, using the main airport road. On the ground, the Syrian conflict is as vicious and unrelenting as any civil war, with civilians the main target.

The airport road runs past Jaramana, a township of at least 250,000 people, most of whom are Christian or Druze and are seen as supporters of the government. There is still a sculptured head of President Hafez al-Assad, father of Bashar and leader of Syria for 30 years, in the main square. A couple of hundred yards further on, the street is blocked by a broken metal street light and a large potted plant, indicating that it would be unwise to travel on to the airport road which lies just beyond.

“Don’t go any further,” warned a local shopkeeper. “There are snipers there and they shoot at anything.” We watched a white pick-up truck gingerly skirt the potted plant and drive towards the airport road before hurriedly making a U-turn and returning to safety. It was impossible to know if the driver had been shot at or lost his nerve at the last moment, because all the time we were in Jaramana we could hear bursts of gunfire and occasionally the crash of rocket-propelled grenades exploding. This background noise is now so common in Damascus, though street fighting has been going on for only a couple of weeks, that local people no longer interrupt their conversation to remark on it and go on talking unless there is an especially loud explosion.

The shopkeeper, a grizzled man in his fifties who wanted to give his name only as Pierre, turned out to design wedding dresses and took us to his small shop which was just round the corner and out of sight of snipers. In the shop window there were two mannequins in magnificent wedding dresses, one white, one purple, with long trains and ample flounces. Pierre rolled up his shirtsleeve to show where he had been wounded when two bombs exploded 10 days ago. He said: “I went to help the people hurt in the first bomb when a second bomb in a Mercedes exploded. It killed 68 people and you can still see their blood on the walls high up on the front of buildings.”

Damascus feels more and more like Belfast in the early 1970s, or Beirut a few years later. Survival requires up-to-date knowledge of the sectarian geography and the city has become full of no-go areas. I asked to visit a military hospital and an official said this might be difficult because it was in a “hot” area. Fighting

had taken place at the gates of the hospital.

There are unexplained events that may be threatening but are often just mysterious and menacing. For instance, there was a dark cloud of smoke rising yesterday morning from Zamalka, another hot area, but nobody knew what was burning. When we were trying to leave Jaramana a few hours later, there were what sounded like two pistol shots near by and suddenly all the soldiers started running, shouting at us to drive away, which we hurriedly did, but nobody we spoke to knew what the alarm was all about.

The centre of Damascus is something of a bubble, with the fighting mostly in the suburbs or townships surrounding the capital. There are giant traffic jams, drivers often taking two or three hours to drive a few miles, because so many roads are blocked and there are so many checkpoints. Vehicles are often banned from in front of government buildings, increasing the congestion. Many shops are open, but the mood is edgy and apprehensive. There are electricity cuts of six to eight hours a day, though this is still better than Aleppo where there has been no electricity for four days. There is plenty of food in the markets and shops, but prices have jumped because the roads are dangerous and transport expensive.

There has also been a flood of people from the rest of Syria into Damascus because it has hitherto been the safest place to live. Often, they are staying with relatives or in small hotels and apartments recently vacated by refugees from Iraq who have gone home, having decided that even Baghdad is not as dangerous as Damascus. Better-off Syrians have moved to Lebanon or further afield, and the big hotels in central Damascus are empty aside from a handful of journalists and UN personnel. The UN and EU pulled out most of their remaining staff from the city last week.

Some in Damascus reject the idea that the country faces a future of sectarian and ethnic division between Sunni, Alawite, Shia, Druze, Christian and Kurd. Anwar al-Bouni, a civil rights lawyer with a Christian background who spent many years in prison, says Syria is not going to be like Lebanon or Iraq, because it doesn’t have sectarian quotas such as those that were imposed by the French and the Americans. He sees the great majority of Syrians as being united against the government and says this is going to end only one way. He pointed out that the government had not staged mass demonstrations to show its popularity for over a year.

Not everybody is so optimistic. Another human rights activist, who did not want his named published, makes the same point that Syria differs from Lebanon and Iraq but he says that the difference may have negative consequences. In Lebanon, the sectarian fragmentation is so great that no sect has a majority, so there have to be compromises if conflict is to be avoided. He said the same was

true frequently in Iraq because, even if the Shia are a majority, they do not have overwhelming numbers. But the activist said that in Syria the Sunni are 70 per cent and may feel they do not have to compromise with anybody. I increasingly hear them grumbling about making any concessions to the minorities."

Syrians discuss constantly how close they are to the end of the crisis convulsing the country. One businessman said: "I go to bed at 8pm because I sent my wife and children to the US and Canada and I am all alone in my house. I wake up at 5am, and watch the news on all the television stations. I can't see how anybody is going to win, but at the same time I feel it can't go on more than another couple of months." A senior diplomat who just left Syria says he does not believe the end is close because, despite its recent losses, the regime has not suffered any really serious defections yet."

Both sides in this war are militarily weaker than they look. Closing the airport sounds impressive, but only means that a few men with rifles are shooting up the airport road. It is difficult to see why the conflict should end any time soon.

10th December 2012

ASSAD'S STRATEGY SHIFT KEEPS REBELS AT GATES OF DAMASCUS

By Patrick Cockburn

A REBEL assault on Damascus has failed to make serious gains in the Syrian capital, diplomats have said, warning that the struggle between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the opposition is now likely to drag on longer than had been expected.

The diplomats say that the Syrian government has adopted a new strategy in recent weeks whereby it withdraws its troops from bases that are indefensible in order to concentrate them in Damascus and other cities it views as strategically crucial. This pull-back enabled the army to launch a successful counter offensive in the past week, relieving the military pressure on the capital and improving its negotiating position.

“The government says it made a strategic choice not to defend smaller outposts,” says one analyst in Damascus who did not want to be named.

This means ceding much of the countryside to the rebels, particularly in the north and west of Syria, but by concentrating its forces in population centres the government should be able to hold out for longer against rebel attacks. The opposition announced yesterday that rebel forces had taken the 111th regimental base at Sheikh Suleman near Aleppo, where 100 government soldiers fled.

The planned withdrawals may have given the rebels and the outside world a false impression in November that the government’s military position was weaker than it really was and that the end of the conflict was in sight over the next two or three months. In practice, the military balance of power between the two sides is much more evenly balanced.

A diplomat said: “In private, Free Syrian Army commanders admit that their attacks in Damascus had not gone as planned and they suffered losses, but this does not mean that they will not try again.”

The road to the international airport, 12 miles south-east of Damascus, was still cut at one point early yesterday, though the airport itself is held by the government. At least one passenger reached it safely by a long detour through south Damascus. But a driver who ventured on to the airport highway closer to the centre of the city says he was greeted “by a volley of shots that went very close to me, so I turned round immediately”. The rebels announced this week that they regard the airport as a military target.

A sign of slackening pressure on the capital is that there are fewer incoming mortar rounds or rockets landing in the centre. Most of the firing that resounds across the city is outgoing, often of heavy rockets used against civilian areas. There are often single helicopters in the sky, but the government forces seem to be using them less, possibly because the rebels have captured anti-aircraft

weapons and have shot down several planes.

If the government can keep control of most of Damascus, its negotiating position will improve. The capital is full to bursting with people because so many have fled violence elsewhere in the country but do not have the money to go abroad. The streets are clogged with traffic because of the checkpoints, closed roads and increased number of vehicles. Apartments once occupied by refugees from Iraq are now rented out to Syrians, while a small house will contain five or six families.

The government also has a measure of support in Damascus and Aleppo that it does not have in impoverished country villages and small towns. A weakness of the army's tactics in the past is that, while it has the fire power to retake a rebel-held district, it has not had the manpower to keep control of it. In some cases the government is setting up local committees to try to maintain its authority. In others, shantytowns on the outskirts of towns, seen as being likely to support the rebels, have been bulldozed.

There is a growing sense of weariness because the conflict has gone on longer than people expected. There is also a mood of desperation because of the shortage of electricity, high prices and lack of employment. In rebel-held parts of Aleppo there have been demonstrations on recent days in favour of the fundamentalist Jihadi militia Jabhat al-Nusra and against the Free Syrian Army, which is accused of corruption and inability to help the civilian population.

The government's concentration of forces means that there are increasingly large swaths of territory under rebel control. Rebels also hold parts of Aleppo, Homs and Hama. In Aleppo the government is making fewer claims that it will recapture parts of the city held by the rebels, possibly because it wants to use its best units to defend Damascus.

Meanwhile, the rebel military forces have announced a major reorganisation at a conference attended by 500 delegates in Antalya in Turkey with a new 30-member Supreme Council elected along with a new chief of staff.

The two main Jihadi groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, were not invited, though they play an increasing role in the fighting. Many of their militants can draw on military experience gained in Iraq over the past nine years.

It is not clear how much authority the members of the new council will wield unless they can supply weapons, ammunition and money to individual units inside Syria. They are often in the ambivalent position of stressing their secular nature to Western backers while at the same time emphasising their Islamic credentials to supporters in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

11th December 2012

HOMS IS CALM - BUT THE FEAR REMAINS

By Patrick Cockburn

THE CITY of Homs, once the heart of the Syrian uprising, is very much back under government control. The only substantial area still held by the rebels is the Old City, under siege by the Syrian army, which exchanges sniper fire and mortar bombs with the rest of the city.

Homs, the third largest city in Syria with a pre-civil war population of 2.3 million, was the scene of heavy fighting and a ferocious bombardment earlier in the year. Some districts still look devastated, though the rubble has been cleared away. But there was no sound of shooting yesterday and most of the city shops and markets were open and traffic was flowing freely. There are many checkpoints, but the soldiers manning them looked relaxed.

But not everything is normal. In a district named after the Armenians who first settled it, several missiles -allegedly fired from the Old City -struck two houses on Sunday, collapsing a four storey apartment building in which at least five people were killed and 37 injured. Ebtessam, a middle aged woman who had been taking her daughter to school, said there were “no military buildings nearby.” This appeared to be the case. She complained that rebel snipers “made some streets unsafe, so I have to take a long way round to reach my house.” Maher, a 12-year-old boy in blue school uniform, said his own district of al-Mohajren was also unsafe because of snipers.

The worst fighting earlier in the year was concentrated in the Bab al-Amar district, which was pounded by artillery. The main road still looks devastated, buildings burned out and walls toppled or scarred by shrapnel. It is a measure of the strength of government control that officials feel safe to go there with foreign visitors. There were almost no cars and few pedestrians though there are more people living in the side streets which are not badly damaged.

Several people refused to talk or spoke guardedly, but one elderly man in a blue coat and embroidered skill cap, who said his name was Mohammed al-Rahmoun, came up to me and said he was trying to find his 30-year-old son Osama who was arrested five months ago and had not been heard of since. “I ask in many places but nobody knows what happened to him,” said his father, who added that his other son, Anas, had been killed by a bullet during the fighting earlier in the year.

Life in most of Homs looks normal. There are queues outside shops where people with ration chits get bottled gas for domestic cooking. Petrol is also rationed. Most schools and colleges were open. On the road from Damascus there were a number of minibuses and small trucks with large bundles of household possessions on the roof bringing back people who had fled to the

capital earlier in the year. One driver said “Homs is now safer than Damascus.” Other displaced people in Homs are crowded into public buildings according to aid officials.

Calm though it appears to be Homs can still be a dangerous place. In the office of the governor of Homs an official produced a bullet that had been fired at chest height from a stadium facing the back of the building the previous day. They showed the hole made in the wall and another hole where two weeks ago another sniper had wounded somebody sitting in a chair.

The governor of Homs, Ahmad Munir Mohand, a general who had become a lawyer before taking up his post four months ago, blamed the troubles of Homs and Syria on al-Qa’ida, the Gulf States and the US. He denounced the rebels as sectarian saying their slogan was “Alawites to their coffins and Christians to Beirut.” He said that the government had discovered that a consignment of missiles had recently reached the rebels in the Old City though he did not explain how this could have happened if the place is besieged. He says he wished the European Union “would send medical supplies instead of threatening to send weapons.”

How safe was the 160km-long road linking Homs to Damascus along which we had just driven? “I would say it was 99 per cent safe,” said the governor. “The dangerous places near he road are at Yabrud and Qara, because Lebanon is close and armed men from al-Qa’ida, Saudi Arabia and Libya come across.”

This was less than reassuring, but fitted with our experience on the way to Homs. We had faced no problems until we reached close to Yabrud, three kilometres from the main road, where there was a government armoured vehicle blocking the road ahead and we had to wait for half an hour. The impression that Yabrud is not a place to linger was reinforced on our return journey when a distant gunman fired a shot in our general direction as we sped by.

11th December 2012

UK MILITARY IN TALKS TO HELP SYRIA REBELS

By Kim Sengupta

A PLAN to provide military training to the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime and support them with air and naval power is being drawn up by an international coalition including Britain, The Independent has learnt.

The prospect of Western intervention comes as opposition groups, which have been disorganised and divided, at long last formed an umbrella political group and a command structure for their militias.

Their foreign backers are said to believe that the 22-month-long civil war has now reached a tipping point and it has become imperative to offer help to the revolutionaries to enable them to make a final push against the regime. The head of Britain's armed forces, General Sir David Richards, hosted a confidential meeting in London a few weeks ago attended by the military chiefs of France, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar and the UAE, and a three-star American general, in which the strategy was discussed at length. Other UK government departments and their counterparts in allied states in the mission have also been holding extensive meetings on the issue. The commanders' conference was held at the request of the Prime Minister, according to senior Whitehall sources. David Cameron is said to be determined that more should be done by Britain to bring to an end the bloody strife which has claimed 40,000 lives so far and made millions homeless.

There is also a growing belief among the Western backers of the opposition that intervention in some form is necessary now to influence the future political shape of Syria. Jihadist groups among the rebels, some like Jabhat al-Nusra linked to al-Qa'ida, have steadily gained in power and influence because of their access to weapons and money coming from the Gulf states putting more secular groups at a severe disadvantage.

The Obama administration is considering proscribing Al-Nusra as a terrorist organisation, making it illegal for American citizens to fund it and sending a warning message to Arab states not to back it. At the same time Western help will be directed at and strengthen the moderate groups. The unified rebel command structure set up in Turkey, at the behest of the US and UK, has excluded the Islamist militias.

Britain, France and the US have agreed that none of their countries would have "boots on the ground" to help the rebels. The training camps can be set up in Turkey. However, the use of air and maritime force would, in itself, be highly controversial and likely to lead to charges that, as in Libya, the West is carrying out regime change by force.

Any such military action will have to take place without United Nations authorisation, with Russia and China highly unlikely to back a resolution after

their experience over Libya where they agreed to a “no-fly zone”.

The plan will also draw accusations that the decision to station Nato Patriot missile defence systems at the Syrian border, at the request of Turkey, was, in reality, to camouflage intervention. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Foreign Secretary William Hague and the alliance’s Secretary-General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, had all insisted at a meeting in Brussels last week that the deployment was a purely defensive measure. British defence sources maintain that Ankara would have made the request even without the plan to aid the rebels. Neither Germany nor the Netherlands, which will be deploying the Patriots, have been part of the secret Syria talks.

There has been a steady flow of briefings from the US that the Damascus regime is readying its stock of chemical weapons. Ms Clinton stated that a desperate Assad may resort to such an attack, while President Obama has warned of a “red line” on chemical weapons, saying the use of them will not be tolerated.

However, there is a growing belief that the Russians, who had steadfastly backed the regime, are now reconciled to a future Syria without Assad. Officials in Ankara say that a visit by President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Turkey last week went extremely well. Speaking in Istanbul, President Putin said: “We are not lawyers for the Syrian leadership’s actions; we are concerned with other things, namely what will happen in the future.”

British and American officials say that the Kremlin’s concerns about chaos following the departure of Assad, with jihadists emerging in control, is shared by governments in the West and Russian help will be needed in averting a bloody endgame.

Intervention, they say, is now inevitable. Le Figaro newspaper has reported that French military advisers have met rebel groups just across the Lebanese border. The US is said to have stockpiled weapons retrieved in Libya for future supply to Syria.

One senior Whitehall official said: “The efforts have so far been unco-ordinated without any focused objective. If this is worth doing, then it is worth doing professionally; training the FSA and providing them with air and maritime support when necessary.

“Obviously there are risks involved in such a mission, but there is enough capability to accomplish this.

“We are aware of the Russian view. We know that Syria is an important strategic ally for them. But it will not remain an ally if the jihadists take over after Assad goes, we are sure they realise this. We still hope they can persuade Assad to leave and an agreement can be formed on the future of the country.”

12th December 2012

REBELS URGE WESTERN ALLIES TO HELP SOONER

By Kim Sengupta

SYRIA'S REBELS fighters have urged their Western backers to speed up plans to help them against the Assad regime, claiming the delay is leading to setbacks.

An offensive by the revolutionaries in Damascus came to a halt because of a lack of heavy weapons and supplies running out, according to some of those who had taken part.

The Independent revealed yesterday that Britain is part of an international coalition drawing up plans to provide combat training for the opposition and support them with air and naval power. General Sir David Richards, head of the UK's armed forces, hosted a meeting with the military chiefs of France, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, the UAE and a three-star American general to discuss the strategy.

There were conflicting reports of a "massacre" in an Alawite village in Hama province last night. It was unclear who was behind a series of explosions in Aqrab with unconfirmed reports of casualties varying from 10 dead to 200 injured or killed. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights put the figure at 125.

The decision by the UK, US and France to consider intervention was partly due to extremist jihadist factions getting the lion's share of arms and money coming from the Gulf at the expense of moderate groups.

Yesterday, the US State Department labelled the most prominent jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra, which has links with al-Qa'ida, a terrorist organisation, making it illegal for American citizens to fund it.

Amar Mohammed Abbadallah, of the Al-Farouq brigade, a rebel group opposed to Al-Nusra, said yesterday: "The Americans have made them illegal? So what? They will continue to get weapons from Qatar and other places. What the Americans and the British should do is help us."

The Obama administration last night recognised the new rebel political umbrella group, National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

12th December 2012

FEAR AND LOATHING OF SYRIAN REGIME'S FALLEN SOLDIERS

By Patrick Cockburn

A MONTH ago Lieutenant Kutaiba Hassan, a career officer in the Syrian army, led his squad of soldiers into an apartment bloc in south Damascus where they had received a tip-off that insurgents were hiding on the fourth floor. The intelligence turned out to be partially mistaken. As Lt Hassan waited with his men on the ground floor to make their attack, they were shot at by seven men who had been hiding in the basement. The young officer was hit by 10 bullets in the legs, while all the rebels died in the fighting.

Today Lt Hassan is lying in Tishreen Military Hospital in Damascus where doctors have struggled to avoid amputating his lower left leg in which the broken bone is held in place by metal clamps. A confident looking man, despite his wounds, he asks why European and other foreign countries give money and weapons to people whom he and his family regard as al-Qai'da terrorists.

It does not take long in Tishreen hospital to realise that the conflict in Syria is very much a civil war of great brutality, in which the government has its committed supporters along with those who believe that, whatever the failings of the present government, the alternative is even worse. Captain Basil al-Khaim, shot through the chest by a sniper when his checkpoint was attacked, says: "We don't protect the regime. We protect Syria." He denounced the insurgents as being terrorists from Afghanistan, al-Qa'ida and fundamentalist groups waging holy war on his country. He added that he was only sorry that "I am too badly wounded to go and fight them again".

The military hospital has 1,000 beds, making it one of the largest in the Middle East and its director, an orthopaedic surgeon with the rank of general who did not want his name published for fear of attacks on his family, said: "We receive about 15-20 wounded soldiers a day, mostly suffering from gunshot wounds, of whom some 20 per cent die from their injuries."

Even getting to the hospital has its dangers. The director, a Christian from near Homs, said that over the past year "six of my doctors and four ambulance drivers have been killed". Later he showed off an ambulance with a bullet hole through the front window that had narrowly missed one driver. Earlier this week there were gun battles at the entrance to the hospital which is close to an insurgent stronghold. Just beyond the hospital gates, buildings on both sides of the road for 100 yards have been flattened by bulldozers to make sniping and ambushes more difficult.

Inside the hospital many of the younger soldiers had been hit when they were on guard. Most looked grey with shock and pain. Ibrahim Mustafa, 25, was in a military training school when he was shot in the shoulder. "I cannot move my

hand now," he said. From the end of his bed his mother, Mahan, furiously denounced those who had shot her son. "In a real revolution people build things but these people destroy everything from schools to electric power lines, they kidnap and kill," she said.

Expressions of support for the government by wounded soldiers and their families are infrequent and sound a little forced, but their fear of and hatred for the insurgents as bloodthirsty religious fanatics backed by foreign powers hostile to Syria appears genuine.

The director of the hospital said he could not give his name because members of his family in a Christian village near Homs might be targeted: "A cousin of mine called George Nakhoul was kidnapped and we are very worried."

Some of what wounded soldiers say in hospital about their determination to fight can be written off as bravado unlikely to be put to the test. Others may be parroting the government line about the rebels being sectarian killers out of an innate sense of caution. But others appear to believe the government's portrayal of the enemy is essentially correct and are willing to go on fighting for the moment, even as the odds mount against success.

13th December 2012

‘HE HASN’T DISAPPEARED. HE’S JUST ON THREE MONTHS’ LEAVE’

By Patrick Cockburn

SENIOR SYRIAN government officials said yesterday that the recognition of the opposition coalition as the legitimate government by the US and many other countries would not change the situation on the ground. The Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Miqdad, said in an interview with The Independent that foreign countries were “recognising an artificial structure, a structure that will help promote the objectives of the US and European countries in Syria”. He denied that the opposition represented real political forces inside Syria.

Mr Miqdad’s assertion that the opposition coalition had been created by the US and was unrepresentative was echoed in a separate interview by the Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoebi. In a striking parallel, he said that the US move was rather as if Syria “had recognised Liverpool Football Club as the sole representative of the British people while in fact it represented very little”.

There was also an intriguing question for Mr Miqdad. What happened to Jihad Makdissi, the foreign ministry spokesman, who was reported earlier this month to have left Damascus? Had he been fired or had he defected? Where had he disappeared to?

“He did not disappear. He is on release for three months and he’s enjoying his time, I hope.” Was he still spokesman for the foreign ministry? “For this moment, until now, he is still spokesman,” said Mr Miqdad. “We did not take any other decision.” And where is he? “It is said he is in Beirut.”

The Syrian government is defiant as it faces growing international isolation, saying that whatever happens it was not going to lose militarily on the ground having withstood heavy pressure from inside and outside the country for almost two years. “I assure you this [move by the US] will not add anything,” said Mr Miqdad. “It is mere propaganda and psychological warfare directed against the Syrians and the Syrian government and is aimed at encouraging those armed groups that have been unable to achieve any real progress in Syria.”

This seemed a bit rich since Damascus had been echoing to the sound of distant gunfire all morning, suggesting that the armed groups had not been wholly ineffectual. But Mr Miqdad responded that in any case armed actions did not give those who carried them out legitimacy and just meant there were terrorist groups “which should have been fought against by Europe and the United States”.

This is a point repeatedly made by Syrian officials asking how come the US and Britain are against terrorists in one country, but favour them in another. What does the Syrian government think of the condemning of the powerful fundamentalist group, the Jabhat al-Nusra, as terrorists. “It is too late, too small,”

said Mr Miqdad. “We believe they should have condemned all those who are carrying arms against a legitimate government. They should tell their friends to refrain from supporting terrorism in Syria.”

Why are the US and its allies so keen on getting rid of the Syrian administration? Mr Miqdad thought that there was hostility to Syria because of its support for the Palestinians against Israel and its long- term alliance with Iran.

He had a particular attitude towards the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring which he said were similar to coups d’etat. Challenged on this, he said that, while Syria respected what other countries did, “if the Egyptian army had not changed sides there would not have been that change. But we want that change to come normally and not from outside.” By far the most important ally remaining to Syria is Russia and Mr Miqdad said they “have daily conversations” with their Russian counterparts.

Finally and most important, how does Syria and the Syrian government get out of its present crisis? Mr Miqdad spoke of constitutional reforms already introduced, a multiparty system, the end of the leading role of the Baath party, and, if that did not work, national dialogue. The UN was having talks with some of the armed opposition.

But the booming of guns in the distance somehow suggested that events had moved beyond negotiation and compromise and the future of Syria would be decided on the battlefield.

14th December 2012

ASSAD'S SENSE OF SECURITY SHAKEN AS RUSSIA ADMITS HE COULD YET BE OUSTED

By Patrick Cockburn

RUSSIA YESTERDAY conceded that a victory of the Syrian opposition is possible, putting in doubt the extent to which the Syrian government can depend on its most important ally. “One must look the facts in the face,” said Moscow’s special envoy for Middle East Affairs, Mikhail Bogdanov, quoted by the state-run RIA news agency. “Unfortunately, the victory of the Syrian opposition cannot be ruled out.”

Mr Bogdanov said the Syrian government was “losing control of more and more territory” and that Moscow was preparing plans to evacuate Russian citizens if necessary. It is not clear if this signals any fundamental change in the Russian position. It was suggested he was unaware of the presence of journalists when he made the remarks.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Nato Secretary-General, separately said that it is “only a matter of time” before the regime falls. He confirmed that the Syrian government had fired short-range missiles at opposition forces in the north of the country. On Syrian state television yesterday, it was denied the government had employed Scud missiles against FSA fighters.

The Syrian deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad told The Independent this week that the Syrian government holds daily conversations with the Russians. He did not say that there had been any change in the Russian position which is to oppose foreign intervention in Syrian affairs and to block any move by the US and its allies to take military action under the auspices of the UN.

There have been a number of car bombs in and around the capital in the last few days, including at least one yesterday, but a government counter-offensive appears to have thrown back a rebel offensive launched several weeks ago. Although opposition sources claimed to hold a swathe of territory to the east and south east of Damascus there was traffic yesterday on the airport road, which the rebels have been seeking to close. The roads north to Homs and west to Beirut are open.

A car bomb has killed at least 16 men, women and children in Qatana, a town about 15 miles south-west of Damascus where many soldiers live, according to the state media. Rami Abdelrahman, head of the opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, put the death toll at 17, including seven children and two women. State television showed soldiers walking past a half-collapsed building.

Earlier in the week there was a bomb at the entrance to the Interior Ministry in which five people were killed including Abdullah Kayrouz, a member of parliament from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. There have been other bombs in Jaramana, largely inhabited by Druze and Christians, and an area with

many Alawites living in it. The bombings may be aimed at keeping up the pressure on the government at a time when there is not much action in the capital. Many opposition strongholds like Douma and al-Qaboun have been heavily bombarded by artillery, forcing most of their population to take refuge in other parts of the city.

Diplomats in Damascus caution against imagining that the government is likely to fall quickly, saying it still has considerable strength. Many people in Damascus are very worried that the capital could be reduced to the level of Aleppo which has been partially destroyed. There is also fear the rebels are increasingly sectarian, fundamentalist and likely to target not only Syria's 2.5 million Alawites, many of them in the army and security forces, but anybody associated with the government.

14th December 2012

PEACE WILL NOT BREAK OUT WITHOUT TOUGH BARGAINING

By Kim Sengupta

THERE HAVE times in the 22 months of the Syrian uprising when it seemed Bashar al-Assad might have been toppled - only for the rebels to falter, outgunned by his resurgent forces. But now, for the first time, there appears to be a feeling that he too will become a victim of the Arab Spring. Despite its massive superiority in weaponry, and the indiscriminate way it often uses it, the regime is ceding more and more territory to the opposition.

This has been the case for a while; but, crucially, Russia is now publicly acknowledging it for the first time. The country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, says it is time to "face facts" and that a victory for the rebels "[cannot] be ruled out."

This is not entirely surprising. Russian officials accompanying the Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, were privately acknowledging that Moscow has to accept the likelihood of a Syria without Assad and that other avenues need to be explored.

As The Independent has revealed, the same thinking lies behind plans drawn up by the UK, US and France, with allies in the region, to train rebel forces and offer them air and naval support.

It is hoped that the Russians will drop their opposition to a safe haven being set up inside Syria and will not object to the training of "moderate" revolutionaries. Vladimir Putin and others in the Kremlin leadership have often expressed concern that extreme jihadist groups could come out on top if the regime collapses. The US seems to share this apprehension, and the Obama administration has labelled Al-Nusra Brigade, the most successful rebel group, as a terrorist organisation.

If the Russian government were to persuade Assad to step down and go into exile it would want a say in the future political shape of Syria, perhaps insisting that members of the current regime are allowed to join a transitional administration. Tough bargaining will take place before peace of any sort breaks out.

15th December 2012

RUSSIA DENIES IT IS SWITCHING SUPPORT TO SYRIAN REBELS

By Patrick Cockburn

RUSSIA DENIES that it has changed its position on Syria, despite remarks by a senior diplomat suggesting that a rebel victory is possible.

The remarks, made by the deputy Foreign Minister and Middle East Envoy Mikhail Bogdanov, were greeted by the US and its allies as a sign that Russia was edging away from its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but Russia now says that he was misinterpreted.

Mr Bogdanov touched off speculation about a possible change in the Russian stance by saying an insurgent military victory was conceivable, but had added that this would not happen for a long time and would ruin Syria.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said yesterday that Mr Bogdanov's words had been misunderstood and taken out of context. It reiterated Moscow's view that any resolution of the conflict in Syria must be political and not military, and that Mr Assad's departure from power should not be a precondition. "We have never changed our position and we will not change it," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told a news conference in Moscow.

The Russians say their policy is based on a communiqué issued in Geneva on 30 June after a meeting of world and regional powers on Syria which called for a transitional government in Damascus, but did not say what role Mr Assad would play in it.

It is unclear if the US and its European allies now believe the rebels can overthrow the Syrian government militarily, a prospect that still seems far off when viewed from Damascus. The rebels control large parts of north and east Syria and sections of cities such as Aleppo, but most of the cities and towns are still with the government.

The sound of heavy artillery fire resounded across Damascus yesterday but the government remained in control. Those neighbourhoods which the rebels seized in past offensives have been heavily damaged and most inhabitants have fled to other parts of the city. There is a shortage of bread and cooking gas, but the capital has not been reduced to siege conditions.

An apparent weakening of Russian resolve over support for the Syrian government was greeted by Washington as Moscow finally waking up to reality. But it is by no means clear that claims by Western leaders, such as that by NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, that the regime in Damascus is approaching collapse are themselves realistic.

Such statements may be propaganda, aimed at demoralising the Syrian government and emboldening its opponents, but do not truly reflect the present balance of forces in Syria.

The country is divided by sect, ethnicity and class. In Damascus there are deep worries, even among critics of the government, that the capital may share the fate of Aleppo, parts of which are in ruins. Neither side appears to have the strength to achieve a knockout blow against its opponents.

The Syrian army remains much the strongest single armed force in the country. The growth of Sunni Jihadi groups as the most effective fighting force on the rebel side is frightening not only for the minorities such as the Alawites, Christians and Druze, but for many urban Sunni. They watch with horror YouTube videos of army officers being decapitated by the rebels in the north or Shia mosques being burned in Idlib.

16th December 2012

SYRIA: THE DESCENT INTO HOLY WAR

By Patrick Cockburn

IT IS one of the most horrifying videos of the war in Syria. It shows two men being beheaded by Syrian rebels, one of them by a child. He hacks with a machete at the neck of a middle-aged man who has been forced to lie in the street with his head on a concrete block. At the end of the film, a soldier, apparently from the Free Syrian Army, holds up the severed heads by their hair in triumph.

The film is being widely watched on YouTube by Syrians, reinforcing their fears that Syria is imitating Iraq's descent into murderous warfare in the years after the US invasion in 2003. It fosters a belief among Syria's non-Sunni Muslim minorities, and Sunnis associated with the government as soldiers or civil servants, that there will be no safe future for them in Syria if the rebels win. In one version of the video, several of which are circulating, the men who are beheaded are identified as officers belonging to the 2.5 million-strong Alawite community. This is the Shia sect to which President Bashar al-Assad and core members of his regime belong. The beheadings, so proudly filmed by the perpetrators, may well convince them that they have no alternative but to fight to the end.

The video underlines a startling contradiction in the policy of the US and its allies. In the past week, 130 countries have recognised the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. But, at the same time, the US has denounced the al-Nusra Front, the most effective fighting force of the rebels, as being terrorists and an al-Qa'ida affiliate. Paradoxically, the US makes almost exactly same allegations of terrorism against al-Nusra as does the Syrian government. Even more bizarrely, though so many states now recognise the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, it is unclear if the rebels inside Syria do so. Angry crowds in rebel-held areas of northern Syria on Friday chanted "we are all al-Nusra" as they demonstrated against the US decision.

Videos posted on YouTube play such a central role in the propaganda war in Syria that questions always have to be asked about their authenticity and origin. In the case of the beheading video, the details look all too convincing. Nadim Houry, the deputy director for Human Rights Watch in the Middle East and North Africa, has watched the video many times to identify the circumstances, perpetrators and location where the killings took place. He has no doubts about its overall authenticity, but says that mention of one district suggests it might be in Deir ez-Zhor (in eastern Syria). But people in the area immediately north of Homs are adamant the beheadings took place there. The victims have not been

identified. The first time a version of the film was shown was on pro-government Sama TV on 26 November, but it has been widely viewed on YouTube in Syria only over the past week.

The film begins by showing two middle-aged men handcuffed together sitting on a settee in a house, surrounded by their captors who sometimes slap and beat them. They are taken outside into the street. A man in a black shirt is manhandled and kicked into lying down with his head on a concrete block. A boy, who looks to be about 11 or 12 years old, cuts at his neck with a machete, but does not quite sever it. Later a man finishes the job and cuts the head off. The second man in a blue shirt is also forced to lie with his head on a block and is beheaded. The heads are brandished in front of the camera and later laid on top of the bodies. The boy smiles as he poses with a rifle beside a headless corpse.

The execution video is very similar to those once made by al-Qa'ida in Iraq to demonstrate their mercilessness towards their enemies. This is scarcely surprising since many of the most experienced al-Nusra fighters boast that they have until recently been fighting the predominantly Shia government of Iraq as part of the local franchise of al-Qa'ida franchise. Their agenda is wholly sectarian, and they have shown greater enthusiasm for slaughtering Shias, often with bombs detonated in the middle of crowds in markets or outside mosques, than for fighting Americans.

The Syrian uprising, which began in March 2011, was not always so bloodthirsty or so dominated by the Sunnis who make up 70 per cent of the 23 million-strong Syrian population. At first, demonstrations were peaceful and the central demands of the protesters were for democratic rule and human rights as opposed to a violent, arbitrary and autocratic government. There are Syrians who claim that the people against the regime remains to this day the central feature of the uprising, but there is compelling evidence that the movement has slid towards sectarian Islamic fundamentalism intent on waging holy war.

The execution video is the most graphic illustration of deepening religious bigotry on the part of the rebels, but it is not the only one. Another recent video shows Free Syrian Army fighters burning and desecrating a Shia husseiniyah (a religious meeting house similar to a mosque) in Idlib in northern Syria. They chant prayers of victory as they set fire to the building, set fire to flags used in Shia religious processions and stamp on religious pictures. If the FSA were to repeat this assault on a revered Shia shrine such as the Sayyida Zeinab mosque in Damascus, to which Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims have flooded in the past and which is now almost encircled by rebels, then there could be an explosion of religious hatred and strife between Sunni and Shia across the Middle East. Iraqi

observers warn that it was the destruction of the Shia shrine in Samarra, north of Baghdad, by an al-Qa'ida bomb in 2006 that detonated a sectarian war in which tens of thousands died.

The analogy with Iraq is troubling for the US and British governments. They and their allies are eager for Syria to avoid repeating the disastrous mistakes they made during the Iraqi occupation. Ideally, they would like to remove the regime, getting rid of Bashar al-Assad and the present leadership, but not dissolving the government machinery or introducing revolutionary change as they did in Baghdad by transferring power from the Sunnis to the Shia and the Kurds. This provoked a furious counter-reaction from Baathists and Sunnis who found themselves marginalised and economically impoverished.

Washington wants Assad out, but is having difficulty riding the Sunni revolutionary tiger. The Western powers have long hoped for a split in the Syrian elite, but so far there is little sign of this happening. "If you take defections as a measure of political cohesion, then there haven't been any serious ones," said a diplomat in Damascus.

Syria today resembles Iraq nine years ago in another disturbing respect. I have now been in Damascus for 10 days, and every day I am struck by the fact that the situation in areas of Syria I have visited is wholly different from the picture given to the world both by foreign leaders and by the foreign media. The last time I felt like this was in Baghdad in late 2003, when every Iraqi knew the US-led occupation was proving a disaster just as George W Bush, Tony Blair and much of the foreign media were painting a picture of progress towards stability and democracy under the wise tutelage of Washington and its carefully chosen Iraqi acolytes.

The picture of Syria most common believed abroad is of the rebels closing in on the capital as the Assad government faces defeat in weeks or, at most, a few months. The Secretary General of Nato, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said last week that the regime is "approaching collapse". The foreign media consensus is that the rebels are making sweeping gains on all fronts and the end may be nigh. But when one reaches Damascus, it is to discover that the best informed Syrians and foreign diplomats say, on the contrary, that the most recent rebel attacks in the capital had been thrown back by a government counteroffensive. They say that the rebel territorial advances, which fuelled speculation abroad that the Syrian government might implode, are partly explained by a new Syrian army strategy to pull back from indefensible outposts and bases and concentrate troops in cities and towns.

At times, Damascus resounds with the boom of artillery fire and the occasional car bomb, but it is not besieged. I drove 160 kilometres north to

Homs, Syria's third largest city with a population of 2.3 million, without difficulty. Homs, once the heart of the uprising, is in the hands of the government, aside from the Old City, which is held by the FSA. Strongholds of the FSA in Damascus have been battered by shellfire and most of their inhabitants have fled to other parts of the capital. The director of the 1,000-bed Tishreen military hospital covering much of southern Syria told me that he received 15 to 20 soldiers wounded every day, of whom about 20 per cent died. This casualty rate indicates sniping, assassinations and small-scale ambushes, but not a fight to the finish.

This does not mean that the government is in a happy position. It has been unable to recapture southern Aleppo or the Old City in Homs. It does not have the troops to garrison permanently parts of Damascus it has retaken. Its overall diplomatic and military position is slowly eroding and the odds against it are lengthening, but it is a long way from total defeat, unless there is direct military intervention by foreign powers, as in Libya or Iraq, and this does not seem likely.

This misperception of the reality on the ground in Syria is fuelled in part by propaganda, but more especially by inaccurate and misleading reporting by the media where bias towards the rebels and against the government is unsurpassed since the height of the Cold War. Exaggerated notions are given of rebel strength and popularity. The Syrian government is partially responsible for this. By excluding all but a few foreign journalists, the regime has created a vacuum of information that is naturally filled by its enemies. In the event, a basically false and propagandistic account of events in Syria has been created by a foreign media credulous in using pro-opposition sources as if they were objective reporting.

The execution video is a case in point. I have not met a Syrian in Damascus who has not seen it. It is having great influence on how Syrians judge their future, but the mainstream media outside Syria has scarcely mentioned it. Some may be repulsed by its casual savagery, but more probably it is not shown because it contradicts so much of what foreign leaders and reporters claim is happening here.

18th December 2012

PERSECUTION OF THE CHRISTIANS

By Patrick Cockburn

TWO MASKED men armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles tried to kidnap a businessman called George Alumeh in the ancient Christian town of Maloula, north-west of Damascus, last week. It was not the first kidnap attempt on richer members of the Christian community here and Mr Alumeh was prepared. He fought back, first drawing a pistol, hurling his car keys away so his car could not be stolen, and then trying to escape. He got away, but was hit by a burst of gunfire from the kidnappers which has sent him to hospital with stomach, leg and hand wounds.

Father Mata Hadad, the priest of the Convent of St Tikla built into the mountain wall that towers over Maloula, tells the story to illustrate how life has become more dangerous for Christians, particularly for those thought to have money. The 10 per cent of the Syrian population who are Christians are debating with trepidation the likely outcome of the Syrian crisis and its effect on them.

The omens are not good. Every country in the Middle East seems to be becoming more Islamic and more sectarian. Syrian Christians have seen since 2003 how an outcome of the invasion of Iraq was the destruction of Christian communities in Iraq that had survived for almost 2,000 years. If the opposition National Coalition, recognised by 130 countries as the legitimate government of Syria, does ultimately take power then its most effective fighting force will be Jadhat al-Nusra, with an ideology similar to al-Qa'ida. It is prospects like this that fill Syrian Christians with alarm.

Maloula is a good place to talk about these fears. It is an hour's drive from Damascus, some 20 miles from Lebanon, and occupies a spectacular site in a cleft in the mountains. Its rocky defiles have always been a place of refuge. It was here that St Tikla, fleeing imperial soldiery, took refuge in a cave high up in the cliffs.

Maloula's isolation helped preserve its Christianity and also gave it the distinction of being the only place where Western Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is still spoken by Christians.

There is a mood of uncertainty about the future. So far there have been four kidnappings that the Syrian army post just beyond the entrance to the town has not been able to do much to prevent. Religious tourism has disappeared. "I used to sell guide books and souvenirs," says Samir Shakti, gesturing towards his small shop, "but now I sell fruit and vegetables".

Another sign of edginess is the bursts of anger against foreigners, in the present case myself, as a symbol of European powers accused of arming Islamic fundamentalists. Even the Mother Superior of the Convent, Pelagia Sayaf, demanded to know why the Europeans were aiding “people who kill with the knife”. She said many people were leaving the town (though this was denied by some others in Maloula).

Mother Superior Pelagia looked strained. She has been at her post for 23 years, ruling over 14 nuns and 33 orphans from Christian families all over the Middle East. The orphans wear a red uniform and tartan caps, giving them a surprisingly Scottish appearance. “It is going to be a sad Christmas in Maloula,” the Mother Superior said. “Sanctions are punishing the people, not the government.”

Christians may feel more frightened than other Syrians, but everybody feels vulnerable. There was no fighting on the road from Damascus to Maloula, but there are many wrecked buildings from battles in the past couple of months. Once the main road to Homs was crowded with car showrooms, but these are now closed and their plate glass windows are protected from blast damage by hurriedly built walls of concrete blocks.

Better-off Christians are able to escape abroad, but for those with little money this is a difficult option. One Armenian, who did not want his name published, said “we can go to Lebanon, but it is expensive to stay there, jobs are difficult to get and Lebanese don’t like Syrians much because our army was there for so long”. He himself was seeking Armenian citizenship.

As with others in Damascus the degree of danger felt depends on precise location. Many Christians live in Jaramana district that is now dangerous from snipers and bombers. The Christian parts of the Old City are safer, but there are electricity cuts and a shortage of diesel. So far the sufferings of the Christians of Syria are no worse than those of the Muslims, but they feel that whatever the outcome of the civil war, their future will most likely be worse than their past.

30th December 2012

SYRIA IS MANY CONFLICTS ROLLED INTO ONE. IT IS ALSO AT THE CENTRE OF TWO REGIONAL STRUGGLES

By Patrick Cockburn

‘SHAME ON you! Shame on The Independent!” boomed the voice of a Syrian intellectual in my phone half an hour after I had returned from Damascus to Beirut. He was so incoherent in his rage that it was difficult to know his precise objections, but my sin seemed to be that I had been in Damascus, talked to members of the Syrian government and concluded that it was not going to collapse any time soon.

Our conversation was not of a high intellectual calibre. After an acerbic exchange, I asked why, if he felt so strongly, did he “not stop being rude to people like me, go to Aleppo and fight beside the rebels instead of spending all your time in the cafés of Beirut”. Shortly afterwards, there was a mutual clicking-off of mobiles.

Driving the short distance between Damascus and Beirut is like shifting from one planet to another. What seems obvious and commonsensical in the Syrian capital becomes controversial and a minority viewpoint over the border in Lebanon. Outside Syria there have been repeated media and diplomatic forecasts of imminent victory for the rebels and defeat for Bashar al-Assad. Ignored in this speculation is the important point that Assad’s forces still hold, wholly or in large part, all the main cities and towns of Syria.

The difference in perceptions inside and outside Damascus is explained partly by the way the international and regional media describes the war. There are few foreign journalists in the Syrian capital because it is difficult to get visas. By way of contrast, the rebels have a highly sophisticated media operation - often also foreign-based - proffering immediate details of every incident, often backed up by compelling, if selective, YouTube footage.

Understandably, the rebel version of events is heavily biased towards their own side and demonises the Syrian government. More surprising is the willingness of the international media, based often in Beirut but also in London and New York, to regurgitate with so little scepticism what is essentially good-quality propaganda. It is as if, prior to the US presidential election in November, foreign journalists had been unable to obtain visas to enter the US and had instead decided to rely on Republican Party militants for their information on the campaign - moreover, Republican activists based in Mexico and Canada.

It is true that there is the rumble of artillery in Damascus, but the city is not besieged. The roads north to Homs and south to Deraa are open, as is the road to Beirut. When the rebels do capture a district, government artillery pounds it, killing some and forcing others to flee. For those living in undamaged areas of the capital, there is an ever-growing fear of what the future holds, combined with

increasing difficulties in day-to-day living because of cuts in electricity and a shortage of bread and cooking gas.

The rebels are making some progress on the ground but, overall, Syrians face a political and military stalemate. The rebels' assaults on Aleppo and Damascus have faltered, but the government forces do not have the strength to push them out of enclaves they have taken over. In the north, in particular, the rebels are making ground in the countryside around Hama, Idlib and Aleppo, but their advance is still slow.

The revolution has turned into a civil war. The uprising of Syrians against a cruel police state that started in March 2011 increasingly looks to Alawites, Christians, Druze and other minorities like a sectarian campaign aimed at their elimination. They watch YouTube pictures of Alawite officers being ritually decapitated and wonder what fate awaits them if Assad is defeated.

On top of this, there is a simple fear of anarchy on the part of middle-class urban Syrians who have seen Aleppo devastated and believe the same will happen to Damascus. When I arrived in the capital at the start of the month I asked a friend about the mood and he said: "Fifteen per cent for the government, 15 per cent against and 70 per cent want this war over before it ruins us all."

Can the present stalemate be broken? It does not really look like it unless the rebels receive a massive transfusion of money, training and guns, and this would not immediately have a decisive impact. Alternatively, Washington and London have long been hoping for a split in the Syrian leadership, but this has not happened. Even a string of well-publicised defections in recent weeks has not come from the core of the regime.

The furies of civil war grow ever fiercer. The war has long ago reached the stage of what in Northern Ireland we used to call "the politics of the last atrocity", in which too much blood is being spilled to allow for negotiation and compromise.

The policy of the US and its allies is increasingly bizarre: on the one hand, they recognise the opposition National Coalition as the legitimate government of Syria but, on the other, they label its most effective fighting force, the al-Nusra Front, as "a terrorist organisation" linked to al-Qa'ida. Just as in Iraq after 2003, Syria has become a magnet for jihadi fighters across the Muslim world. Washington is showing ever-decreasing enthusiasm for an outright rebel military victory that would strengthen jihadi militants and dissolve the governing machinery of the Syrian state.

A problem for Syria in this crisis is that so many conflicts are wrapped into one. Secular supporters of the uprising emphasise that it is about "the people against the regime". They downplay its sectarian nature, saying this is being

exaggerated and manipulated by the government. But sectarianism and democracy are intertwined in Syria, just as they were in Iraq. In Iraq, a fair election meant rule by the Shia majority replacing the Sunni. In Syria, it means rule by the 70 per cent of the population who are Sunni replacing the Alawites and their allies. In both countries, democratic change has had, or will have, explosive sectarian consequences, because majority rule means a change in which community holds power.

The Syrian crisis is further complicated and exacerbated by being at the centre of two long-running regional struggles. These are the growing confrontation between Sunni and Shia across the Muslim world and, secondly, the conflict that pits the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and their allies against Iran and its few friends.

It is difficult to see how the present stalemate is going to be broken. Damascus, Aleppo and Homs feel increasingly like Beirut during the 15-year civil war. Parts of these cities cling to normal life while, a few blocks away, snipers have their hideouts in buildings shattered by artillery fire. Neither side has the strength to checkmate the other. Warlords, small and big, become the real rulers of the country. In Aleppo, the commercial heart of Syria, the rebels' main preoccupation is looting the city. The militarisation of the uprising is degrading its original democratic purpose. Barring full-scale foreign intervention, a negotiated settlement is becoming inevitable though it may be a long time coming.

2013

5th January 2013

SYRIAN REGIME CAPTURES AL-QA'IDA CHIEF'S BROTHER ON 'AID MISSION'

By Kim Sengupta

THE BROTHER of the head of al-Qa'ida is reported to have been captured by regime forces in Syria. Mohamed al-Zawahiri is said to have been seized in Deraa in the south-west where he was meeting opposition activists.

Rebel fighters insisted Mohamed al-Zawahiri was engaged on a humanitarian mission and had not been involved in violent acts. They also claimed that he had, in fact, proposed a local truce to enable aid to get through.

However the Syrian regime is likely to try to capitalise on Mr Zawahiri's presence in the country - if indeed they have him under arrest - as proof of their repeated charge that the revolution has been taken over by "terrorists".

Ayman al-Zawahiri, who took over as al-Qa'ida leader following the killing of Osama bin Laden, has declared that it is the duty of Muslims to take part in a jihad against the "pernicious, cancerous regime" of Bashar al-Assad and warned the opposition against depending on the West for help.

Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist rebel group with links to al-Qai'da, has become increasingly powerful in the conflict, overshadowing the more moderate fighters, and its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, is said to be in personal contact with Ayman al-Zawahiri.

There is also evidence of groups of foreign volunteers, albeit not in large numbers, joining the uprising. Mohamed al-Zawahiri has, however, denied in the past that he wanted to get involved in the Syrian struggle. Speaking in Cairo recently, he stated that he had no plans to join the rebellion. Mr Zawahiri spent 14 years in an Egyptian prison on charges of being involved in the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and taking part in terrorist acts. But he has protested his innocence and insisted that he now devotes his time to attempt reconciliation between jihadists and mainstream Islam.

Mohamed al-Zawahari is a former military commander of the Islamic Jihad movement, but has, he has stressed, turned away from violence. He claims to have been a conduit for talks between hardline Salafist groups in the Sinai and the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government. Last year Mr Zawahiri offered to help in negotiations between the US and Islamists and maintained that his attempts at reconciliation had made him a target for hardline Islamists who have accused him of betraying the cause. There is no evidence that his offer was taken seriously by the US administration.

The reports of his presence in Syria have come from rebel factions but remain unconfirmed.

Deraa, near the Jordanian border, has, however, become a stronghold for Jabhat al-Nusra where its "emir", the organisation has announced, is Abu

Julaybib, a brother-in-law of the former leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq who was killed in an American air strike in 2006.

Jabhat al-Nusra denied reports on Al Jazeera that Abu Julaybib and Mr Julani, who has been described as an emissary of the al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawhari, were recently killed in fighting in Deraa.

7th January 2013

SYRIA'S CARNAGE IS NOT IN DISPUTE. BUT THE NUMBERS ARE IMPOSSIBLE TO QUANTIFY

By Robert Fisk

NOTICE HOW Syria's civil war casualty figures shot up by 15,000 overnight last week? The world's press had happily settled into the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights" statistic of 45,000 dead in almost three years.

But then at New Year's the UN's Human Rights Commission tells the world that the real figure is close to 60,000. Come again? Did 15,000 Syrians climb into a mass grave on 1 January, 2013?

First, however, a health warning. No-one disputes the carnage in Syria. But figuring out just how many souls die in a civil war - and whose "side" they were on when they expired - is a mighty dangerous game.

News desks beware, for history suggests that the "bad guy" must always be held responsible for the greatest number of deaths - at least in the Middle East - and that civilians who become "fighters" end up in civilian death lists, while men and women killed by the "good guys" don't get on lists at all. It's not just a question of lies, damned lies and statistics; in a war, each side produces its own rules for the dead. And none of them tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

For example, how many Syrian soldiers, pro-government militiamen, pro-government supporters and civilian sympathisers are counted among the statistics. SANA, the Syrian government news agency, once spoke of 2,000 dead among Assad's military. Assad's own officers suggested to me in Damascus last year that this figure had reached at least 6,000. I suspect it may be nearer to 10,000 pro-Assad soldiers who have now been killed. So does this mean that at least one sixth of the UN figures actually comprise the army which is accused by the West of committing atrocities? And if this is true, how many more "pro-Assad" civilians should be added to the list? Hundreds of recent victims of the Syrian war have been Christians - who could scarcely rank among the insurgents. Does this account for one figure, which puts pro-government dead as more than 13,000?

One reason, of course, why the pro-opposition "Syrian Observatory" suspects the UN figure is inflated is that the ladies and gentlemen of the Human Rights Commission want to heap more coals of derision upon the slumbering - and certainly impotent - UN Security Council. The UN, after all, is not a committee of wise men, but a monumental political beast, not unlike a giant donkey. Give it the carrot of a bigger mass grave and it might plod a little faster.

So how many rebels have been killed in Syria? We are told that almost 5,500 military defectors are among the dead. So are 372 Palestinians, killed in inter-Palestinian fighting around the largest refugee camp in Damascus.

It’s sobering to remember how we have wrestled with the same kind of statistics in the past. In “our” Iraq war from 2003-2009 - note how we assume the conflict ended when “we” abandoned the country, although another 4,500 Iraqis were killed in 2012 alone - every blue-eyed Western casualty was meticulously listed. But the Western occupation authorities went along with General Tommy Franks’ obscene invention about the Iraqi dead, that “we don’t do body counts”. The Pentagon was later revealed to have kept a list of civilian dead up to 2005 - the total was 25,902 - but these figures were slyly contrived. They listed only civilians killed by insurgents: unarmed Iraqis killed by Western military forces found no place in the Pentagon’s figures.

But you can go further back. Armenians claim - with good reason - that a million and a half of their people were victims of the 1915 Turkish genocide. But the Turks still peddle the myth that these figures were falsified, and that Armenians died in the “chaos” of internal conflict during the First World War.

And what about the Second World War? Did 40 million die, as we used to believe, or was it 70 million (more likely if you include the Sino-Japanese war)? Against this hecatomb, a 15,000 discrepancy in the killing fields of Syria is hardly surprising.

7th January 2013

THE REAL TARGET OF ASSAD'S THEATRICAL DISPLAY WAS HIS ARMY

By Robert Fisk

BASHAR AL-ASSAD was really talking to his soldiers yesterday - and the ghosts of their 12,000 dead. The faces of hundreds of these government “martyrs”, coloured and bleached out on to a massive red-white-and-black Syrian flag, paraded on the wall of the Assad Opera House in Damascus just behind the President. It was, perhaps, ghoulish. Theatrical, of course. It must have taken days to stitch this lot together. But the message for Syrians was clear enough: the army is the real bedrock of power.

He saluted them, he praised them, “the officers, warrant officers, brave soldiers”. He never mentioned the Baath party, gave short shrift to the hated government militias. But the Syrian military - the Syrian Arab Army - might as well have stood with Assad on the 34-metre stage. The names of their dead, he said, would be “written in letters and lights of fire.” And their dead faces stared down at the audience with what might have been reproach.

Those who hate Assad will remind us that Hitler’s most important speech came at the Kroll Opera House in Berlin. Bashar al-Assad’s most important speech came yesterday in the opera house he opened scarcely nine years ago. The last work to be performed at the Kroll - and among the first at the “Assad” - was The Marriage of Figaro. All speeches are theatrical. The comparisons end there.

Hitler was declaring war on the US. Assad was continuing his war with armed “terrorists”. But - pity the West - Assad is far from Hitler’s megalomania, and, boring though it appeared to his opponents, his address contained some intriguing clues about what is going on in the Baathist halls of power.

His odd reference to the battle for Ras el-Ein was important. This tiny conflict in Hassakeh was fought between the Kurdish Democratic Union - which tends to ally itself with the regime - and the Free Syrian Army and its allies who have alienated and sometimes insulted the Kurds. Assad was praising his non-Arab Syrian friends, suggesting that armed Syrians need not remain alongside his opponents. Question: is the Syrian leader trying to win back bits of his territory by popular appeal rather than military firepower?

Much of the stuff, the “national dialogue”, border security and the “national pact”, we’d heard before. Familiar was Assad’s assertion that Russia and China were the best thing since friend bread. And I was a bit taken aback by his claim that the ideology of jihadists, their desire to destroy Syria and their foreign backers, meant that he had no-one to talk to among them. Isn’t this what Netanyahu says about Hamas?

But it was the army which took centre stage. Not the party. Not the family.

But the military, which the West regards as little more than war criminals. Did the young civilian men - struggling and fighting to mob their boss as he made his exit with rather too much reality for the security goons - realise this? I bet Assad did. The West will headline the obvious: “I will go one day, but the country stays.” The truth? Intriguing. The man’s not out of the ring. But nor is his army. The war, alas, goes on.

7th January 2013

ASSAD HINTS AT TALKS WITH WEST - BUT NOT WITH ‘REBEL PUPPETS’

By Kim Sengupta

BASHAR AL-ASSAD used his first public speech for seven months - trailed by his regime as outlining a peace deal to end Syria's bloody civil war - to reject any dialogue with opponents whom he described as "armed criminals, enemies of God and puppets of the West".

But the Syrian President appeared to offer the prospect of talks with the Western powers he has accused of trying to dismember the country, saying that his government was not rejecting diplomatic moves and wanted to negotiate with the "master not the servants".

During his hour-long speech - with supporters chanting "God, Bashar and Syria is enough" - Mr Assad also proposed a new constitution and elections preceded by a national reconciliation conference.

But this would not include "those who betrayed the state and taken up arms", he stressed, interpreted as meaning that the rebels can have no part in the process.

The opposition and its international backers dismissed the speech as offering nothing of value and reiterated that there could be no ceasefire while Mr Assad and his coterie, accused of human rights abuse, remain in office.

Attempts by the regime to hold talks with the US and European states are unlikely to succeed, with increasing numbers of countries in the West, the Middle East and beyond recognising the opposition as the legitimate representative of Syria.

David Cameron said in London: "My message to Assad is that he should go. He has the most phenomenal amount of blood on his hands."

The EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner, Catherine Ashton, said: "We would look carefully if there is anything new in the speech, but we maintain our position that Assad has to step aside and allow for a political transition."

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutogl, whose country is hosting more than 100,000 Syrian refugees, said: "His remarks are just repetitions of what he's said all along. They are the same promises he made to us. As Assad no longer has the representative authority over the Syrian people, his words have lost persuasiveness.

"A transition period needs to be completed swiftly through talks with representatives of the Syrian nation."

Mr Assad accused the rebels, who control swaths of territory including half of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, of stealing from people, depriving children of education and creating electricity and water shortages.

While insisting that his forces were winning, Mr Assad called for a full

mobilisation of the population. “We are now in a state of war in every sense of the word,” Mr Assaid said.

“This war targets the Syria using a handful of Syrians and many foreigners. Thus, this is a war to defend the nation.

“We meet today and suffering is overwhelming Syrian land. There is no place for joy in any corner of the country in the absence of security and stability. I look at the eyes of Syria’s children and I don’t see any happiness.”

Outlining his “peace initiative”, Mr Assad said: “The first part of a political solution would require regional powers to stop funding and arming [the rebels], an end to terrorism and controlling the borders.”

Negotiations can then begin, he said, but the regime reserved the right to take military action to “defend national institutions”.

“We never rejected a political solution... but with whom should we talk? With those who have extremist ideology who only understand the language of terrorism? Or should we with negotiate puppets whom the West brought? We negotiate with the master not with the servants.”

The Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Miqdad, is currently holding talks in Iran, whose Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, is due to visit Cairo later in the week. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi brokered the ceasefire deal between Hamas and Israel. Cairo is also home to the new opposition umbrella group, the Syrian National Coalition.

Separately, the UN and Arab League envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, has been pushing a plan approved at an international conference in June that would create a transitional government. But the plan leaves President Assad’s role in a future Syrian political landscape unclear.

9th January 2013

NEW FEARS ON SYRIA'S CHEMICAL WEAPONS

By Kim Sengupta

THE PROSPECT of Syria's chemical arsenal falling into the hands of Islamists who are fighting in the country's bloody civil war is a matter of mounting concern for the West.

General Sir David Richards, the head of the British military, has raised his worries in Whitehall in recent weeks and European and American officials have held a series of meetings with governments in the region about the issue.

Although the American and British governments still think a beleaguered regime on its last legs may use weapons of mass destruction, they also fear there is a danger of jihadist fighters gaining possession of stockpiles. The Obama administration has proscribed the Al-Nusra Brigade, one of the strongest of the rebel groups and one which declares itself affiliated to al-Qa'ida, as a terrorist organisation.

The possibility that President Bashar al-Assad may unleash chemical weapons was one of the key reasons given for the deployment this week of Nato Patriot missiles to the Turkish border. At the end of last year Barack Obama warned that the use of chemical weapons would mean the Assad regime had crossed a "red line" and must bear the consequences. The regime appeared to have stopped in its tracks in preparing such attacks and the US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta, stated subsequently that the threat has been reduced.

An SAS team is believed to have observed an exercise carried out by US and Jordanian special forces in preparation for any operation which may have to be undertaken to secure the stockpiles. Defence sources in London stated there are no plans at present to deploy British personnel for such a mission.

There is bound to be public scepticism towards claims about the Syrian regime and weapons of mass destruction after the exposure of similar false reports about Saddam Hussein's arsenal used by the Bush and Blair administrations to justify invading Iraq.

Western officials insist, however, that there is ample evidence that the Damascus regime has the means to carry out chemical warfare and also evidence, of a more limited nature, that it has a biological warfare programme. One cause of apprehension is that the regime's command and control of WMD has been severely damaged by casualties and defections.

A series of meetings have taken place involving military personnel from the US, France, countries in the region and Israel, whose Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, according to media reports in Jerusalem, met King Abdullah II of Jordan in Amman to discuss the matter. One aspect of Israeli concern is that Hezbollah, some of whose fighters have been fighting for the Assad regime, may

be able to smuggle chemical weapons into Lebanon.

The vulnerability of the chemical stock is believed to have been discussed between American and Russian officials on a number of occasions. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, subsequently stated that the chemical stock was being kept in two centres and it would be “suicidal” for the Assad regime, which his government has supported throughout the uprising, to use them.

General Adnan Sillu, the recently defected former head of Syria’s chemical weapons programme, has claimed that the regime has already used sarin gas in an attack last month on the Al-Bayyadh district of Homs.

The opposition Free Syrian Army maintains that the regime has used chemical weapons on 18 separate occasions. Western officials maintain, however, that photographs and testimonies they have received do not back up the charge.

An independent chemical and biological analyst, Dr Sally Leivesley, said: “If there really was an attack involving sarin, then one would expect a significant number of fatalities. From what one hears about the symptoms it’s possible that a harassing agent rather than a nerve agent was used.”

Dr Leivesley, who trained as a scientific adviser with the Home Office, said: “Reports of Syria’s bio-warfare programme go back to the mid-90s and there was a report to the US Congress in 2004 and Nato reports. The material on all this is interesting because it was put together a long time before current events and thus one can’t say that it has been put together to fit a particular agenda.”

Problems with biological agents, Dr Leivesley held, may start by accident rather than the design of either the regime or rebels. “Pathogens such as anthrax, plague, tularemia, botulinum, smallpox, aflatoxin, cholera and ricin can become exposed by people stumbling across them in insecure bases.”

11th January 2013

AT THIS RATE, ASSAD COULD BE STILL IN POWER A YEAR FROM NOW

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SYRIAN president Bashar al-Assad will have no place in any transitional government that follows the civil war in Syria, the UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said this week. But if there are no negotiations, then the Syrian leader stands a good chance of still being in power in Damascus this time next year. On the ground, rebels are making gains, though not enough to end the political and military stalemate. Neither they nor the government forces hold a winning hand.

The Syrian government's position looks more fragile when viewed from Beirut, London or Washington than it does in Damascus. Last month, I drove the 100 miles from the capital to Homs, the city that was once the heart of the uprising, and heard only a few shots fired on the road. In the city itself, the third largest in Syria, I heard no gunfire, though the Old City is held by the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) and most other districts by the government.

The military tactics of both sides ignore the well-being of civilians in the cities. Armed rebel units move into the suburbs, whether they are welcome or not. In some places, like the large township of Douma on the outskirts of Damascus, the Muslim Brotherhood has always been strong and the FSA is popular. In others, particularly in Aleppo, the arrival of the FSA is regarded with dread.

Local people know what will happen next. Government artillery opens fire and bombs are dropped from the air. The population flees and the contested district becomes a ghost town. The rebels loot government offices, schools, factories and shops. The strongest support for the revolution is in the impoverished Sunni countryside and the city slums. The looting reminded me of Baghdad in 2003 when the poor and deprived Shia of Sadr City took advantage of the fall of Saddam Hussein to wreak social revenge, ransacking everything from the palaces of Baathist leaders to the showcases in the Natural History Museum.

The scale of the looting, and the inability of the rebels to restore regular life in the urban districts they control, strengthens the government. As an alternative to the Baathist police state, the rebels look decreasingly attractive, particularly to those who have anything to lose. For the 30 per cent of Syrians who are Alawite, Christian, Druze or any other minority, the FSA seems like a Sunni militia from which they can expect little mercy. The rebels respond that it is government death squads and propaganda that have forced a popular revolution into sectarian channels.

Could anything happen to change the present balance of power? Over the past

year, the rebels have hoped that there would be foreign intervention along the lines of Nato's air support for the insurgents in Libya. This is clearly not happening because of US and British fears of entanglement in another Middle East war.

Patrick Seale, the author and journalist who is an expert on Syria, says the conflict might become like the Algerian civil war in the 1990s when 200,000 Algerians died but the government stayed in power. But a great difference between Syria and Algeria is that the Syrian rebels have far more outside support, notably from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. The government's military weakness is shown by its failure to launch a sustained counteroffensive in Aleppo to recapture parts of the city it has lost.

All this makes the Russian proposal for negotiations sound increasingly sensible. The rebel insistence that Assad's departure be a precondition for talks is unrealistic since he controls most of the Syrian population. So far, there is little sign, unlike in Libya, of divisions within the inner core of the regime that might hasten its end, however dim its long-term prospects.

Forecasts by foreign leaders that the Assad regime is going to collapse of its own accord are in effect predictions of a rebel military victory. This is not going to come any time soon, bar massive foreign intervention. If the war is to end at all, it will be by negotiation. "There is no military solution," as Mr Brahimi said. "The solution should not wait until 2014. It should be in 2013."

11th February 2013

IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH TO MAKE PROTESTERS BEHAVE LIKE DICTATORS

By Robert Fisk

THE SYRIAN civil war has “spilled over” into... Canada. Now you might say that the land Generals Wolfe and Montcalm died for on the Plains of Abraham doesn’t have a lot in common with the Arab world. Canada, like America, is a land of the free and a refuge, indeed, for Arabs fleeing their dictators. This may be one of the reasons why ailing, 85-year-old Paula Coulton was ready to hear me speak in her Ontario town - itself frozen in -18C this winter - during a 10-city lecture tour. But Canada, alas, is also the land of political correctness and, I suspect, a certain amount of fear.

I should have guessed this when I was told that a group of Arab Muslim residents of Ottawa, Montreal and London, Ontario, objected to my reports of the Syrian civil war; so enraged were they that one faction in Ottawa sent an extraordinary, imperishable email to the organisers of my lectures. “If you believe in free speech,” it said, “please cancel Robert Fisk’s tour.” Bravo!

At one venue I was due to speak in a mosque about the Arab Awakening - and the gents and ladies of this particular Muslim clique managed to persuade their brothers and sisters that it might be a good idea if I did not speak there. The town’s volunteers, a fine bunch of folk with years of sterling work behind them in promoting debates on the real Middle East, felt they had no option but to step back from the mosque venue. And no other hall was available for my talk that night.

Of course, I’ve a pretty good idea why they didn’t want me to speak in Canada. While The Independent scrupulously covers both sides in the Syrian conflict - among my first reports, two years ago, was a description of Syrian militia cruelty in a Sunni village near the northern Lebanese border - opponents of Bashar al-Assad’s vicious regime did not like the fact my last reports came from the Syrian government side of the civil war front lines. They included interviews with Syrian army officers and details of the killing of civilians by armed rebels, as well as by the regime.

Nothing new in this. In the Lebanese civil war and in Northern Ireland, Christians, Palestinians, the IRA and the British Army variously accused me of being pro-terrorist, pro-Zionist, pro-British and pro-IRA. But these Muslim lads and lassies had gone a stage further. They were adopting precisely the same tactics as ruthless regimes used in the past against myself and other foreign correspondents. Two decades ago, I was banned from Bahrain because I reported on secret police torture, carried out - believe it or not - in an institution run by a former British Special Branch officer. Mubarak’s goons harassed me in Cairo when I reported on government torture - fellow prisoners were forced to rape

each other - at the Tora jail complex. The Bahrain press cartooned me as a rabid dog. The Egyptian press claimed I was “a black crow pecking at the corpse of Egypt”.

Even more shocking was that the Muslim group was also copying exactly the methods used by lobbyists claiming to represent Israel several years ago. After Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was prevented from speaking at Concordia University in Montreal - quite shamefully, of course - a supposedly pro-Israeli organisation published a series of bright-red posters claiming that if I was allowed to speak in Concordia the following week, anti-Semitism on the campus would increase. I challenged this nonsense by tearing down their libellous placards in front of a television crew, spoke to a full house at the university and received a standing ovation.

Not so now in one Canadian town. There these same pressures worked for the Arab Muslims who wanted to prevent me speaking. The venue was changed to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where I spoke to a far larger audience - and in a Catholic college. Another victory for Islam. Along with the fact that Mrs Coulton - in the words of her sister - was too sick to travel to hear me speak in Toronto after my earlier talk was cancelled.

All the other lectures I delivered on time - and in the scheduled venues - but I have to say that this doesn’t particularly matter. Fisk is no Edward Said or Noam Chomsky and doesn’t pretend to be. But it was an instructive lesson to find that Muslim Arabs living in Canada, resident in Canada and, I’m sure, in many cases citizens of Canada, forgot the basic freedoms of the land in which they have chosen to be. Once anger overcame them, they preferred the suppression tactics of the dictators they hate.

19th February 2013

REVEALED: RUSSIA'S DOUBLE DEALING ON ARMS TO ASSAD

By Kim Sengupta

RUSSIA HAS been accused by Western diplomats of reneging on a pledge to stop supplying arms to the Syrian regime. The assurances made over a month ago were presented by British officials as a sign that the Kremlin was distancing itself from President Bashar al-Assad and his ruling coterie.

The flow of arms has, however, continued unhindered with the Russians stressing that there was no United Nations prohibition on supplies and it was simply fulfilling its contractual obligations. As well as air- and naval-defence systems, the Kremlin may now be preparing to send Yak-130 jets which can be fitted with missiles to carry out ground attacks, according to American and European officials.

The Syrian regime has extensively used warplanes to carry out raids on heavily populated areas, leading to dozens of civilian casualties. Russia's state arms agency holds a $550m contract to supply 36 of the Yaks, which are trainers but can also be used on combat missions. Last year, a Russian-operated ship carrying helicopter gunships and air-defence missiles was forced to turn back to Russia, after its British insurers withdrew coverage. The aircraft were subsequently sent through a different shipping company.

While the Assad regime continues to receive weapons, from Iran as well as Russia, a British attempt to provide military aid to the Syrian rebels failed at a European Union meeting in Brussels yesterday.

There was agreement, instead, on an amendment which would allow more "non-lethal" assistance to the opposition. But the outcome of the meeting in Brussels made it very clear that David Cameron's Government had been isolated in its efforts to strengthen militarily the moderate revolutionary factions, who have been increasingly sidelined by jihadist groups receiving arms and money from backers in the Gulf states.

Russia has insisted that it is within its rights to keep arming the regime as there are no UN resolutions prohibiting this. Anatoly Isaikin, the director of Rosoboronexport, said: "In the absence of [UN] sanctions, we are continuing to fulfil our contract obligations. We are mostly shipping air-defence systems and repair equipment intended for various branches of the military."

However, it is the Syrian regime's air defences, overhauled and upgraded with Russian help, which have been a powerful deterrent against the West declaring a "no-fly zone" of the type which, after it became a bombing campaign, brought down Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

Western officials also claim that Moscow has refused to provide full details of the contractual obligations they have to fulfil and there is also evidence that the

regime is getting further Russian arms through third parties.

Critics point to the British proposal on arming the rebels as an example of lack of clarity in the Western approach. The move had been opposed from the outset by Germany and Scandinavian countries as well as by Baroness Ashton, the British head of EU foreign affairs. “There is no shortage of arms in Syria,” said Jean Asselborn, the Luxembourger Foreign Minister.

The French, who had backed the UK position, have become more lukewarm since the troops they sent to Mali found Western arms supplied to Libyan rebels in the jihadist arsenal. Yesterday, the Hollande government seemed satisfied with the agreement on non-lethal aid. “Technical assistance and protection of civilians will be easier,” said Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius.

In the US, the outgoing Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, had advocated arming the rebels. The new defence secretary, Leon Panetta, also backed the move and stated that the head of US military, General Martin Dempsey, was also on board. However, General Dempsey and Barack Obama have publicly urged caution in the past over getting entangled in Syria.

The Russians, on the other hand, insist that their opposition to UN resolutions against the Assad regime, bitterly criticised by the US and Britain, has not stopped the building of growing links with the Syrian opposition.

Ahmad al-Khatib, the head of the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition Forces - set up at the instigation of the West to replace the Syrian National Council, which had become faction-ridden - has offered to hold direct talks with the regime.

Yesterday, Ali Haidar, Mr Assad’s minister for national reconciliation, responded: “We, the government and me personally, will meet, without exceptions, Syrian opposition groups inside and outside Syria.”

It remains to be seen whether the talks will actually take place, but UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman held the offers were “the most promising thing we’ve heard on Syria recently”.

28th February 2013

BRITAIN CAN GIVE MILITARY SUPPORT TO SYRIAN REBELS

By Kim Sengupta and Loveday Morris

BRITAIN AND its allies will be able to provide training for rebels fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime and supply them with military support, including armoured cars, under major changes which are due to be made to European Union sanctions rules on Syria.

Political agreement has already been reached in Brussels on a UK proposal to allow the dispatch of "non-lethal" aid to the revolutionaries. Steps to protect civilians with a formal declaration are expected by the end of the week, The Independent understands.

Assurances that help was on its way will be made to the Syrian Opposition Council at a meeting of the Friends of Syria - a coalition which includes the US, Britain, Germany and France - in Rome today. Its leader, Moaz Khatib, had threatened to boycott the talks in protest at Western inaction, and agreed to attend only after a personal plea from the US Secretary of State, John Kerry.

The changes to the EU embargo -which will also allow items such as body armour and advanced communications systems to be sent - are expected to be for a trial period of three months.

Despite the potential support from the West, last night some activists insisted that non-lethal assistance was pointless. Khalid Saleh, a spokesman for the Opposition Council, said: "What Syrians need is lethal assistance that [will] shift the balance of power. Body armour... will not bring this conflict to an end. This is the last chance for the international community to show commitment. Every time we go and all we get is talk."

Senior diplomatic sources stress Britain has not decided what equipment it will dispatch, or whether it will become involved in training fighters. But having the legal framework to take such action would, it is felt, be of immense value as President Assad's forces continue their brutal assault. Recent Scud attacks in Aleppo killed around 140 people, while close to a million Syrians have fled across borders.

The EU meeting in Brussels last week rejected a request from British Foreign Secretary William Hague to alter the rules to allow weapons to be sent to the rebels. The Assad regime has, by contrast, continued to receive arms from Russia and Iran. The intention had been to help, in particular, "moderate" rebel groups which have been handicapped while bands of increasingly powerful

extremist Islamist fighters have been receiving supplies from their backers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

But the move ran into opposition from, among others, the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and countries including Germany and Spain. "There is no lack of weapons in Syria, rather the contrary. More arms will mean more deaths," said Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's Foreign Minister. However, the meeting agreed to provide more non-lethal support and technical assistance to protect civilians. The French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, whose government had supported the UK initiative, said non-lethal support was an "easier" compromise, but refused to elaborate on the type of technical assistance London and Paris will consider.

It has been reported that the US is also considering supplying the rebels with body armour and armoured cars, and is planning to send them humanitarian assistance directly, rather than via aid agencies.

This would represent a significant change of tack. Last year Barack Obama rejected calls to arm the rebels from his then Secretaries of State and Defence, Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta, as well as David Petraeus, the former head of the CIA, as he believed the arms would fall into the hands of jihadists.

Mr Kerry said in London this week: "We are determined that the Syrian opposition is not going to be dangling in the wind, wondering where the support is. We are not coming to Rome simply to talk." US officials said, however, that the focus was still on a negotiated settlement, with President Assad stepping down.

Mr Kerry met the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, on Tuesday for talks the Kremlin described as "constructive". Russia has offered to stage face to face talks between Syria and the opposition, proposed by the Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Mouallem.

Mr Lavrov accused the rebels of failing to grasp the chance for peace: "We spoke about it during our meeting [with Mr Kerry]. We count that the opposition... will also speak in favour of the dialogue. We will try to ensure that [the talks] can start as soon as possible."

Going into today's meeting Mr Saleh said the opposition has three main demands: the lifting of arms embargoes to allow the provision of defensive equipment; further political recognition for the coalition, including allowing it to open international consulates; and increasing the flow of humanitarian aid.

Arms continue to be shipped to the rebels through clandestine channels. Weaponry, much of it left over from the Yugoslav civil war, is reportedly being sent from Croatia, paid for, supposedly, by Saudi Arabia.

2nd March 2013

PITY WILLIAM HAGUE, HIS REVOLT'S BEEN HIJACKED

By Robert Fisk

I SNIFF treachery. Because - let's be frank about it - something is going very wrong with the narrative of the Syrian war. Our Western lords and masters - as untrustworthy today as they were when they sold Poland to Stalin at Yalta - have started to talk much less about their visceral desire to destroy Bashar al-Assad and much more about their fear of the corrosive presence of al-Qa'ida within the rebel forces fighting to remove the Syrian president. As the Syrian tragedy deepens, so our moral Western policy towards the damned of this ghastly war has turned into a betrayal of its people.

Forget about Rome this week and our "pledge" - I love this news agency gunk - "to empower [sic] the Syrian people" and support the "supreme military command" (which does not exist) of the Free Syrian Army with bandages and radios.

The whole sorry story began, I think, exactly a year ago when La Clinton - mercifully now absent from US policymaking until the next presidential elections - made an astonishingly cruel statement to CBS television in Rabat. Squeaking about the refusal of the Syrians of Damascus and Aleppo to join in the uprising against Assad, she then - apparently referring to a recent statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the post-Bin Laden al-Qa'ida leader, in which he said he supported the Syrian opposition - asked: "Are we supporting al-Qaida in Syria? Are we supporting Hamas in Syria?"

Infinitely more frightful was the pitiful version of Lord Palmerston who now masquerades as our foreign secretary and who - just before he arrived in Beirut to truffle through potential oil discoveries off the Lebanese coast - gave a speech to the Royal United Services Institute which positively reeked of Potsdam-like duplicity.

While claiming that Britain had not lost faith in the Arab revolutions - Churchill said as much about his fidelity to Poland after handing the country to Stalin - William Hague said that Syria was the most serious case of a revolt being "hijacked" by militants. The country, he claimed, was "the No 1 destination for jihadists anywhere in the world today".

Incredible. This might almost have been a speech by Bashar al-Assad himself, who has been repeating this for almost two years about "al-Qa'ida terrorists" in Syria. Even putting aside the fact that Mali was supposed to have assumed the mantle of "terror centre" less than two months ago, this was an extraordinary statement for the pitiful Hague to make.

He babbled on about UK and other European extremists in Syria, then added: "They may not pose a threat to us when they first go to Syria, but if they survive,

some may return ideologically hardened and with experience of weapons and explosives. The longer the conflict continues [in Syria], the greater this danger will become."

Ergo, I suspect, let's bring this war to a close. Why else are Hague and Lavrov now talking about "dialogue" between rebels and regime? But the most recent reports from rebel-held Syrian territory do, indeed, speak of looting and sectarian kidnappings and killing, ransom and retribution, of what one report from Atme - a rebel base on the border with Turkey - speaks of as a "beautiful" revolt marred by corruption. "The real revolution in Syria is over. We have been betrayed," Abu Mohamed (described by Agence France-Presse as a "respected rebel leader") has said. There are countless accounts, even from government-held parts of Damascus, of hostage-taking for both cash and political demands.

The injection of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters and other proto-jihadis has fouled the secular nature of the battle so badly that Assad's original claims that al-Qa'ida was the regime's enemy is beginning to look frighteningly true. There have been battles between the Free Syrian Army and al-Nusra and between al-Nusra's own commandos.

Arab journalists who loathe Assad have been all too aware of this, not least since al-Nusra apparently claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Salamieh which killed dozens of civilians. "This movement with its criminal terrorist methods and doubtful patriotism must not be allowed inside the revolution," Hazem Saghieh wrote in Al-Hayat. "It closes the doors on the foreign nations which could help the revolution. It turns away from the revolution the Syrian minorities - Alawite, Kurd, Christian Druze and Ismaeli - as well as those among the Sunnis who believe in a civil state." Too true.

Goran Tomasevic, the award-winning Reuters photographer, filed a brilliant dispatch from Damascus only last week. "Rebel fighters in Damascus are disciplined, skilled and brave," he wrote. "I saw them… mount complex mass attacks, manage logistics, treat their wounded - and die before my eyes. But as constant, punishingly accurate mortar, tank and sniper fire attest, President Bashar Assad's soldiers on the other side… are also well drilled, courageous - and much better armed."

And there you have it. Both sides still think they can win - so the war goes on. But the West is in retreat. Forget support for the rebels. Even the gutless Obama has stood up to his generals and forbidden them from arming the good guys/bad guys. Wait now for some Yalta-like bleating for talks between Assad and his enemies. "So terrible is the bloodshed that even our hatred of Assad must take second place to common humanity"; wouldn't that do as a template for Palmerston-Hague?

And at the risk of being proved wrong in just weeks, I must add a small addendum. I came across a ferociously anti-Assad friend in Beirut last week. “He might survive, I think,” she said. Indeed.

4th March 2013

WEST HAS NEVER UNDERSTOOD SYRIA - JUST TAKE A LOOK AT THE HISTORY BOOKS

By Robert Fisk

IN SYRIA these days, we are resorting to our racist little maps. The Alawite mountains and the town of Qardaha, home of the Assad family - colour it dark red. Will this be the last redoubt of the 12 per cent Alawite minority, to which the President, below, belongs, when the rebels “liberate” Damascus? We always like these divisive charts in the Middle East. Remember how Iraq was always Shias at the bottom, Sunnis in the middle, Kurds at the top? We used to do this with Lebanon: Shias at the bottom (as usual), Shias in the east, Sunnis in Sidon and Tripoli, Christians east and north of Beirut. Never once has a Western newspaper shown a map of Bradford with Muslim and non-Muslim areas marked off, or a map of Washington divided into black and white people. No, that would suggest that our Western civilisation could be divvied up between tribes or races. Only the Arab world merits our ethnic distinctions.

The problem, of course, is that Syria - as secular and assimilated as any Arab nation before its current tragedy - doesn’t lend itself to this neat distribution of religious minorities. Aleppo was always a home to Christians, Sunnis and Alawites. The Alawites were “citified” many years ago - hence their presence in Damascus - and many of them came not from the mountains but from Alexandretta, which is now in the Turkish province of Hatay. Yet even if we know where they live, there has been precious little research into this community - save, perhaps, in France.

For now Sabrina Mervin, the French author and researcher, has put together a remarkable document in which she traces the history of a people who used to call themselves “Nusayris” - after the founder of their faith, Muhammad Ibn Nusayr - and whose religion was founded “in the bosom of Shiism” in the 9th and 10th centuries. Mervin’s work, published now in that splendid French institution Le Monde Diplomatique, should be essential reading for every Syria “expert”, for it suggests that the Alawites are victims of a long history of religious dissidents, persecution and repression.

As long ago as 1903, the Belgian-born Jesuit and Orientalist, Henri Lammens, was identifying the Alawites as former Christians - until he met a Sheikh who insisted he belonged to Shia Islam. Lammens, a typical imperialist, suggested that the Alawites - who appeared to believe in the transmigration of souls and a trinity (the Prophet Muhammad, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and Salman, a companion) - might become Christians “which would allow France to interfere in your favour”. Indeed, France did indeed show favour to the Alawites in later years.

The Ottomans had tried to integrate the Alawites who, according to Ms

Mervin, were exploited by Sunni landowners and often illiterate. By 1910, their religious dignitaries were opening relations with the Shias of southern Lebanon and Iraq, calling themselves “Alawites” after Ali and distancing themselves from Nusayr. The French mandate authorities in Syria went along with this, not least because they wished to divide them from the Sunnis. Popular myth would have it that the Alawites collaborated with the French while the Sunnis fought for independence. In fact, one prominent Alawite, Saleh al-Ali, fought the French army in the mountains between December of 1918 and 1921 - and was subsequently recognised as a national hero by the first independent Syrian government in 1946. Another prominent Alawite, a would-be shepherd-saint called Sulieman al-Mourchid, met a less happy end, hanged in 1946 for treason.

The Alawites were themselves divided over French rule, some favouring the short-lived Alawite state created by Paris, others the Syrian nationalism espoused by the Sunnis. The latter stood behind Sulieman al-Ahmed, claiming adherence to Islam and in 1936 publishing a text stating that they were Muslim Arabs; and successfully seeking a “fatwa” from the grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, which included the Alawites in the “umma”. And yes, this was the same Haj-Amin who would meet Hitler - though this had nothing to do with the Alawites.

Supported by Iraqi Shias, the Alawites founded their own religious institutions, constructed mosques and published works on their faith, receiving the acknowledgement of the Mufti of Syria in 1952.

This rapprochement with the Shias continued under the first Alawite president - Hafez, father of Bashar - and in 1973, Imam Moussa Sadr, the most politicised of Shia leaders in Lebanon (later believed to have been killed on the orders of a certain Muammar Gaddafi), declared that the Alawites were indeed Muslims; Shia religious schools were then opened at Sayeda Zeinab in the suburbs of Damascus - thus the story of the “shia-isation” of Syria. And henceforth Alawites ascended in the Syrian military and in the Baath party, albeit that most Syrian generals were Sunni.

Yet within the Alawite community, not everyone found favour. Tribal organisations and religious influence, according to Ms Mervin, declined under the Assads. So too did the great traditional families. Poverty still undermines the Alawite hinterland north of Damascus. Even to speak of the Alawites in sectarian terms has been, of course, forbidden.

Cruellest of all was the habit adopted by Syrians of referring to the Alawites with the code word “Germans” - in Arabic, “alawiyyin” (Alawites) and “almaniyyin” (Germans) are similar. What’s in a name? But please, no more maps.

14th March 2013

CONFLICT IN SYRIA CREATES NEW WAVE OF BRITISH JIHADISTS

By Kim Sengupta

THE BLOODY uprising against Bashar al-Assad is creating a new wave of jihadists in Britain, with Syria now the main destination for militant Muslims wishing to fight abroad, The Independent has learnt.

Syria has replaced Pakistan and Somalia as the preferred front line where Islamist volunteers can experience immediate combat with relatively little official scrutiny, security agencies said.

The worrying development has been taking place as extremist groups, some with links to al-Qa'ida, have become the dominant force in the uprising against the Damascus regime.

More than 100 British Muslims are believed to have gone to fight in Syria with the numbers continuing to rise. The situation presents a unique problem for Western security and intelligence services. In Syria, unlike Pakistan and Somalia, they have to keep track of jihadists who are being backed by Britain and its allies.

The Syrian rebels are drawing recruits from a variety of national backgrounds in the UK. Only a handful of those who have returned from the fighting there have been arrested and all for a specific offence: their alleged role in the kidnapping of a British freelance photographer, John Cantlie, in Idlib province last summer. Others who have been taking part in the armed struggle against the Assad regime are not deemed to be doing anything illegal.

Mr Cantlie, along with a Dutch colleague, Jeroen Oerlemans, are believed to have been abducted by a group called al-Dawa al-Islamiyya, which encouraged British and other Western volunteers to join the struggle against the Assad regime. The hostages were rescued by moderate fighters.

Abo Mohamad al-Shami, the leader of al-Dawa al-Islamiyya, was executed five weeks later, supposedly by the Farouq Brigade, a unit of the Free Syrian Army, which had become alarmed at the activities of the extremists.

But since then the Islamists, and in particular one group, Jabhat al-Nusra - which proclaims links with al-Qa'ida and has been proscribed by the US administration as a terrorist group - have grown in size and influence largely due to supplies of money and arms from backers in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other states in the Gulf.

It is to counter the growth of the extremists that the British Foreign Secretary William Hague successfully campaigned for a partial easing of European Union sanctions on Syria. The UK will supply armoured cars and body armour to "moderate" rebels.

David Cameron announced earlier this week that if the EU rescinds the easing

of the rules, the UK will go ahead with supplying more lethal weapons to the "democratic" opposition.

Security officials point out that the volatility of the strife in Syria, with khatibas (battalions) forming, merging and disbanding, makes it difficult to keep track of whether British jihadists have ended up fighting for so-called moderate groups or extremists.

The Independent has come across revolutionaries who were avowedly "secular" in the past who now declare themselves Islamists. Some do so to get funding from the Gulf states.

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, whose government has backed the Assad regime, declared during a visit to London yesterday that any attempt by Britain to arm the rebels would be a violation of international law and strenuously opposed by the Kremlin.

"International law does not permit the supply of arms to non-governmental actors," he said.

Standing beside him at a press conference, Mr Hague and the Defence Secretary Philip Hammond stated that the UK "had not ruled anything out" in arming the rebels. Mr Lavrov warned weapons may fall into the hands of extremists.

"We don't know who is going to receive the arms, how they are going to use them. The most dangerous and effective group fighting the regime is the Jabhat al-Nusra which, we note, the US has declared a terrorist organisation," the Russian Foreign Minister said.

16th March 2013

ARMING THE ‘RIGHT’ REBELS IS THE REAL ISSUE

By Kim Sengupta

LAST SUMMER, when the rebel offensive in Aleppo promised to wrest Syria’s largest and wealthiest city from Bashar al-Assad, Jabhat al-Nusra were relatively insignificant players.

Within six months, however, al-Nusra, proudly proclaiming its link with al-Qa’ida, had become the largest and most powerful organisation in the revolutionary ranks, well-funded and armed by backers in the Gulf. In contrast, the more secular groups were a fading influence. Receiving little support from the international community they saw the Islamists get the lion’s share of local and foreign recruits.

The push by David Cameron and François Hollande to send arms is supposed to rectify this. But will it work? One of the clichés trotted out is that “there are already enough weapons in Syria”. Well, not for the non-Salafist opposition there aren’t - and certainly not enough of the right kind.

The real issue is whether Western arms will get to the “moderates” or simply be taken over by the al-Nusra. The only way to keep weapons in the right hands would be through far greater Western involvement - in training, setting up command and control structures, and through covert presence inside Syria.

This could suck the West into the conflict; but then interventions in civil wars rarely have neat and tidy endings.

17th March 2013

WESTERN MEDDLING IN SYRIA WILL ONLY FUEL THE SUNNI INSURGENCY

By Patrick Cockburn

WE ARE going to do it again. The British effort to get the EU arms embargo amended so it can supply weapons to the Syrian insurgents is justified by self-serving falsifications about the situation on the ground similar to those used to garner support for the invasion of Iraq 10 years ago. In Iraq and Syria, propaganda masked the fact that Britain was intervening in a country where civil war was brewing or had already broken out.

A spurt of suspiciously timed claims by unnamed diplomats last week suggested that British and French arms should be sent to the rebels because Russia and Iran had increased their supply of weapons to the Syrian government. This had disturbed the military balance of power between insurgent and government forces to the advantage of the former. A British official denounced the "perversity" of this, saying that these new arms made it impossible for opposition forces to protect civilians.

It would be nice to believe that the only fault line in Syria is between a tyrannical government and a popular uprising enjoying overwhelming support. But, if that was ever true, it certainly is not so today. Syria is a divided society engaged in a ferocious civil conflict. It was not a partisan of the government but a rebel fighting in Aleppo named Abu Ahmed, the commander of a unit of the al-Tawheed Brigade belonging to the supposedly secular and moderate Free Syrian Army, who told a reporter from Reuters earlier this year that he put support for President Bashar al-Assad in Aleppo at 70 per cent. "They don't have a revolutionary mindset," he said. "There has been a lot of corruption in the Free Syrian Army's battalions - stealing, oppressing the people - because there are parasites that have entered the Free Syrian Army."

When I was in Damascus three months ago, a friend explained that the popularity or lack of it of both sides was about the same. He said: "About 15 per cent of people in Damascus support the rebels; 15 per cent are for the government, and the other 70 per cent want to get the whole thing over with." But giving more arms to the rebels is not the way to end the war and will only give them hope that, if they refuse any negotiations with the government, the Western powers backed by their Arab allies will finally be driven to decisive military intervention on their behalf.

The weapons will apparently go to "moderate" factions of the insurgency. But a striking development in the fighting over the past six months has been the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra, labelled by the US as a "terrorist group" and built around a core of experienced fighters from al-Qa'ida in Iraq, as the most effective rebel military force. Its fighters, along with other jihadi groups, are ever more

prominent in the struggle for northern and eastern Syria, while the FSA has been pushed to one side. The FSA drew much of its support from the poor Sunni of the country towns and villages. The middle class of Aleppo, which might have preferred Assad to stay in power, opts for Jabhat al-Nusra over Western-backed groups because it keeps some sort of order and does not steal. “The Free Syrian Army are thieves,” shout protesters in rebel-held parts of Aleppo. “We want the Islamic Army.”

Another aspect to the rise of al-Nusra ought to give pause to those in Britain and France planning to arm the opposition with the aim of ending the war more swiftly. Their strangely contradictory argument is that it is important to end the war if Syria is not to be wholly destroyed, and the way to do this is give enough arms to the insurgents that they can win a decisive victory. Not only is there no sign of this happening soon, but a long war is very much in the interests of al-Nusra. Its literature makes the point that the longer the conflict goes on, the stronger the jihadis will become because they are better soldiers than their more moderate, but less effective, allies. Nevertheless, they need time to establish themselves in the countryside in areas where they are weak.

Arab diplomats say that, after two years of fighting, the rebels “have still not been able to take a single city and there have been no major defections to them by whole units from the government forces”. This was very different from Libya in 2011 when the insurgents held Benghazi and eastern Libya from the beginning and there were defections from the regime.

This may be changing. On 4 March, the city of ar-Raqqah on the Euphrates in eastern Syria fell to the rebels, the first provincial capital to be captured by them. But it is very significant that ar-Raqqah fell entirely to jihadi forces led by al-Nusra using captured armoured vehicles. The Free Syrian Army appears to have played little role in the taking of the city.

The fall of ar-Raqqah has another consequence. As eastern Syria falls increasingly under the control of the jihadi Sunni fighters, the border with Iraq is becoming a fiction. Al-Qa’ida in Iraq can move backwards and forwards across the frontier, where the population is solidly Sunni on both sides, with no impediment. This is bad news for the stability of Iraq as well as Syria. Tribes such as the Shammar live in Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the capital, and across the border in Syria. Iraqi government forces have decreasing authority in overwhelmingly Sunni Anbar province since protests against the government of Nouri al-Maliki began in December. In a further twist, Kurdish peshmerga have prevented Iraqi army units reinforcing the Iraqi-Syrian border from crossing west of Sinjar as part of the struggle for the territories disputed between Kurds and Arabs.

The dimensions of the crisis have still not sunk in. Soon, if it has not happened already, the area of Sunni Arab insurgency will stretch from Fallujah up the Euphrates to Aleppo and on to the shores of the Mediterranean. It is wishful thinking to imagine that, even if weapons in large quantities are channelled to “moderate” Syrian rebels, this is going to make much difference at this stage. Assad’s government is not going to collapse like a house of cards as Western leaders were hopefully prophesying up to a few months ago. Only negotiations can end this war, and fresh supplies of arms will put off the day they start because the weapons send a message to the rebels that one day they may get full-scale Western military intervention.

18th March 2013

SYRIAN CRISIS CAN BE MEASURED IN ITS TOLL ON PEOPLE - AND HISTORY

By Robert Fisk

WHAT IS a child's life worth against all the antiquities of Syria? Any reflection of Syria's architectural disasters must include this question. The child, a humanitarian must say, is worth all the columns of Palmyra. The child, a cold-hearted historian might suggest, could be sacrificed for the heritage of all future children. Alas, both are being destroyed in Syria.

The inner burning of the Omayyad mosque in Aleppo, the Roman "dead cities" of northern Syria - which have acquired new ghosts as thousands of refugees now hide amid the ruins of antiquity - are the latest victims of the war of archaeology.

And Emma Cunliffe, of Durham University, sums up the dilemma succinctly in the latest issue of British Archeology magazine. If there are 60,000 to 70,000 dead, with winter snow burying refugee tent communities, "what does heritage matter in the face of such tragic desolation"?

Cunliffe, who is developing ways to monitor damage to Middle East archaeological sites, has produced a remarkably even-handed report which lays blame on both the regime and the rebels. While still not on the post-2003 Iraqi scale, "there now appear to be established networks (on the opposition side) that circumvent official inspection … Seizures of several thousand unmarked artefacts on the Syrian border, including pottery, coins, mosaics, [and] statues... suggest the extent of looting could be vast". Perhaps, Cunliffe says, the trade now stands at more than £ 1.25bn.

In Palmyra, however, it appears to be government bullets that have scarred the Roman pillars and government tracks that have used the Roman roads - not unlike the US Humvees which blithely crushed the highways of Babylon in 2003 - while in Homs the Cathedral of Um al-Zennar, one of the city's oldest churches, "now lies in ruins, its worshippers dead and scattered, its ancient Aramaic liturgy silenced". It was one of the world's oldest churches, its site dating back to AD59, containing a belt said to belong to the Virgin Mary. If you want to search for responsibility then you must ask: who was the first to use firearms in this Syrian bloodbath?

Ever since The Independent on Sunday first gave large-scale publicity to the destruction of Syria's heritage, both sides in the war have used the damage in their own cause. Free Syrian Army officers have vouchsafed to prevent all looting - a dubious claim since the Jordanian markets are now flooded with Syrian gold, mosaics and statues - and have even used Roman Palmyra in a propaganda YouTube video. Produced by the "Media Centre for the city of Tadmor (Palmyra)", a horseman gallops across the screen bearing the FSA's

green, white and black flag in front of the Roman columns of the city's Via Maxima.

Interestingly, however, the Syrian government's own Minister for Antiquities, Professor Maamoun Abdul-Karim, has appealed to all Syrians to protect the country's architectural treasures because "it is everyone's responsibility [to] work together to protect those antiquities". While acknowledging severe damage to some Roman heritage sites in the north, he praises local villagers for driving away looters. The locals, it would appear, realise that a town without antiquities is a town that will never earn tourist money. The minister also assures us that the vast bulk of treasures have been secured in "safe places". But where are all these "safe places"? And if they are so safe, why do the internally placed refugees not flock to them?

One prominent Lebanese archaeologist tells me, and this one of the most disturbing characteristics of this tragic treasure-hunt, is that the smugglers are now working for the same networks created by the Iraqi looters. A taste for treasures has now been acquired internationally - and buyers are asking Iraqi gangs to use the same methods in Syria. The Washington Post has been investigating rebel smuggling trails, and insurgents told the paper that an average haul can net $50,000 for weapons purchases. "Some days we are fighters; others we are archaeologists," an Idlib rebel told the paper.

Several archaeologists (the legal kind) have suggested that their approaches to Nato - even the British Ministry of Defence - led to attempts by pilots to avoid damaging Roman heritage sites in Libya in 2011, switching munitions to avoid shrapnel spray while targeting Gaddafi's legions. But there are no Nato planes over Syria, and I doubt if Syrian government pilots carry Minister Abdul-Karim's appeal in their cockpits. So the same old question: what is a child's life worth?

10th April 2013

IRAQI AL-QA'IDA DECLARES TAKEOVER OF LEADING SYRIAN REBEL FACTION

By Patrick Cockburn

AL-QA'IDA IN Iraq has said it has united with the most militant and effective Syrian rebel group, the al-Nusra Front, in a move likely to embarrass Western countries supporting Syrian insurgents seeking to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qa'ida's umbrella organisation in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq, said in a statement posted on Islamic fundamentalist websites yesterday that his group had helped create al-Nusra, had funded it and reinforced it with experienced al-Qa'ida fighters from Iraq. He said: "It's now time to declare in front of the people of the Levant and the world that al-Nusra Front is but an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq and part of it." The US has labelled al-Nusra a "terrorist" group.

Al-Nusra has been at the forefront of the fighting in and around Aleppo and appears to have been behind a series of car bombings in Damascus. Some 15 people were killed by a suicide bomber who blew himself up near the Central Bank in Damascus on Monday. Its use of suicide bombers, foreign volunteers and fundamentalist rhetoric, targeting non-Sunni Syrians as heretics or disbelievers, is similar to the tactics and ideology of al-Qa'ida in Iraq.

Many opposition military and political factions have sought to downplay evidence that the uprising in Syria is dominated by jihadi and salafi movements preaching holy war. Al-Nusra is not the only such organisation and it was Ahrar al-Sham, another well-organised Islamic fundamentalist group, which led the assault on Raqqa, the first provincial capital to fall to the opposition earlier this year. Al-Nusra also played an important role in the fighting while the Western-backed Free Syrian Army was largely absent. Religious courts have been set up in Raqqa, and al-Nusra has sought to ban the sale of cigarettes as un-Islamic.

Mr Al-Baghdadi said in a 21-minute audio talk that the new united group operating in both Iraq and Syria would in future be called The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, Sham being the name for Syria and the surrounding area. He said that al-Qa'ida in Iraq had been devoting half its budget to supporting al-Nusra, of which the overall leader will apparently be Mr Al-Baghdadi himself.

The Sunni majority areas of Iraq in Western Anbar and Nineveh provinces share a common border with eastern Syria which is increasingly falling under rebel control. The degree of co-ordination was underscored early last month when 48 Syrian soldiers who had fled into Iraq were ambushed and killed at Akashat as they were being returned to Syria. An Iraqi intelligence officer was quoted as saying that al-Qa'ida in Iraq and al-Nusra have three joint training camps in the border area where they share training, logistics, intelligence and

weapons.

The US, Britain and France, along with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have promoted and financed other factions of the opposition. But, while supposedly more moderate, these have often been denounced by Syrians in areas they control as being little more than bandits and incapable of maintaining civil government.

12th April 2013

THE WAR HAS REACHED DAMASCUS, BUT FOR MANY IT IS NOT A WAR ZONE

By Robert Fisk

DAMASCUS UNDER siege? Certainly. But at war? I'm not so sure. The shells swish high over the city, from Mount Qasioun to Deraya, soaring far over the 18th-century Azem Palace and the mosque built on air, the glorious Umayyad with its fragile 8th-century mosaics, last resting place of Saladin, the head of Imam Hussain and John the Baptist. The place vibrates with explosions. Yet down at my favourite hostelry near the Barada river yesterday morning, the latte and the chocolate croissants were as fresh as they were eight months ago, the front page of the government newspaper Thawra bearing a poorly coloured photograph of a regime soldier amid heaps of anonymous rubble. But haven't I seen this picture before?

Rumours of war. A cliché? Of course. Yet true. On Wednesday, I'm told by trusted friends that the Iranian-style shrine of Sayyida Zeinab has been destroyed by Salafist mortar fire. The tomb of the Prophet's grand-daughter stands - or stood - on a site from the fourth caliphate. So yesterday, I drive at 140km/h south from Damascus, thundering down fearful motorways amid equally terrified drivers and along country laneways and earthen front-line barricades until suddenly, towering above me, are the blue-marble minarets and golden dome of the tomb of poor Zeinab, sister of Hussain, the Shia world's first martyr whose own death began the whole sorry chasm within Islam. Mortars crack and rumble around us but save for a few marble squares, the place stands untouched. There's a T-72 tank down the road and a clutch of government soldiers outside. But the rumour is untrue.

You can tell the diminishing circle of middle-class hope from the destinations plastered over the city's buses. Until recently, they were announced on display boards; now they are written in vast inky whorls on cardboard taped to the windscreen. The Jobar bus now terminates at the edge of the rebel suburb. The Samaria station single-decker now finishes its journey just the other side of the Old Market. The great Haj railway terminus hasn't seen a train in six months.

But who is under siege? The shopkeepers and the middle classes of the Mezze boulevard, "supporters" - a dodgy word these days - of the President, or the people of the little hell of Deraya, those who are left amid the cellars and chewed-through fabric of long-destroyed homes whose antagonists worm their way like centipedes through the walls of living rooms, toilets and hallways? "A whole society eaten away," a Syrian journalist describes it.

A whole country, you might say. Anniversaries are celebrated with suitable gloom. The foundation of the Baath party; the start of the uprising against the Assad regime; the first major attack on government troops. The latter slightly

upsets the Western narrative, of months of peaceful demonstrations brutally assaulted by government forces until the rebels reluctantly seized weapons in the summer of 2011. In fact 25 days after the beginning of the revolution, a convoy of the government army's 145th Infantry Brigade was attacked on Banias bridge. Up to 12 soldiers were killed, 40 more wounded. But the "other" narrative, that of the Assad government's desperation for "democracy" in order "to save the homeland", is also hourly contradicted by the air raids against "foreign terrorists" - and surely the Assad lads and lassies can do better than dish up Israel's and Washington's clichés - which are erasing so many towns.

I talk to a former Syrian Special Forces officer. "Don't you remember the ambush and murder of seven of our finest pilots in Hama province?" he asks contemptuously. "Is it surprising that their comrades want to go and smash the people who did this?" How easily revenge becomes a legitimate motive for war in Syria, in any war I guess. Casually, almost without realising its significance, I bump into this awful phenomenon.

At the al-Jdeideh border post between Syria and Lebanon, a Syrian-Turkish journalist has to return to Istanbul - via Beirut. Driving home over the northern frontier is impossible. "My village is just south of the Turkish border. The rebels killed my nephew. This was a message for me." A Syrian-Armenian TV personality's home is attacked in Damascus. Yerardo Krikorian's grandparents were from Kilis in ancient Armenia. The Turks killed her grandfather in the 1915 genocide, her grandmother escaped. She comes from Aleppo. "The rebels knew where I lived," she tells me. "They tried to kill my brother when they came to the house. I had asked the local (government) checkpoint to protect us when we saw the armed men in the area. They said their duty was only to guard the mukhabarat [intelligence] headquarters down the road." When the same armed men attacked the secret police, the government soldiers were at last forced to fight.

The mukhabarat, the torturers, beaters, threateners, killers of the regime, are to blame. It's surprising how many within the steadily diminishing circle of government Damascus say this. Soldiers say the same. The mukhabarat are to blame, they started this wretched business by assaulting the teenagers who painted graffiti on the walls of Deraa, they went beserk, they thought they were kings. It's said that Assad wanted to rid himself of these thugs - there are tens of thousands of them - and that quite a few soldiers in the still-loyal army want to destroy them. But whose side would the mukhabarat then join?

"Really Robert, this country was always complicated - now it's more difficult to understand than ever," I'm told. Take the rebel commander who allegedly offered to pay for 25 captured government tanks for 750,000 Syrian pounds

each. “I refused to sell for less than a million,” their “owner” is supposed to have proudly announced. He was told he was a fool. A million Syrian pounds was rubbish money. The tanks were worth a million dollars each.

Take the Sayyida Zeinab shrine. The soldiers outside have been ordered to let us enter. Inside a little room bearing pictures of Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah chairman - this is, after all, a Shia shrine - sits a smiling man, the head of security for the shrine, a foreigner, I suspect (readers may answer this little riddle without much trouble), who speaks with impressive ease. “Yes, we have water and other things to protect this shrine when it is attacked. We have expertise in these things. You cannot protect the shrine from mortar attack with the Koran.”

But his message is simple. “This shrine is not for Shia only but belongs to all Muslims because Zeinab was the granddaughter of the Prophet. We want to protect this shrine and all others. But we must protect this shrine because if there is damage, it will make Shia across the world more angry with Sunnis - so we are protecting all Muslims.” This friendly man lives and sleeps in the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab. He has been there for a year. The last mortar strike damaged a tiny part of the roof on Wednesday. “We know exactly who is trying to destroy this building. They are not Sunni who are doing this. The Sunnis don’t think like this. It was the Salafists.” Ah, those great tomb-destroyers, shrine-eradicators, Bamyan Buddha-liquidators, the Salafists. They are indeed in Syria now. Chief funders: our old and wealthy friend Saudi Arabia.

I walk into the great marble square for prayers where I find another Zeinab, a Syrian woman with her two tiny children in a pram. “I am not afraid,” she says. “It is normal here.” Untrue, of course. She sees the two soldiers standing in the corner. Then there is Moratada Ali, a 30-year-old from Najaf in Iraq. From Iraq, I ask incredulously? Yes, he says, a refugee who came here two-and-a-half years ago to escape the sectarian terrors of his homeland. He says he’s unafraid. Lives just round the corner with the wife and two children. The shrine “speaks” to him, he says. The woman guardian who stands not far from Zeinab herself - the real Zeinab who cared for her vast family when Hussain had bled to death - says that she prays for the Prophet’s granddaughter to protect her.

Only by chance, chatting to a Syrian companion yesterday did he mention that his brother had been kidnapped six months ago. He had never mentioned this to me. Not his business to, I suppose. “We are still searching for him,” he says, and I realise that he, too, is under siege. Damascus isn’t Leningrad in 1941 or Stalingrad or Troy or even Beirut, 1982. Not yet. The best description I heard came from a colleague. “Damascus?” he asked. “Going. But definitely not gone.”

13th April 2013

MOBILES BECOME WEAPONS AS TACTICS CHANGE IN SYRIA'S NEW PHONEY WAR

By Robert Fisk

A MAN was stopped at a government checkpoint on the highway north of Deraa and his mobile phone taken. The soldier found an SMS message which said: “I am in the hospital. The shooting has started.” Assuming that the man was a rebel signalling his whereabouts to his comrades, the soldier arrested him. Another motorist, this time the checkpoint is manned by the rebels, and another mobile is demanded. The rebels found a photograph of his father on his phone. Unfortunately, his father is an officer in the government army - and is in full uniform. The motorist disappeared.

The war of the mobile has long been a staple of Iraq and Afghanistan. If Iraqi rebels or Taliban fighters found evidence at checkpoints that a mobile had been used even to dial the number of a Western organisation, the motorist was usually executed. Now the same frightening war has begun in Syria. It is the grim circuit through which the kidnap demand is made. Not long ago, the nephew of a senior Syrian official was kidnapped. The boy came on the family phone. They are beating me, he said. Please tell my uncle to stop appearing on television. The uncle obliged.

The entire Syrian war is changing. The tactics of both sides are fitting into the realisation that this bloodbath is going to last far longer than either they or the think-tank mountebanks in the West could have predicted. Syrian writers very close to the military - but who also meet rebels commanders - are the sources for this new picture of the Syrian conflict, whose fatalities may have reached 50,000 or 60,000 or 70,000. Death, or rather the scarcity of those ready to confront the final sacrifice, has shaped this new war.

It is no secret that the Assad army cannot afford to lose more men. While disloyalty is now far rarer than in the early days of the uprising, each soldier’s death leaves a gap hard to fill. Even if more troops can be found - and draft avoidance is now a science - an untrained recruit is no match for a man who has spent months under fire. So Syrian generals are turning to specially trained individual units of only 60 men in operations that would last year have involved whole battalions.

Frequently, soldiers are finding themselves confronted not by the Free Syrian Army - supposedly secular and thus Nato’s favourite militia - but by much more efficient Islamist fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups with advanced weapons, also often operating with only 50 or 60 fighters.

Like the Americans in Iraq the Syrian army finds itself constantly “capturing” the same areas it has seized from rebels in the past. The Damascus suburb of Douma, for example, has been “won” back from rebel forces three times over

the past 18 months. “But the army eventually has to leave - and the rebels are back within a month,” a former Special Forces officer says. “In the past, the ‘Free Army’ made what they called ‘tactical withdrawals’. Not any more. The jihadists are in there now and they have come here to die.”

For many months, the Damascus authorities were content to place checkpoints around those Damascus suburbs which had been “lost” to the armed rebellion. The Free Syrian Army went along with this. A status quo of rotting sandbags and weeds formed the scenario of an unofficial ceasefire. But then three months ago, rebel forces in Harasta staged an attack on all the surrounding checkpoints and killed every government soldier manning them. This is savage punishment for a government army already overstretched in holding the highway from Damascus north to Homs.

For ever since the military decided to adopt the “tree” system of defence - holding the towns and main roads while giving the countryside up to the rebels - it has confronted the same problems that the Soviet army faced in Afghanistan: the country is simply too big to keep the highways open.

The government army long ago worked out why Islamist and al-Qa’ida forces have based themselves in Idlib province. Back in 2005, the CIA used to refer to the “al-Qa’ida triangle” in Idlib from which fighters were regularly transferred from Syrian territory into Iraq to fight the Americans. The Idlib triangle is now the most securely held of the Islamist rebel areas, because al-Qa’ida know it well. The CIA would call that “blowback”.

Yet dark humour can pervade any battlefield. In Harasta a few days ago, government troops were fighting with rebels between two rooms of the same building. One of the rebels shouted: “If you are Sunnis from Idlib, come and join us.” A government soldier shouted back a nasty insult about the man’s mother. “I didn’t mention your mother,” came the reply. “So leave my mother out of this!”

14th April 2013

ASSAD'S ARMY IS STARTING TO CALL THE SHOTS

By Robert Fisk

OLD MOHAMED Said al-Sauda from Deraa, in his tawny gown and kuffiah headscarf, sat at the end of a conclave of tribal elders, all newly arrived in Damascus for an audience with no less than the President himself. They sat - only one woman in a blue dress among them - round a long table in the Damas Rose Hotel drinking water and coffee, rehearsing their anxieties. How should they talk to the young armed men who came into their villages? How should they persuade the rebels not to damage their land and take over their villages? “We try to talk to the saboteurs and to get them to go back to rebuilding the country,” al-Sauda told me. “We try to persuade them to put aside their arms, to stop the violence. We used to have such a safe country to live in.”

These men, middle-aged for the most part with tough, lined, dark faces, are the first line of defence of the Assad regime, the landowners and propertied classes of the peasants who benefited most from the original Baathist revolution and whose prosperity has been threatened by the mass uprising against the regime. They come from Tartus, Deraa, the Damascus countryside, from Hama and Latakia, and they speak the language of the Assad government - up to a point. “Syria is a mosaic unlike any other in the world,” says Salman Hamdan. “The sectarian divide does not exist in our country. Muslims, Christians, they are the same. It is a conspiracy that is classifying people. Some have chosen the homeland; others have decided to be ungrateful to their country for personal gain.”

But the woman in blue hands me a printed sheet of paper with a list of demands. “We come from all walks of political life,” it begins. “We reject violence and we reject repression, sectarian massacres and the destruction of the cultural heritage of Syria.” And there it was. That word. Repression. For these men and this lonely woman know what helped to set fire to Syria. “Every government makes mistakes,” one of the men says - but we know what he means. He is talking about the mukhabarat intelligence service which lit the fire two years ago by its brutality towards the children of Deraa. The system of torture and fear that the secret police services of the regime imposed for decades upon Syria - the “repression” mentioned so obliquely in the lady’s demands - still lies like a blanket over those areas of the country that the government still controls.

How does a Syrian loyal to the regime tell its leader that his own security agencies helped to bring down this catastrophe upon their country? For these agencies have contaminated not just the Baath and the President but even the government army - the Syrian Arab Army - which is now trying to shrug off the

awful carapace of legimitised violence that the plain-clothes men, in their tens of thousands, have used as a tool for more than 30 years. Even in the cities that the government still controls they have still not learned their lesson.

A clerk at the “Terrorism Tribunal” in Damascus admits that 1,000 new files go into the court every day - a huge figure that only hints at the vast numbers of unknown prisoners in the regime’s jails. But the figure is also, in the words of one well-placed Syrian, a “chequing account”, a bank balance of fear that rises and falls according to the security searches and arrests. If 1,000 are arrested today, another 1,000 can be released tomorrow. The state security organs now appear to restrict themselves - if that is the right word - to arresting only those whom they believe are an immediate danger to themselves, to Assad or to the regime. They no longer have the time or resources to hunt down every protester. Nor do they have any longer the vast territory of the countryside in which to roam.

There are also some intriguing signs that the government army, so keen to appear as the foundation stone of the state - which it is - without the dark stain of fear left by the mukhabarat, is taking its own steps to push back the “terror” men. The military security forces, now that they have - for the first time - to deal directly with their own civilians, are giving orders over the heads of the intelligence agencies. In 2010, Assad himself took a decision to ban security agents from carrying weapons covertly - a highly contentious rule for the secret police - and the army has now followed on from this.

The army, for example, is today in command of security in battle. In the past, military intelligence men would give instructions to the army. But the Syrian army is now in charge. Field commanders - not cops - make decisions. There have been many cases, according to those involved with the military, where plain-clothes security agents witnessed brutalising civilians have been arrested and - incredibly - put before military courts. The generals and the colonels, in other words, are no longer prepared to play patsy to the regime’s thugs.

But romantics beware. The army is a ruthless machine and its commander-in-chief remains Bashar al-Assad. Its loyalty is still without question. The UN maintains voluminous files of war crimes that they say were committed by regular soldiers in the Syrian army. And the idea that the presidency itself may abandon its own security agents is a myth. A militarised state will always need a bodyguard of secret policemen. Nor will Assad’s enemies ever accept an army takeover - with or without an Assad leadership - as a compromise for a truce. For them - correctly - the army remains more dangerous than Assad himself. The mukhabarat may come and go, but the army remains.

There are stories in Damascus - and here you must float on the wings of all

kinds of black and white doves - that the army leadership is distancing itself from the thugs of air force security and from the infamous 4th Division of Maher al-Assad, the president's brother. When all 45 soldiers are killed in every checkpoint surrounding just one rebel suburb of Damascus - as happened three months ago - commanders must make their own decisions. And now that so much of the countryside has been lost to the government, the army's role in the cities has increased.

It is an irony of Syrian history that hitherto most threats to the regime have come from within the cities. The Muslim Brotherhood, still officially illegal in Syria, was an urban institution and it was the Brotherhood that threatened Damascus and the central cities of Homs and Hama in the 1980s. The great uprising of 1982 emanated from the centre of Hama, from the city's mosques and underground tunnels; and thus the cruellest of the nation's security forces, the Special Forces of Rifaat al-Assad - led by the president's now-disgraced uncle - was sent in to liquidate the Brotherhood and up to 20,000 of Hama's residents. But now the uprising comes from the countryside, the defectors of the Free Syrian Army and the al-Nusrah and the various Islamist outfits - with their clusters of foreign jihadis - who are moving in from the villages and descending on the cities. The agrarian refugees already in the cities have thus joined the rebel forces - which is why the normally secure government city of Raqaa fell so swiftly on 4 March.

That a regime originally founded on peasant reform should discover that its enemies now live among that same peasantry is a terrible stroke of history for Baathism. That a nation with a non-sectarian constitution - needless to say, we all know what is wrong with it - should find itself consumed by the very sectarian conflict that it was designed to prevent is a tragedy. No wonder the new 60-man special units of the government army being trained for operations across Syria are a careful mixture of all sects - Sunnis, Christians, Alawis, Druze and others - and are openly referred to as the most "colourful" of all military battalions. This may be intended to improve their image in what is left of "public opinion". But it is also a faint ghost of what some army officers hope a future Syrian army may be.

For the message - if there is one in the coming weeks and months - is that the most important institution to watch in Syria is not the regime. Nor is it Bashar al-Assad. Nor is it the secret police. Nor is it the Free Syrian Army, nor al-Nusrah. Nor the platitudes of the White House or Downing Street. It is the government Syrian Arab Army. Watch, as they say, this space.

15th April 2013

A BARBARIC WAR THROWS UP A HORROR STORY THAT MAKES VILLAINS OF ALL

By Robert Fisk

HORROR OF horrors. A young Syrian, clean-shaven, perhaps in his early twenties, in a windcheater and with a Kalashnikov rifle slung over his left shoulder, holds the head of a decapitated man. The head appears to have been hacked from his unseen corpse with a knife. Just last week, we are told. It has short hair, a thin moustache, eyes mercifully closed. And - here we need an infinitely more terrible word than horror - the young man is holding the head over a smouldering barbecue.

The boy is described as a member of the Free Syria Army (FSA), the ragtag militia of government army deserters who now fight against the Assad regime. The head, so a website caption would have us believe, is that of a Syrian air force officer who survived the crash of a helicopter in Idlib province after the machine was shot down by a ground-to-air missile.

Propaganda? Most certainly. Truth? Perhaps. But the internet has so skewed the Syrian war that propaganda has become truth and truth, propaganda - even myth. Everyone believes what they want to believe. And this awful image is not just a challenge to humanity. It is also, in its most obvious form, a challenge to journalism.

Here I am in Damascus when a website - most assuredly sympathetic to the regime - produces “evidence” of a war crime and lists the names and ranks of the other seven air force “martyrs” who last week apparently endured the terror and pain of decapitation with the man in the picture.

I first heard of this gruesome picture in conversation with a friend yesterday morning. By midday, I saw it running from printing machines in the Ministry of Information in the Mezze suburb of the city, not for distribution to the press but for the files of the staff. Several could not bring themselves to look at the photograph, one woman leaving the room in order to avoid vomiting. This was not play-acting for my benefit.

By chance, I was about to meet briefly with the information minister himself, Omran Zoubi. “I can’t confirm this,” he said to me. “I need to ask first.” By last night, he had made no further comment. It would have been easy for Mr Zoubi to have said that he believed every word. But he had clearly never heard of this before.

So let us begin with the air force dead. For the record, they are listed as General Souhel Akram, parachute Major Youssef Ma’alla, Air Force Captain Hussam Asaad (who had allegedly survived an earlier massacre of air force personnel), Air Force Captain Ayham Al-Hussain, First Lieutenant Mohamed Ali Al-Dikar, First Lieutenant Maias Ramadan, and Sergeants Sarot Ghanija and

Mohamed Diben.

Most assuredly, the Syrian air force can confirm - indeed, must confirm - if these are real names. And the details on the website - which appears to have come from Lebanon and is highly sectarian (in this case, anti-Sunni Muslim) in tone - are quite straightforward: the air force men were flying on a helicopter from Latakia airport on the Mediterranean coast, carrying food and humanitarian aid to villages and army units around Maaret al-Noman when they were shot down over Idlib province. All survived. They were then beheaded.

The website implies that the executioners were Sunnis and that the victims were Shias - or from that intriguing offshoot of Shiism, the Alawites, to which President Bashar Assad belongs. But there is no evidence to what religion the dead men - if they are dead - belonged. And there is another weird side to all this. The killers were described as “Free Syria Army gangs”, yet most of the atrocities - and decapitations - carried out by the armed opposition to the regime have been the responsibility of extreme Islamist groups. Why would the largely secular - a painfully inaccurate word in any Syrian context - FSA commit such a war crime?

If it was committed. Pictures and video from the Iraq war show that Islamist groups were prepared - and happy - to carry out such executions. Yet the Syrian regime has itself indulged in barbarity. And if even part of yesterday’s horror story is true, was the military helicopter taking only “humanitarian” supplies across Idlib? And did this horror of horrors actually happen? Did these men even exist?

Alas, in war, photoshop technology and the internet have made villains of us all.

16th April 2013

‘WE DON’T REALLY KNOW WHAT WAR IS LIKE. WE HAVEN’T SEEN IT YET’

By Robert Fisk

“THE UNBEARABLE lightness of being.” I apologise to Milan Kundera, who wrote the line. But this is Damascus and that is the only title. I was on the phone less than 24 hours ago, offering my pathetic condolences to an old friend. “Thank you for calling, Robert,” was all he could say, in tears. We had been chatting in the morning, arranging to meet later in the day. Then at two o’clock in the afternoon, on the way to her home, his mother - at the wheel for she was an engineer - was murdered. A single shot. The only shot fired into the car. And it killed her. She was buried yesterday morning, in the beautiful hill village above Latakia.

My friend had told me that as a journalist, he walked on ice. It was becoming more and more dangerous to go to his family home. His father is a retired army officer who served in Lebanon. A proud family, loyal to the regime but free with its criticism. Victims, all of them now, of the President’s enemies.

Within hours, I am in a restaurant on the Mezzeh boulevard; swish cars, fine food, laid-back middle-class customers, 10 at night, talking freely, all of them contemptuous (fearful too?) of al-Nusrah Islamists - and a sentence pops up in the middle of a conversation with a good friend, a lawyer. “Three of my employees were murdered,” he says. “They were taken from their car north of Deraa. They were tortured first, then murdered. They were Alawites.”

I am taken aback by the frankness of it all. The suddenness with which it enters our conversation. When I tell him about my friend’s mother and tell him I am upset, he says simply: “That’s because you don’t live here all the time.” And it’s true, you hear things in Damascus and, after a few hours, the human double-take stops operating. I am chatting to a government official, and out of the blue she tells me that a member of her family was murdered.

His head was cut off - by a young boy. His execution was videotaped by his killers. She actually saw the video of his decapitation. I am stunned. Or am I? Damascenes no longer are. Nor, I fear, is the rest of Syria. Listen to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and they talk of their losses - a baby to government air strikes, a husband missing to the intelligence services - with the same bleak nonchalance.

I drop by to speak to a minister, an adviser to Assad - and discover that she now starts her day with yoga sessions. Yoga! In Damascus? She is a prolific author. Her new book contains hitherto confidential Syrian documents on the secret Clinton-Hafez al-Assad negotiations and she is optimistic, talking of government army gains. I am more circumspect.

A businessman admits that he “let go” an employee because he was a Sunni

Muslim. You simply have to look after yourself, he explains. I am shocked, like a good Westerner should be. This is the sectarian wedge in all its reality, right there, freely admitted. But then, of course, there is the old question. What would I have done if I were a Syrian Christian?

Then yesterday afternoon, I am chatting to another confidant, a man involved in children's charities. I assume the people of Damascus have taken in the shock of war. "No, we don't know what it's like - we haven't really seen it yet," he replies. "A lot of people don't understand it. The people who carry bodies from Douma, they understand it. But I don't have the guts to go and do that, to carry bodies." A jet flies over us and there is the smack of an air-dropped bomb, almost certainly on the opposition-held suburb of Daraya. The windows rattle appropriately, a slight change of air pressure.

At my hotel, the staff watch television, one of them literally open-mouthed, as captured rebels explain the details of their battle against the government, how money arrives in untold quantities from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. When one of the prisoners speaks, his face is inter-cut with videotape of his own press conference after originally defecting from the government army. There he is in green uniform, a bearded member of the Free Syria Army, self-confident, safe. And then he is back full-face on television, a bamboo curtain behind him to screen the walls of his Damascus dungeon.

In one way, I fear all Damascus is a dungeon. Or do you have to live here to appreciate that?

17th April 2013

‘RELIGION SHOULD MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY, NOT BE USED TO CONTROL PEOPLE’

By Robert Fisk

“CAN YOU imagine the psychology of my soldiers when they stand here all day, knowing that one of these cars could be a suicide bomber?” The Syrian army colonel eyed the two long lines of cars trailing past the Assad library, each pulling to a gentle, slightly frightened halt. Most of the checkpoint men were bearded. The colonel was a Sunni Muslim - since all journalists now want to know the religion of everyone they meet in this country - and asked that I do not print his name. We were welcome to take pictures but, please, no faces. The colonel did not say so, but I know the reason. Months ago, several soldiers were assassinated after apparently being identified on a clip of Russian television news tape.

And as for the psychology of the colonel’s men? Well, they are now enduring what Iraqi forces and Nato soldiers across Afghanistan and especially Americans in Iraq have confronted; the knowledge that the next car could blow up in your face. Since the suicide bomber came to Damascus this month, the regime realises that the kamikaze is probably unstoppable. So the colonel’s soldiers approach the drivers politely but with great care. ID card. Destination. Boot open. Much of the traffic in the centre of Damascus is now channelled through three main streets - the rest are cordoned off. The result: traffic jams of epic proportions and more soldiers on patrol.

But the colonel is a phlegmatic man and, like many Syrian officers, is prepared to speak his mind. Yes, of course he supports the President but he thinks before he speaks (a rare quality in soldiers) and talks about religion as well as suicide bombers.

“You know, religion is not meant to be something you use to control people,” he says. “Religion should be something that makes people joyful and happy. All extremist organisations use religion for organising but religion is for beautiful things. I don’t like it when you use the word ‘Islamist’ for ‘extremist’. Extremists are not Muslims.” I try to explain that in English, we often use “Islamist” for “extremist”, that “Muslim” in an English context means just that: a Muslim. He frowns. I mention Osama bin Laden and he shrugs.

“You know, bin Laden’s job was not to think. His job was to obey and carry out orders and operations. Maybe he did not work for the Americans. But for the West?” We are now in conspiracy country - although as usual, I have to admit that bin Laden was fighting on our side against the Soviets - and the word Boston creeps into our conversation. He is afraid the Americans will send their troops here, blaming Syria, as they sent them to Iraq after 9/11.

I say no, the Americans have no enthusiasm for another Middle East war. The

colonel disagrees. Yes, the US will send “its” soldiers but they won’t be American. They will be sent locally by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The UN is amassing war crimes indictments against all kinds of armed groups in Syria - the government army very much among them - but the fact remains that this conversation would have been impossible - unthinkable - before the uprising. The war has given a freedom of speech even to soldiers to debate among themselves, as they do, about the war. The colonel lamented the fact that he had to tell me he was a Sunni. “We never talked like this before. We never thought in terms of religion. We were Syrians.”

I reflect on this for several minutes. If everyone was a Syrian before the revolt, then why did the uprising begin in the first place? Even the most lick-spittle supporters of the regime admit that deeper causes must be admitted for the terrible tragedy now overwhelming this country. It’s not good enough just to blame “terrorists” as all governments do when they want to demonise their enemies. But...

The government in Damascus yesterday stated that the bodies of the eight air force officers - including two generals - said to have been beheaded by rebels in Idlib province after their helicopter was apparently shot down, had been brought to the Latakia Military Hospital. All, according to a government official, had been beheaded. Several, he said, had - before or after death - had their eyes taken out. No further details were forthcoming. In Syria these days, you hear these things from both sides; and you fear they may be true. Take it or leave it.

19th April 2013

WHO WILL WIN THE BATTLE FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE? NOBODY

By Robert Fisk

SYRIANS WHO settled down to listen to Bashar Assad's independence day speech two nights ago were sorely disappointed. He didn't exactly offer blood, sweat and tears. Just more war, and the assurance that he would win. Up to 7,000 prisoners would be released to celebrate Syria's freedom from French rule 67 years ago - which goes to show how many prisoners are still held in the country's jails - but Assad wanted to assure his people that this really was a war. As if they didn't know. It was not sectarian. Foreign news media were portraying a lie: that "a president was holding on to his seat against a population who want him gone, but that is not the case". France still regarded Syria as its colony. Western nations wanted the Arabs to submit to them. "We saw their humanitarian intervention in Iraq, in Libya, and now we see it in Syria."

But Assad had a point. London, Paris and Washington love exiles. Into Iraq, we tried to inject the ghastly and wealthy exile Ahmed Chalabi. And we all know how reliable he turned out to be. We pretended that Libya's freedom fighters were Homeric warriors; and now they control their little Islamist fiefdoms in Benghazi and Tripoli (having done away with the US ambassador), courtesy of Nato air strikes against Gaddafi. If Algeria was not such a loyal ally of Syria, Assad might have pointed out that the French handed their colony over to the Algerian exiles who had largely avoided the war of independence - and who produced the autocratic and vicious state which slaughtered its own people in the Islamist struggle of the 1990s and which remains a corrupt and corrupted regime to this day.

And then we have the Syrian "opposition", insofar as it exists, with its endless fraternal arguments and juvenile infighting - what on earth does dear leader Khatib think he is doing? Has he resigned or not resigned? - and its alliance with the very same al-Qa'ida groupuscules that are supposed to be the centre of jihadism in Mali. Remember Mali? This was the centre of world terror back in January. Now the centre of world terror is supposed to be in northern Syria - fighting on "our" side against the hated Assad. And we brave Westerners are worried, supposedly, that Bashar's chemical weapons will fall "into the wrong hands" - being presumably in the "right hands" (Assad's) now! It makes you wonder who writes the Assad speeches. Can't they do better than the curmudgeonly interview that Assad gave on Wednesday night?

But we still don't understand the autocracies of the Middle East, both those we love - Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other well-known freedom-loving, pro-American democracies - and those we loathe - Syria, Iran, possibly a future Iraq (if it doesn't obey our orders) and potentially Egypt (unless the army takes over

and returns the country to a Mubarak lookalike). Never will I forget the fantasist Daniel Pipes' suggestion that what Iraq needed in the aftermath of Saddam was "a democratically minded strongman". Isn't that what Assad would claim to be?

And all the while, we are content to see Arab nations ganging up on the Syrian regime, pushing more and more weapons into the war - which is indeed, contrary to what Assad says, more and more sectarian - even though the Islamist al-Nusra movement is now by far the strongest among the rebels. Yet we are outraged that Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah might be involved - in Hezbollah's case, there is no "might" about it - in the same war. Up to 40 Hezbollah fighters are now said to have died in the Syrian conflict, most in Shia Lebanese villages on the Syrian side of the border. In Qusayr last week, at least five Hezbollah fighters were killed. One of them, Assad Ali Assad - and here we have a name, in case anyone cares to deny the story - was buried in southern Lebanon at the weekend.

But Hezbollah's involvement is important because Iran and its allies are also part of the reason for this conflict. And it remains a fact, even though Assad did not - could not - mention this in his independence day speech, that Iran is the target of the Syrian war, the overthrow of Assad part of our plan to destroy his Iranian ally - just as it was part of Israel's plan to deconstruct Iran by fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. Israel lost its war. Will Assad's enemies lose, too?

We have, in London, Paris and Washington, an odd habit. We believe that those dictators we don't like will actually go - "step down", "step aside", lose the war, whatever phrase we like to use - because we want them to go. Wasn't Saddam destroyed? Wasn't Gaddafi liquidated? Didn't Milosevic go to the Hague? All true. But Stalin survived. Kim Jong-un isn't doing too badly, either - though that's probably because he actually has nuclear weapons, as opposed to Iran which might or might not be trying to acquire them and thus remains on the Israeli-American target list. And here's some bad news for Assad's foes.

He mentioned the Syrian government army on Wednesday night. What he did not do was refer to their recent expansion of territory. His soldiers have now retaken most of rebel Deraya and are advancing into Harasta in the suburbs of Damascus. The 100-mile highway to Tartus, and thus to Latakia - long closed by the armed opposition - has just been reopened by Assad's divisions. For the first time in months, Syrians can now drive from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast. The rebels so beloved of Nato nations are losing their hold of Damascus. Yes, they may get it back. The road to Latakia may close again. This war - beware - may last another two, three or more years. Nobody will win.

But the power that will have to be reckoned with - barring some mass mutiny

- will be the Syrian army of Bashar Assad. It is tired of corruption. It is tired of party nepotism. It is becoming very angry with those it blames for the war: not just al-Qa'ida, al-Nusra, defectors and Nato, but with the intelligence services whose brutality in Daraa struck the match to the Syrian uprising. And just at the moment it is fighting back against Assad's enemies. Western "statesmen", diplomats, "analysts" and those absurd think-tankers so beloved of the networks may yet have to buy a new crystal ball.

20th April 2013

THE LIFESAVERS WHO TOOK SYRIA'S TOUGHEST TERRITORY: THE MIDDLE GROUND

By Robert Fisk

THERE ARE not many unsung heroes in the Syrian war, but Khaled Erksoussi and his 9,000 volunteers have got to be among them. Convoying food and medical aid across the front lines of this tragic conflict, arguing and cajoling and pleading and negotiating their way between enemies must place you somewhere near sainthood.

They even exchange detainees and dead bodies between the government and the rebels - - a remarkable task which shows just how many unofficial ceasefires must exist in this civil war.

Khaled Erksoussi doesn't call it a civil war, of course. For him there is only "the crisis". The Secretary General of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (Sarc) in Damascus doesn't mince his words about the problems he faces; the arguments with the Free Syria Army and the al-Nusrah rebels, the failure of government mukhabarat intelligence officers to understand that Sarc must work on both sides of the front lines, the seven Red Crescent volunteers still imprisoned by the mukhabarat.

"We are in a unique situation," Mr Erksoussi says. "By law, you are the auxiliary of the armed forces. But we can't be the auxiliary of the armed forces because the conflict involves them. We felt we would be of more benefit if we stayed in the middle and offered assistance to all sides in a neutral and impartial way. This has proved to be very difficult. People say: 'You are either with us or against us.' And this applies to both sides. We enforced our code of conduct on all our 500 employees and our 9,000 volunteers. We tell them: 'You mustn't act on your feelings - only by our seven principles.'"

Humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, unity, voluntary service, universality. Quite a mouthful. To the government forces who suggest that Sarc is helping the rebel side, Erksoussi's argument is simple. "If we don't get aid in there, they will get it from across the border in Turkey." But aware that the opposition would also like to get its hands on the aid, Erksoussi and his colleagues deliver only to their own local offices in the villages and towns of the north.

He was one of the Red Crescent men and women who managed to retrieve the bodies of the journalists Marie Colvin and Rémi Ochlik from Homs last year after they were killed by Syrian army fire. "We entered Baba Amr. The army dug up the graves and took the journalists' bodies to the military hospital. We took them from there back to the Damascus military hospital. Their bodies were whole. It was our duty to do this. Some of the opposition areas in Damascus, we take aid to the people. We pick a time to negotiate when there is no fierce

fighting.

“We even help both sides in the retrieval of bodies and detainees. We have helped in these exchanges a lot of times but we are not involved in the negotiations,” Erksoussi says.

Nor are the dangers impersonal. Forty-three-year old Erksoussi’s own 25-year-old wife Nuha is a Sarc volunteer. “I had to dispatch her on a humanitarian mission at the beginning of the crisis,” Erksoussi says. “I sent her to Jabor, Harasta, to parts of Deraya.” All three are battlefronts and you can see the relief on the man’s face when he says that the couple now have a child and so Nuha stays at home. “The Red Crescent is filled with love,” he says. “If you don’t love each other, you can’t give love to others.”

Talking to both sides has its own problems. In Homs, a rebel fighter noticed that the convoy contained volunteers from the capital. “You are from Damascus,” the man said. “Why don’t you support the revolution?” When government security forces found a Red Crescent food basket in the hands of the FSA, Erkssousi tried to explain the organisation’s work. “A food parcel is good for one month - I can’t stay till the people it’s given to eat it. But a food basket is not a weapon.”

Firas al-Nakib took the last convoy across the front lines and found himself talking to a “free army” officer who claimed that Sarc was under government control. “He didn’t trust us,” al-Nakib says. “But when he saw our warehouse in the opposition area and saw a lot of people going there for aid, he started to change his mind.”

Erksoussi is quite blunt about it. Our interest is the people in need. Just that. We don’t ask people if they love the government. Sometimes we retrieve military personnel. Soldiers wounded in opposition areas - they are brought to us and we bring them here to Damascus. The army likes us most of the time.” Not always so, it seems, the mukhabarat. Erksoussi says, “They are suspicious - maybe it is their right to be suspicious.”

But he has excellent advice to all his volunteers which might apply to all NGOs, indeed to journalists as well. “I tell our volunteers: ‘You are all educated - so when you have a fight with a policeman who only has an elementary education and you are arrogant, this is your fault. Don’t argue. Remember the other side has no chain of command while some of the [government] soldiers have had humanitarian law training. If you don’t like the person at the checkpoint, you can ask who is in command. You can’t do this with security men and with the other side. If you get into an argument, you can be taken from your car and beaten with an AK-47.’”

Or worse. The Red Crescent has lost 18 volunteers to the war, the last one

killed in one of its own warehouses in Aleppo last week when the building was hit by a mortar.

22nd April 2013

INSIDE DAMASCUS: HOW WOULD ASSAD'S FATHER HAVE DONE IT?

By Robert Fisk

WHAT WOULD Hafez have done? Every Syrian asks this question. Would the old lion of Damascus, whose son Bashar al-Assad became president when he died in 2000, have handled the present Syrian tragedy more harshly or more leniently? Would Hafez have allowed Syria to collapse into civil conflict so quickly? Would he have used the same ruthlessness as he did when he destroyed the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama in 1982 at a cost of up to 20,000 lives? Or would Hafez have reined in the secret police and acknowledged the original street demonstrations as an opportunity to turn away from dictatorship?

The dead cannot speak. But hitherto unknown information has emerged from the confidential archives of the Syrian presidency and foreign ministry, published in a new book by Bouthaina Shaaban, who spent ten years as Hafez's interpreter and is still an adviser to his son Bashar.

Shaaban was in on many of the 1990s "peace process" talks between Hafez and George Bush and Bill Clinton, and between secretaries of state Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright and the then Syrian foreign minister (now vice-president) Farouk al-Sharaa - not to mention Israeli leaders. Her book, Damascus Diary, provides new insight into that most powerful and intriguing of Arab leaders, written as her country has fallen apart over the past two years.

Shaaban's tale begins in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait from Saddam Hussein in 1991, when Bush Sr's secretary of state, James Baker, arrives in Damascus to persuade Hafez al-Assad to send a delegation to "peace" talks with the Israelis and other Arab nations in Madrid. Baker tells Hafez that the oil fires lit by Saddam "can reach as far as Iran and Turkey". Assad smiles, replying: "There are fires that we see and others that we don't. The invisible fires can sometimes be more dangerous than the actual ones." It's a response that he might have uttered - in a different context - had he been alive two years ago.

Assad demanded the return of all the Golan Heights - occupied by Israel since 1967 - based on the pre-war borders, every square foot of Syrian land in return for complete peace, an Israeli retreat before even an exchange of ambassadors. Assad demanded that the Russians and the United Nations co-sponsor Madrid. And he got his way. Baker said he agreed to UN participation, angrily claiming that he always said "yes" to Assad. His reply? "But in fact, you are not saying yes, Mr Baker... you are saying no! I asked you to say yes to UN sponsorship... but you said no."

Baker said he could provide 50 per cent of what Syria wanted for the conference. "In order to reach 100 per cent, we have to take our clothes off," Assad responded. "We have a decision in Syria never to take our clothes off!"

The Syrians attended Madrid, but it was a flop. Yitzhak Shamir walked out of the talks and Syrian foreign minister Sharaa famously held up a British Mandate "wanted" poster for the "terrorist" Shamir.

Clinton impressed Assad: a young man who appeared to want to be neutral in the Arab-Israeli dispute - an illusion of course, but that's what Assad thought. Warren Christopher told Assad that Middle East peace would be Clinton's first priority. But Assad had personally heard the same from Nixon, Carter and Bush. "The previous administration was also serious," he said. "But when elections started, everything related to peace came to a grinding standstill."

Clinton and Assad negotiated what was called the Rabin Deposit, the idea of going back to the stage of negotiations reached with Yitzhak Rabin. This included the dismantling of Jewish colonies on Golan and a staged Israeli military withdrawal.

There is much more - including a fascinating phone conversation in which Clinton blamed Israel for the Shepherdstown failure - but of course, a healthy dose of salt must be added to this account. It doesn't tally with others who were present at the talks, as Shaaban admits, but the voice of Hafez al-Assad is genuine enough. Here was one tough man who wouldn't give an inch on sovereignty but liked Clinton and even understood Israel's need for security.

So what would Hafez do today? Endure the Obama condemnation as Bashar has done? Fight back? Or give way to history and retire? His son has not vouchsafed his views on this. It's the question I would like to ask him.

24th April 2013

KERRY WARNS NATO TO PLAN FOR POSSIBLE SYRIAN CHEMICAL ATTACK

By Kim Sengupta

THE US Secretary of State has warned that preparations must be made for the threat posed by chemical weapons in Syria's civil war amid claims that President Bashar al-Assad's forces have already carried out attacks using Sarin nerve gas.

Appearing at his first Nato conference in Brussels yesterday, John Kerry asked the alliance to put plans in place to tackle the spread of chemical contagion. The US President, Barack Obama, had warned the use of such weapons of mass destruction by the regime would be crossing a "red line".

The reports of Sarin being used during an operation outside Damascus on 19 March came from Israel, with the chief of research for military intelligence, Brigadier-General Itai Brun, saying photographs of victims with foam coming out of their mouths and contracting pupils indicated the use of the gas. He claimed: "There's a huge arsenal of chemical weapons in Syria. Our assessment is that the regime has used and is using chemical weapons."

Mr Kerry said he had telephoned the Israeli Prime Minister about the report. "I talked to Prime Minister Netanyahu this morning. I think it is fair for me to say that he was not in a position to confirm that in the conversation that I had. I don't know yet what the facts are," he said.

Earlier Mr Kerry told Nato foreign ministers: "Planning regarding Syria is an appropriate undertaking for the alliance. We should also carefully and collectively consider how Nato is prepared to respond to protect its members from a threat, including any potential chemical weapons threat."

The British and French governments sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, last week claiming there was evidence that the regime had used chemical weapons this year in Homs, Aleppo and Damascus.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Nato Secretary-General, said: "The situation is Syria has dramatically deteriorated and continues to pose a threat to regional stability. We are extremely concerned about the use of ballistic missiles in Syria and the possible use of chemical weapons. There is no call for Nato to play a role, but if these challenges remain unaddressed they could directly affect our own security. So we will continue to remain extremely vigilant."

However, repeated warnings about the disintegrating situation in Syria posing the most immediate and widespread danger to the international community, was accompanied, it is said, by growing belief among some of the member states that a negotiated settlement was needed to prevent further damage to neighbouring countries already destabilised by the strife across the border.

Mr Rasmussen said he had found support, in particular, for talks to be based on the Geneva Agreement signed last year by a number of counties including the

US and Russia.

Russia's foreign minister raised the proposals, which call for talks leading to an interim government prior to elections, in bilateral talks with Mr Kerry during yesterday's conference in Brussels.

The main source of disagreement had been over the West's insistence that no political process can progress without Assad's departure and the Kremlin saying there could be no such precondition.

Mr Kerry maintained yesterday that Washington and Moscow are not that far apart on the Geneva Agreement with both countries acknowledging that President Assad will have to go and suggesting that timing of that was the issue; "but everyone's first choice is a political solution."

27th April 2013

‘BASHAR’S SPECIAL FORCES NOW APPEAR CONFIDENT, RUTHLESS, POLITICALLY MOTIVATED, A DANGER TO THEIR ENEMIES’

By Robert Fisk

CLOUDS HANG oppressively low over the Syrian army's front-line mountain-top in the far north of Syria. Rain has only just replaced snow, turning this heavily protected fortress into a swamp of mud and stagnant ponds where soldiers man their lookout posts with the wind in their faces, their elderly T-55 tanks - the old Warsaw Pact battlehorses of the 1950s - dripping under the showers, their tracks in the mud, used now only as artillery pieces. They are "rubbish tanks" - debeba khurda - I say to Colonel Mohamed, commander of the Syrian army's Special Forces unit across this bleak landscape, and he grins at me. "We use them for static defence," he says frankly. 'They do not move.'"

Before the war - or "the crisis" as President Bashar al-Assad's soldiers are constrained to call it - Jebel al-Kawaniah was a television transmission station. But when the anti-government rebels captured it, they blew up the towers, cut down the forest of fir trees around it to create a free-fire zone and built ramparts of earth to protect them from government gunfire. The Syrian army fought their way back up the hillsides last October, through the village of Qastal Maaf - which now lies pancaked and broken on the old road to the Turkish border at Kassab - and stormed on to the plateau which is now their front line.

On their maps, the Syrian army codenamed "Kawaniah Mountain" according to their own military co-ordinates. It became "Point 45" - Point 40 lies east through the mountain gloom - and they spread their troops in tents under the trees of two neighbouring hills. I climb on to one of the T-55s and can see them through the downpour. There are dull explosions across the valley and the occasional "pop" of small arms fire and, rather disconcertingly, Col Mohamed points out that the nearest forest is still in the hands of his enemies, scarcely 800 metres away. The soldier sitting in the tank turret with a heavy machine-gun doesn't take his eyes off the trees.

It is always an eerie experience to sit among Bashar al-Assad's soldiers. These are the "bad guys" of the regime, according to the rest of the world - although in truth the country's secret police deserve that title - and I'm well aware that these men have been told that a Western journalist is coming to their dug-outs and basement headquarters. They ask me to use only their first names for fear that their families may be killed; they allow me to take any photographs I wish, but not to picture their faces - a rule that the rebels sometimes ask of journalists for the same reason - but every soldier and officer to whom I spoke, including a Brigadier General, gave their full names and IDs to me.

Such access to the Syrian army was almost unimaginable just a few months ago and there are good reasons why. The army believe they are at last winning

back ground from the Free Syrian Army and the al-Nusra Islamist fighters and the various al-Qa'ida satellites that now rule much of the Syrian countryside. From Point 45 they are scarcely a mile and a half from the Turkish frontier and intend to take the ground in between. Outside Damascus they have battled their way bloodily into two rebel-held suburbs. While I was prowling through the mountaintop positions, the rebels were in danger of losing the town of Qusayr outside Homs amid opposition accusations of the widespread killing of civilians. The main road from Damascus to Latakia on the Mediterranean coast has been reopened by the army. And the line troops I met at Point 45 were a different breed of men from those soldiers who became corrupted after 29 years of semi-occupation in Lebanon, who fell back to Syria without a war to fight in 2005, the discipline of the soldiers around Damascus a joke rather than a threat to anyone. Bashar's Special Forces now appear confident, ruthless, politically motivated, a danger to their enemies, their uniforms smart, their weapons clean. Syrians have long grown used to the claims by Israel - inevitably followed by the Washington echo machine - that chemical weapons have been used by Bashar's forces; as an intelligence officer remarked caustically in Damascus: "Why should we use chemical weapons when our Mig aircraft and their bombs cause infinitely more destruction?" The soldiers up at Point 45 admitted the defections to the Free Syrian Army, the huge losses of their own men - inevitably referred to as "martyrs" - and made no secret of their own body counts for battles lost and won.

Their last "martyr" at Point 45 was shot by a rebel sniper two weeks ago, 22 year-old Special Forces Private Kamal Aboud from Homs. He at least died as a soldier. Colonel Mohamed spoke ruefully of the troopers on family leave who, he said, were executed with knives when they entered enemy territory. I remind myself that the UN is bringing war crimes charges against this army and I remind Colonel Mohamed - who has four bullet wounds in his arms to show that he leads his soldiers from the front, not from a bunker - that his soldiers were surely meant to be liberating the Golan Heights from Israel. Israel is to the south, I say, and here he is fighting his way north towards Turkey. Why?

"I know, but we are fighting Israel. I joined the army to fight Israel. And now I am fighting Israel's tools. And the tools of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, so in this way we are fighting for Golan. This is a conspiracy and the West is helping the foreign terrorists who arrived in Syria, the same terrorists you are trying to kill in Mali." I have heard this before, of course. The "moamarer", the conspiracy, sits beside me at all interviews in Syria. But the colonel admits that the two Syrian T-55s which fire shells at Point 45 every morning - the very same vintage war-carts as his own tanks - are sets of twins, that his enemies have taken their artillery

from the government army and that his opponents include men from Bashar al-Assad's original army.

On the road to Qastel Maaf, a general tells me that on the highway to the Turkish border, the army have just killed 10 Saudis, two Egyptians and a Tunisian - I am shown no papers to prove this - but the soldiers at Point 45 produce for me three handset radios they have captured from their enemies. One is marked "HXT Commercial Terminal", the other two are made by Hongda and the instructions are in Turkish. I ask them if they listen to the rebel communications. "Yes, but we don't understand them," a major says. "They are speaking in Turkish and we don't understand Turkish." So are they Turks or Turkmen Syrians from the villages to the east? The soldiers shrug. They say they have also heard Arabic voices speaking with Libyan and Yemeni accents. And given that the great and the good of Nato are now obsessed with "foreign jihadis" in Syria, I suspect these Syrian soldiers may well be telling the truth.

The laneways of this beautiful northern countryside conceal the viciousness of the fighting. Clusters of red and white roses smother the walls of abandoned homes. A few men tend the mass of orange orchards that glow around us, a woman combs her long hair on a roof. The lake of Balloran glistens in the spring sunshine between mountains still topped with a powder of snow. It reminds me, chillingly, of Bosnia. For several miles the villages are still occupied, a Christian Greek Orthodox township of 10 families with a church dedicated to the appearance of the Virgin to a woman called Salma; a Muslim Alawite village, then a Muslim Sunni village close to the front lines but still co-existing; a ghost of the old secular, non-sectarian Syria which both sides promise - with ever decreasing credibility - will return once the war is over.

Then I am in a smashed village called Beit Fares where hundreds of Syrian soldiers can be seen patrolling the surrounding forests, and another general fishes into his pocket and produces an army mobile phone video of dead fighters. "All are foreign," he says. I watch closely as the camera lingers over bearded faces, some contorted in fear, others in the dreamless sleep of death. They have been heaped together. And, most sinister of all, I observe a military boot which descends twice on the heads of the dead men. On the wall of the dugout, someone has written: "We are soldiers of Assad - to hell with you dogs of the armed groups of Jabel al-Aswad and Beit Shrouk."

These are the names of a string of tiny villages still in rebel hands - you can see the roofs of their houses from Point 45 - and Col Mohamed, a 45-year-old veteran of the Lebanese war between 1993 and 1995, lists the others: Khadra, Jebel Saouda, Zahiyeh, al-Kabir, Rabia… Their fate awaits them. When I ask the soldiers how many prisoners they took in their battles, they say "None" with a

loud voice. What, I ask, even when they claim to have killed 700 “terrorists” in one engagement? “None,” they reply again.

Opposite a bullet-riddled school building is a pulverised house. “A local terrorist leader died there with all his men,” the colonel states. “They did not surrender.”

I doubt if they had the chance. But at Beit Fares, some rebels did escape earlier this year, along - so says General Wasif from Latakia - with their own local leader, a Syrian businessman. We clump into the man’s ruined villa on the hills of this abandoned Turkmen village - the inhabitants are now in Turkish refugee camps, the general tells me - and it seems that the businessman was wealthy. The villa is surrounded by irrigated orchards of lemon and pistachio and fig trees. There is a basketball court, an empty swimming pool, children’s swings, a broken marble fountain - in which there are still Turkish-labelled tins of stuffed vine leaves - and marble-walled living rooms and kitchens and a delicate plaque in Arabic above the front door saying: “God Bless This House.” It seems He did not.

I pluck some figs from the absentee businessman’s orchard. The soldiers do the same. But they taste sharp and too sour and the soldiers spit them out, preferring the oranges that hang by the roadside. General Fawaz is talking to a colleague and lifts up an exploded rocket for inspection. It is locally manufactured, the welding unprofessional - but identical to all the Qassam missiles which the Palestinian Hamas movement fires into Israel from the Gaza Strip. “Someone from Palestine told the terrorists how to make this,” General Fawaz says. Colonel Mohamed remarks quietly that when they stormed into the village, they found cars and trucks with Turkish military plates - but no Turkish soldiers.

There is an odd relationship with Turkey up here. Recep Tayyip Erdogan may condemn Assad but the nearest Turkish frontier station a mile and a half away stays open, the only border post still linking Turkey and government-controlled Syrian territory. One of the officers refers to an old story about the Umayyad Caliph Muawiya who said that he kept a thin piece of his own hair “to connect me to my enemies”. “The Turks have left this one frontier open with us,” the officer says, “so as not to cut the hair of Muawiya.” He is not smiling and I understand what he is saying. The Turks still want to maintain a physical connection with the Assad regime. Erdogan cannot be certain that Bashar al-Assad will lose this war.

Many of the soldiers show their wounds; more valuable to them, I suspect, than medals or badges of rank. Besides, the officers have already removed their gold insignia on the front lines - unlike Admiral Nelson, they do not wish to be

picked off by the rebels' early morning snipers. Dawn seems to be the killing time. On a roadway, a second lieutenant shows me his own wounds. There is a bullet's entry below his left ear. On the other side of his head, a cruel purple scar runs upwards towards his right ear. He was shot right through the neck and survived. He was lucky.

So were the Special Forces soldiers who patrolled towards a hidden land-mine, an IED in Western parlance. A young Syrian explosives ordnance officer in Qastal Maaf shows me the two iron-cased shells that were buried under the road. One of them is almost too heavy for me to lift. The fuse is labeled in Turkish. An antenna connected to the explosives was strung from the top of an electricity pole for a line-of-sight rebel bomber to detonate. A technical mine-detector - "all our equipment is Russian," the soldiers boasted - alerted the patrol to the explosives before the soldiers walked over them.

But death hovers over the Syrian army, just as it haunts their enemies. The airport at Latakia is now a place of permanent lamentation. No sooner do I arrive than I find families crying and tearing their faces in front of the terminal, waiting for the bodies of their soldier sons and brothers and husbands, Christians for the most part but Muslims too, for the Mediterranean coast is the heartland of Christians and Shia Alawites and a minority of Sunni Muslims. One Christian woman is restrained by an old man as she tries to lie down on the road, tears streaming down her face. A truck by the departure hall is piled with wreaths.

A general in charge of the army's bereaved families tells me that the airport is too small for this mass mourning. "The helicopters bring our dead here from all over northern Syria," he says. "We have to look after all these families and find them housing, but sometimes I go to homes to tell them of the death of a son and find that they have already lost three other sons as martyrs. It is too much." Forget Private Ryan. I see beside the control tower a wounded soldier hobbling along on one foot, a bandage partly covering his face, his arm around a comrade as he limps towards the terminal.

Military statistics I was shown suggest that 1,900 soldiers from Latakia have been killed in this awful war, another 1,500 from Tartus. But you must add up the statistics of the Alawite and Christian mixed villages in the hills above Latakia to understand the individual cost. In Hayalin, for example, the village of 2,000 souls has lost 22 soldiers with another 16 listed as missing. In real terms that's 38 dead. Many were killed in Jisr al-Shughur back in June of 2011 when the Syrian army lost 89 dead in a rebel ambush. A villager called Fouad explains that there was one survivor who came from a neighbouring village. "I telephoned him to ask what happened to the other men," he said. "He said: 'I don't know because they cut out my eyes.' He said that someone led him away

and he thought he would be executed but found himself in an ambulance and was taken to hospital in Latakia." One of the Jisr al-Shughur dead was returned to Hayalin, but relatives found that his coffin contained only his legs. "The latest martyr from Hayalin was killed only two days ago," Fouad told me. "He was a soldier called Ali Hassan. He had just got married. They couldn't even return his body."

The 24 Syrian helicopter gunships that throb on the apron beyond the terminal project the power of the government's hardware. But soldiers tell their own stories of fear and intimidation. That rebel forces threaten the families of government soldiers is a long-established fact. But one private told me bleakly of how his elder brother was ordered to persuade him to desert the army. "When I refused, they broke my brother's legs," he said. When I asked if others had shared this experience, an 18-year old private was brought to me. The officers offered to leave the room when I spoke to him.

He was an intelligent young man but his story was told simply and untutored. His was no set propaganda speech. "I come from Idlib Province and they came to my father and said they needed me there," he said. "But my father refused and said, 'If you want my son, go and bring him here - and if you do, you will not find me here to greet him.' Then my father sent most of his family to Lebanon. My father and mother are still there and they are still being threatened." I tell the officers later that I do not believe every Syrian defector left because of threats to his family, that some soldiers must have profoundly disagreed with the regime. They agree but insist that the army remains strong.

Colonel Mohamed, who mixes military strategy with politics, says he regards the foreign "plot" against Syria as a repeat version of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of the First World War, when Britain and France secretly decided to divide up the Middle East - including Syria - between them. "Now they want to do the same," he says. "Britain and France want to give weapons to the terrorists to divide us, but we want to have a united Syria in which all our people live together, democratically, caring not about their religion but living peacefully…" And then came the crunch. "…under the leadership of our champion Dr Bashar al-Assad."

But it is not that simple. The word "democracy" and the name of Assad do not blend very well in much of Syria. And I rather think that the soldiers of what is officially called the Syrian Arab Army are fighting for Syria rather than Assad. But fighting they are and maybe, for now, they are winning an unwinnable war. At Beit Fares, I peak over the parapet once more and the mist is rising off the mountains. This could be Bosnia. The country is breathtaking, the grey-green hills rolling into blue velvet mountains. A little heaven. But the fruits

along this front line are bitter indeed.

27th April 2013

HAS ASSAD CROSSED ‘RED LINE’? DOUBTS CAST ON EVIDENCE OF USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

By Kim Sengupta

SYRIA LAST night denied it had used chemical weapons on rebel forces, denouncing as “lies” Western claims the nerve agent sarin was detected in samples sent from the front line. A day after US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel went public with claims of sarin use “on a small scale” he believed came from regime forces, Syria’s Information Minister Omran Al-Zoubi told Russian TV: “Everything the American minister and British government have said lacks credibility. It’s baseless, and it’s a new tactic to put political and economic pressure on Syria.”

Earlier yesterday the Prime Minister David Cameron told the BBC the use of chemical weapons in Syria was a “war crime” that breached a “red line”, but stressed further evidence was required and he had no desire to intervene militarily. The claims chemical agents have been used comes at a time when stalemate on the ground, disunity among the political opposition, and growing unease about the predominance of extremists among rebel fighters, have led to calls for a renewed push for peace.

At the Nato conference of foreign ministers in Brussels this week, US Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the alliance’s Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, all proposed resuscitating the Geneva initiative for talks signed last year, with Mr Kerry stressing differences between Washington and the Kremlin were not as deep as before. The claim from Israel that the regime has already used the nerve agent Sarin on other occasions immediately led to Mr Kerry being asked why this was not seen as crossing the “red line” by Assad which, Barack Obama had warned, would lead to a change in Washington’s Syria policy. Forty-eight hours later, pressed by supporters of the Syrian opposition, the White House sent out a letter to members of Congress saying US intelligence agencies believed “with varying degrees of confidence” chemical weapons were used against rebels.

This follows a letter sent by the British and French governments to the United Nations accusing regime forces of using WMD. David Cameron continued to hold yesterday: “It’s limited but there is growing evidence that we have seen the use of chemical weapons, possibly by the regime.”

The picture which is emerging from accounts given by Western and Middle Eastern officials and members of the Syrian opposition is this: the tests so far have not yielded conclusive results; they have been based on blood, hair and soil samples as well as photographs and video footage; the samples have not been collected independently by Western investigators inside Syria but handed over by the rebels or, at least on one occasion, by Turkish intelligence; some of the

footage may have been faked; the tests had been carried out at the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory and in America. Conclusions on them vary within US intelligence agencies and the experience of Iraq and WMD is a source of caution among officials in Washington and London.

Dr Sally Leivesley, a chemical and biological analyst, and a former scientific adviser to the Home Office, said: "There are things here which do not add up. A chemical attack using Sarin would leave mass fatalities and very few people alive. From what one hears about the symptoms it's possible a harassing agent rather than a nerve agent was used". She added: "The latest ones show people with an eye disorder, which is obviously worrying but does not mean chemical [weapons] or Sarin was involved. Some of the earlier photos we had seen were odd: people in masks and gloves, who were supposedly doctors, touching the victims - something which will not happen. The symptoms we've seen could be caused by other elements, such as chlorine.

"What may be considered 'evidence' of the presence of chemical elements in things like hair samples could be something like pesticide, which is the reason American agencies want to wait for further tests. Could there have been some faking? Possibly, but if that is being done it's not because people are bad; it's because they are desperate."

Analysts are also puzzled by the way regime supposedly used its WMD arsenal. Dr Ralf Trapp, a specialist on chemical proliferation, said: "From a military perspective, it doesn't make sense to use chemical weapons bit by bit. Why would the regime just put it on a grenade here or a rocket launcher there? It's just not the way you would expect a military force to act."

Doubts about provenance of the evidence are providing the US administration the caveats to resist activating the "red-line" threat. Washington is now desperate to get UN inspectors involved. In Brussels, the Americans have urged Mr Lavrov to intercede with Assad to allow the teams access to sites inside Syria.

28th April 2013

SYRIA AND SARIN GAS: US CLAIMS HAVE A VERY FAMILIAR RING

By Robert Fisk

IS THERE any way of escaping the theatre of chemical weapons? First, Israeli “military intelligence” says that Bashar al-Assad’s forces have used/have probably used/might have used/could use chemical weapons. Then Chuck Hagel, the US Defence Secretary, pops up in Israel to promise even more firepower for Israel’s over-armed military - avoiding any mention of Israel’s more than 200 nuclear warheads - and then imbibing all the Israeli “intelligence” on Syria’s use/probable use/possible use of chemical weapons.

Then good ol’ Chuck returns to Washington and tells the world that “this is serious business. We need all the facts.” The White House tells Congress that US intelligence agencies, presumably the same as Israeli intelligence agencies since the two usually waffle in tandem, have “varying degrees of confidence” in the assessment. But Senator Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee - she who managed to defend Israel’s actions in 1996 after it massacred 105 civilians, mostly children, at Qana in Lebanon - announces of Syria that “it is clear that red lines have been crossed and action must be taken to prevent larger-scale use”. And the oldest of current White House clichés - hitherto used exclusively on Iran’s probable/possible development of nuclear weapons - is then deployed: “All options are on the table.”

In any normal society the red lights would now be flashing, especially in the world’s newsrooms. But no. We scribes remind the world that Obama said the use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a “game changer” - at least Americans admit it is a game - and our reports confirm what no one has actually confirmed. Chemical arms used. In two Canadian TV studios, I am approached by producers brandishing the same headline. I tell them that on air I shall trash the “evidence” - and suddenly the story is deleted from both programmes. Not because they don’t want to use it - they will later - but because they don’t want anyone suggesting it might be a load of old cobblers.

CNN has no such inhibitions. Their reporter in Amman is asked what is known about the use of chemical weapons by Syria and replies: “Not as much as the world would want to know … the psyche of the Assad regime ….” But has anyone tried? Or simply asked an obvious question, posed to me by a Syrian intelligence man in Damascus last week: if Syria can cause infinitely worse damage with its MiG bombers (which it does) why would it want to use chemicals? And since both the regime and its enemies have accused each other of using such weapons, why isn’t Chuck as fearful of the rebels as he is of the Assad dictatorship?

It all comes back to that most infantile cliché of all: that the US and Israel fear

Assad's chemical weapons "falling into the wrong hands". They are frightened, in other words, that these chemicals might end up in the armoury of the very same rebels, especially the Islamists, that Washington, London, Paris, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are supporting. And if these are the "wrong hands", then presumably the weapons in Assad's armoury are in the "right hands". That was the case with Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons - until he used them against the Kurds.

Now we know that there have been three specific incidents in which sarin gas has supposedly been used in Syria: in Aleppo, where both sides accused each other (the hospital videos in fact came from Syrian state TV); in Homs, apparently on a very small scale; and in the outskirts of Damascus. And, although the White House appears to have missed this, three Syrian child refugees were brought to hospital in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli with deep and painful burns on their bodies.

But now for a few problems. Phosphorus shells can inflict deep burns, and perhaps cause birth defects. But the Americans do not suggest that the Syrian military might have used phosphorus (which is indeed a chemical); after all, American troops used the very same weapon in the Iraqi city of Fallujah, where there is indeed now an explosion of birth defects. I suppose our hatred of the Assad regime might better be reflected by horror at reports of the torture by Syrian secret policemen of the regime's detainees. But there's a problem here, too: only 10 years ago, the US was "renditioning" innocent men, including a Canadian citizen, to Damascus to be interrogated and tortured by the very same secret policemen. And if we mention Saddam's chemical weapons, there's another glitch: because the components of these vile weapons were manufactured by a factory in New Jersey and sent to Baghdad by the US.

That is not the story in our newsrooms, of course. Walk into a TV studio and they're all reading newspapers. Walk into a newspaper office and they're all watching television. It's osmotic. And the headlines are all the same: Syria uses chemical weapons. That's how the theatre works.

29th April 2013

THE LESSONS OF LIBYA HAVE SAVED SYRIA FROM THE WEST - FOR NOW

By Robert Fisk

THE IRAQI poet al-Mutanabbi - he who said that “if you see the teeth of a lion, it doesn’t mean that the lion is smiling at you” - was murdered by someone he had offended in a poem. So writers living in Middle Eastern dictatorships have generally adopted the cautious politics of the Tudor poets, of Shakespeare’s tragedies or John Donne. Tell your story in metaphor.

Always when I come to Syria, I bring Warwick Ball’s gentle archeological manual, published almost 20 years ago. And so in Damascus, contemplating the nature of autocracy, I naturally turned to it and the inscription on the wall of the Aleppo citadel which commemorates the 13th-century Sultan Qalawun. The reader deserves to read this: “Lord, the greatest ruler, the most noble king, the learned, the just, the victorious, the warrior, the guardian of the frontiers, the helper, the triumphant … suppressor of rebels … the Alexander of his time.” Syrian Baath Party propaganda couldn’t beat that!

But as I was writing these words in Damascus, I did wonder how the occupant of the city’s presidential palace felt more than two years into a bloodbath as violent as that through which Qalawun lived. The sultan had to face family feuds - just as the father of Bashar al-Assad did - but the latter has a long way to go to earn those other titles. Bashar’s own enemies may regard him as an apostate (a sectarian label, for Alawites are no heretics) but the “suppressor of rebels” is a sobriquet that Assad has not yet earned. His army may be winning for the moment, but the rebels are not “suppressed”. As for “guardian of the frontiers”, Syria has lost all but one border post with Turkey.

So where do we stand in Syria today? Well, what happened in Libya - Nato support for rebels who killed Gaddafi and then turned their country into a series of Islamist fiefdoms where even the US ambassador could be murdered - probably saved Syria. Take a listen to the senior US Democrat Nancy Pelosi on Friday. “This is not Libya. The Syrians have anti-aircraft capability that makes going in there much more challenging.” Indeed.

For journalists have forgotten - but I bet Pelosi hasn’t - that US aircraft did attack the Syrian military in Lebanon in the 1980s. One bomber was shot down in the Bekaa Valley, one of its crew killed and the other held for weeks in a Damascus prison until Jesse Jackson decided to “break the cycle of violence” and plead successfully with Assed père for his release. So no, Nato is not going to bomb the tanks of the Syrian regime.

In much the same way, Iraq has probably saved Iran from US attack. True, the Qataris and the Saudis are arming the rebels of Syria but - with just enough to stop them losing but not enough to allow them to win. Does the same apply, one

wonders, to the Russians as they resupply the Syrian army's tank corps?

If the Sultan Qalawun had to defeat Crusaders from the superpowers of Europe and from regional enemies like Iran, Bashar al-Assad has Washington and the EU, plenty of local Gulf kings and a host of rebels of various Islamist credentials to contend with.

This time, he has Iran on his side.

Yet history is a strange companion. Look at the last two years. Remember the mass defections, the Free Syria Army and the tens of thousands who were expected to flock to its colours? Thousands did. Tens of thousands did not.

Remember General Manaf Tlass who defected last July? When did we last hear of him? A Prime Minister defected - and was replaced. A Defence Minister was assassinated - and replaced. Assad's forces were collapsing at Aleppo, or so we were told. A government general in the city did tell me last August that he would recapture neighbouring streets in 10 days. He still has not. And if Aleppo can hold on, why shouldn't Damascus?

Then there are Syria's chemical weapons. Last week's hair-raising "red line" headlines transmogrified Obama into King Lear ("I will do such things - what they are yet, I know not…") with his usual double-speak: "this is going to be a game-changer", but it's only a "preliminary assessment". So forget red lines.

And so no change. Two more years of war? Three? History is a cruel master. For last autumn that wonderful inscription was blasted off the Aleppo citadel wall by rebel explosives. So much for the guardian of frontiers and the suppressor of rebels.

30th April 2013

ASSAD SENDS HIS FEARED MILITIA SQUADS TO THE BATTLEFRONT

By Robert Fisk

IN A decision that is certain to arouse fear among the regime's enemies, the Syrian government has decreed that thousands of volunteers loyal to President Bashar al-Assad should be recruited into uniformed and armed units under Syrian army command to fight on the front lines against anti-Assad rebels, and to control newly "liberated" towns and villages. The "National Defence Forces" will, according to their commander - interviewed by The Independent in the fiercely loyalist city of Latakia - include tens of thousands of recruits, many of them from the same Alawite branch of the Shia Islam sect to which the President belongs.

The Syrian opposition already claims that the regime's decision will merely legalise the brutal pro-Baathist "shabiha" militia - a word that can be chillingly translated as "ghosts" - which is accused of torturing and killing both civilians and armed opponents of the government around the central city of Homs. But Syrian officers charged with training and commanding the new "defence force" insist that it will be kept under the strictest military discipline and used only as a support for the regular army in its battle against the rebels.

"We are trying to stop undisciplined militias everywhere," the National Defence Force's commanding general told me in his office in Latakia. "We and our leadership, side by side with the [government] Syrian Arab Army will try to stop looting and killing in every part of Syria - by all sides."

The general - the only senior officer in a visit to north-western Syria, who asked me not to reveal even his first name - said that his men would be divided into two separate forces.

"They will be on the front lines, performing the same tasks as the army, and they will also form a self-defence force in the villages to protect government offices and buildings."

The creation of this new force could indicate that the regular army, after its recent military successes, is short of manpower; or that Syria's President - aware of the lawlessness of pro-government militias and the massive condemnation they have provoked internationally - realises that they must be brought under the control of the armed forces to avoid further bloodshed. According to the general, however, the new force "does not mean that the Syrian army is weak", but that it will be able to maintain control of areas "until the arrival of the Syrian army" in towns and villages loyal to the government. "Their job will be monitoring, protecting and collecting intelligence and helping the Syrian army to advance," he said.

National Defence Force recruits who fight on the front lines will be paid £100

a month and will be armed with AK-47s, pistols, light rockets and Russian-made heavy machine guns. After a month of training, they will wear army uniform and must serve full-time until the end of hostilities - or “the crisis” as Syrian officers refer to the war. For “courageous achievements” at the front, recruits will receive extra payment. Those remaining in villages and towns will be unpaid. “They are doctors, engineers, farmers and shopkeepers,” the general said soothingly.

But this is no “Dad’s Army” of ancient military veterans and local mayors. The only members of the force identified by an officer to me in Latakia were young men aboard a truck mounted with a heavy machine gun near the airport. All were carrying Kalashnikovs and all wore black ski-masks. When I went to meet the general in Latakia, I found a decoration of a huge 15ft-long, double-bladed metal sword - a symbol of Shia Islam - on the wall of his outer office. To put it mildly, this did give a slightly disturbing edge to his claim that his was a secular part-time army.

The general became upset when I suggested to him that his new force - especially in the Latakia region - would be composed mainly of Alawites. “The majority of the people in the coastal areas are Alawites,” he roared at me. “But why don’t you ask about our National Defence Force recruits in Aleppo and Hama and all the other governorates where there are even more recruits than in Latakia? They are of all religions. The people want to keep Syria safe because they love their country.”

This, of course, is a view that can be applied to the government’s opponents. The tens of thousands of civilians who originally protested against the regime’s continuing rule in 2011, also proclaimed their love of country. But since the Free Syrian Army and its cohorts of “jihadis” coalesced into an armed insurrection against Assad in Idlib and around Aleppo, Hama, Homs - and indeed, in the suburbs of Damascus - government forces have felt able to portray their enemies as “foreign terrorists”, the very words the Latakia general used to describe the target of his National Defence Force.

When I recalled for him the fate of the Algerian “village defenders”, recruited in similar circumstances by the Algerian government in the ferocious 1990s war against Islamists - and whose wives and children were massacred by the Islamists once they had left their towns for the front lines - the general shook his head vigorously.

“What happened in Algeria will not happen here,” he said. “On the coastal front near here, we have not lost a single martyr in our forces. Our people know the mountains and the valleys on the front lines, which are tough places in which to fight. It is a mistake to call honest people who defend their lands and dignity ‘shabiha’. The television chains which lie use this word to refer to people who

loot and kill - but why do these television reporters use this term ‘shabiha’ to describe these honest people?”

The general was warming to his subject. “Why don’t they refer to the foreigners who come here from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Tunisia - even Europe - as terrorists? What do they mean by ‘shabiha’? Do they mean those who thieve and kill, or what? But the acts of the ‘takfiri’ are known to everybody. They are terrorists.” In its most literal interpretation, a takfiri is a Muslim who accuses a co-religionist of apostasy, but it has become shorthand in Syria for Islamic extremism.

Even now, the general continued, National Defence Force volunteers had taken over government army positions on a 1,625-metre hill called Nabi Younis from which they can control large stretches of road across Hama, Idlib and Latakia. “The National Defence Force is now responsible for keeping these roads open.”

The new “army” will have one clear advantage for the regime; as well as putting thousands of new men under arms, it provides an alternative to the system of conscription which has failed in time of war in so many Middle East states, from Afghanistan to Iraq. And its roots were planted months ago. Since last year, armed men in civilian clothes have guarded Catholic and Orthodox Christian villages north of Damascus.

6th May 2013

AN INTERVENTION THAT MEANS WE ARE ALL INVOLVED NOW

By Robert Fisk

LIGHTS IN the sky over Damascus. Another Israeli raid - “daring” of course, in the words of Israel’s supporters, and the second in two days - on Bashar al-Assad’s weaponry and military facilities and weapons stores. The story is already familiar: the Israelis wanted to prevent a shipment of Iranian-made Fateh-110 missiles reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon; they were being sent by the Syrian government. According, at least, to a ‘Western intelligence source’. Anonymous, of course. And it opens the old question: why when the Syrian regime is fighting for its life would it send advanced missiles out of Syria?

But the Syrians themselves have officially confirmed that military installations were hit by the Israelis. And not for the first time during the rebellion. The Fateh-110 - the new version, at least - has a range of perhaps 250km. And it could indeed reach Tel Aviv from southern Lebanon. If the Hezbollah has actually acquired any. But why would the Syrians send them, as US sources were also claiming last night, when the Americans themselves claimed only last December that the Syrians had used the same ground-to-ground missiles against rebel forces in Syria.

In other words, the Syrian regime was prepared to dispense with their rockets to Lebanon when they were already using them in the brutal war in Syria… Now there are other questions to be asked. If the Syrian air force can use their MiGs so devastatingly - and at such civilian cost - against their enemies inside Syria, why couldn’t they have sent their jets to protect Damascus and attack the Israeli aircraft? Isn’t the Syrian air force supposed to be guarding Syria from Israel? Or are the MiGs just not technically able to take on Israel’s state-of-the-art (American) hardware? Or would that just be a step too far?

Much more important, however, is the salient fact that Israel has now intervened in the Syrian war. It may say it was only aiming at weapons destined for the Hezbollah - but these were weapons also being used against rebel forces in Syria. By diminishing the regime’s supply of these weapons, it is therefore helping the rebels overthrow Bashar al-Assad. And since Israel regards itself as a Western nation - best friend and best US military ally in the Middle East, etc, etc - this means that “we” are now involved in the war, directly and from the air.

Let’s see if the US and the EU condemn Israel’s air attacks. I doubt it. Indeed, Obama and Hague said over the weekend that Israel has the right to defend itself. Which means we approve of them.

So now the Iranians and Hizballah are accused of intervening in Syria - true, though not to quite extent we are led to believe - and Qatar and Saudi Arabia funnel weapons to the rebels - true, but not quite enough weapons, as the Syrian

rebels will tell you - and the Israelis have joined in. We are now militarily involved.

6th May 2013

ISRAEL ACCUSED OF WAGING WAR ON SYRIA AFTER SECOND AIR STRIKE

By Kim Sengupta

ISRAEL HAS carried out a second series of air strikes in three days on Syria, this time hitting targets close to the capital, Damascus, and raising further fears of the conflict spreading across the region.

There were early reports that a military and scientific research centre at Jamraya, which the opposition claims has been used to produce chemical weapons, was among the locations attacked. State media reported that there had been a number of casualties.

However, it appears that the targets may have been stockpiles of Iranian-made Fateh-110 missiles which, Tel Aviv believes, may have been heading across the border to the Hezbollah militia. The first bombings, 48 hours earlier, were aimed at batches of the same weapons whose presence in Lebanon was said to have been described by the Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu as a “game-changer”.

Syria’s Deputy Foreign Minister said the attacks were a “declaration of war” and that they invited retaliation. Faisal al-Mekdad warned “Israeli aggression opens the door to all possibilities”, and that action would be taken “in our own time and way”. The regime, which has claimed that an international conspiracy is trying to dismember the country by supporting the rebels, said in a statement that the air strikes were “direct support for terrorists”.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon yesterday expressed “grave concern” at the reports of Israeli strikes, but said the UN was unavailable to independently verify the incidents.

Ban’s press office said he “calls on all sides to... act with a sense of responsibility to prevent an escalation of what is already a devastating and highly dangerous conflict”. The Syrian National Coalition opposition group condemned Israeli strikes inside Syria, and said the Jewish state had “taken advantage” of the conflict.

Amateur video footage in Damascus showed flames lighting up the night sky and sounds of multiple explosions lasting several minutes in the vicinity of Mount Qasioun, which houses a number of military installations.

Fighters from Hezbollah have been battling alongside the forces of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the country’s civil war. Israel, which fought an inconclusive war with the group seven years ago, has accused it of building up an arsenal of long-range missiles which can reach deep into the Jewish state.

The Fateh-110, with an elaborate guidance system, and sufficient range to reach Tel Aviv from south Lebanon, is much more sophisticated that anything held by Hezbollah so far, and large shipments are said to have arrived from Iran in the past three months.

Israeli military analysts say there are fears that Scud Ds - which, with a range of 422 miles, would be able to hit southern Israel from Lebanon - may also be destined for Hezbollah. The Israelis also carried out bombings inside Syria in January against a convoy carrying SA-17 anti-aircraft systems en route to Lebanon. The Israeli government has stated that it will not allow the delivery of advanced missiles to Hezbollah, using similar rhetoric to Barack Obama who declared that the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons would be a "red line".

No definite proof has so far emerged that weapons of mass destruction have actually been used in the conflict and the indications from Washington are that the US administration is keen to avoid direct military action. But military analysts point out that the raids by Israeli warplanes, and the Assad regime's inability to counter them, show that one argument against imposing a no-fly zone - the supposed effectiveness of Syrian air defences - could be brought into question.

Speaking shortly before yesterday's raids, President Obama insisted that Israel had a right to act. "The Israelis have to guard against the transfer of advanced weaponry to a terrorist organisation like Hezbollah," he said.

Iran urged neighbouring countries to unite "in the face of Zionist aggression" and stated it was prepared to train President Assad's forces to resist foreign attacks.

12th May 2013

HISTORY LESSONS THE WEST REFUSES TO LEARN

By Patrick Cockburn

IN THE aftermath of the First World War, Britain and France famously created the modern Middle East by carving up what had been the Ottoman Empire. The borders of new states such as Iraq and Syria were determined in keeping with British and French needs and interests. The wishes of local inhabitants were largely ignored.

Now, for the first time in over 90 years, the whole postwar settlement in the region is coming unstuck. External frontiers are no longer the impassable barriers they were until recently, while internal dividing lines are becoming as complicated to cross as international frontiers.

In Syria, the government no longer controls many crossing points into Turkey and Iraq. Syrian rebels advance and retreat without hindrance across their country's international borders, while Shia and Sunni fighters from Lebanon increasingly fight on opposing sides in Syria. The Israelis bomb Syria at will. Of course, the movements of guerrilla bands in the midst of a civil war do not necessarily mean that the state is finally disintegrating. But the permeability of its borders suggests that whoever comes out as the winner of the Syrian civil war will rule a weak state scarcely capable of defending itself.

The same process is at work in Iraq. The so-called trigger line dividing Kurdish-controlled territory in the north from the rest of Iraq is more and more like a frontier defended on both sides by armed force. Baghdad infuriated the Kurds last year by setting up the Dijla (Tigris) Operations Command, which threatened to enforce central military control over areas disputed between Kurds and Arabs.

Dividing lines got more complicated in Iraq after the Hawaijah massacre on 23 April left at least 44 Sunni Arab protesters dead. This came after four months of massive but peaceful Sunni protests against discrimination and persecution. The result of this ever-deeper rift between the Sunni and the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad is that Iraqi troops in Sunni-majority areas behave like an occupation army. At night, they abandon isolated outposts so they can concentrate forces in defensible positions. Iraqi government control in the northern half of the country is becoming ever more tenuous.

Does it really matter to the rest of the world who fights whom in the impoverished country towns of the Syrian interior or in the plains and mountains of Kurdistan? The lesson of the last few thousand years is that it matters a great deal. The region between Syria's Mediterranean coast and the western frontier of Iran has traditionally been a zone where empires collide. Maps of the area are littered with the names of battlefields where Romans fought against Parthians,

Ottomans against Safavids, and British against Turks.

It is interesting but chilling to see the carelessness with which the British and French divided up this area under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The British were to control the provinces of Baghdad and Basra and have influence further north. The French were to hold south-east Turkey and northern Syria and the province of Mosul, believed to contain oil. It turned out, however, that British generosity over Mosul was due to Britain having promised eastern Turkey to Tsarist Russia and thinking it would be useful to have a French cordon sanitaire between themselves and the Russian army.

Sykes-Picot reflected wartime priorities and was never implemented as such. The British promise to give Mosul to France became void with the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and the Bolsheviks' unsporting publication of Russia's secret agreements with its former French and British allies. But in negotiations in 1918-19 leading up to the Treaty of Versailles, only the most perfunctory attention was given to the long-term effect of the distribution of the spoils.

Discussing Mesopotamia and Palestine with David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister, who was not very interested in the Middle East, said: "Tell me what you want." Lloyd George: "I want Mosul." Clemenceau: "You shall have it. Anything else?" Lloyd George: "Yes, I want Jerusalem too." Clemenceau agreed with alacrity to this as well, though he warned there might be trouble over Mosul, which even then was suspected to contain oil.

Those negotiations have a fascination because so many of the issues supposedly settled then are still in dispute. Worse, agreements reached then laid the basis for so many future disputes and wars that still continue, or are yet to come. Arguments made at that time are still being made.

Not surprisingly, the leaders of the 30 million Kurds are the most jubilant at the discrediting of agreements of which they, along with the Palestinians, were to be the greatest victims. After being divided between Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, they sense their moment has finally come. In Iraq, they enjoy autonomy close to independence, and in Syria they have seized control of their own towns and villages. In Turkey, as the PKK Turkish Kurd guerrillas begin to trek back to the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq under a peace deal, the Kurds have shown that, in 30 years of war, the Turkish state has failed to crush them.

But as the 20th century settlement of the Middle East collapses, the outcome is unlikely to be peace and prosperity. It is easy to see what is wrong with the governments in present-day Iraq and Syria, but not what would replace them. Look at the almost unanimous applause among foreign politicians and media at the fall of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011, then look at Libya now, its government

permanently besieged or on the run from militia gunmen.

If President Bashar al-Assad did fall in Syria, who would replace him? Does anybody really think that peace would automatically follow? Is it not far more likely that there would be continued and even intensified war, as happened in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003? The Syrian rebels and their supporters downplay the similarities between the crises in Iraq and Syria, but they have ominous similarities. Saddam may have been unpopular in Iraq, but those who supported him or worked for him could not be excluded from power and turned into second-class citizens without a fight.

US, British and French recipes for Syria's future seem as fraught with potential for disaster as their plans in 1916 or 2003. In saying that Assad can play no role in a future Syrian government, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, speaks of the leader of a government that has still only lost one provincial capital to the rebels. Such terms can only be imposed on the defeated or those near defeat. This will only happen in Syria if Western powers intervene militarily on behalf of the insurgents, as they did in Libya, but the long-term results might be equally dismal.

16th May 2013

THE DAY I MET THE CANNIBAL COMMANDER'S BRIGADE

By Kim Sengupta

EVEN BY the standards of a particularly murderous war, a fighter eating the freshly cut out lungs of a dead enemy soldier reached a new depth of savagery; the images on the internet were, to the outside world, gruesome evidence of a depraved and babaric conflict.

Yet Abu Sakkar, the man who has introduced cannibalism into the Syrian civil war, was, until quite recently, seen as someone in the mainstream of the revolutionaries trying to overthrow Basher al-Assad; something of a hero even for his part in the defence of Baba Amr when the district in Homs came under onslaught from regime forces.

Indeed his khatiba, or brigade, Omar al-Farouq, had won praise for taking a stand against the Islamist extremists in rebel ranks who are becoming more of a worry to Western governments than the Damascus regime. They had arrested and executed a commander, Mohammed al-Absi, leader of a group of foreign jihadists, who was suspected over the kidnapping of a British photographer and was affiliated to Jabhat al-Nusra, an organization since prescribed as a terrorist organisation by the Obama administration.

I had spent some time with members of al-Farouq in Syria. What was clear was that they were not among the more wild eyed, prepared to pledge allegiance to al-Qa'ida, as al-Nusra has done. On a number of occasions they talked earnestly at length about the problems the country will face post-Assad and how difficult it would be to repair the fractures between warring communities. What was also clear was that they, like most other khatibas on the ground, have little regard for the Free Syrian Army, the supposed umbrella group for rebels. Khalid al-Hamad (Abu Sakkar is his nom de guerre) was not always a bloodthirsty man of violence. People in Baba Amr remember him taking part in marches in the very early days of protests which declaimed sectarianism among the opposition and urged the need for a united front to achieve the reforms being denied by the regime.

The question remains what turned al-Hammad, below, into the man seen in a video mutilating a corpse?

Haitham Mohammed Nassr, a former al-Farouq fighter, currently in Turkey, acknowledged the video footage was extremely damaging to the opposition, but insisted it should be put in the context of crimes committed by the Shabiha, the pro-regime militia.

There have been reports that members of Abu Sakkar's own family were raped by regime forces. "I do not know any family who has not suffered," Mr Nassr said. "He [Abu Sakkar] should not have done what he did, doing that was

haram [wrong in religion] and unwise. But it was a message to the Shabiha. They film young men and women being tortured to try and frighten people and this was meant as a warning to them."

He went on: "Everyone has been changed by this war; when all you are seeing are fires, bombs, bodies it is very difficult to remain normal. We all want Basher to go, the longer this goes on the more violent people become, it will be difficult to have a normal society after all this, whatever happens."

19th May 2013

SYRIA HAS NO REASON TO USE CHEMICAL WEAPONS

By Patrick Cockburn

‘I AM not afraid of anything except for God and poison gas,” said an Iraqi officer who had fought in the Iran-Iraq war. “It’s like a ghost. You have no defence against it.” Though not a target of poison gas as a member of the army using it, he knew what it did to its victims.

Poison gas is a terrifying weapon. People are still dying in Iran from the effects of ingesting it a quarter of a century ago. It is one of the few weapons to be banned with partial success between its first use on a mass scale in the First World War and again by Saddam Hussein with even greater intensity against Iranians and Kurds in the 1980s.

It is right, therefore, that the alleged attack by the Syrian armed forces using chemical weapons against Saraqeb, a rebel-held town south-west of Aleppo on 29 April, should be carefully investigated. Doctors told the BBC’s Ian Pannell that after an artillery bombardment they treated eight people with breathing problems, some of whom were vomiting and others who had constricted pupils.

One woman named Maryam Khatib later died. Her son Mohammed said: “It was a horrible, suffocating smell. You couldn’t breathe at all. You’d feel like you were dead. I couldn’t see anything for three or four days.” Videos taken by local people show a helicopter dropping an object which appears to leave a trail of white vapour.

My experience of trying to report allegations of the deployment or use of such weapons over the years makes me cautious. Local people, including local doctors, are often sincerely convinced that some exotic weapon has been used against them, but they may not have past experience of either conventional or chemical attack.

For instance, doctors in Fallujah west of Baghdad suspect that non-conventional weapons must have been used against the city when it was stormed by US forces in November 2004. This might explain why so many malformed babies have been born since. It is impossible not to sympathise or suppress a feeling of rage over the sufferings of these people.

But, in blaming non-conventional weapons, people may underestimate what conventional munitions can do. In two weeks’ fighting in Fallujah in 2004, US marine artillery units fired an average of 379 high-explosive 155mm shells a day into this small city. In addition, American jets flying overhead dropped 318 bombs and, together with helicopters, fired 391 rockets and missiles.

At the time, the Iraqi government of Iyad Allawi made the unlikely claim that just 200 buildings in Fallujah had been destroyed or damaged. A recently published book, The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq from

George W Bush to Barack Obama by Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, from which the above figures are taken, reveals that the US marines “estimated that out of about 50,000 residences in the city, their operations had destroyed between 7,000 and 10,000, as well as 60 mosques”. Perhaps this vastly excessive use of firepower is sufficient explanation for the appalling birth defects.

Allegations about the use of poison gas in Syria are made under the shadow of the notoriously false claims about Saddam Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction made to justify the Iraq war. Not surprisingly, this has made the public everywhere in the world dubious about stories about the possession or use of WMD being used to hoodwink them into supporting another war.

Of course, it is much against the interests of the Syrian government to use chemical weapons because this might provoke foreign military intervention. The Syrian army has no need to use it as a terror weapon because artillery, aerial bombardment and death squads are quite enough to frighten people into taking flight. There are already 1.5 million refugees outside the country.

Journalists bear a large measure of responsibility for giving credence to the stories peddled by Iraqi defectors, intelligence services and government about Saddam’s WMD. In that case, it should have been self-evident that Iraqi defectors with juicy stories, and the opposition parties that promoted them, wanted to tempt the US into military action against Saddam. When it comes to chemical weapons, the Syrian opposition has similar and wholly understandable motives.

As for the credibility of Western government claims about WMD, it is worth recalling that they tolerated Saddam using poison gas on a mass scale. And they did more than just turn a blind eye. Joost Hiltermann, in his book A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq and the Gassing of Halabja, writes that Western powers “sent repeated signals to Iraq that the regime could continue, and even escalate, chemical weapons use - which it did, with the Halabja attack [when thousands of Kurdish civilians died] as climax”.

30th May 2013

SYRIAN REBELS TURN ON THEIR POLITICAL LEADERS

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIAN REBEL groups strongly criticised their political leadership outside Syria yesterday, saying it has no real connection to the rebellion and calling for half of its members to be drawn from fighters inside the country.

The rebuke follows a chaotic week for the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and is likely to further undermine the standing of the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which has been treated by its foreign backers as if it were capable of replacing Mr Assad and its regime.

A meeting of the exiled SNC in Istanbul has still not decided if it will attend a peace conference in Geneva, tentatively planned for June, and, if so, who should attend. It is also deadlocked about Western-supported proposals to broaden the membership of the 60-member coalition with more secular representatives.

The statement, issued in the name of the Revolutionary Movement in Syria, said that the failure of the opposition had opened the door to “blatant interference” by outside powers. This is probably primarily a reference to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which support different opposition factions; Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood, which is regarded with suspicion by the Saudis.

As serious diplomatic moves aimed at a negotiated settlement initiated by the US and Russia begin, the total disarray and rancorous disagreements of the Syrian opposition will seriously hamper efforts by their foreign backers to support them as the new leadership of Syria.

The Revolutionary Movement of Syria said it could not “bestow legitimacy upon any political body that subverts the revolution”. Moaz al-Khatib, the former leader of the coalition, said he had stepped down because he had no influence and the group was a proxy for Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The chaos in opposition ranks is also likely to discredit the EU decision to end the arms embargo on supplying weapons to the rebels. Russia warned yesterday that the decision would damage plans for peace talks being made by Russia and the US. In response, Russia has already said it will send ground-to-air S-300 missiles to Syria, while Israel has said it will act to stop their delivery.

Meanwhile, inside Syria elite troops are being sent to reinforce the government offensive against the town of Qusayr outside Homs, near the Lebanese border.

Rebels there have been under heavy attack for a week but are still holding out in parts of the town, which is heavily damaged. Fighters from Hezbollah in Lebanon are for the first time playing a central and open role in the fighting, which has also been joined, on the rebel side,by Sunni fighters from Lebanon.

In a further development, Britain said it had sent a letter to UN Secretary-

General Ban Ki-moon with new information of alleged chemical-weapons use by the Syrian government. Britain’s UN Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant said his Government has continued to provide new information to the UN.

1st June 2013

WAR WITHOUT END IN A LAND AWASH WITH ARMS

By Kim Sengupta

THE FAILURE of the European Union to renew the arms embargo on Syria was hardly unexpected. David Cameron and William Hague indicated two months ago that Britain would demand that the terms were relaxed so that the option would be there to send weapons to the rebels. This, it was acknowledged, was unlikely to succeed because of strong opposition from some other member states, and thus the sanctions regime would cease to exist.

Britain and France, which also supported the call on the embargo, have been locked into a position and timeline from which it has become impossible to retreat without losing political credibility. The chain of unintended consequences of this may be that the Cameron Government will actually succeed in uniting all interested parties - in irritation against itself.

Since the uprising began in Syria two years ago, moderate opposition fighters - of which there were many - had begged for arms. Britain and France could and should have given them this help, but did not. In that time, the Islamists, receiving weapons and money from Gulf states, have grown enormously in power. Jabhat al-Nusra was a small, unimpressive group, big on jihadist talk, short on action, when I first met them in Aleppo last summer. Now they are the largest and most effective of the rebel khatibas, or battalions, in the process becoming described by the US as a terrorist organisation. The moderates are seen as counterweights to the terrorists, but they have dwindled in numbers.

Having failed to seize the momentum in helping its natural allies, Britain and France have now announced that they will (probably) arm the rebels. The timing is unfortunate. Despite bitter accusations and recriminations from the protagonists, there is still hope that the planned conference in Geneva next month can begin the process of ending the savage strife which has claimed about 80,000 lives so far.

It is true that the Syrian National Council, the opposition’s dysfunctional umbrella group, says it may not attend. But it has become well known for making contradictory statements and, if push comes to shove and the Americans and the Arab League tell it to turn up, it will. The SNC is also aware that there are other opposition organisations that would be only too willing to take their place. John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov have been working hard at this, and although the White House says it broadly supports ending the sanctions by Brussels, there is annoyance in the State Department at yet another unwelcome problem in the run-up to Geneva.

The Russians are protesting about the end of the embargo, pointing out that David Cameron had publicly said he was heartened after his recent meeting with

Vladimir Putin that both of them wanted an unfragmented Syria to achieve peace. A day after the EU meeting, deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov warned that the Kremlin would now go ahead with the supply of the S-300 missiles to the Assad regime. The contract for the system had long been signed, but has not so far been delivered, at the request of the US, European states and Israel. This, in turn, has boosted Assad's confidence and will make it that much harder to impose any kind of a "no-fly zone" in the future.

Israel says the S-300 falling into the hands of Hezbollah across the border in Lebanon would be a game-changer; defence minister Moshe Yaalon threatened more air strikes on Syria if the missiles arrive. At the same time, Tel Aviv does not want the rebels to be armed with weapons which could be turned against the Jewish state. Tel Aviv's position remains ambivalent at best. Efraim Halevy, a former head of Mossad, says Assad remains "Israel's man in Damascus". A column in Haaretz said "Israel can stand to gain from war" and its current stalemate.

What about the rebels themselves? The news from Brussels was followed within hours by the SNC asking the EU to send "specialised weaponry". Abu Qasem, a commander I spent time with in Idlib province, said in an excited phone call from Turkey, where he had gone to obtain ammunition, that the khatibas were expecting, above all, Manpads (shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles). Having seen cold-blooded killings meted out from the air by Assad's warplanes, I can understand the desire to strike back. But it seems highly unlikely that Britain and France will supply such weapons. There is deep apprehension that they may end up with Islamists. The Americans are still trying to secure Manpads looted from Gaddafi's arsenal in Libya. I saw some in Mali being used by al-Qa'ida to try to shoot down French helicopters.

The British and French are likely to supply, through a third party, small arms and ammunition. Qasem and his comrades will probably be very disappointed and then resentful towards the West as their high expectations are dashed. Other questions remain. How are AK-47s going to swing the balance against the regime, or, indeed, the heavily armed Islamists? What are the chances that al-Nusra would not get hold of them anyway? This particular reasoning has become a bit of a cliché, but is of concern, nevertheless. We have seen Islamists help themselves, from depots, to food donated from abroad: why shouldn't they be able to do so with arms? Also, driven by necessity, some remaining moderate groups are having to work alongside jihadists; it is easy for weapons to change hands in battlefield conditions.

William Hague wants to help people suffering at the hands of a vicious regime. He does not desire the arms option as an imperialist conspiracy, as some

of his more swivel-eyed critics charge. The aim is not to prolong the war, he says, but to pressure the regime to the negotiating table. But it also means Assad’s allies abroad will use this as an excuse to add more to his arsenal and the risk that the move may jeopardise the first real chance of negotiations to end the bloodshed - the Geneva conference.

1st June 2013

BRITISH JIHADI ONE OF THREE WESTERNERS KILLED IN BATTLE WITH SYRIAN REGIME

By Kim Sengupta

A YOUNG British man has been killed along with an American woman and another Western national during a gun battle in Syria, the main destination for young Muslims from this country wishing to take part in jihad abroad.

The Assad regime claimed that 22-year-old Ali Almanasfi, from London, Nicole Lynn Mansfield, 33, from Michigan in the United States, and their companion - who is believed to be a Canadian - were killed fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra, an Islamist group which had pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida.

Graphic photographs of bodies, in Idlib province, alongside the passports and driving licences of Mr Almanasfi and Ms Mansfield, along with a bullet-marked car and the black flag of al-Nusra, were shown on state-run television in Damascus.

It has, however, been the policy of the regime to describe all opposition groups as Islamist extremists and tie them to al-Nusra, which has been prescribed as a terrorist organisation by the Obama administration.

Last night as police visited Mr Almanasfi's home in Acton, west London, a family member said that he had been in Syria for four months and out of contact for a few weeks. He added: "We are sitting tight to hear, but it looks like it could be him." Kusai Noah, the brother of Mr Alamasfi's wife, Bushra, said that a missing person's report was made with the police after Ali first went missing several months ago.

More than 100 British Muslims have taken part in the bloody uprising against Bashar al-Assad. Not all have been fighters; Issa Abdur Rahman, a 26-year-old graduate of London University's Imperial College who died last Wednesday, was treating injured people at a clinic when the building was shelled by regime troops.

Abu Hajer, a commander with the Suqur Al-Sham brigade, said yesterday that Mr Almanasfi and Ms Mansfield were with his fighters when they were killed in an engagement with the Shabiha, a militia from the Alawite community from President Assad and the ruling elite are drawn.

He said: "We had engaged in several shoot-outs with Shabiha forces, we launched an attack against a government checkpoint and managed to kill several Shabiha. Another group of rebels came from Al-Akrad mountains to join us. They wanted to avoid the centre of Idlib and took a back route through the suburbs. They didn't know there was a Syrian army checkpoint there; the army shot up the car and the British guy was killed."

The complex and changeable nature of rebel organisations can, at times, make it difficult to demarcate different between different groups. Suqour al-Sham has

been described as Islamist, but not necessarily extremist. Its leader, Ahmed Abu Issa, has stated in a sermon that Muslims are losing their honour because they are abandoning jihad. But he has also maintained that his vision after the downfall of Assad would be of Syria as a moderate Islamist state.

Mohammed Ali Razaq, a rebel fighter from the Binesh area, said last night: “We have had quite a few brothers who have joined us from other countries because they want to get rid of the cruel Assad. I have seen some of them become influenced by jihadists and they change. They also know that jihadists like Al-Nusra are the most effective groups so they are attracted.”

Ms Mansfield, who was raised a Baptist, converted to Islam five years ago. Her aunt, Monica Mansfield Speelman, said the FBI had informed the family of the death. “I am just devastated, evidently she was fighting with opposition forces.”

On Facebook, Ms Mansfield’s daughter, Triona Lynn, posted a memorial message saying: “I will never forget everything you taught me. I wish I could honour in some other way but I have no control what happens to you now. I will try to not give up on life even though I really want to. I just want to see your face, hear your voice, and touch your skin again. But I’ll stay strong. And you will never be forgotten.”

The Britons fighting in Syria are drawn from a variety of national backgrounds. Only a handful of those who have returned from the fighting there have been arrested and all for a specific offence: their alleged role in the kidnapping of a British freelance photographer, John Cantlie, in Idlib province last summer. Others who have been taking part in the armed struggle against the Assad regime are not deemed to be doing anything illegal.

Unlike Pakistan or Somalia, the rebels in Syria are being backed by the British government which is sending aid including communications equipment and body armour to them and has declared that military supplies may follow in the future.

2nd June 2013

JUST WHO HAS THE MOST TO GAIN IF THE KILLING IN SYRIA GOES ON?

By Patrick Cockburn

THE BEST hope for an end to the killing in Syria is for the United States and Russia to push both sides in the conflict to agree a ceasefire in which each holds the territory it currently controls. In a civil war of such savagery, diplomacy with any ambition to determine who holds power in future will founder because both sides believe they can still win.

There appeared to be an opportunity for productive talks after it was announced on 7 May that the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, had agreed to hold a peace conference on Syria in Geneva. The US, Russia and Iran could see themselves being sucked into an ever more violent conflict and one that is rapidly spreading. It is destabilising Syria's neighbours in Jordan and Lebanon as Shia and Sunni support opposing sides. Even Turkey's new-found prosperity is vulnerable as a result of its whole-hearted backing for Syria's rebels.

However, the chance of any talks taking place in Geneva have dimmed in the past few days. The Syrian opposition has rejected the idea, though its intentions are very much determined by its paymasters in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Going by the evidence of their own leaders, the rebels, inside and outside Syria, are so divided and dysfunctional they may not be in the business of talking to anybody.

Even if the opposition were better organised, they might still not want to talk. One of its leaders said: "We have to make the removal of the regime fundamental to any political solution." This may sound obvious, but an unstated part of opposition policy is that they can only win if the West and its allies among the Sunni states of the Middle East decide on massive military involvement to remove President Bashar al-Assad. They want a Libyan-type solution in which Assad would be overthrown, as was Muammar Gaddafi by Nato in 2011, with the rebels conducting a well-publicised mopping up.

However, the truth is that Assad was never as politically or militarily weak as portrayed in the international media or, until a few months ago, by foreign leaders. After two years of war he holds almost all the main cities and towns of Syria and the inner core of his regime has held together. This has become more evident in the past two months, as government forces go on the offensive and make limited but definite gains.

Foreign perceptions have changed. Six months ago, German intelligence was predicting Assad's fall. Now, it has been publicly saying it expects the government to secure its grip on Damascus and all of southern Syria by the end of the year.

The White House has said in the past few days that its top priority in Syria is

to impose regime change, but this is a recipe for a very long conflict. Why should Assad and his government surrender when they are more than holding their own on the battlefield? Moreover, Washington appears to have shut the door on the idea of Iran, a main player, attending Geneva talks. This again is unrealistic if the aim of negotiations is to end the fighting. And Britain and France are playing a small but mischievous role in ensuring the slaughter in Syria continues. By successfully ending the EU embargo on arms for the rebels they will not bring talks nearer, as they pretend, but make them unlikely to take place at all. The type of weapons they will send are not going to tip the military balance. Government forces are too strong for this. The current stalemate is too well rooted in realities on the ground. The most significant impact of more arms for the rebels will be to persuade them that, if they refuse to negotiate, they will eventually get full-scale Western military intervention such as a Libya-type no-fly zone, which, in practice, meant Nato air forces joining the war.

It may be that Russia announced that it was selling Syria a sophisticated S-300 anti-aircraft missile system precisely in order to block this. By offering more arms, the EU will also be putting off the day when the two sides talk to each other through mutual exhaustion and the knowledge that neither can win.

At this stage, mutual hatred is too great for any long-term deal on sharing power. Everybody is caught up in what we used to call in Belfast “the politics of the last atrocity”. Power-sharing would be geographical, with each side holding its own territory.

The first priority should be for the US and Russia to compel the sides they back to cease fire. This would have to be policed on the ground by a UN observer force. I recall the much-maligned UN Supervision Mission in Syria in 2012 arranging a ceasefire in the hardcore rebel town of Douma on the outskirts of Damascus. It did not stop all the shooting but many Syrians lived who would otherwise have died.

There may be a more sinister reason why the US has started setting the bar so high for talks. Washington’s involvement is greater than appears because so much of it goes through Qatar, with the CIA determining who gets arms and money sent via Turkey. This would also explain why Britain and France are so keen to send the rebels weapons.

The explanation for the actions of the Western states may be that they do not want the war to end except as a victory for their allies. This certainly is the view of many in the Middle East, such as Mowaffak al-Rubaie, the former Iraqi National Security Adviser, who told me the civil war “is the best option for the West and Israel because it knocks out Syria as an opponent of their policies and keeps Iran busy. Hezbollah is preoccupied by Syria and not with Israel. Turkey’s

idea of a new Ottoman empire is gone with the wind."

This is a cynical but probably correct explanation for why the US, Britain, France and the Sunni monarchies do not want the war to end until they can declare victory.

3rd June 2013

SYRIA IS UNKNOWN TERRITORY FOR HEZBOLLAH. YOU CAN TELL BY THE CASUALTIES IT IS SUFFERING

By Robert Fisk

SO OBAMA thunders on. Hezbollah must leave Syria. That will have them shaking in their boots in the Bekaa valley. For Hezbollah - 22 dead in one day a week ago, according to an acquaintance who should know - has no intention of withdrawing from a battle which threatens its existence in Lebanon. Casualties? Well huge, it seems - and we will come to that later. But…?

Here's a little story that may help to explain why the Shia Muslim Hezbollah, the most fearless and ruthless guerrilla army in the world, is in Syria. A major political mistake by its leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, no doubt. But not a major military one. For the Syrian war is in danger of flipping across into Lebanon; not in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, where its Sunni and Alawite (Shia) militias have long played out a symbolic struggle between each other. But in the dirt-poor town of Arsal, up in the hills beside the Syrian border scarcely 20 miles from the Hezbollah-held - and I mean "held" - Lebanese town of Hermel.

Arsal - no tourist should waste their time here, though the people are kind and care for their town - is a Sunni and rather Salafist place. It supports the Sunni uprising against President Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

If its Sunni rebel neighbours just over the border in Qusayr - most from the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra (not the Free Syrian Army beloved of Obama and the US Senator John McCain) - capture Qusayr, they will be able to use the Lebanese town of Arsal as a place of rest and recreation and, indeed, rearming.

Arsal is a mortar's range from the main highway between Hermel and the south of Lebanon, Hezbollah's two fiefdoms in Lebanon. Three Lebanese soldiers were killed in Arsal last week - quite probably because Syrian rebels don't want their movements in and out of Lebanon to be monitored.

So Arsal and Hermel are the two most important towns in Lebanon right now. The Lebanese army has no checkpoints in Hermel - which is why armed Hezbollah men ride the range there - but it is determined to keep a tight hold on Arsal. Which is why the local anti-Assad men would prefer the Lebanese army left. And which is why the Lebanese President - a former general himself - went to visit the scene of the army killings himself last week. He did not go to Hermel where a young Shia woman was killed a few hours earlier by a missile almost certainly fired by Sunni rebels in Syria.

These are not facts which make it into the headlines. And all praise to the fine journalism of the Christian French-language L'Orient Le Jour newspaper and especially its reporter Scarlett Haddad (she once admitted to me that her parents had named her after Scarlett O'Hara) for pointing out not only the battle-lines of

northern Lebanon but the resilience of the Lebanese army which is now the only foundational block upon which Lebanon itself survives. For this is a country which has neither a functioning government nor a legal parliament - albeit that the assembly has just voted itself another 17 months of unelected power.

But there are other events which have also eluded the headlines these past few days. Not the least is the interesting character shown next to Senator John McCain in a photograph during his recent visit to rebel-held northern Syria. For beside McCain can be seen a man identified here in Beirut as Mohammed Nour, a Sunni Muslim spokesperson for the Northern Storm Brigade, accused of kidnapping 11 Lebanese Shia pilgrims in Syria a year ago.

What on earth was McCain doing with such a guy? If it was Nour, it was "regrettable", McCain's spokesman said. Quite so. Just as it was regrettable that no one in Washington appears to have condemned the killing of the young Shia woman in Hermel last week. Why? Because she was a Shia? Or because the killers may have been Syrian rebels - who may or may not be the kind of rebels Obama (and Hague and other minions) would like to help.

There are other things going on in Lebanon which the world should know about. Not least is the anger of Palestinians (the majority of them Sunnis) with Hezbollah.

Last week, Palestinians at that most shameful of all refugee camps - at Ein el-Hilweh in Sidon - burnt Hezbollah food parcels beside a poster which said that "we don't want assistance soaked in the blood of the Syrian people". Hamas, the Palestinian controllers of Gaza, abandoned Damascus after the revolution began; now Hezbollah suspects Hamas has been teaching the Sunni rebels in Syria how to fight.

Is this why Hezbollah is losing so many men? Shia fighters returning from Qusayr are telling frightening stories; that the Sunnis burn their bodies at night so that they should not be identified, that they have new sniper rifles.

Interestingly, a Syrian military officer told me several months ago that when the rebels storm government bases, they retrieve the bodies of their dead with grappling hooks; again, so that there should be no identification.

I asked an Afghan - always the trustiest source for such information - why Hezbollah was taking such huge casualties. Here is the reply I got: "In southern Lebanon, when they were fighting the Israelis, Hezbollah knew their own land and their own territory.

"They were fighting from home and the Israelis fell into the trap because they didn't know Lebanon. The occupied always know the territory better than the occupiers. But now Hezbollah are on unfamiliar territory. The Syrians know Qusayr. Hezbollah do not."

A big “ouch”. I guess Sayyed Nasrallah thinks about this.

6th June 2013

HEZBOLLAH HELPS TURN TIDE AS ASSAD TAKES KEY TOWN - AND SETS HIS SIGHTS ON ALEPPO

By Kim Sengupta

THE FORCES of Bashar al-Assad are thought to be preparing an assault on Syria's biggest city after capturing the strategically important town of Qusayr with large-scale backing from Lebanon's Hezbollah.

The rebels' loss of the town - which holds symbolic value to both sides in the country's vicious civil war - after three weeks of bitter fighting comes amid reports that the regime is readying an attempt to re-take Aleppo.

Such an attack could come with further help from Hezbollah; some commanders of the Shia militia claim they are ready to take thousands of men across the border.

The opposition holds about half of the northern city, and a battle to retake it is likely to be bloody with the opposition aware that failure to hang on to their positions would be a setback.

Large swathes of territory remain outside the control of the regime two and half years since the start of the uprising. But recent gains being made on the ground have put President Assad in a stronger position before peace talks in a bid to end the conflict which has claimed 80,000 lives so far. UN international envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, said the delayed talks may happen in July. American and Russian officials held a preliminary meeting yesterday in Geneva, the venue for the projected talks. The Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella group of the opposition, maintains that no ceasefire is possible while President Assad stays in power and Hezbollah participates in the fighting.

The expectation among diplomats remains that the SNC will be persuaded to attend the talks by its backers in the Arab League and the West. There is deep apprehension that the talks failing, or not taking place, would accelerate the spread of strife from Syria into neighbouring countries.

Residents in the predominantly Shia suburb of Dahiyah in Beirut celebrated after news broke of the fall of Qusayr. The movement's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has given unequivocal backing to the Assad regime, and its involvement in Syria is likely to increase rather if fighting continues.

Furthermore, the entry of the Shia militia will further demarcate the war along sectarian lines between the Alawites, a Shia offshoot from which President Assad and the ruling elite are drawn and the mainly Sunni opposition.

Anxiety to keep the Geneva talks on track is seen as one of the reasons why the Americans are urging caution after the latest claim, by France and Britain, that the regime has been using sarin gas. Officials in Washington stated that stronger evidence would be needed to prove that President Assad had crossed the "red line" on chemical weapons set down by Barack Obama.

Meanwhile, humanitarian organisations called for help for victims of conventional weapons in Qusayr. Doctors said there was little or no medicine left for the severely injured who could not leave when much of the population fled the fighting. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said it hoped to gain access. “There are reports of hundreds of people that have been wounded,” spokeswoman Rima Kamal told the BBC.

Qusayr, which had a population of 30,000 before the attack, was of great value to the opposing sides. Its capture means the regime holds a land corridor to the Mediterranean coast where the Alawite community is mainly based. Before the recent gains, there had been speculation President Assad would retreat there if Damascus fell.

The rebels have now lost their supply line to the Lebanese border just six miles away, and Sunni villages in the area are more vulnerable to the actions of the regime and Hezbollah.

Although most of the rebel fighters in Qusayr had been locals, volunteers from other parts of the country came to defend the town. Among them were several hundred from Jabhat al-Nusra, a hardline Islamist group prescribed as a terrorist organisation by the US.

General Salim Idriss, the head of the opposition’s Free Syria Army, had accused the Lebanese government of doing nothing while Hezbollah “invaded” Syria. “There are now a very large number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria,” he declared, saying this entitled the rebels to carry out attacks on the Shia militia inside Lebanon.

Abu Qassem, a rebel commander in Idlib province, said his forces were preparing to face an onslaught. “Bashar’s troops are getting a lot of arms from Iran and Russia, especially long-range rockets, and they are having an effect. We also know that Hezbollah have a lot more of their fighters inside Syria than they used to. They will try to come this way and they will try to terrorise people, so we must be ready.”

15th June 2013

WEAPONS ARE NOT JUST GUNS. THEY ARE ABOUT MONEY

By Robert Fisk

TOSH! THAT'S the only sane reaction to the White House's announcement that America the Brave is to arm the Syrian rebels.

The US doesn't plan to send weapons to the horrid rebels, mark you - not to the al-Qa'ida-inspired al-Nusra Front whose chaps film themselves eating Alawites for YouTube videos, barbecue the heads of captured Syrian troops and murder 14-year-old schoolboys for blasphemy. Only to the nice rebels, the Free Syrian Army deserters who are battling the forces of Assad darkness in the interests of freedom, liberty, women's rights and democracy.

Anyone who believes this knows nothing about war, killing, barbarity and, especially, greed. Because weapons are not just guns. They are currency. They are money. They are saleable commodities the moment you send them across any border. Their value in US dollars, pounds sterling, Syrian pounds or Qatari dinars is infinitely more important than their use in battle.

The Western powers are dangerously close to flooding Syria with weapons and ammunition which will officially go to the nice rebels - but will quickly pass to the horrid rebels, who will sell some of them to al-Qa'ida, Iraqi insurgents, Syrian government troops, Malian militiamen, Taliban fighters and Pakistani hitmen. Guns are about money.

It works like this. The nice rebels could be given anti-aircaft missiles (shoulder-fired variety preferred) to use against Assad's helicopters and Migs. Thank you - "shukran" - the nice rebels will say. But once over the border, the horrid rebel Nusra chaps will make an offer the nice rebels can't refuse: either many thousands of dollars or a threat to seize the munitions (head-chopping optional), or a mixture of both. For a hefty sum, the horrid rebels will then split the proceeds with their chaps in Iraq. Ask the Syrian government soldiers - as I have - and they'll tell you that they too would prefer the weapons to go to the nice rebels, who always run away - because the horrid rebels of the Nusra always fight to the last man.

In the Lebanese civil war, not a single gun I ever saw was actually donated to the men who carried them. The Phalangists used weapons they received from the Israelis, who got them from the Americans (or with American money, the same thing). The Palestinians used guns from Syria, which had in turn imported them from the Soviet Union. Hezbollah even have a few self-loading rifles which appear to have come long ago from the Lebanese Army, which received them as surplus from the British Ministry of Defence after our chaps left Northern Ireland following the Good Friday Agreement.

Back in the Eighties, the US handed out missiles and other goodies to

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the super-freedom fighters trying to kill lots of Russians in Afghanistan. But Mr Hekmatyar then became a super-terrorist and decided to kill lots of post-2001 American occupiers of his country - using the same weapons donated to him by those grand arms dealers Messrs Carter and Reagan Inc.

In 1991, the Israelis took delivery of AGM-114C missiles from the Americans - manufactured for the US Marine Corps, who were supposed to fire them at Iraqi soldiers - and used one of them to blow up an ambulance full of Lebanese women and children in 1996.

History lesson. The weapons used by both sides in the 1922-3 Irish civil war - and you can see them in museums - included Lee-Enfield.303 rifles, each bearing the imprint of a British crown on the butt. They had been made for the Brits to use against Germans in the First World War. Whoops...

16th June 2013

IRAN WILL SEND 4,000 TROOPS TO AID ASSAD

By Robert Fisk

WASHINGTON'S DECISION to arm Syria's rebels has plunged the United States into the great Sunni-Shia conflict of the Islamic Middle East, and so into a struggle that dwarfs the Arab revolutions which overthrew dictatorships across the region. For the first time, all of the US's "friends" in the region are Sunni Muslims and all of its enemies are Shia. Breaking President Barack Obama's rules of disengagement, the US is now fully engaged on the side of armed groups which include the most extreme Sunni Islamist movements in the Middle East.

The Independent on Sunday has learnt that a decision has been taken in Iran - even before last week's election - to send a first contingent of 4,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Syria to support President Bashar al-Assad's forces against the largely Sunni rebellion that has cost almost 100,000 lives in just over two years. Iran is committed to preserving Assad's regime, according to pro-Iranian sources deeply involved in the Islamic Republic's security, and is even proposing to open up a new "Syrian" front on the Golan Heights against Israel.

In years to come, historians will ask how the US - after its defeat in Iraq and its humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan scheduled for 2014 - could have so blithely aligned itself with one side in a titanic Islamic struggle stretching back to the 7th-century death of the Prophet Mohamed. The effects of this schism, between Sunnis who believe that the father of Mohamed's wife was the new caliph of the Muslim world and Shias who regard his son-in-law Ali as his rightful successor - a 7th-century battle swamped in blood around the present-day Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala - continue across the region to this day. A 17th-century Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbott, compared this Muslim conflict with that between "Papists and Protestants".

America's alliance now includes the wealthiest states of the Arab Gulf, the vast Sunni territories between Egypt and Morocco, as well as Turkey and the fragile British-created monarchy in Jordan. King Abdullah of Jordan - flooded, like so many neighbouring nations, by hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees - may now find himself at the fulcrum of the Syrian battle. Up to 3,000 American "advisers" are believed to be in Jordan, and the creation of a southern Syria "no-fly zone" - opposed by Syrian-controlled anti-aircraft batteries - will turn a crisis into a "hot" war. So much for America's "friends".

Its enemies include the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Alawite Shia regime in Damascus and, of course, Iran. And Iraq, a largely Shia nation which America "liberated" from Saddam Hussein's Sunni minority in the hope of balancing the Shia power of Iran, has - against all US predictions - itself now largely fallen

under Tehran's influence and power. Iraqi Shias as well as Hezbollah members, have fought alongside Assad's forces.

Washington's excuse for its new Middle East adventure - that it must arm Assad's enemies because the Damascus regime has used sarin gas against them - convinces no one in the Middle East. Proof of the use of gas by either side in Syria remains almost as nebulous as President George W Bush's claim that Saddam's Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

The real reason why the US has thrown its military power behind Syria's Sunni rebels is because those rebels are losing their war against Assad. The Damascus regime's victory this month in the central Syrian town of Qusayr, at the expense of Hezbollah lives as well as those of government forces, has thrown the Syrian revolution into turmoil, threatening to humiliate US and EU demands for Assad to abandon power. Arab dictators are supposed to be deposed - unless they are the friendly kings or emirs of the Gulf - not to be sustained. Yet Russia has given its total support to Assad, three times vetoing UN Security Council resolutions that might have allowed the West to intervene directly in the civil war.

In the Middle East, there is cynical disbelief at the US contention that it can distribute arms - almost certainly including anti-aircraft missiles - only to secular Sunni rebel forces in Syria represented by the so-called Free Syrian Army. The more powerful al-Nusra Front, allied to al-Qa'ida, dominates the battlefield on the rebel side and has been blamed for atrocities including the execution of Syrian government prisoners of war and the murder of a 14-year-old boy for blasphemy. They will be able to take US weapons from their Free Syrian Army comrades with little effort.

From now on, therefore, every suicide bombing in Damascus - every war crime committed by the rebels - will be regarded in the region as Washington's responsibility. The Sunni-Wahabi Islamists who killed thousands of Americans on 11 September 2011 - who are America's greatest enemies as well as Russia's - are going to be proxy allies of the Obama administration. This terrible irony can only be exacerbated by Russian President Vladimir Putin's refusal to tolerate any form of Sunni extremism. His experience in Chechnya, his anti-Muslim rhetoric - he has made obscene remarks about Muslim extremists in a press conference in Russian - and his belief that Russia's old ally in Syria is facing the same threat as Moscow fought in Chechnya, plays a far greater part in his policy towards Bashar al-Assad than the existence of Russia's naval port at the Syrian Mediterranean city of Tartus.

For the Russians, of course, the "Middle East" is not in the "east" at all, but to the south of Moscow; and statistics are all-important. The Chechen capital of

Grozny is scarcely 500 miles from the Syrian frontier. Fifteen per cent of Russians are Muslim. Six of the Soviet Union's communist republics had a Muslim majority, 90 per cent of whom were Sunni. And Sunnis around the world make up perhaps 85 per cent of all Muslims. For a Russia intent on repositioning itself across a land mass that includes most of the former Soviet Union, Sunni Islamists of the kind now fighting the Assad regime are its principal antagonists.

Iranian sources say they liaise constantly with Moscow, and that while Hezbollah's overall withdrawal from Syria is likely to be completed soon - with the maintenance of the militia's "intelligence" teams inside Syria - Iran's support for Damascus will grow rather than wither.

It is a sign of the changing historical template in the Middle East that within the framework of old Cold War rivalries between Washington and Moscow, Israel's security has taken second place to the conflict in Syria. Indeed, Israel's policies in the region have been knocked askew by the Arab revolutions, leaving its Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, hopelessly adrift.

Only once over the past two years has Israel fully condemned atrocities committed by the Assad regime, and while it has given medical help to wounded rebels on the Israeli-Syrian border, it fears an Islamist caliphate in Damascus far more than a continuation of Assad's rule. One former Israel intelligence commander recently described Assad as "Israel's man in Damascus". Only days before President Mubarak was overthrown, both Mr Netanyahu and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called Washington to ask Obama to save the Egyptian dictator. In vain. If the Arab world has been overwhelmed by two years of revolutions, none will have suffered from the Syrian war in the long term more than the Palestinians. Today, Washington barely mentions them.

In Arab eyes, Israel's 2006 war against the Shia Hezbollah was an attempt to strike at the heart of Iran. The West's support for Syrian rebels is a strategic attempt to crush Iran. But Iran is going to take the offensive. Even for the Middle East, these are high stakes. Against this fearful background, the Palestinian tragedy continues.

16th June 2013

ONLY AN ALL-OUT WAR CAN DEPOSE ASSAD. ANYTHING LESS IS LIKE BEING ‘HALF-PREGNANT’

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIA IS close to following Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as the target of a major Western military intervention. It certainly looks that way after the American decision last week to send weapons to the rebels in a move that can only deepen the conflict.

The supposed aim of the United States arms supply is to “tip the balance” in favour of the insurgents and force Bashar al-Assad’s government to negotiate its departure from power. But Assad holds all but one of Syria’s cities and large towns, so, to transform the military situation on the ground the US, Britain and France would have to become the main fighting force of the rebels and engage in a full-scale war.

Such a war would be similar to what happened in Afghanistan in 2001 when the cutting edge of the anti-Taliban offensive was strategic and tactical American air support. The anti-Taliban militiamen led by the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara warlords of the Northern Alliance were few in number - I kept running into the same small units on the road from Kabul to Kandahar - and acted essentially as a mopping-up force that did little real fighting.

In northern Iraq in 2003 the Kurdish Peshmerga were careful not to advance anywhere until the Iraqi army facing them had been pummelled by US bombers. One Kurdish commander told me that his men could not advance an inch without US permission because “we have to co-operate with American air support”. Much the same happened in Libya in 2011 when, for all the laudatory media coverage of the rebels, they would not have survived for more than a few days without Nato Special Forces on the ground and air power overhead.

Of course, the Western intervention in Libya started off with the declared humanitarian purpose of preventing Gaddafi capturing Benghazi and massacring its people. The reality was that Nato leaders were determined to overthrow the regime. The main role of Libyan militiamen on the road south of Benghazi was to appear on foreign television. One of the more amusing sights at the time was to watch cameramen asking other members of the media to stand to one side so viewers would not see that journalists were more numerous than Libyan fighters in the front line.

The message of these three wars is that if the US and its Western allies do intervene in Syria it is they who will be the main players while the rebels will have only bit-parts or be there to give a Syrian gloss to foreign intervention. There are already signs of this happening. Brigadier Salim Idris, the chief of staff of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), appears to spend more of his time giving interviews to foreign journalists than commanding

his troops. Not that these are numerous since even his own aides admit privately that he can give orders to a maximum of 10 per cent of the insurgent brigades in Syria.

There is a disconnect between the rebels as they really are and as presented by Western politicians such as David Cameron. Suddenly there is international concern about what will happen in Aleppo if the Assad forces launch a counter-attack to drive the rebels out of the parts of the city they hold. The rhetoric is similar to that used by then president Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron over the need to save the people of Benghazi from massacre in 2011. It is a measure of British and French cynicism that they hardly seemed to notice when, 10 days ago, militiamen in Benghazi, whom they formerly supported, shot dead 31 Libyans protesting against militia rule.

Britain and France speak as if the struggle was between an overwhelmingly popular insurgency and a hated dictatorship. But it was a rebel commander, Abu Ahmed, in the al-Tawheed Brigade that is part of the FSA in Aleppo, who volunteered to a reporter earlier this year that 70 per cent of people in Aleppo support Assad. “They don’t have a revolutionary mindset,” the rebel officer lamented, blaming this on the FSA’s oppression, and corruption caused by “parasites” who had infiltrated its ranks. Inured to horrors though Syrians have become, they were appalled last week to see pictures on Twitter of the mangled head of a 14-year-old boy selling coffee in the street in Aleppo. He had been shot twice in the face by rebels after they accused him of speaking ill of the Prophet. Also last week, rebels massacred 60 people in a Shia village in Deir Ezzor province in the east of the country.

The volume of propaganda justifying Western military intervention in Syria is so high because leaders advocating it know that polls show that such intervention is highly unpopular at home. Hence the White House’s claim that it decided to arm the rebels when it finally became convinced that the Assad regime had crossed a red line by using chemical weapons including sarin gas. Anthony Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic Studies in Washington, while arguing for full-scale US intervention in Syria, says “the ‘discovery’ that Syria used chemical weapons may well be a political ploy. It seems very likely that the administration has had virtually all the evidence for weeks, if not months.”

In fact, the evidence smells very like that for Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction in 2003. It begs the question of why Assad should use small quantities of sarin gas knowing it would be used to justify Western military intervention when his forces are not short of artillery and every other weapon if they want to kill people. One curious aspect of the sarin gas story is that, at the end of May, the Turkish security forces said they had arrested in Turkey

militants of the Syrian rebel al-Nusra Front, affiliated to al-Qa'ida, who had in their possession a 2kg cylinder filled with sarin. This is far more substantial evidence for the possession of poison gas than anything alleged against Assad's forces, but the US, Britain and France showed no interest.

At the G8 meeting in Enniskillen tomorrow it may become clearer how far the US and its allies distinguish between propaganda and reality in relation to Syria. Do Britain and France really imagine that a mix of bluff, threats and a limited supply of infantry weapons will have a decisive impact on the battlefield? Cordesman argues for a no-fly zone that should be rapidly transformed into "a de facto no-move zone". This is the most effective way to allow the rebels to defeat Assad if they can. In other words, only an all-out war by the West will work against Assad; anything else will be like being "half-pregnant".

Cordesman is probably right in his military assessment but surely wrong, as we have seen in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, that this will end the fighting. Better by far for the G8 leaders to compel all parties in Syria to go to Geneva, agree a ceasefire, establish a UN mission in Syria to monitor it, and then seek to negotiate long-term solutions.

20th June 2013

ASSAD TIGHTENS HIS GRIP ON DAMASCUS TO LEAVE CAMERON'S 'COUP' IN TATTERS

By Patrick Cockburn

THE GOVERNMENT of President Bashar al-Assad is tightening its control of Damascus, encircling and bombarding the remaining rebel strongholds in or near the city. There was only the sound of a few distant explosions yesterday that appear to come from the south where the Syrian army is seeking to drive rebels from around the golden-domed Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, 10 miles from the centre of Damascus.

The capital is quieter than it was six months ago when the sound of artillery constantly reverberated from the mountains nearby. There are fewer mortar rounds being fired into the city centre from rebel-held districts. The airport road, which had been closed by snipers, is open; so too is the long road north to Homs, Syria's third-largest city, and from there to the Mediterranean coast.

"People are very tired after two years fighting," said one local observer who did not want to give his name. "Many are feeling very poor because they have lost their jobs and prices are very high. But they don't think there is any peace without Assad. They are looking to see what will come out of a Geneva peace conference." He said that the rebels had been discredited in the eyes of some of their former supporters as a result of the widely watched film of a rebel commander eating the heart of dead government soldier and of a 15-year-old boy in Aleppo shot in the face for allegedly profaning the name of the Prophet.

David Cameron's pledge at the G8 on Tuesday to maintain Syria's security services, military forces and state institutions while insisting that President Assad leave power appears to be wholly at odds with the reality on the ground. Mr Assad's forces have a tight grip on 13 out of 14 provincial capitals and increasingly hold the main roads between them. The one provincial capital captured by the rebels, Raqqah on the Euphrates in the east of the country, is held by Islamic fundamentalists who have no intention of maintaining Syria's security services or military forces which they regard with fear and hatred.

Mr Cameron's message was interpreted by some as an appeal to the leadership of the Syrian security forces to mount a coup, safe in the knowledge that they would hold their jobs under any new government.

But an important feature of the Syrian civil war is that the core of the regime has not split, unlike in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen in 2011. Mr Assad's fortunes are also buoyed up by the fact that he is no longer seen as an inevitable loser in the civil war inside and outside Syria.

But recent government successes such as the capture of Qusayr do not mean the Syrian army is going to roll up and defeat the opposition which still holds large parts of the country. The rebels have been advancing near Deraa in the

south, aided by foreign backers in Jordan. Predictions of a massive government offensive to drive the rebels from Aleppo may be premature, the fruit of government over-confidence and rebel hopes of frightening allies outside the country into giving them more weapons and money to avert a supposed rebel collapse.

In any case, the government's tactics around Damascus appear to be to encircle and isolate hard-core rebel areas like Douma, Harasta and Zamalka but not to storm them and become involved in street fighting which would lead to heavy losses.

Mr Cameron explained that the West should not repeat in Syria its mistakes in Iraq where, he claimed, existing institutions were dissolved, creating a vacuum and leading to chaos. This is something of a misunderstanding of what happened in Iraq in 2003. It is true that the US helped drive the Sunni Arabs into revolt by dissolving the Iraqi army and security forces, but the Shia and Kurds, together with 80 per cent of the Iraqi population, were determined to break the Sunni Arab grip on the institutions of the state. This revolutionary change was probably unstoppable, contrary to what Mr Cameron believes.

Damascus is very different from Baghdad 10 years ago. Although streets clear by eight in the evening there is almost 24 hours-a-day supply of electricity. People often walk to work because checkpoints and road closures create lengthy traffic jams. While foodstuffs such as tomatoes are expensive, cheap bread is available to most people from state bakeries. In the capital, at least, Syria is a long way from an Iraqi-type collapse.

21st June 2013

‘WE DON’T CARE WHO RULES US, WE JUST WANT TO LIVE’

By Patrick Cockburn

THE BOOM of outgoing artillery fire no longer makes people in Damascus glance up from their work or interrupt their conversation even for a moment. After a year of fighting, it is a background noise so familiar that nobody refers to the thunderous sounds even though they show that the battle for the capital is not quite over.

The artillery fire yesterday was in support of a government push to regain ground around the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab to the south of Damascus.

Fighters from Hezbollah are reported to be taking part in the Syrian army's local offensive in the area. The gold-leaf covered dome and blue minarets of the mosque rise above the tomb of Sayyida Zeinab, the Prophet Mohamed's grand-daughter, which until recently attracted hundreds of thousand of Shia pilgrims from across the Muslim world.

Syrians are weary but do no expect the civil war to end soon. A diplomat said: "The problem is that both sides still think they can win." The government would like a ceasefire but for the opposition this would seem to be a surrender. "I think there will be a peace conference in Geneva, but maybe not until September," commented a Syrian official. "I think it will happen because the Russians want it to happen." Observers in Damascus believe that success over the Syrian crisis is crucial for Russia in reaffirming its status as a great power after many humiliations and setbacks since the first Gulf War in 1991.

In a sign of the escalating conflict between Shia and Sunni stemming from the Syrian civil war, Saudi Arabia said yesterday that it is expelling Lebanese who support Hezbollah. Many of the half-million Lebanese who work in Gulf countries ruled by Sunni monarchs are Shia and feel under threat.

Stories of sectarian atrocities exacerbate fears in the capital. Pictures of the 14-year-old boy shot twice in the face in Aleppo for making use of a common phrase about the Prophet were seen by everybody on social media.

Other atrocity stories, such as one about a Christian taxi driver whose body was cut up and fed to dogs after he referred to the rebels as "terrorists", are less provable but are believed and increase the sense of fear in the capital.

The struggle for the Damascus has swayed back and forth since the rebels launched a mass attack last July and captured many districts close to the centre. They were then driven out by the army and suffered heavy losses, but the army was never able to consolidate its control and rebels were able to reinfiltrate.

A foreign diplomat said that "from last December the government told us it was adopting a new strategy of holding Damascus, the main population centres and the main roads". This approach largely succeeded though the rebels fired

mortar bombs into the centre of Damascus earlier in the year without precise targeting. Three landed in the grounds of the Sheraton hotel.

It is important for the rebels to show that they have not permanently lost the military initiative after their defeat at Qusayr. “The opposition is being weakened by their internal problems, inability to provide security as well as looting, criminal activities and failure to provide services,” said a foreign observer. “In Aleppo, Christians are being kidnapped as apostates, but all the kidnappers want is money. In Damascus even people who supported the opposition now ask: ‘Are we really going to give power to these people?’” He pointed out that the Islamic fundamentalist groups are winning more recruits from other movements because their fighters are get better pay.

The growing unpopularity of the rebels does not necessarily imply that the government is becoming more popular. “Maybe 10 per cent support the rebels, 10 per cent the government and 80 per cent just want the war to end,” said one observer, who like everybody else in this piece wished to remain anonymous. Another person with strong links to the government said: “People are saying ‘We don’t care who rules us. We just want to live’.”

The collapse in value of the Syrian pound has been a further shock. It fell sharply over the weekend. Bread is subsidised long with sugar, rice and heating, but people queue for hours outside bakeries. “I waited for one-and-a-half hours for bread and had to leave to go to work,” said one woman.

22nd June 2013

SYRIA'S LOST TREASURES

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SITE where Cain is held to have murdered Abel is in a cave below a white dome on the slopes of Mount Qassioun, overlooking Damascus. It seems strikingly appropriate that the most notorious Biblical example of fratricide should be on the outskirts of a city now being torn apart by fratricidal strife.

The place where the killing took place is called “the Cave of Blood”. Tour guides once claimed that the whole mountain quivered at the enormity of the deed. But if Qassioun shakes today it is the result of government artillery firing at rebel-held enclaves and of rebel mortars firing back at the centre of the city.

UNESCO warned this week that the great cultural monuments of Syria, including, Damascus are at risk of damage or destruction. The soukh in Aleppo has already been burned out. Heavy fighting has ruined Aleppo’s Umayyad Mosque, built between the 8th and 13th centuries and reputedly home to the remains of John the Baptist’s father.

In Damascus the great Umayyad Mosque, with its glorious Byzantine style mosaics, stands undamaged in the Old City, although the volleys of ill-directed mortar bombs could easily hit it. More vulnerable are Christian and Shia churches and shrines.

Just behind Damascus’s Umayyad Mosque is the Sayida Ruqqaya Mosque, a Shia shrine once visited by thousands of pilgrims. Its mosaics and inlaid glass still shimmer, but elsewhere in Syria Shia mosques and Christian churches are being burned and desecrated. There is fighting around another Shia shrine, Sayyida Zeinab Mosque, in the south of the city. The fate of the great monuments of Syria, as well as its people, is in the balance.

Looking down on Damascus it is easy to underestimate the destruction because so many damaged buildings are still standing. People are not starving but bread queues are long and jobs are few. The city, until two years ago one of the most attractive in the world, has turned into a patchwork of hostile districts like Belfast, Baghdad or Beirut. Their inhabitants regard each other at best with suspicion and more usually with hatred and fear. This week, two mortar bombs killed a Christian standing guard at the Bab Touma gate into the Old City. A local man said: “The bombs came from the valley over there which leads to the Eastern Goutah where the rebels are strong.” He gestured towards the east as if it were a foreign country. Another Christian said: “I haven’t been out of this area for four months because I don’t feel safe anywhere else in Damascus.”

There are checkpoints everywhere, sometimes manned by uniformed soldiers, but often by men with guns wearing a mixture of military and civilian clothes, such as dirty white T-shirts and camouflage trousers. They may be members of

the 60,000-strong Local Defence Forces who often replace the army. but I never ask because I am only too glad to have passed through without trouble.

Media reports over the past year, from the time when the rebels made their first big attack on Syria's capital in July 2012, refer to districts being won or lost by the government and the insurgents. But the struggle is more complicated than this, as the government may appear to gain control but the rebels still have a presence. Many rebel districts, like Jobar or Douma, are largely empty of civilians.

Government tactics are to surround and isolate rebel strongholds, but not necessarily to try to fight their way in. Even where the government is in overall control it is not possible to stop rebels moving mortars in the boots of their cars, setting them up in a matter of minutes to fire on government positions before disappearing.

Isolating districts does not always work in the government's favour. The men who stay have little choice but to join the rebel militias since there is no other work available. The media often over-emphasises the supply of weapons as determining the rise and fall of rebel units, but it may be more important to know if their men are being paid and, if so, how much..

Fundamentalist groups linked to al-Qa'ida, such as the al-Nusra Front, can afford to pay better and can therefore attract more recruits and defectors from other insurgent movements. "Money counts for more than ideology," one diplomat said.

23rd June 2013

SYRIA: ONE DEATH AMONG 93,000

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SECOND of two mortar bombs killed Ghassan al-Khouly as he stood guard last Thursday at an ancient gate into the Christian quarter of the Old City of Damascus. It exploded right beside him killing him instantly, dark bloodstains and a small heap of stones today marking where he died.

Barakat al-Shamas who was standing guard with him, said: “I heard the sound of a shell coming in and I threw myself on the ground. When I got up I saw there was so much blood that I knew Ghassan must be dead.” Barakat was wounded with a piece of shrapnel penetrating his right hand as well as his neck and left leg.

Ghassan al-Khouly, an unemployed labourer who specialised in tiling floors, was one of the latest of an estimated 93,000 Syrians to have died since the start of the civil war in March 2011. Other than the fact he was a Greek Orthodox Christian, his experiences were not very different from those of many other Syrians caught up in the war.

His widow, Nour al-Sabek, says that until two years ago he was fully employed but when the rebels came all that was finished. They hold outer suburbs of Damascus where most of the new construction was, and as a Christian he did not dare go there. Everybody who is not a Sunni Muslim Arab assumes they are in danger of being killed, kidnapped or robbed in rebel-held areas. Forced to stay in the centre of the city he tried to eke out a living by doing odd jobs fixing electrical wiring, setting up satellite dishes and flooring. His family became poorer.

I started to learn about the life and death of Ghassan al-Khouly after I heard four rifle shots fired at regular intervals while I was walking to the great Umayyad Mosque in the Old City just before Friday prayers. It did not sound like a gunfight, and it turned out the shots had been fired by an honour guard bringing a body home for the funeral later in the afternoon. We learned the name of the dead man but were told that it was not a good moment to see his widow and her two sons. But if we wanted to know what had happened we should talk to Barakat al-Shamas, who had been wounded in the same incident but was just back from hospital.

I knew that Ghassan and Barakat had both been in the National Defence Force (NDF), a 60,000-strong militia organisation that has been publicised abroad as being a ferocious pro-government paramilitary organisation, freshly trained to turn the tide of war in Syria. The NDF may contain such units but in the Old City of Damascus its members are very much like the Home Guard in Britain in 1940. Everybody between the ages of 20 and 65 is meant to join, and many are

quite elderly.

We met Barakat, not looking at all intimidated by his experiences, surrounded by friends sitting in the guest room of his house. He extended his right hand which was covered with a blood-stained bandage as if he had forgotten for a moment that he cannot shake hands with anybody.

I was surprised by the age of the two men who had been doing sentry duty: Barakat said he is 65 and Ghassan, the dead man, was 10 years younger. A photograph of Ghassan was on his death notice announcing funeral arrangements which had been pasted to walls in the Old City. The picture had the de-personalised look of head-and-shoulders ID photos, but showed a narrow-faced serious-looking man with a black moustache.

The rebels regularly fire mortars into districts of Damascus they do not control. This is difficult to stop because the rebels jump out of a car, take a mortar and a shell from the boot, fire it and are gone in a few minutes. This is their reply to government artillery which fires constantly at rebel-held districts. Ghassan and Barakat could not do much about the mortar attacks, but they were meant to stop rebels infiltrating through the Bab al-Sharqi, the Eastern Gate, into the Old City. “Old men are better at this because they know everybody who lives here and can pick out strangers,” said a local observer.

“Our shift was meant to end at 2pm,” recalled Barakat. He and Ghassan had moved to the north side of the gate to stay in the shade. It was then that the mortar bombs came down, one on either side of the gate. They did not leave much of a crater in the hard ground, but, aside from hitting the two guards, the shrapnel peppered an empty school bus and smashed its windscreen.

Nobody could be certain where the mortar was fired from but they thought it might have been Eastern Ghouta, a rebel stronghold to the east of Damascus under pressure from government forces. The mortar fire is the rebels’ way of showing they are still in business.

The outside world focuses on the Syrian refugees that have fled the country, but millions have also fled to the uncertain safety of Damascus where they are crammed into houses. Christians, once 6 per cent of Syria’s 23 million population, feel particularly vulnerable. Wael al-Shamas, the son of Barakat who works in a bank and speaks fluent English, described how the world he lived in was increasingly confined to a few Christian districts. He said: “I don’t have the courage to go outside these areas.” He said a problem for the Christians is that they do not have many places to flee to where they are safe. They are also often unemployed.

There are other less obvious difficulties. Wael said his father suffered from diabetes, and so far the government provided medicine free but he was worried

what would happen if that stopped because buying it privately was very expensive. He added: “There is also a transport problem simply getting the medication from one side of the city to the other.”

All over Damascus day-to-day living is getting more difficult and expensive. There is still cheap government-subsidised bread, but there are long queues outside bakeries. Everything which is not subsidised is costing more and even people with jobs are paid in rapidly devaluing Syrian pounds. Last weekend, the pound’s value fell 30 per cent against the dollar before making a partial recovery. The streets of the Old City which would have been packed with pilgrims and tourists around the great monuments two years ago are empty. The restaurant of the Four Seasons Hotel still serves four different wines by the glass but had only a single customer.

I went to see Ghassan’s widow, Nour al-Sabek, in the family house where she was living with her two sons, Shadi and Sherbel. A friend had said he was worried that she would have nothing to live on, her close relatives and friends had also lost their jobs. As people came to pay their respects, the family sat near a large picture of the dead man. I asked Nour why her husband had joined the National Defence Force since it paid almost no money.

She replied that he loved his country and was frightened for his church, his children and his friends. Others said there were about 600 Christians in the neighbourhood who had joined the NDF and eight had been killed by mortars, snipers and bombs. Nour described how her husband had tried to scrape together a living by doing occasional jobs in the last two years. There was discussion among family members about the probability of Nour getting a lump sum from the government and a pension because her husband had been martyred. They thought this likely, going by past experience, but not absolutely certain.

While we spoke there was the booming of outgoing artillery in the background but nobody paid any attention to it since this has been typical background noise in Damascus for the past year. There was not much talk of general politics until Ebtisam, a thin, short, nervous-looking woman who was the sister of the dead man, asked me: “Why does your country send weapons to Syria? Without foreign support we would finish the rebels.” She said that in the past she could walk home in the middle of the night, but now I must ask my brother to pick me up.”

Everybody who had gathered to mourn Ghassan al-Khouly said how good relations between Muslims and Christians had been in Syria before the revolt. This has not always been true historically, since between 5,000 and 10,000 Christians were massacred in Damascus over eight days in 1860. But somebody remarked that there had been more Muslims than Christians in Ghasan’s funeral

procession. His sons had remained silent while their older relatives talked about their dead father.

But just before I left, Shadi, aged 13 and looking grief-stricken, suddenly said in a loud voice: “The people and the world loved Ghassan al-Khouly.”

24th June 2013

THE HOPES OF REBELS LIE IN THE RUINS OF QUSAYR

By Patrick Cockburn

AS REPRESENTATIVES of 11 countries supporting the Syrian rebels met in Qatar over the weekend pledging to supply them with arms, Syrian military officers in the recaptured town of Qusayr expressed confidence that rebels will never be able to retake their old stronghold.

The rebel defeat at Qusayr - south of Homs and close to the Lebanese border - after a two-week assault by government forces earlier this month has had a crucial political impact.

Outside powers realised that President Bashar al-Assad's overthrow was not as inevitable as they had imagined. The so-called Friends of Syria, which include the US, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, now promise military and other aid to enable the rebels to repel the government offensive.

Qusayr looks firmly under the control of the Syrian army, but the government is taking no chances. On the road to this once prosperous market town, set amid olive and almond trees, there are military checkpoints every few hundred yards, where soldiers carefully examine identity documents.

The debris of battle is all around in the shape of wrecked buildings, burnt orchards, a smashed mosque with its minaret lying on the ground and a burnt-out tank.

The government always held part of Qusayr town and it is only beyond the old front line that all buildings on the main street have been torn apart by shellfire. The old telecommunications building is a spectacular heap of smashed concrete, while the minaret of an another old mosque has a gaping hole in it, though it is still standing. There are almost no civilians about aside from two small boys on bicycles, who seemed cheerfully oblivious to the ruins around them.

Off the main street, the disruption is not quite so bad. People are beginning to trickle back. Qusayr had been surrounded by rich farmland, and had a surprising number of shops. Most of these have been wrecked, their metal screens buckled and twisted by the force of explosions.

We spoke to a young man called Shibli Halaq, who 10 days ago had returned to Qusayr, "where I used to own a perfume shop". Lack of perfume is not the town's most pressing shortage, but he seemed confident he would soon be back in business. He said he and his family had left the town 14 months ago, because they did not like the rebel factions. Their place of exile was his grandfather's house two miles away.

Mr Halaq had come back with his three brothers to clean up their house before their family return. He said, "Fifteen families are back in our street and

more will come.”

Looking down side streets it was evident that most civilian houses had escaped damage from shellfire but had been thoroughly looted by one side or the other. Mr Halaq was waiting for the water and electricity to be switched on, which he expected to happen in the next few days.

Ahmed, a young soldier who was our guide, blamed most of the heavy damage on the rebels and said they had planted mines everywhere. A construction worker had been killed by one exploding the previous day.

Could the rebels of the Free Syrian Army return? An army major, who refused to give his name, said, “If we keep control they won’t be able to.”

Some of this was bravado, but the army does seem to have a tight grip on the town. But areas of rebel and government control are very close to one another, and each side is in a position to launch a surprise attack.

We had an example of this later in the day, when I asked to visit a military hospital in the al-Waar district in the northern outskirts of Homs. A car with security men in it that was driving us took a circuitous route out of the city and back “to avoid dangerous roads”.

Crossing a bridge over the motorway to the city of Hama to the north, we saw that it had been closed to traffic by earth embankments, indicating that the rest of the road is under rebel control. There were other barricades sealing off roads going to rebel-held districts. The soldiers on sentry duty looked on edge. When we got to the military hospital, we waited a long time at the gate until we were told that we could not enter “without a permit from military intelligence”.

Despite the government’s success at Qusayr, the military situation around Homs feels like a stalemate. Even in Damascus, where government forces are meant to be advancing, we had to divert off a main road because snipers were shooting at vehicles at a suburb called Harasta. At this spot, snipers had recently shot dead two chicken farmers and a man bringing olive oil to the market.

26th June 2013

REBEL TOWN THAT FORGED ITS OWN PEACE DEAL

By Patrick Cockburn

ONCE A rebel stronghold, the town of Tal Kalakh on the Syrian side of the border with Lebanon changed sides at the week-end and is now controlled by the Syrian army. The switch in allegiance is the latest advance by government forces into areas where they have had little or no authority since the start of the revolt in Syria two years ago.

The government is triumphant at the surrender of 39 local leaders of the rebel Free Syrian Army with their weapons, which were ceremoniously stacked against the outside wall of the town's military headquarters. The exact terms of the deal are mysterious, but there is no doubt that the regular Syrian army now holds all parts of Tal Kalakh, which had a pre-war population of 55,000 and is an important smuggling route for arms and ammunition from Lebanon a couple of miles to the south. Syrian army commanders claimed the reason the rebels had given up in the town so easily was because of their defeat in the battle for the similarly strategically important town of Qusayr, 20 miles away, earlier in June.

The Syrian opposition denied that the town had fallen, saying that there was still fighting going on there. In a three-hour visit, I saw no sign of it. Soldiers and civilians looked relaxed and there were no indications of recent destruction, though there are plenty of buildings damaged by shellfire or pockmarked with bullet holes from fighting in 2011 or 2012. The pro-rebel Al-Jazeera Arabic satellite television channel claimed smoke was rising from the town. I did not see or smell any.

The rebels' strenuous denial that they had lost an important town without a fight may show a certain desperation on their part. Ahmed Munir, the governor of Homs province, which includes Tal Kalakh, pointed out that the Syrian army had moved into the town just as 11 major powers, including the US, Britain, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, meeting in Qatar, had promised the rebels more weapons and equipment.

A local FSA commander, who said his name was Khalid al-Eid, explained that he had gone over to the government side along with 20 men he led because of general disillusionment with the uprising. A paunchy man, he appeared self-confident and almost truculent as he talked about his life as an FSA leader. He said that before the uprising, he "used to work as a policeman during the day-time and in the family perfume shop in the evening". He seemed assured he would be able to return to his old routine.

Listening to him impassively were Syrian army officers and some civilians, including Khalid al-Eid's father, who expelled his son from the family home when he joined the FSA. The deal that brought the army back into Tal Kalakh

appears to have been brokered by leading citizens of the town who did not want it to become a battleground again. The devastating destruction at Qusayr, when it was stormed over two weeks by the Syrian army and the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah, gave a sense of urgency to the final negotiations.

Tal Kalakh may be peaceful now but it has seen much fighting. There is an elaborate military checkpoint at the entrance to the town just off the Homs-Tartus main road where documents are checked. The atmosphere in the military headquarters housed in an administrative building of a large grain silo was relaxed, as if nobody expected to do more fighting. The buildings immediately in front of the army's positions had been wrecked by cannon fire and looked as if they had been abandoned. Armed rebellion had started early in Tal Khalak in May 2011, probably because its position on the Lebanese border made it easy to smuggle in weapons.

The cache of weapons on show by the army - a few mortar bombs, rockets and explosives - were not very impressive. There was also a truck of furniture looted from the local hospital, but the aging white-painted beds and chairs looked unsaleable.

Beyond a zone of outright destruction in front of Syrian army's front line there was an area which looked as if shops and houses had been abandoned a long time ago. A government guide who tried to explain why there was nobody on the streets said "it is because it is siesta time and they are all in bed". But this did not explain the absence of cars or clothes drying on lines in backyards.

The shutters of shops were rusty in places and there was grass growing in cracks in the pavement. Most local inhabitants are likely to have become refugees in Lebanon over a year ago.

Even here there were some government loyalists. Umm Said al-Masri, a woman surrounded by her family, was reopening a vegetable shop. "God bless the army," she said, confirming that it had reasserted control three days earlier. Her children chanted slogans in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and there were new-looking posters of him on the walls. Deeper into the town, most of the small shops were open.

Close to the border there are Christian Maronite villages along the steep sides of the hills, houses often having small statues of the Virgin Mary in blue and white robes facing the road. The land falls away quickly to the al-Kabir river at the bottom of a deep wooded valley, which is the frontier between Syria and Lebanon. In this area a donkey specially trained to carry smuggled goods and cross the border without human assistance is said to be worth more than a car.

Everybody seemed to accept that the Syrian army is back for good. The soldiers in checkpoints were not wearing helmets and often not carrying their

weapons, as if they did not expect anybody to attack them. Khalid al-Eid said there had been 300-400 FSA in Tal Kalakh before the army's return but they must have melted back into the local population under an unofficial amnesty or have gone to Lebanon. Soldiers or guerrillas who have switched sides are often an unreliable source of information about their former colleagues because they denigrate them in a bid to impress their new masters. But Khalid al-Eid did say that his men were "paid $1,300 a month and we got an extra $1,000 if we carried out an operation". He described how he would make Youtube films - "sometimes they show us firing when there was nothing to shoot at" - which would later be shown on al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera TV.

What were the exact terms of the deal that replaced the FSA with the Syrian army? Peace did not break out all of a sudden and it had been preceded by a series of local ceasefires and negotiations arranged by leading local townspeople. Monsignor Michel Naaman, a Syriac Catholic priest in Homs, who has often taken part in mediating such agreements said that "older people had seen much of it damaged and did not want it destroyed".

He adds that there are many other such deals and agreements in the making. For instance in Homs many people have moved to the al-Waar district for safety, its population rising from 150,00 to 700,000. The Old City, which once had 400,000 people in it, is almost empty aside from rebel fighters. He says that ceasefires or agreements for rebels to put down their weapons in return for an amnesty are much easier to arrange when all the rebels are Syrians. "When there are foreign Salafi or Jihadi fighters present, as there are in the Old City, an agreement is almost impossible."

The Governor Ammed Munir believes "one should try to make a deal in each case without a special military operation". He says that the Old City of Homs is particularly difficult to deal with because "you can't have an agreement with so many gangs and there are many tunnels into and out of the Old City". Overall, there is little fighting in Homs province because of the government success at Qusayr and because these local ceasefires are holding. An injection of more arms and money, which may be the result of last weekend's Doha meeting could bring a new surge in violence but would not produce a decisive result in the war.

The Tal Kalakh peace deal is important because no serious negotiations on who holds power in Syria can take place given the present level of violence in the country as a whole. The only way to bring the political temperature down is by local ceasefires and peace deals. The government is gaining ground as the rebels did in 2011 but nobody is going to win on the battlefield.

28th June 2013

‘THE ATMOSPHERE HERE IS POISONED BY FEAR OF A KIND I HAVE ONLY EVER SEEN ONCE BEFORE’

By Patrick Cockburn

KHALID IS too frightened of travelling the 100 miles from Homs to Damascus to ask officials if they know what happened to his three sons, who disappeared 16 months ago as government troops over-ran the rebel stronghold of Baba Amr. He has not heard anything from them since and does not know if they are alive or dead, though he has repeatedly asked the authorities in Homs, Syria's third-largest city, about them.

Khalid, a thick-set man of 60 with grizzled white hair - who used to be a construction worker until he injured his back - says he dare not make the journey to Damascus because "as soon as the soldiers at the checkpoints on the road see I come from a place like Baba Amr, with a reputation for supporting the rebels, they are likely to arrest me". He explains that he cannot risk being detained because he has a wife and four daughters who rely on him. He is the last man left in his family since his sons went missing.

Syria is full of parents trying to keep their children alive or simply seeking to find out if they are already dead. It is as if both sides in the civil war are in a competition to see who can commit the worst atrocities. A few days before I spoke to Khalid I saw a picture on the internet of a fresh-faced 23-year-old soldier called Youssef Kais Abdin from near the port city of Latakia. He had been kidnapped a week earlier by the al Qa'ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra while serving in the north-east of Syria, close to the Iraqi border. The next his parents heard of Youssef was a call from their son's mobile at 4am from al-Nusra telling them to look for a picture of their son online. When they did so, they saw his decapitated body in a pool of blood with his severed head placed on top of it.

The Syrian conflict is a civil war with all the horrors traditionally inflicted in such struggles wherever they are fought, be it Syria today or Russia, Spain, Greece, Lebanon or Iraq in the past. For the newly appointed American National Security Adviser Susan Rice, David Cameron or William Hague to pretend that this is a simple battle between a dictatorial government and an oppressed people is to misrepresent or misunderstand what is happening on the ground.

Evidence that both sides have committed supporters prepared to fight to the death is borne out by the estimate of some 100,000 dead published this week by the pro-rebel Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. It concludes that fatal casualties come almost equally from the two sides in the civil war: broadly 25,000 of them government soldiers, 17,000 pro-government militia, 36,000 civilians and 14,000 rebel fighters, though the last two figures in particular are probably understated.

Homs, an ancient city at the centre of a province with a population of two

million, is a good place to judge the course of the war. It was an early scene of anti-government action in 2011 in the course of which peaceful protests turned into irregular but devastating warfare. Most of Homs today is controlled by the Syrian army, aside from a few important areas including the Old City in the centre, which is held by rebels. Some 400,000 people have fled from here and are now scattered across the rest of the city. The houses they leave behind are occupied by opposition fighters, a fair number of whom are non-Syrian jihadi volunteers intent on waging holy war. “It is very difficult to talk to the Salafi [Islamic fundamentalists] in the Old City,” says Monsignor Michel Naaman, a Syriac Catholic priest who used to live there and who has sought to mediate and arrange ceasefires between the Free Syrian Army and government forces.

But the political geography of Homs is not just divided between pro- and anti-government forces but has grey areas of uncertain or disputed control, where hundreds of thousands of people are trying to survive pressures from both sides. They live in an atmosphere poisoned by fear of a kind I have not experienced since Baghdad at the height of the sectarian civil war in 2006-7. Where else in the world would not just vulnerable refugees but army generals surrounded by armed guards make me promise not to reveal their names for fear that they and their families might be targeted for retaliation?

Homs is full of people who are refugees within their own city. A lowly government civilian employee, who gave his name as Walid but did not want his exact job identified, told me how he had been forced to move twice.

“I was living in al-Khalidiya when I was kidnapped by the Free Syrian Army because I worked for the government,” he said. “Fortunately, I knew somebody in the group who said I was a good man and they let me go, but the shock of my kidnap killed my father who died of a heart attack.” Munir moved to another area on the outskirts of northern Homs call al-Waar, where neither government nor rebels are in full control. He said, “I had to leave again because the rebels would set up checkpoints at night and ask people if they were Sunni or Alawite or they would ask for money or take your car.”

I had some experience of al-Waar, the district from which Munir had to flee a second time. It is a large area in the north of Homs with high-rise buildings and plenty of accommodation with a population that has risen to 700,000 from 150,000 before the crisis. I had asked to visit a military hospital there earlier this week, had received permission and was guided there by security men in a civilian car. We took a highly circuitous route, driving west out of the city and then circling back to avoid “hot areas”. Earth embankments started to appear on roads indicating they were not secure, including the main highway north to Hama. Our guides consulted with soldiers at checkpoints, which were more and

more heavily fortified, as to whether it was safe to go ahead and we finally reached the hospital gates, only to be told that the head of the unit would not let us in without a permit from military intelligence.

Some people in Homs flee because they are in areas that support the rebels and others because they are known to work for the government. Most simply want to get to a place of safety. In Homs this is often means taking refuge in a school where the government provides food, water and the basics of life. At one school (again the person in charge asked me not to identify it), where I had met Khalid whose three sons were missing, I talked to Abu Nidal who worked in Homs water and sanitation department. He, too, came from Baba Amr and had left there for two months during the heavy fighting in 2012 when the Syrian army stormed it. “We went back and stayed six or seven months but [in March this year] the rebels came back, the situation was very bad and we had to leave again.” He said Baba Amr was now empty and when I drove past it the entrance to the district was blocked by rubble and there was nobody to be seen on the road beyond.

The policy of the government, as expressed by the Governor Ahmad Munir, is not to storm areas in Homs it does not control unless other options have been exhausted. He said he was trying to deal with each case “without a special military operation”. He had just arranged for the Syrian army to move into the rebel town of Tal Kalakh near the Lebanese border and for 39 local FSA leaders to surrender. He did not expect the same thing to happen in the Old City because “there are lots of gangs and nobody to negotiate with”. The storming of the rebel stronghold of Qusayr earlier this month may have made other communities more determined to avoid similar destruction.

Rickety local ceasefires do not solve the Syrian crisis but they do prevent a lot of people being killed, jailed or driven from their homes. The fact that people in Homs have become inured to living in a constant state of terror does not make their suffering any better. “It must be very dangerous to be a young man of military age here in Syria,” I said to a group of refugees in Homs, leading them to laugh dryly and respond: “No, you are wrong. They kill men in their 60s and 70s as well!” I asked if they expected things to get better and they dolefully shook their heads.

By pledging at a meeting in Qatar last weekend to send more arms and equipment to the rebels, the 11-member so-called “Friends of Syria”, including the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, decided in effect to stoke the civil war in Homs and the rest of Syria. To pretend it is not a civil war or to support the rebel side as somehow uniquely representative of the Syrian people flies in the face of demonstrable facts. West of Homs in the port city of Tartus on

the Mediterranean there is a long wall with pictures of many of the 2,000 young men from the city killed fighting as soldiers for the government in the last two years. The Syrian state, in control of most of the country, is not going to implode just because the rebels receive fresh supplies of money and arms.

As for Khalid and his hopeless search for his three missing sons, he says, “I wish the Free Syrian Army and the government would leave ordinary people out of it and go and fight each other.”

28th June 2013

‘THERE WAS A SERIES OF DULL THUMPS... A SUICIDE BOMBER HAD BLOWN HIMSELF UP’

By Patrick Cockburn

I WAS writing the accompanying article about the situation in Homs when there was a series of dull thumps near my hotel in the Christian Bab Touma district in the Old City of Damascus. The boom of artillery rounds going out and the sharper crack of mortar rounds coming in have become part of background noise in the Syrian capital, so I did not pay much attention. Then the phone rang and a friend said a suicide bomber had blown himself up a few hundred yards away outside the Naranj, a restaurant where I have often eaten, and the Greek Orthodox Virgin Mary church which stands opposite. Four people had been killed.

Almost all these early reports, aside from the number of dead, turned out to be not entirely true. I started to walk to the church. The explosion had happened in the Street Called Straight, of biblical fame, 100 yards or more from the Naranj and the church and was close to a Shia Muslim hospital, which might imply a sectarian motive for the attack.

The first thing I saw on entering Straight Street was a white sheet covering a body. People would come up and flick open the top of the sheet to see if it was anybody they knew. There were local Christian militiamen from the National Defence Force keeping order but there was a mood of resignation rather than panic. I went to look at the place of the explosion where there was a dent about three inches deep in the pavement. It looked to me more like the detonation mark of mortar bomb than a suicide bomber. There was no blood around the spot as there would have been if someone had blown themselves up. It looked as if the mortar had been randomly fired into the Christian quarter by rebels who assume Christians, frightened of Islamic fundamentalism, are pro-government.

The force of the explosion had hit a curio shop for foreign tourists, wounding the owner in the leg. A few yards further on, the pavement was drenched with blood and I assumed somebody had died there.

Witnesses are difficult to find in these situations because those truly close to the explosion are usually dead or in hospital. A man called Joseph Ballangi described how he had just parked his car and was walking away from when he heard the crash of the explosion. We had just finished talking when there was sharp crack of a mortar bomb exploding nearby and the militiamen told everybody to go inside.

I went and sat in the entrance passage of a house. Walking home I stopped for an orange juice at the Naranj restaurant which remained resolutely open. I asked if anybody had been injured in the second explosion and was told a woman had been killed, bringing the total number of dead to five.

30th June 2013

FOREIGN MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA ARE DANGEROUSLY INACCURATE

By Patrick Cockburn

EVERY TIME I come to Syria I am struck by how different the situation is on the ground from the way it is pictured in the outside world. The foreign media reporting of the Syrian conflict is surely as inaccurate and misleading as anything we have seen since the start of the First World War. I can't think of any other war or crisis I have covered in which propagandistic, biased or second-hand sources have been so readily accepted by journalists as providers of objective facts.

A result of these distortions is that politicians and casual newspaper or television viewers alike have never had a clear idea over the last two years of what is happening inside Syria. Worse, long-term plans are based on these misconceptions. A report on Syria published last week by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group says that "once confident of swift victory, the opposition's foreign allies shifted to a paradigm dangerously divorced from reality".

Slogans replace policies: the rebels are pictured as white hats and the government supporters as black hats; given more weapons, the opposition can supposedly win a decisive victory; put under enough military pressure, President Bashar al-Assad will agree to negotiations for which a pre-condition is capitulation by his side in the conflict. One of the many drawbacks of the demonising rhetoric indulged in by the incoming US National Security Adviser Susan Rice, and William Hague, is that it rules out serious negotiations and compromise with the powers-that-be in Damascus. And since Assad controls most of Syria, Rice and Hague have devised a recipe for endless war while pretending humanitarian concern for the Syrian people.

It is difficult to prove the truth or falsehood of any generalisation about Syria. But, going by my experience this month travelling in central Syria between Damascus, Homs and the Mediterranean coast, it is possible to show how far media reports differ markedly what is really happening. Only by understanding and dealing with the actual balance of forces on the ground can any progress be made towards a cessation of violence.

On Tuesday I travelled to Tal Kalakh, a town of 55,000 people just north of the border with Lebanon, which was once an opposition bastion. Three days previously, government troops had taken over the town and 39 Free Syrian Army (FSA) leaders had laid down their weapons. Talking to Syrian army commanders, an FSA defector and local people, it was evident there was no straight switch from war to peace. It was rather that there had been a series of truces and ceasefires arranged by leading citizens of Tal Kalakh over the

previous year.

But at the very time I was in the town, Al Jazeera Arabic was reporting fighting there between the Syrian army and the opposition. Smoke was supposedly rising from Tal Kalakh as the rebels fought to defend their stronghold. Fortunately, this appears to have been fantasy and, during the several hours I was in the town, there was no shooting, no sign that fighting had taken place and no smoke.

Of course, all sides in a war pretend that no position is lost without a heroic defence against overwhelming numbers of the enemy. But obscured in the media's accounts of what happened in Tal Kalakh was an important point: the opposition in Syria is fluid in its allegiances. The US, Britain and the so-called 11-member "Friends of Syria", who met in Doha last weekend, are to arm non-Islamic fundamentalist rebels, but there is no great chasm between them and those not linked to al-Qa'ida. One fighter with the al-Qa'ida-affiliated al-Nusra Front was reported to have defected to a more moderate group because he could not do without cigarettes. The fundamentalists pay more and, given the total impoverishment of so many Syrian families, the rebels will always be able to win more recruits. "Money counts for more than ideology," a diplomat in Damascus told me.

While I was in Homs I had an example of why the rebel version of events is so frequently accepted by the foreign media in preference to that of the Syrian government. It may be biased towards the rebels, but often there is no government version of events, leaving a vacuum to be filled by the rebels. For instance, I had asked to go to a military hospital in the al-Waar district of Homs and was granted permission, but when I got there I was refused entrance. Now, soldiers wounded fighting the rebels are likely to be eloquent and convincing advocates for the government side (I had visited a military hospital in Damascus and spoken to injured soldiers there). But the government's obsessive secrecy means that the opposition will always run rings around it when it comes to making a convincing case.

Back in the Christian quarter of the Old City of Damascus, where I am staying, there was an explosion near my hotel on Thursday. I went to the scene and what occurred next shows that there can be no replacement for unbiased eyewitness reporting. State television was claiming that it was a suicide bomb, possibly directed at the Greek Orthodox Church or a Shia hospital that is even closer. Four people had been killed.

I could see a small indentation in the pavement which looked to me very much like the impact of a mortar bomb. There was little blood in the immediate vicinity, though there was about 10 yards away. While I was looking around, a

second mortar bomb came down on top of a house, killing a woman.

The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, so often used as a source by foreign journalists, later said that its own investigations showed the explosion to have been from a bomb left in the street. In fact, for once, it was possible to know definitively what had happened, because the Shia hospital has CCTV that showed the mortar bomb in the air just before it landed - outlined for a split-second against the white shirt of a passer-by who was killed by the blast. What had probably happened was part of the usual random shelling by mortars from rebels in the nearby district of Jobar.

In the middle of a ferocious civil war it is self-serving credulity on the part of journalists to assume that either side in the conflict, government or rebel, is not going to concoct or manipulate facts to serve its own interests. Yet much foreign media coverage is based on just such an assumption.

The plan of the CIA and the Friends of Syria to somehow seek an end to the war by increasing the flow of weapons is equally absurd. War will only produce more war. John Milton's sonnet, written during the English civil war in 1648 in praise of the Parliamentary General Sir Thomas Fairfax, who had just stormed Colchester, shows a much deeper understanding of what civil wars are really like than anything said by David Cameron or William Hague. He wrote:

For what can war but endless war still breed?
Till truth and right from violence be freed,
And public faith clear'd from the shameful brand
Of public fraud. In vain doth valour bleed
While avarice and rapine sharethe land.

3rd July 2013

‘THE US HAS NO CONTROL OVER THE REBELS IT IS ARMING - AND IF CAMERON AND HAGUE THINK WEAPONS CAN FORCE ASSAD’S DEPARTURE, THEY ARE STUPID’

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIA IS convinced the US cannot control the rebel groups it is arming and will be unable to get them to declare a ceasefire that would be central to any successful peace talks, says the country's Deputy Foreign Minister. This puts a further obstacle in the way of negotiations in Geneva proposed by the US and Russia which seem the best chance of ending the Syrian civil war. It now appears they will either not take place, or if they do, they will achieve nothing.

Faisal Mekdad says in an interview with The Independent in Damascus that the Americans "provide arms and money but they have absolutely no control. Nobody will listen. The US has been trying to unify this opposition for two years and you can see the results: more disintegration." Mr Mekdad has been at the centre of Syrian foreign policy at a time when the country has been progressively isolated, while still managing to retain crucial allies.

Mr Mekdad looks more confident and relaxed than he did six months ago, probably reflecting a Syrian government belief that it has survived the worst of the crisis. A dapper, fast-talking man, Mr Mekdad comes from Daraa in southern Syria where the uprising began two years ago.

The cavernous Syrian foreign ministry feels insulated from the war, yet Mr Mekdad has not escaped the stresses of the conflict. His 84-year-old father was kidnapped and held for 14 days by rebels and he says he no longer goes to his family home because he wants to avoid further troubles.

Mr Mekdad says events have been moving in the Syrian government's favour throughout the first half of the year. Its forces are on the offensive, having won a crucial battle at Qusayr outside Homs near the Lebanese border, and he stresses that the opposition should take heed. "It will send a clear message to armed groups, saying: 'The Syrian army is coming for you,'" he says. Crucially, Syria's most important allies - Russia and Iran - are steadfast in supporting it diplomatically and financially. Mr Mekdad seems to draw a certain amount of unspoken pleasure from the spectacular disarray of the civilian and military opposition inside and outside Syria.

At the end of the interview Mr Mekdad commented that six months earlier Damascus had been resounding with the sound of artillery fire while now it is much quieter. In reality, this is not quite true and there is the constant boom of outgoing artillery and the occasional sharper crack of incoming fire from rebel mortars.

The difference is largely psychological, with foreign diplomats warning that the government may be getting over-confident as its recovers its nerve. But the rebels retain a core of supporters that are not going to be eliminated, making a

long war inevitable.

Mr Mekdad does not look overly concerned by the postponement of the Geneva II peace conference, saying that Syria had always been ready and willing to attend without preconditions. But he goes out of his way to refute the idea that, if the US and its allies could make the rebels a bit stronger on the battlefield, “they can force the government to give more concessions. This is completely wrong,” he says.

This is the argument of David Cameron and William Hague, who claim arming the rebels would tilt the balance of the war in their favour forcing Mr Assad to negotiate his own departure. “I think they are stupid,” says Mr Mekdad. “I think they are absolutely mistaken. More arms means more killing.” He derides any idea that the British and French stance is humanitarian or sincere, attributing it in both cases to revived colonialist ambitions. The Syrian government sees Britain and France as front men for the US administration, which Mr Mekdad claims is “behind everything in the region”. He believes that Saudi Arabia and Qatar likewise act as proxies for the US: “They can’t do anything without written instructions from Washington.”

The government in Damascus has always portrayed the rebels as fundamentalist jihadists who represent as much of a long-term threat to the West as they do to Syria. He also plays down the role of the Lebanese Shia paramilitary movement Hezbollah - other Syrian officials have said they wish Hezbollah had not been so vocal in publicising its presence - and says that thousands of Islamic fundamentalists have joined the rebels without provoking such an international outcry. Foreign diplomats note that Hezbollah provides elite troops while the presence of foreign jihadists videoing themselves decapitating government soldiers has done much to discredit the opposition movement at home and abroad.

Mr Mekdad denies that Iran has a single soldier or member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria, but adds that the Iranians are generous with economic and financial assistance. “They are sending food, oil and financial support,” he says. There is little evidence of an Iranian military presence but their expertise in guerrilla warfare, honed in Lebanon and Iraq, is highly regarded in the region. As one Iraqi political leader said: “The Iranians have a PhD in irregular warfare.” Despite Mr Mekdad’s assertions, Hezbollah is a crucial supplement to the government’s position in central Syria, which is the most heavily populated part of the country.

A further reason why Damascus is feeling more confident these days is that two of its harshest critics, Egypt and Turkey, are preoccupied with their own waves of popular protest.

As for chemical weapons, he denies that Syria - “supposing [we] had them” - would ever deploy them against its own people and called for the UN to investigate a Syrian government claim of poison-gas use by the rebels. But he also claims that UN inspectors would not be allowed to investigate similar charges against Syrian government forces because “we don’t want to repeat the Iraqi experience”. He claims that the Syrian opposition had every incentive to fake evidence about chemical weapons use by the government in order to provoke foreign military intervention. “They know that President Obama said that this was a red line,” he says.

13th July 2013

WITH THE OPPOSITION NOW AT WAR, THERE'S ONLY ONE WINNER - ASSAD

By Robert Fisk

BASHAR IS a happy man today. Long did America and the EU rub their hands with delight each time a minister or general left Assad to collaborate with the regime's enemies. Every split within the Assad government was paraded as the "tipping point". And now, suddenly, what Assad's lads had been telling us for months - that it is their enemies who are divided - turns out to be true. The bodies of Kamal Hamami and his brother are the proof. The rebels are split. The Islamists and the Free Syrian Army are at war.

The Obamas and the Camerons are going to have to catch their breath. They, after all, want - or wanted - to send weapons to the FSA, the secular, "heroic" resistance fighting for "democracy" against the fascist regime of the dictator in Damascus. And our leaders can still make the argument that the FSA are the guys we should be arming, now that the al-Qa'ida outfits have started killing the FSA leadership. If the good guys in the FSA are now fighting the bad guys of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, we should help them.

But history suggests that the good guys might turn into the bad guys and that the bad guys might win. What if the Islamists wipe out the FSA? Then our weapons really will fall into the "wrong hands" rather faster than they would have done anyway - since guns are money in civil wars and al-Nusra and the rest have the cash to buy anything we give the FSA. Then there's the argument that does not occur to the Hagues and Kerrys of this world: that if the FSA really do want to polish off their former fundamentalist allies, then their obvious ally is the chap in the presidential palace in Damascus.

Bashar would be only too ready, surely, to help the FSA against the regime's Islamist "terrorist" antagonists - and maybe offer the FSA a dignified reunification with the government army. Regime intelligence officers have for more than a year held regular meetings with FSA officers to try and woo them back to Bashar. And if they are successful, then our generous donations of weapons will end up not in the Islamist "wrong hands" but the "wrong hands" of the Baath Party.

But why be surprised at all this? Rebels almost always fall out. Anti-Russian Shia and Sunni resistance movements in Afghanistan fought each other when the Soviets still occupied their country - and then went on to kill each other in a civil war which allowed the Taliban to take over Afghanistan. In Algeria, the FLN destroyed the rival MNA - a nationalist movement which may also have been French-paid - before driving France out of its North African colony in 1962. And the Second World War provides far more examples of heroic maquisards killing heroic maquisards.

In Yugoslavia, the British dropped arms to Mihailovic's monarchists in their struggle against Nazi occupation - until the British SOE told Churchill that Tito's Communists were killing more Germans than Mihailovic's men. When Churchill then switched sides to Tito, a young SOE officer asked the Prime Minister if he realised Yugoslavia would become Communist after the war. Churchill shot back: "Do you intend to live in Yugoslavia after the war?"

You bet Obama and Kerry and Cameron and Hague do not intend to live in Syria after the war. But it might be a good idea if they thought through who might actually win before they send weapons to their friends in the FSA.

11th July 2013

THE SYRIAN WAR HAS KILLED 100,000. BUT WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE STILL ALIVE?

By Patrick Cockburn

SAMIR AND Hassan in the Buzuriyah souk used to earn their living selling luxury sweets to visitors to the nearby 18th-century Azem Palace. Their shop in the covered market stays open, multicoloured tubs of sweets on display, but Samir says gloomily that “business is very bad and our customers are few”. The factories that make his sweets in the villages around Damascus are closed or cut off by fighting and he must pay for expensive imported ingredients in devalued Syrian pounds.

Customers in the souk are no happier than the shopkeepers. Ramadan starts this week and Umm Said, a housewife in her forties, has come with her two daughters to the market from her home in the al-Midan district of Damascus in the hope of finding cheap foodstuffs for special Ramadan dishes. “I am disappointed,” she says. “Prices here are just as high as in the small shops where I live and they will get even higher later in Ramadan.” The economic breakdown in Syria is exacerbated by the country being broken up geographically as government and rebels hold their own territory, making it unsafe to produce and transport goods. This is frustrating for Khalid, a neatly dressed elderly shop-owner in the souk who sells Syrian folk remedies made out of herbs, flowers and almost anything else.

Above his head at the shop entrance hang dried starfish, ibex horns, tortoise shells, dried frogs and other health-giving items. He complains that his main stock in trade is 25 different types of dried flowers and rare herbs which he can now only obtain with difficulty and at great expense.

He says that “women from the villages west of Aleppo and in Idlib used to go into the mountains and spend all day collecting a kilo of flowers. Now they are too scared to do that so there is no supply for me.”

One medicinal herb came from near Darayya, a southern suburb of Damascus that has been much fought over in the past two years. The few families that cultivated the herb have fled and nobody else has their expertise. Foreign imports of dried flowers and herbs from Egypt and Sudan, stored in sacks in front of Khalid’s shop, are very expensive because the importers want payment in dollars.

The Syrian pound used to be 47 to the dollar and is now about 200. But, despite the laments of the shopkeepers, the centuries-old Buzuriyah souk is full of bustling crowds because Syrians have seen their incomes plunge and prices in souks are cheaper than in shops elsewhere.

Parts of the economy have disintegrated or are badly hit. A study led by a former Syrian Planning Minister, Abdullah al-Dardari, on post-war

reconstruction, estimates the total damage so far at $60-$80bn or a third of the pre-war economy.

Oil exports worth $8bn have stopped because the oilfields in the north-east are in the hands of the al-Qa'ida-related al-Nusra Front and because of US and EU sanctions on importing Syrian oil. Tourism, once worth $8bn a year, has vanished and Syria's great monuments stand empty or are closed. Agriculture is crippled by war, which has hindered cultivation and raised the price of transport. One Damascene complains that tomatoes used to cost very little at this time of year "but now you pay the same for a kilo of tomatoes as you paid for 20 kilos three years ago. Fewer are produced and it is costly to get them here."

Physical damage is difficult to assess but many factories in rebel-held areas of Aleppo, the site of so much of Syrian industry, have been destroyed or looted. Much of the plant on the outskirts of Damascus is located in contested districts. A businessman who manufactures lighting equipment in a factory he owns in China says "my warehouses in Syria with $5m- worth of stock have all been destroyed. How stupid we Syrians are to let this happen!"

How do Syrians survive the burdens of civil war? The answer is that many of them do not. In a school in Homs, I met an 85-year-old man called Awad al-Izou who is a refugee from Baba Amr district whose house - "it had seven rooms" he recalls - in that former rebel-held bastion has been destroyed. "I had five sons, one of them martyred, two in prison [one in Damascus, the other in Homs], one disappeared and one living in a distant village." He lives in a government-run refugee shelter in a school because "at least here I have a bed, food and electricity".

Chance encounters with strangers invariably produce sad stories. In the Tekkiyya al-Suleimaniyah - an entrancing 16th-century Ottoman complex of mosques, gardens, khans and ancient schools - I met a woman called Fatmih al-Hassan. She had lived in Aleppo but her husband disappeared and she suspected he was dead. The government had given her compensation, which had been stolen, and a small pension which she had to share with his sister. She said: "I came to Damascus with eight other women and we have rented a small house for 7,000 Syrian pounds [about $35] but we are running out of money."

Civil war has disastrously damaged the economy in government-held areas, but it has not entirely sunk it and may not do so. Electricity, mobile phones and the internet still operate in Damascus, Homs, Tartous and other cities most of the time. There are queues at petrol stations but there is petrol and diesel for those who wait.

Bread, rice, cooking oil and cooking gas are available at heavily subsidised prices. Queues outside bakeries are a common sight because people buy in

quantity so they do not have to queue again for a few days. Overall, Damascus compares quite well with Baghdad, though this is a tribute to Iraq's uniquely corrupt, incompetent and dysfunctional administration.

The government is keen to maintain normal life and services, such as hospitals, in the areas it controls. People in rebel areas sometimes get their pensions but districts where the opposition is strong such as Eastern Ghouta, the rich agricultural lands east of Damascus, are squeezed, with people unable to get to work outside them because of checkpoints even if they still have a job. A failure of the opposition has been its inability to provide even rudimentary administration and facilities where it is in control, though the government is eager to compound these failings of the opposition by cutting off supplies.

The Syrian economy is weak and getting weaker. The rebels might cut the electricity supplies in Damascus as their counterparts used to do in Iraq. But the Syrian government is buttressed by close alliances with Russia and Iran and friendly relations with China. Kadri Jamil, the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the economy, was quoted as saying these three countries deliver $500m in oil on credit each month. "It's not bad to have behind you the Russians, the Chinese and Iranians. Those three countries are helping us politically, militarily - and also economically," he said.

Syria may survive but many Syrians will not. Unicef says that 6.2 million Syrians, out of a population of 23 million, are in need of direct assistance. Half of them are children. The plight of refugees fleeing to Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan gets international attention but the 4.25 million displaced inside Syria are less visible. In Homs alone, 400,000 people have fled the Old City and in Damascus whole families are often crammed into a single room.

Many Syrians have suffered catastrophe and more have seen their lives disrupted and their standard of living collapse. Ibrahim is a manager in a hotel and has kept his job "but they cut my salary in half because the hotel is almost empty and is losing money".

He had a house in the hills west of Damascus, but the road from there became too dangerous so he sold his car two years ago and used the money to rent another house in a safer area. He says "a few months ago I could no longer afford to pay the rent and I moved into my parents' house".

Most dispiriting for Syrians is not just that life is hard and getting harder, but they do not see why it should get any better.

Syria is facing a conflict akin to the Lebanese civil war that lasted 15 years. A diplomat in Damascus said "both government and opposition think they can win. That is why the war is going to go on a long time."

And a long war leads to irreversible losses such as a sustained lack of

confidence in the economic future, emigration of the best educated and a damaged infrastructure. Even if the civil war ends tomorrow - which it will not - Syria will be a crippled society and economy for years to come.

13th July 2013

SYRIA'S REBELS TURN ON EACH OTHER AFTER FSA LEADER IS KILLED

By Patrick Cockburn and Richard Hall

A NEW front is opening in the Syrian civil war that looks set to pit rebel against rebel, as confrontations between Western-backed groups and Islamic fundamentalist fighters threaten to spiral out of control.

The assassination of a leading commander of the Free Syrian Army by fighters allied with al-Qa'ida will further divide the rebels in Syria at a time when they are struggling to deal with government offensives against opposition strongholds.

Kamal Hamami was killed on Thursday along with his brother at a checkpoint near Latakia in north-west Syria.

The assassination was reportedly carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which has long been conducting a guerrilla war against the Iraqi government and fighting under the banner of the al-Nusra Front in Syria until earlier this year.

The Iraq-based part of the movement is likely to have been responsible for killing most of the 44 people killed in bomb attacks and shootings in Iraq in recent days.

Mr Hamami, also known as Abu Bassir al-Ladkani, was a member of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and commander of an important brigade within the loosely organised FSA.

A spokesman for the FSA said Mr Hamami had been driving through Latakia on his way to take part in an operation against regime forces when he encountered a checkpoint manned by members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

When the fighters from the al-Qa'ida-linked group refused to let him pass through, Mr Hamami ordered them to dismantle their checkpoint.

After they refused to do so, a confrontation ensued in which Mr Hamami was killed.

It is not clear if his death was the result of that dispute or a pre-planned assassination, but the Free Syrian Army yesterday appeared to be convinced of the latter.

"We think they made a decision to fight us. It seems they have prepared themselves very well for this moment," FSA spokesman Louay Mekdad, told The Independent.

“They have started to take control in certain areas and started to arrest certain people. We will not allow this to happen,” he added.

Mr Mekdad said a video conference had been held between members of the FSA’s military council on Thursday to decide an appropriate response to the attack.

A second crisis meeting was due to take place yesterday between General Salim Idris, the commander of the FSA, and other rebel leaders.

The shooting may be the precursor of an all-out civil war between the Islamic State, whose in primary leadership is based in Iraq, and the FSA.

Mr Mekdad says that one FSA fighter caught in the ambush was allowed to go free in order to carry a message from the Islamic State saying that it considers the FSA heretics and will target its 30-member Supreme Council.

He added that “if these people came to defend the Syrian revolution and not help the Assad regime, then they have to hand over the killers,” adding that the bodies of the two men are still held by the Islamic State forces.

FSA commanders reacted angrily to the killing.

“We are going to wipe the floor with them,” one was quoted as saying, before adding that there was “no place” for al-Qa’ida type militants in Latakia province near the Syrian border.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was formed earlier this year and is made up of fighters who split from the al-Nusra Front.

The split was prompted by an announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, who claimed to have been responsible for founding al-Nusra.

In April, Mr Baghdadi announced a merger between al-Nusra and al-Qa’ida in Iraq, which would operate under his leadership.

The merger was opposed by al-Nusra’s leader in Syria, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, and the fighters who had been operating under the al-Nusra umbrella broke into two groups under the two leaders.

Those loyal to Mr Baghdadi now operate under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

The Islamic fundamentalists have been making headway within the opposition because they are better organised, fight harder, are well-funded and less prone to loot civilian property.

They also guarantee a degree of order in districts they control by implementing summary justice under sharia while the FSA units are notorious for plundering factories and warehouses and selling for profit humanitarian aid sent from outside Syria.

The US, Britain, France and their regional allies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and

Turkey have been continuously trying to boost the FSA and the Syrian coalition, the civilian rebel opposition, as representative of Syria as a whole.

Despite the blows it is receiving from Islamic fundamentalists supporting the rebellion and from Syrian government forces, the FSA is still hopeful of receiving US and European weapons and equipment.

An opposition statement pledged that these arms would not fall into the hands of jihadist fighters because “the Syrian Coalition and the Free Syrian Army have already introduced necessary measures to ensure full and comprehensive vetting of all armed forces under our command.”

The killing of Mr Hamami is evidence that the FSA may be in no position to guarantee anything inside Syria.

15th July 2013

BY TAKING SIDES WITHIN SIDES, RIFKIND RISKS A REPEAT OF THE BALKANS MISTAKES

By Robert Fisk

SO THERE was Malcolm Rifkind, harrumphing away on Newsnight last week about the need to arm the brave boys of the Free Syrian Army who are fighting for freedom, democracy, secularism and all the other isms we support in the Middle East. Weapons should be sent to the FSA to match the tanks and missiles and to shoot down the aircraft of the Assad regime, which is so generously supplied by Russia. This was, alas, only a day before the Syrian "rebels" started a mini-civil war among themselves - between Rifkind's "good" rebels of the FSA and the really horrible rebels of Jabhat al-Nusrah and of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

But my memory crept back to a shameful day more than 20 years ago - 8 December 1992, to be precise - when I stood with colleagues in the bitter winter of Bosnia, in a snow-drifted town called Vitez. We were all discussing the need for Nato and the UN to allow the Bosnians, most of whom were Muslims, to acquire arms so that they could defend themselves against the tanks, missiles and aircraft of the Serbs, who were receiving supplies from the Russian-armed Yugoslav army. Then, with the UN almost cut off in Sarajevo and facing the greatest crisis of its Balkan involvement, there arrived in this miserable town one Malcolm Rifkind, burdened in those days with the title of UK Minister of Defence.

Our Malcolm (pictured below), clad in a camouflage uniform, patent leather shoes, an army belt worn inside-out and an ear-flapped hat, performed his photo-op duties atop a Warrior armoured vehicle. UN soldiers of the Cheshire Regiment listened expressionless at what he had to say.

The Syrian tragedy makes his words all the more shocking. Rifkind called the Bosnian conflict a "civil war" - despite Britain's recognition of President Alija Izetbegovic's government in Sarajevo - adding that to impose peace in Bosnia "would be inappropriate because I think the scale of what would be involved would be dramatic. It's been suggested that over 100,000 soldiers might be required. Their commitment would be open-ended. It could last for very many years and there would be the certainty … of significant casualties." He did not explain where this epic figure of 100,000 had come from, nor his evidence for an "open-ended commitment". But off he went in his Warrior across the frozen hills of Bosnia, standing at the rear and waving at the cameramen as if he was on a publicity tour. Was there not, I wrote at the time, a tragedy in this land?

And is there not a tragedy in the land of Syria? Read again David Rieff's devastating critique of the Bosnian war: "The West …chose to do anything but intervene. Instead, they mounted one of the largest and most heroic humanitarian

relief efforts in modern history … all the while pursuing decidedly unheroic diplomatic negotiations. The purpose of these … was not to save Bosnia but, as politicians like to say, 'to contain the crisis'." What all the peace plans had in common was division along ethnic lines.

And today we will intervene in Syria - yet neither risking our soldiers nor mounting heroic relief efforts. We are sending millions of dollars to Syrian refugees, but have lost all interest in humanitarian corridors and certainly do not intend to defend such corridors if they ever exist. Having decided to starve the Bosnians of arms in the Balkans - while sending in supplies - Rifkind now wants to send guns into Syria while the commentariat tells us that a divided, sectarian Syria - Alawites on the coast, Sunnis in control, readers know the story - may end the war. Ergo Bosnia.

In other ways, Syria resembles the Spanish civil war, where the Royal Navy mounted a League of Nations (for which read UN) arms embargo while the Germans and Italians armed the rebel nationalists and the Russians armed the government republicans. The parallels are not exact. Franco's nationalist rebels were not interested in democracy - is the FSA, for that matter? - and the government side lost. But the mendacity is there for all to see. The Russians backed the republicans because they wanted to fight fascism. The Germans and Italians supported the nationalists because they wanted to fight Communism. All wanted to test their new weapons. In the outside world, only the International Brigades - armed with largely useless guns - cared about Spain.

Today's superpowers are now fighting in Syria; Russia wants to prove its international power and crush an Islamist uprising close to its borders. The West wants to counter Russia's power in the Middle East by giving guns to the rebels while at the same time preventing the Islamists taking over Syria. A tall order!

But let's be in no doubt why we want to arm the rebels. If the civil war in Syria is worthy of intervention, ours is defined by one major fact: we want to give more guns to the rebels because, for the moment, the Assad regime is winning. Our masters now tell us we must "balance" the forces - which is intriguing. It means we don't really care to end the war. We just don't want the rebels to lose it. So the war will go on. And sending more guns into Syria will maintain this bloody status quo.

For, grafted on to this phantom West-versus-Russia conflict there is the Sunni-Shia struggle, in which the Sunni - the Gulf monarchies, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt (up to a point) and much of north Africa - have aligned themselves against the Shia - the Iranians, the Alawites, Hezbollah, and a minority Shia population in Saudi Arabia. "We" are now 100 per cent on the Sunni side. It is we who want to arm the Sunni rebels - the good Sunnis, of course, not the bad Sunnis - and have

therefore also taken a side in the Islamic “civil war”.

Thus our “statesmen” are now trying to explain that the bad rebels in Syria are outsiders, foreigners, jihadis from other Muslim countries; while the good FSA rebels are Syrian patriots. The problem is that - while it’s true that thousands of armed jihadis have arrived from abroad - thousands of Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, who have declared links to al Qa’ida, happen to be Syrians.

Thus the Rifkind plan - and the Hague plan, and the Cameron plan, and the Hollande plan, and I suppose the Obama plan - for sending guns to the rebels means arming one side in the rebel “civil war”, both of whom are fighting another “civil war” against the government.

Yes, we all know about the mass murders, ethnic cleansing, raping, gassing - a question mark here still, I fear - and the atrocities. In the Balkans, we acknowledged that the Bosnians committed war crimes but agreed that the Serbs committed far more. In Syria, we agree that the Assad forces commit war crimes but accept that the rebels commit far fewer - unless they are “bad” rebels, in which case they might be committing still more.

But back to Bosnia. There we couldn’t arm the Bosnians because they might then win - and thus destroy the chances of peace negotiations which would lead to a divided sectarian state (which is exactly what happened). In Syria, we should arm the rebels because they might otherwise lose - in which case there may be no negotiations and no sectarian state. The bottom line is the “balance”. And if both sides still think they can win, the war will go on. Is that what we want?

17th July 2013

UK TO HELP REBELS WITH DEFENCES

By Kim Sengupta

BRITAIN IS to supply rebels in Syria with defences against chemical attacks, including protective hoods, after repeated claims that regime forces have been using sarin gas.

The move comes as President Bashar al-Assad's forces have made significant recent gains in the vicious civil war and the Cameron Government remains undecided about whether to arm to the opposition fighters after warnings from senior military officers that simply sending limited numbers of weapons would have little effect on the ground.

William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, said he was sending the WMD-related equipment, worth £656,800, as a "gift" as it was "a matter of special urgency". He has had to follow this path after the Commons passed a motion last week calling on the Government to seek the "explicit" consent of Parliament to send arms to the rebels.

The Assad regime has denied deploying chemical weapons and has accused the rebels of doing so. Britain and France have presented "evidence" to the UN that sarin had been used.

24th July 2013

ONLY FULL-SCALE WAR CAN UNSEAT ASSAD, SAYS IRAQI MINISTER

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIAN PRESIDENT Bashar al-Assad is not going to lose power unless there is foreign intervention amounting to a full-scale war, according to a leading Middle-East politician.

Iraqi Foreign Minister, Hoshyar Zebari, said with a united army in control of Damascus and the major Syrian cities, Assad “will survive for the foreseeable future”. Mr Zebari, pictured below, is one of the few leaders to be in touch with all parties in the Syrian civil war, including the government and various factions of the opposition, along with their foreign backers.

In an interview with The Independent he expressed pessimism about peace negotiations in Geneva proposed by the US and Russia, but said he believes that the best way forward may be a ceasefire policed by the UN prior to any agreement on a transitional government. He said: “I think it would be possible to do that with strong engagement by the UN to follow through and maybe some international peacekeepers.”

He was scornful of recent speculation about the possibility of a military coup in Damascus displacing Assad. He said “the idea of the army moving is a recent invention”, adding that it reminded him of abortive attempts by the CIA to organise the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, but that “this kind of regime is coup-proof”. Prime Minister David Cameron gave the impression in a recent speech that he thought that the Syrian army and security apparatus might be encouraged to move against the regime.

Mr Zebari said he believes that the stalemate on the ground would not be broken even if the government or the rebels captured a few towns. “I saw lots of people but it is very depressing,” he said of recent meetings in the Middle East and Europe with all those involved in Syria, adding: “Nobody has any idea how to help.”

The Gulf monarchies are supplying advanced weapons to the rebels and the US and the Europeans “are conducting some covert operations in Syria and helping the Syrian opposition”. But he is convinced this will not really change the balance of forces on the ground which would only happen in the event of full-scale foreign intervention amounting to all-out war against the regime. He is equally convinced that there is no political will to do this and Mr Assad, Iran and Russia are fully aware of this.

Mr Zebari points out that when the US and Russia agreed to try to bring the Syrian government and opposition together at Geneva, the US effectively accepted that Mr Assad would be there: “When [Russian Foreign Minister Sergei] Lavrov and [US Secretary of State John] Kerry agreed on Geneva II it

meant that Assad would stay in power until 2014 or until he finishes his term." Syrian ministers visiting Baghdad made it clear that removing Mr Assad as head of state or army commander-in-chief was a red line for Syria.

The Russians have pressed for Iran to attend a Geneva meeting but the US and the Gulf states are opposed. "The Iranians are desperate to attend," said Mr Zebari after meetings in Tehran. "I said to them that unless you behave yourself from now until then your prospects for attending are very slim."

Iran is a crucial ally for the Syrian government, but the US and its allies do not want to give Iran a place at the negotiating table. Iraq believes Iran should be there because of its influence on Syria and because Iran sees the assault on the regime in Damascus as a threat to itself.

Mr Zebari believes it unlikely that the oft-postponed Geneva II conference will take place at all and says that a conference on the sidelines of a UN meeting would not be taken seriously. The opposition still hopes that if it hangs on long enough there will be international intervention to overthrow Mr Assad along the lines of Nato military intervention in Libya in 2011. Mr Zebari said he has always told opposition leaders this is a pipedream.

He said that there is such a strong appetite internationally to do something to de-escalate the conflict that a renewed ceasefire arrangement might work. "They [foreign players] will go for anything to calm the situation." But Mr Zebari said that such a ceasefire would require heavy involvement by the UN and international peacekeepers.

26th July 2013

THE DIY ARMS OF THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

By Kim Sengupta

THE REBELS should never have fired back; they did so out of pride and thus exposed their position further to salvos of machine gun and mortar rounds from Assad's forces. At one point during this hopelessly mismatched exchange a Remington pump-action shotgun being used by one of the fighters, Abu Karim, simply fell apart, possibly due to metal fatigue.

After we had managed to get away, Commander Abdul Haq displayed the weapons of the 50 revolutionaries under his command: 20 hunting rifles shotguns and handguns, including a Soviet Star pistol proudly bearing the place of manufacture, CCCP, and the date, 1948, and a British Webley revolver, circa the 1930s. The next day the group got its first semi-automatic, a regime-issue Kalashnikov, bought from a soldier for $ 2,000 (£1,300).

This was near the village of Darkush, in Syria's Idlib province in February last year, just before the bloodletting began in earnest and the opposition began to smuggle in weapons on a large scale. Distribution, however, remains haphazard among the various khatibas (battalions) and as this collection of pictures shows, some of them have to rely on a cottage industry to provide themselves with arms.

Carpenters and plumbers have turned into proficient armourers. The ingenious improvisations include "grenades" fashioned from ornamental balls; catapults for firing incendiaries; "armoured cars" of corrugated iron sheets bolted on to pick-up trucks, IEDs (improvised explosive devices) made Afghan style from fertilisers and any assortment of home-made artillery and missiles. The Islamist fighters of groups like Jabhat al-Nusra are the best-armed among the opposition, receiving generous supplies from sympathisers in Qatar and the Gulf. On Wednesday the Congressional committees in Washington gave approval to the Obama administration's plans to send military items to more moderate opposition factions. Britain and France have lifted European Union sanctions on Syria, but the Commons voted by 114 to one earlier this month in favour of a motion which requires the Government to hold a parliamentary vote before weapons can be sent.

US supplies are expected to be limited to small arms. British and American military figures have warned that is unlikely to have any effect on the course of the war. The West is opposed to sending the one item which could actually be a game-changer - surface-to-air missiles - due to fear they will fall into the hands of jihadists.

Even the more exotic of the rebels' home-made weapons can be effective - most of the time. Last summer I witnessed a catapult being used to lob

explosives into an army base in the town of al-Bab, near Aleppo, with some success. On the seventh launch, however, the whole structure collapsed; everyone stood stock still looking at the bomb on the ground before a general stampede away from the area.

8th August 2013

SYRIA OPPOSITION ADVANCES DESPITE LOSING 62 FIGHTERS IN ASSAD AMBUSH

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SYRIAN army killed 62 rebels in an ambush near Damascus yesterday, just as the opposition looked to be making advances on two fronts in northern Syria.

Bloody corpses, some in uniform, were shown on Syrian television, which said the rebels were on their way to attack a government post near Adra, a north-eastern suburb of Damascus. The rebels were reportedly shot dead as they moved on foot along what they believed to be a secret route not known to the Syrian army.

In northern Syria jihadi rebels linked to al-Qa'ida are playing a leading role in attacks on key strategic points. In Latakia they claimed to have killed 200 pro-government soldiers and militiamen in fighting for half a dozen villages. The violence is likely to spark sectarian hostility because the Sunni insurgents are targeting mountain villages inhabited by members of the Alawite sect to which President Bashar al-Assad and many leaders of his government also belong. Hundreds of villagers have sought refuge on the coast.

In a further gain for the rebels, Islamist fighters have taken control of Menagh military airport near Aleppo after months of skirmishes. A statement issued by nine brigades carrying out the assault on the airport, including the al-Qa'ida-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), said that "the airport has been fully liberated. The remnants of the Assad gangs are now being chased".

The command headquarters of the airport were over-run on Monday by ISIL rebels after a suicide bomber drove an armoured personnel carrier packed with explosives into the building.

The leading role in these rebel advances of the al-Nusra Front and the ISIL, which is also carrying on an insurgency in Iraq heavily reliant on suicide bombers, is likely to complicate Western supporters of the opposition. The government's claims that the al-Qa'ida linked fundamentalists are the backbone of the opposition may be exaggerated. But there is plenty of evidence that ISIL and al-Nusra Front, both of which have jihadi volunteers from abroad, are more effective than the Western-backed Free Syrian Army.

After the ambush of rebels near Damascus, state-run Al-Ikhbariya television showed a Tunisian passport picked at scene from the body of a bearded man who was born in 1978. It also showed Islamic headbands and automatic rifles that were apparently carried by the rebels.

Mohammed Saeed, an activist who is based near Damascus, told the Associated Press says that 65 rebels were on their way from the eastern suburbs of the capital to the nearby area of Qalamoun when all but three were killed. A

local activist added that the rebels were walking the 19-mile route because it is dangerous to drive in the area as it is watched by regime forces. “The regime forces riddled them with heavy machine gun fire,” he said. “It seems that the regime discovered the secret road that the rebels were using.”

Around Aleppo and Latakia the rebels have the advantage of the nearby Turkish border which is open to them. They also control much of the Euphrates Valley west of the border with Iraq. Further south around Homs and Damascus their supply lines are often cut and the Syrian army has been sealing off enclaves and reducing them one by one. Their inhabitants generally flee to avoid the fighting. Both sides are in a position to make gains but not to deliver a knock-out blow which would lead to victory in the war.

Meanwhile Saudi Arabia has reportedly offered Russia a deal whereby it would scale back weapons supplies to Syria in return for weapons purchases worth $15bn and a promise that gas from the Gulf would not compete with Russia. It is unlikely Russia will reduce its backing for President Assad given that its support for Syria is aimed at restoring its pre-eminence as a great power.

11th August 2013

VIOLENCE IS ONE THING, BUT WHAT CAUSES REAL TERROR IS THE THREAT OF KIDNAPPING

By Patrick Cockburn

NUMBERS OF dead and wounded and signs of physical destruction are usually taken as a measure of the violence and breakdown of order in any civil war. But, in practice, kidnapping can carry a greater charge of fear for a community. People are more terrified by an ever-present risk that they, their children or other relatives may be kidnapped than they are by a more momentary fear of being hit by a shell, a bomb or a bullet.

Kidnappings in Syria contribute far more to the atmosphere of insecurity and instability than is generally appreciated by non-Syrians. They are crimes that take place in the shadows, as both perpetrators and victims have an interest in keeping them secret.

Over the past year, they have become big business and everybody is vulnerable, particularly families with money since most abductions are carried out by criminal gangs working for profit. This is not the only motive - many kidnappings are tit-for-tat actions between hostile communities, either as a form of vengeance or to enable an exchange of hostages for a person held by the other side. Along the Syrian Lebanese border, Shia and Alawites have been seized to get a relative freed from a Syrian government prison. The distinction between commercial and political kidnappings is not definitive, as gangsters pretend to act on behalf of their community or in opposition to the government.

Sometimes the identity and motive of the kidnappers is frighteningly obscure, and it never becomes clear if people are being held for ransom or are already dead. What happened, for instance, to two eminent Christian clerics from Aleppo, the Greek Orthodox Bishop Boulos Yazigi and his Syriac Orthodox counterpart Yohanna Ibrahim, who went on a mission of mercy on 22 April this year into rebel-controlled territory to try to free two kidnapped priests? They were themselves abducted by a jihadi gang, which was reportedly led by Chechens, and nothing has been heard from them since, leading to fears they were murdered.

You do not have to go far in Syria or among well-off Syrians abroad to find stories of relatives kidnapped and bought back or still being held prisoner. Earlier this summer in Damascus, the Syrian deputy foreign minister, Faisal Mekdad, who comes from near Daraa in the south, told me that his 84-year-old father had been kidnapped in May and held for 14 days. His nephew had similarly been abducted and mistreated. Two senior Syrian army officers asked me not to mention their names for fear that family members might be kidnapped or killed. The situation in Syria is now getting as bad as Iraq after 2003, when I did not know a single well-off Iraqi family that had not had a close relative

grabbed by gunmen and held for ransom.

Kidnappings take place largely though not exclusively in rebel areas and they are on the increase. Peter Bouckaert, the Geneva-based emergencies director of Human Rights Watch, confirms this in an interview with the website Syria Deeply: “The kidnappings have been going on for about a year,” he said. “It’s really intensified. It started mostly when fighting broke out in Aleppo, and has developed and grown since then into a broader trend across many parts of Syria, and is also spilling into neighbouring countries.”

Kidnap gangs are becoming better organised and have good intelligence about when and where their victims will be easy to snatch. Mr Bouckaert cites the recent case of a prominent member of the Armenian community in Aleppo, who was travelling to Beirut by bus when it was stopped by gunmen who asked for him by name and took him away, knowing that the Armenian community in Damascus would pay to get him back. Again, there is an ominous parallel with Iraq, where gangs would pay informants a cut of the ransom for identifying a vulnerable and lucrative target. To this day, people selling houses in Baghdad do so without publicity because neither the seller nor the buyer wants it known that a large sum of money is about to change hands. Wealthy doctors used to be favourite targets, as kidnappers could gain easy access to them by pretending to be in need of medical attention.

Kidnappings spur flight and demoralise those who stay behind. They also have a long-term political impact. They have done much to discredit the Syrian opposition because it is in rebel-held areas that most people are seized and held (though there are stories of people being taken in government-controlled areas, too). US Senator John McCain, a militant advocate of Western help for the rebels who slipped into Syria to be photographed with rebel leaders, was embarrassed when one of them was alleged to be the kidnapper of 11 Lebanese Shia pilgrims. Two Turkish pilots were abducted from a bus outside Beirut airport last week to put pressure on Turkey to use its influence to get the pilgrims released.

The criminalisation of the opposition in Syria is following the same pattern as in Chechnya after 1999 and in Iraq after 2003. In all three cases, heroic militiamen who may have begun as defenders of their community became indistinguishable from bandits. Their former supporters came to feel that, as cruel and violent as the authorities might be, the alternative was even worse. In Chechnya, I remember going see President Aslan Maskhadov in the Chechen capital, Grozny, at the start of the Second Chechen War and noticing that his presidential guard was more worried that I and the party of foreign journalists I was with would be kidnapped than they were by possible attacks by Russian aircraft.

Many journalists who used regularly to visit rebel-held zones in Syria are expressing reluctance to continue doing so. Earlier this year, one internationally known television crew were seized by kidnappers who said they would hold them for three months and ask for $1m in ransom. In the event, they escaped after 10 days. Last year, the NBC chief correspondent, Richard Engel, and his crew were held for five days and were lucky to get free when their abductors unexpectedly ran into a checkpoint operated by another opposition group - there are 1,200 in Syria - and were shot. Reporters Without Borders says it is “aware of a total of 15 cases of foreign journalists disappearing or being abducted in Syria”.

Syrian rebels are thus losing the great advantage they had of giving greater access to reporters while the government handed out few visas. The international media may have been credulous in lapping up opposition propaganda, but the government had only itself for blame for creating a vacuum of information that was filled by its enemies.

Even rebel strongholds are no longer safe for visting foreign journalists. Two weeks ago, a Polish journalist called Marcin Suder was kidnapped from an opposition media centre by a gang of gunmen in the rebel-held town of Saraqeb in the north-western Idlib province. An opposition militant who tried to stop the kidnappers was beaten to the ground with rifle butts.

The Syrian opposition is discrediting itself in the same way as insurgents in Chechnya and Iraq. Kidnappings and the inability to provide even basic security alienate people at home and abroad. The methods of a police state begin to appear acceptable if they mean that your children can go to school in safety.

21st August 2013

BATTLE FOR SYRIA'S OIL WELLS BUBBLING OVER THE BORDER

By Patrick Cockburn

TENS OF thousands of Syrian Kurds have fled into Iraq in the past five days as fierce fighting between heavily armed Kurdish groups and al-Qa'ida-linked militias rages for control of oil wells. UN officials report "a river of people" crossing the Tigris into the Kurdish autonomous area in northern Iraq.

Some 30,000 refugees have already crossed the border and yesterday the government of Iraqi Kurdistan put in place an entry quota of 3,000 refugees a day to cope with the influx, according to Reuters.

"The Kurdistan regional government authorities have put a daily quota for those refugees who will be allowed in," Jumbe Omari Jumbe of the International Organisation for Migration told reporters in Geneva.

"A main reason for the fighting is control of the oil," says Omar Sheikhmous, a veteran Syrian Kurdish leader, in an interview with The Independent. Syria's oilfields are concentrated in the north-east corner of the country where the two million Syrian Kurds are the majority population. A further important factor in the escalation of the violence is a struggle for control of border crossings from Turkey.

The little-reported battles in north-east Syria are an important development in determining the outcome of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian army withdrew from many Kurdish towns and villages in 2012 in what Mr Sheikhmous describes as "a devilish plan" to woo the allegiance of Syria's Kurdish minority.

As the Syrian army withdrew, its place was mostly taken by the well-organised militiamen of the PYD, the most powerful of the Syrian Kurdish groups, which is strongly linked to the largely Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Mr Sheikhmous says the PYD, which he describes as "undemocratic and authoritarian", is now dominant in Kurdish areas. As the PYD was getting stronger, two jihadi groups, the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), were becoming the most effective Syrian opposition force in Arab areas of northern Syria. The PYD's dominance is not welcomed by all Syrian Kurds and six people were killed in an anti-PYD riot in Amuda on the border with Turkey.

Both sides control oil wells, though output is 95 per cent down on the 380,000 barrels a day before the start of the rebellion in 2011. Some of the oil is crudely refined locally, but Mr Sheikhmous says the PYD and the al-Qa'ida linked groups maintain covert commercial links with the government in Damascus and sell crude to Syrian government refineries.

The complex struggle for control of north-east Syria has sucked in many players. It has also become increasingly violent. After months of intermittent

fighting and ceasefires, the PYD captured on 27 July the important town of Ras al-Ayn on the Turkish border which is used as a supply route and is a link between Kurdish enclaves north of Aleppo and in the north-east of the country. On 30 July a Kurdish leader, Issa Hiso, was assassinated by a bomb in his car in Qamishli, a killing blamed by the PYD on the Isis (though others claim this is Syrian security stirring the pot of Arab-Kurdish animosities).

22nd August 2013

THE EVIDENCE SEEMS COMPELLING - BUT REMEMBER: THERE'S A PROPAGANDA WAR ON

By Patrick Cockburn

PICTURES SHOWING that the Syrian army used chemical weapons against rebel-held Eastern Ghouta just east of Damascus are graphic and moving. But they are likely to be viewed sceptically because the claims so much resemble those made about Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) before the US and British invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, the present claim differs from previous ones in the number of dead, variously put at between 213 and 1,360 and the quantity of YouTube evidence of the dead and dying supported by interviews with local activists.

Like the Iraqi opposition to Saddam, who provided most of the evidence of WMDs, the Syrian opposition has every incentive to show the Syrian government deploying chemical weapons in order to trigger foreign intervention. Although the US has gone cold on armed involvement in Syria, President Obama did say a year ago that President Bashar al-Assad's use of such weapons was "a red line". The implication is that the US would respond militarily, though just how has never been spelt out.

But the obvious fact that for the Syrian government to use chemical weapons would be much against their own interests does not prove it did not happen. Governments and armies do stupid things. But it is difficult to imagine any compelling reason why they should do so since they have plenty of other means of killing people in Eastern Ghouta, such as heavy artillery or small arms, which they regularly use. Every day, Damascus resounds to the sound of outgoing artillery fire aimed at rebel strongholds.

The problem is that the evidence so far for the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian army is second-hand and comes from a biased source. This is a good reason to have a 20-strong team of UN experts in Damascus to investigate in three cases if either the government or the opposition has been using poison gas. Could they go to Eastern Ghouta and investigate the opposition claim immediately? This is not very likely given the limited nature of their mandate and the necessity to cross between government and rebel-held territory.

In June, the US said it has conclusive evidence for the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government and would therefore give aid to the rebels. The US action was most likely precipitated by the government's loss of the town of al-Qusayr and a fear that the Damascus government might be starting to dominate the battlefield. Chemical-weapons experts expected the US to go out of its way to prove its conclusions were correct by being open about the origin of tested materials and the means by which they reached laboratories in the US. They also wanted details of the laboratory testing but little of this was produced.

International media organisations do their best to verify YouTube footage, but they do not have reporters who are eyewitnesses to chemical-weapons attacks. Scepticism about film produced by opposition activists has increased in the past two years but frequently it is the only evidence available. The difficulty is, can it be concocted or edited to prove a point? The propaganda war fought through YouTube is an important front in the Syrian civil war. How sure is one that a film of a Syrian soldier being decapitated by al-Qa'ida-linked fighters has not been staged by Syrian security? Opposition groups use film against each other. Film purporting to show that 400 Kurds had been massacred by the rebels appears to have been manufactured by a Kurdish party using film of similar atrocities in Syria and Iraq.

Outraged denunciations and demands for an investigation by the US and Britain yesterday are unlikely to cut much ice because of memories of similar statements about WMDs in Iraq. At this stage of the war in Syria it is also unlikely that the stalemate will be broken by foreign intervention.

22nd August 2013

SYRIA CONFLICT: THE DARKEST DAY YET?

By Kim Sengupta

THE VICTIMS were laid out in a hospital, on beds and on the tiled floor, their eyes lifeless and staring. Many of them were very young children, even babies. Others were in convulsion, mouths foaming, as medics frantically tried to save them, using hand-pump respirators.

These were the scenes from videos showing, it was claimed by the Syrian opposition, the devastating aftermath of a massacre of more than 1,300 people by Bashar al-Assad's forces using chemical weapons in Ghouta, east of Damascus.

The regime has denied the allegations, accusing "terrorists and their supporters" in the international media of disseminating false propaganda.Such recriminations have become standard in the vicious civil war. But, for the first time since reports of the use of weapons of mass destruction began to circulate, there is now a United Nations inspection team not only inside the country, but in the vicinity of the affected area. It arrived in the Syrian capital on Sunday after months of negotiations with the regime to investigate three occasions where chemical agents have, allegedly, been used in the past.

One of these was at the village of Khan al-Assal near Aleppo where the two sides in the conflict accused each other of carrying out the attack resulting in 26 deaths; the location of the other two sites has not been confirmed.

A number of Western states asked the UN team to investigate the latest deaths, which prompted an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council in New York last night.

The British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said that if the claims were verified they would "mark a shocking escalation in the use of chemical weapons". "I hope this will wake up some who have supported the Assad regime to realise its murderous and barbaric nature," he added later. Russia had backed up the Assad regime's denials, by saying the attack looked like a rebel "provocation" to discredit him.

The French President François Hollande declared it was imperative that the team be allowed "to shed full light" on what had taken place and the German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle demanded that the inspectors be given immediate access.

The head of the 20-strong team of inspectors, Ake Sellstrom, a scientist from Sweden, said in Damascus: "It sounds like something that should be looked into. It will depend on whether any UN member state goes to the Secretary General and says we should look at this event. We are in place to do so."

What happened was recent enough for the inspectors to be able to form a

view on what had happened, according to specialists on chemical warfare. Such a development may have a major impact on the course of the conflict.

Evidence that the regime has indeed used WMDs, with such a massive number of fatalities, would greatly strengthen the hands of those pressing for large-scale supplies of advanced weapons to the rebels.

Evidence that the footage was fabricated would further dent the already fragile credibility of the disjointed opposition and weaken the position of their Western sponsors.

Ghazwan Bwidany, a doctor treating the casualties, held that the symptoms indicated the use of sarin gas. “It may be sarin, most probably it is sarin” he said. “We don’t have the capacity to treat all this number of people. We’re putting them in mosques, in schools. We are lacking medical supplies now, especially atropine, which is the antidote for chemical weapons.”

Bayan Baker, a nurse at the Douma Emergency Collection facility, initially put the death toll at 213. “Many of those affected are women and children. They arrived with their pupils dilated, cold limbs and foam in their mouths. The doctors say these are typical symptoms of nerve gas victims.”

Local co-ordination committees of activists in the area said the numbers killed had risen to 1,360, while George Sabra, the deputy chief of the Syrian National Coalition, the main umbrella group of the opposition, announced a figure of 1,300. He said: “This is the coup de grâce which kills all hopes for a political solution in Syria. This is not the first time they have used chemical weapons, but it constitutes a significant turning point; this time it was for annihilation rather than terror.”

However, there are questions as to why the regime would want to have recourse to WMDs at a time when it was making gains using conventional arms and with the knowledge that UN inspectors were present in the country. “If you look at the way they have sought legitimacy through having the UN team there, in a carefully orchestrated fashion, with the help of the Russians and the Iranians, the use of chemical weapons does not make sense,” said a European diplomat.

Robert Emerson, a security analyst, added: “Assad has not been doing too badly in the publicity stakes with the excesses of Islamists among the rebels like the cannibal commander, et cetera. Deploying WMDs at this stage would be a hell of an own goal.”

Jean Pascal Zanders, a senior research fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies in Paris, was also puzzled as to why the regime would carry out such an attack with UN experts there. But he continued: “It is clear that something terrible has happened. The scenes could not have been stage-managed. None of

the victims appeared to have external wounds from blast, shrapnel or bullets. The footage seems to offer more convincing evidence of poisoning through asphyxiation - witness the pinkish-bluish hue on the faces of some of the fatalities. Further elements that seem to confirm exposure to toxicants are the unfocused and rolling eyes, severe breathing difficulties and possible signs of urination or defecation on trousers.”

23rd August 2013

SYRIA: THE WORLD DEMANDS THE TRUTH

By Kim Sengupta

UN INSPECTIONS which could establish the truth behind accusations that 1,300 people were massacred using chemical weapons in Syria have been delayed by realpolitik and bureaucracy, it has been claimed.

The team of 20 specialists is stuck at the Four Seasons Hotel in the Syrian capital, just 12 miles from the site of one of the attacks, waiting for permission to gain access.

A formal request to the Syrian government to allow UN inspectors to investigate the latest alleged gas attack in the suburbs of Damascus was sent last night, according to a statement from the office of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The UN was meeting again last night, but a separate statement it was due to release on the deaths has been diluted at the insistence of China and Russia, allies of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The US, Britain, France and Germany have demanded that the inspectors should be immediately allowed to go to the area affected, Ghouta, east of Damascus. The leader of the UN's team of investigators, Ake Sellström, said: "It looks like something that should be looked into… We are in a place to do so."

But the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Jan Eliasson, insisted in New York that the "security situation does not permit" visits to the area for the time being. He also stressed that doing so would need the explicit consent of the regime and this might take time as it would require a change to the mandate under which the inspectors were allowed into Syria.

The team arrived on Sunday after months of negotiations to investigate three occasions when chemical agents are alleged to have been used. They were at the village of Khan al-Assal, north of Aleppo; Ataybeh near Damascus; and the Homs region. Under their terms of operation, the inspectors will try to ascertain whether chemical weapons had been used, but will not apportion blame.

When the team arrived, Syria's deputy foreign minister, Faisal Mekdad, declared: "I assure you, on behalf of the Syrian Arab Republic, that we will fully co-operate with this team and provide it will all information we have and all facilities to reach a rational conclusion. Our basic target is for this team to find facts on ground."

The investigators were expected to be in the field within 24 hours of arrival in Syria. But there were initial delays due to security concerns before the reports of the mass deaths surfaced on Wednesday. Yesterday, residents of Khan al-Assal said they would not permit inspectors to enter their area until Ghouta was investigated.

Officials in Damascus have continued to strongly deny that the regime was responsible for the use of a weapon of mass destruction, claiming that video footage of dead and dying men, women and children was “terrorist propaganda”. A Foreign Ministry spokesman said discussions had been held for the UN team to be taken to Ghouta, but he could not say when this would take place as there were “logistical and security issues”.

Specialists in chemical agents pointed out that delays in acquiring samples would mean that meaningful evidence would dissipate. Philippe Vincent, who has carried out research into the use of WMDs in conflicts, said: “Extremely valuable time is being lost here. Traces of Sarin, if that was allegedly used, do not last for long. If there is an active cover-up then munitions used to carry out the assault can be removed. The video footage was quite graphic and indicated symptoms of possible poisoning, but it was just footage at the end of the day; you need to have research on the ground.”

The Russian government stated that it wanted the UN and the regime to come to an agreement as soon as possible for the inspections to take place. However the Kremlin claimed yesterday that opponents of President Assad may have carried out the killing to discredit him. A Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Lukashevich, said the Russian government had “information” that rockets carrying toxic chemicals could have been fired from a rebel-held suburb.

“This all smacks of an attempt, at any cost, to establish grounds for forwarding the demands of the enemies of the regime to the Security Council,” he said, pointing to the timing of “this crime near Damascus” and the arrival of the UN team as evidence of “premeditated provocation”.

The French government declared that military force may be the response by the international community if it is proved that the Assad regime had carried out a chemical attack. But Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius also ruled out putting any troops on the ground in Syria and failed to explain what form this force would take.

France, along with Britain, forced the lifting of the EU arms sanctions on Syria to enable weapons to be sent to the rebels. However, in the ensuing four months neither country has supplied weapons, sending humanitarian and “civic assistance” aid instead.

24th August 2013

WEST TURNS ITS SIGHTS ON ASSAD IN CONDEMNATION OF CHEMICAL MASSACRE

By Kim Sengupta

BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S regime was accused by Western leaders yesterday of being responsible for the massacre of 1,300 people with chemical weapons.

Russia, the Syrian President's strongest ally, asked him to co-operate with UN inspectors, but also claimed that the attack may have been carried out by the rebels.

It has emerged, in the meantime, that senior members of the US administration have met in the White House to discuss a possible response to the massacre in Ghouta, an eastern suburb of Damascus, with options including Tomahawk launches and a more sustained air campaign.

However, no immediate action is likely with divisions within the military and diplomatic leadership.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, remains staunchly opposed to armed intervention while others, including Susan Rice, the UN representative, had been pressing for action which would send an unequivocal message to the Damascus regime.

With more graphic and shocking footage appearing of the killings, the growing consensus was that chemical weapons had been used with the US and western European states holding President Assad responsible.

Barack Obama, who had in the past declared that the use of weapons of mass destruction would cross a "red line", said, "What we've seen indicates that this is clearly an event of grave concern. This is something that is going to require America's attention."

William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, held: "The only possible explanation of what we have been able to see is that it was a chemical attack.

"So we believe this is a chemical attack by the Assad regime on a large scale… It was the only plausible explanation for casualties so intense in such a small area."

The odds that rebels had staged the attack to "frame" the regime, said the Foreign Secretary, were "vanishingly small".

Mr Hague spoke on the phone yesterday to the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, as well as Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General, stressing that the inspectors must get access to the affected area from the regime as soon as possible.

Prolonged delay would make the collection of viable evidence impossible and, if that happens, the UK intends to take the issue back to the Security Council.

A UN spokesman said that Mr Ban was "deeply troubled" by reports of the

alleged attack.

“He expects to receive a positive response without delay.”

The high representative for disarmament, Angela Kane, was on her way to Damascus to press the regime for inspectors to be given access to the affected areas.

The opposition said it was trying to move survivors out of the area to safer places where they could receive treatment.

The Russian foreign ministry claimed in a statement, meanwhile, “a homemade rocket loaded with an unidentified chemical agent” was used in the attack which was “probably a provocation” by the opposition to implicate President Assad.

But the Kremlin failed to provide any further details to back up the charge.

The Syrian Deputy Prime Minister, Qadri Jamil, saw a foreign hand at work, “since no Syrian can do this to each other”.

In their version of events, opposition activists said that the first rockets bearing nerve agents were fired from a bridge on the highway from Damascus to Homs and others were launched from the Sironex factory in the Qabun district of the capital.

The areas are under regime control.

Mr Lavrov, in a telephone call to Mr Kerry, acknowledged that it was in the interest of both the countries for an investigation to take place.

“It is now up to the opposition to ensure safe access for the mission to the site of the alleged incident,” he is reported to have stressed.

25th August 2013

DID SYRIA GAS ITS OWN PEOPLE? THE EVIDENCE IS MOUNTING

By Patrick Cockburn

THE PRIORITY for Syrian foreign policy for the past two-and-a-half years has been to avoid foreign military intervention on behalf of the rebels. By the same token, the opposition has tried by every means to secure armed intervention by the US and its allies sufficient to win the war.

The action by the Syrian government most likely to push an unwilling White House into military involvement has been the open use of chemical weapons against civilians. Damascus has furiously denied in the past that it had done so and proof has been lacking. Rebel accusations might have been fabricated and claims by Western governments were tainted by propaganda.

Experts specialising in chemical weapons had hitherto expressed scepticism, even derision, at supposed proofs of chemical weapons use in the media. CBRNe World, a journal specialising in chemical and biological weapons, asked of one alleged sarin gas attack: “Could it be real - possibly. Could it be misdiagnosed and something other than sarin - possibly. Could it be fake - possibly.” Considering the question two months ago of whether chemical weapons had been used in Syria, Professor Julian Perry Robinson of Sussex University, a renowned expert, concluded: “Onlookers can as yet believe the reporting only if they are willing to trust unsubstantiated assertion or incomplete evidence.”

So it is difficult to think of any action by the Damascus government more self-destructive than the Syrian army launching a massive chemical-weapons attack on rebel-held districts in its own capital. Yet the evidence is piling up that this is exactly what happened last Wednesday and that the Syrian army fired rockets or shells containing poison gas which killed hundreds of people in the east of the city. The opposition may be capable of manufacturing evidence of government atrocities, but it is highly unlikely it could do so on such a large scale as this.

President Obama’s security advisers were meeting yesterday in the White House with the strong possibility that there will be a US military response, such as missile strikes from outside Syrian airspace on Syrian military units or bases from which the chemical weapons may have been launched. No doubt Obama would like to keep out of a full-scale intervention, as he made clear last week, saying of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that people who “call for immediate action, jumping into stuff that does not turn out well, gets us mired in very difficult situations, can result in us being drawn into very expensive, difficult, costly interventions that actually breed more resentment in the region”. Nevertheless, the blatancy of the poison-gas attacks will make it difficult and damaging for him not to react militarily.

If the Syrian leadership knew that chemical weapons were going to be used, what could be their motive? They may be so convinced of American weakness and so confident of the backing of Russia and Iran that they feel they can ignore international condemnation. They may have seen Egypt's security forces shoot down hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters on 14 August and thought, "If they can get away with it, so can we." Even so, the benefits of such an operation were always going to be outweighed by political costs abroad.

Other factors, too, may have been at work. The Middle East has been bubbling, this past year, with exaggerated talk of US political and military decline, pumped up by visits from US politicians such as Senator John McCain denouncing White House "cowardice". No doubt the US has a weaker position in the Middle East because of the Iraq and Afghan wars, when its army failed to defeat limited guerrilla forces. But US and Nato intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was cited last week as an example of interventions that succeeded.

Still, the Balkans are different from the wider Middle East where American interventions have usually brought disaster. There was bloody failure in Lebanon in 1982-83 and in Somalia in 1993; and even the one exception, the First Gulf War in 1991, did not turn out so well for the US in the long term. Moreover, the failure of the Iraq war of 2003 and the ongoing Afghan conflict have soured American voters' enthusiasm for other Middle East ventures.

Syria's conflict differs from Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya in another respect: Moscow is back as a world power and cannot be ignored or intimidated. One of the reasons Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 was the calculation that the fall of the Soviet Union would leave the US as sole superpower and cramp independent action by Iraq or other regional powers. Russia is back for the first time in more than 20 years as a powerful player, embittered by what it understandably sees as a double-cross over Nato intervention in Libya and determined not to let that happen again.

Russia's re-emergence is not the only factor restraining America. For all the wringing of hands in the West about the human tragedy, the situation is not entirely against its interests. Syria, so long the heart of opposition to the West and Israel in the Arab world, is, for now, fragmented and weak. Any decisive outcome ending the war carries with it clear risks for Western interests. If President Bashar al-Assad wins then this is a defeat for them and a success for Iran and Hezbollah. If he is defeated then al-Qa'ida-linked organisations, such the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - increasingly the most effective military component of the opposition - will be among those who replace him. The US, Britain and France may want the war to end but only on their own terms - probably involving the decapitation of the government, but

stopping well short of revolutionary change.

What will be the impact of the chemical attack within Syria? It will frighten people further in rebel areas and will show the ruthlessness of the government, something scarcely in doubt. But the action is also a sign of weakness, suggesting the Syrian army cannot take districts such as Jobar close to the centre of Damascus with conventional arms. Plenty of Syrian officials can see the criminal stupidity of using chemical weapons, so experts are asking if some state faction might want to sabotage possible peace talks by deploying them. A problem with this scenario is nobody else has noticed talks getting anywhere.

The Assad regime denies having anything to do with the gas attack, but it has not given a credible account of what did happen. Initially, there was disbelief that it would do something so patently against its own interests, but all the evidence so far is that it has done just that.

26th August 2013

IS THE WEST PREPARED TO CROSS THE RUBICON? PROBABLY

By Patrick Cockburn

WILL THE night sky of Damascus soon be illuminated by the explosion of American cruise missiles striking government buildings and military bases as used to happen periodically in Baghdad between 1991 and 2003? Pillars of fire would suddenly spring up on each side of the Tigris river and bursts of tracer rounds from anti-aircraft guns would rise slowly and ineffectively into the sky.

The firing of Tomahawk cruise missiles from four American destroyers in the Mediterranean at targets in Syria are among the actions being telegraphed ahead by the US, Britain and France as the most likely form of retribution for the Syrian army's alleged chemical attack on civilians in Damascus.

The units and bases from which the US believes rockets carrying poison gas were fired will be probable targets. So too would be Syrian airfields and probably the bases of elite units frequently deployed against the rebels.

If these attacks do take place, with Britain and France in a supporting role, then President Barack Obama will make them heavy enough to be more than a slap on the wrist but not so devastating that they herald the US becoming a participant in the war. It will not be an easy balancing act: ineffective air strikes that the Syrian government can shrug off would be a demonstration of weakness rather than strength. But strikes by missiles and possibly military aircraft will mean the US is crossing a Rubicon, committing itself more than ever before against President Bashar al-Assad and in favour of the armed opposition. This may mean that if there are missile strikes they will be limited in their timescale but heavier and more destructive than expected.

It is not probable, however, that an air campaign could closely emulate lengthy action in Kosovo in 1999 or in Libya in 2011, both of which have been cited as examples of successful military interventions by Nato. The political situation today is different. The Syrian government is a harder nut to crack than Muammar Gaddafi and his ramshackle state. It has strong regional allies in Iran and Hezbollah who see the struggle for Syria as a battle for their very survival. Syria is also a test case for Russia, which has so far firmly supported Mr Assad and is bidding to regain something of the international influence it had before the fall of the Soviet Union 20 years ago.

Arming the rebels on the ground is the other recipe for punishing the Syrian government. That is already happening with 400 tons of arms, mostly shoulder-fired anti-tank weapons and ammunition, paid for by Saudi Arabia and arriving in northern Syria from Turkey.

Anti-tank weapons from Saudi Arabia are said to have been crucial in the opposition's capture of Mannagh helicopter base north of Aleppo on 6 August.

The most effective force in the battle was the al-Qa'ida-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), which began the final assault with a suicide bombing carried out by a Saudi. This success emphasises a further problem faced by increased Western or Saudi arms supplies: to whomever they are initially given, they are likely to end up in the hands of Isil or the jihadist al-Nusra Front.

The Syrian army has a tight grip on most of Damascus and the roads leading north to Homs and west to Tartous on the coast. There are checkpoints every few miles on the main roads which minutely examine documents.

Many of the rebel-held areas such as villages between Homs and Hama are largely empty because they have been heavily bombarded by artillery and from the air. The same is true in many of rebel-held districts in Damascus which have been sealed off, are short of food and have many buildings in ruins. Similarly places like Baba Amr and Qusayr, once rebel strongholds, are now ghost towns while Sunni villages at Houla are cut off.

What stops the Syrian army capturing many rebel areas is not armed opposition but shortage of troops, unwillingness to suffer casualties among trained soldiers and an inability to hold captured areas in the long term. If Syrian generals did use chemical weapons last Wednesday this lack of manpower might explain why they did so.

27th August 2013

A SHORT SHARP SERIES OF AIR STRIKES IS THE WEST'S LIKELY INVOLVEMENT IN THIS VICIOUS CIVIL WAR

By Kim Sengupta

WHAT LAY behind the massacre of 1,300 people, the worst atrocity so far in Syria's vicious civil war, has yet to be fully uncovered. But Western powers have declared they are convinced that Basher al-Assad's forces were responsible and military intervention now seems increasingly likely.

General Martin Dempsey, the head of the US military, met his counterparts in allied states, including Britain's General Sir Nick Houghton, at the Jordanian capital, Amman, yesterday in what was seen as putting the final touches for a campaign if the go-ahead is given by Barack Obama.

The reality on the ground, and in this case especially the air, is that no mission will be undertaken without Washington's say-so. Britain and France may have been the most voluble advocates of confronting the Damascus regime, but it will be American Tomahawk missiles, B-2 bombers and F-16s that will take the lead role in inflicting punishment on the regime for supposedly crossing the US President's "red line" on WMDs.

The scale and scope of the operation would depend on which of the various contingency plans put forward would be chosen. What gives the unfolding scenario an additional twist is that General Dempsey, and Sir Nick's immediate predecessor, General Sir David Richards, had repeatedly urged caution against involvement in the two and half year old conflict. The French high command, relieved that their intervention in Mali has been relatively pretty successful, are also wary of entanglement in Syria.

In meetings with politicians, the commanders have pointed out that the strife is now deeply sectarian and the presence and power of al-Qa'ida affiliates in the ranks of the opposition adds hugely to the complications. General Dempsey, in his latest statement on the issue, said last week that air strikes "would not be militarily decisive, but it would commit us decisively to the conflict".

But, with political and military leaders at least in agreement that there must not be Western boots on Syrian ground (with the possible exception of special forces) an air war is the likely scenario. And despite General Dempsey's warning about being "committed decisively", defence sources point towards an extremely sharp, but relatively short series of assaults.

The US has currently got four warships in the eastern Mediterranean. The USS Mahan, USS Barry, USS Gravely and USS Ramage between them carry around 430 Tomahawk Block III missiles, costing around £300,000 each, with a range of up to 1,500 miles.

The USAF would also be able to carry out strikes using B-2 stealth bombers based in Missouri, which would be able to reach targets in the Middle East with

just one refuel with each aircraft carrying 40,000lbs of ordnance. In addition, the Americans have the option of using a variety of fighter-bombers including F-16s from their bases in the region.

Despite the recent deep cuts in the defence budget, the UK is in a position to take part in the mission with Trafalgar-class submarines armed with Tomahawks and Tornados from RAF Marnham in Norfolk, with refuelling, carrying Storm Shadow missiles with a range of 150 miles. The French can provide what the UK currently cannot, an aircraft-carrier. Following a major refit, the Charles de Gaulle is now operational at Toulon. The French also have Rafale and Mirage jets stationed in the UAE.

The most obvious targets would be the Syrian regime's chemical complexes. There are, it is believed, chemical storage facilities in Damascus, nearby Dumayr, Palmyra and Homs, Masyat, north of Aleppo and Latakia on the coast.

Production plants are said to be near Damascus, Latakia, Hama and Aleppo.

An air campaign would need to take out the regimes own air capabilities. There are large bases for airplanes in Damascus, Dumayr and Homs and missile launching sites at Al Safrah and Al Kibar.

Other potential targets could include the155th Brigade of the 4th Armoured Division of the Syrian Army blamed for last week's Ghouta attack, commanded by President Assad's brother Maher as well as units of the Shabia, Alawite militia, which have been accused of extensive human rights abuse.

The great danger is "mission creep"; but with the military commanders so wary about getting sucked into the Syrian quagmire that, according to defence sources, it is unlikely to happen on this occasion.

27th August 2013

LEARN FROM MISTAKES OF IRAQ - LET INSPECTORS DO THEIR JOB

By Kim Sengupta

THE FAREWELL dinner in Baghdad was a sombre affair tinged with apprehension about what lay ahead and also a sense of frustration and anger. Around the table were UN inspectors, about to fly out of the country with their mission to find Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction abandoned in the face of impending attack by the US and Britain.

"Bush and Blair don't want us to finish our investigation because they would not like the result" one of the scientists said. "Air strikes never found WMDs, you need patient forensic examinations on the ground," another pointed out before apologising to us for stating the obvious. The 60 inspectors left Iraq a day before "shock and awe" began. Two months later, Hans Blix told the UN Security Council what those from the media who had accompanied the inspectors knew - no chemical, biological or nuclear stockpiles had been found.

Admittedly, what is unfolding on the ground in Syria 10 years later is not quite the same as Iraq. No one seriously disputes that the regime has chemical weapons and footage and testimonies coming from the scene of last week's attack strongly suggest that some kind of nerve agents were used.

However, British and American officials were saying only last Friday that Bashar al-Assad must give the UN access to the affected areas in the next few days. That is precisely what had happened; three days on the inspectors are there, starting their job. The Western mantra now is that the UN team had been delayed far too long; their presence at the scene means little.

"Too little, too late," were the words often used by officials in the Blair and Bush administrations to describe the UN inspections in Iraq. At the time, Washington and London were alarmed that no WMD would be found. When a group of us visited supposed sites named in the now famous "dodgy dossier" produced by the British government as housing chemical and biological agents, we were described by Downing Street officials as "naive dupes".

We had reported that we had seen nothing overtly suspicious, stressing the caveat that not having scientific knowledge, ours was a superficial judgement but, nevertheless, our newspapers were apparently printing regime propaganda according to No 10.

But the situation is different in Syria. The UN inspectors are very likely find that a nerve agent had, indeed, been used in Ghouta. Contrary to some ministerial pronouncements in London, chemical warfare specialists say there is still time to gather incriminating evidence. It would not be impossible to arrive at who was responsible for the attacks.

The West may well find itself involved in the civil war very soon. But the UN

team must be allowed to do its job and produce evidence. Sidelining the inspectors now risks military action in Syria being tainted by association with Bush and Blair’s immoral war on Iraq.

27th August 2013

WE STILL HAVE THE LEVERAGE TO BRING ASSAD AND HIS ENEMIES TOGETHER

By Patrick Cockburn

AMERICAN, BRITISH and French air strikes by planes or missiles look probable in retaliation for the alleged use of poison gas by the Syrian army against people in rebel-held areas of Damascus. Controversy rages about whether or not this is the right thing to do, an argument coloured by memories of official mendacity over Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction in 2003 and Nato's destruction of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011 under the guise of a limited humanitarian operation.

What armed intervention by foreign powers in Syria will not do is bring an end to the present bloody stalemate in the two-and-a-half-year-old civil war. But governments in Washington, London and Paris should realise that in one respect the slaughter by chemical weapons of hundreds of people in Damascus on 21 August is an opportunity as well as a crime.

It is an opportunity because the chemical weapons atrocity and the crisis it has provoked show that the Syrian civil war cannot be left to fester. Previously, there was a shallow belief that, like the 15-year-long Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, the Syrian war was basically containable. This hope has ebbed over the past year as sectarian and ethnic violence in Syria has spread to Lebanon and Iraq. The use of poison gas is the grossest sign, but not the only one, that the level of violence is spiralling out of control inside Syria.

While the world has been focusing on the horrors in Damascus over the past week, anti-government rebels have been carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Syrian Kurds in the north-east of the country, forcing 40,000 of them to flee across the Tigris into northern Iraq in less than a week. So many are trying to escape in what the United Nations says is the biggest single refugee exodus of the war that the pontoon bridge across the Tigris they were using is near collapse and has had to be closed, trapping tens of thousands of terrified Kurds inside Syria.

The sense of urgency among foreign powers generated by the present crisis should be used to launch the much-delayed peace negotiations in Geneva. A peace conference between the warring sides was proposed by the US and Russia in May, but has been repeatedly postponed. It is unrealistic to imagine for now that negotiations between people whose prime aim is to kill each other will lead to any long-term political solution for Syria. The priority should rather be to prevent the continuing escalation in the violence and the further disintegration of Syrian society.

A ceasefire is the greatest need, in which power-sharing would be geographical with each side holding the territory it controls. Such a truce should

be put in place and monitored by UN teams. It might not cover all the country and would no doubt be frequently breached, but it would be better than the present bloody anarchy. There were hundreds of ceasefires during the Lebanese civil war and they were regarded with cynicism by the Lebanese, but thousands more people would have died without them.

Why has a peace conference not happened before? Within Syria the main reason is that government and opposition each believe they can still win and do not contemplate sharing power with anybody.

President Bashar al-Assad's forces have made limited advances since they captured in June the strategic rebel stronghold of Qusayr outside the city of Homs, 100 miles north of Damascus. Most important, Assad's foreign allies - Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon - have stood firm and shown that they are not going to allow him to be defeated.

The rebels do not want to negotiate with government in part because they are so fragmented that they would find it difficult to agree a negotiating team which represented the different strands of opposition. There are 1,200 different rebel military units in Syria by one estimate, varying in size from family bands of a few dozen fighters to small armies of well-organised and heavily armed militiamen deploying tanks and artillery.

The most powerful of the latter are the al-Qa'ida-linked al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Speaking of the Free Syrian Army, to which the US and its allies may send arms, a diplomat in Damascus expressed, saying: "How can they support the FSA, which doesn't really exist inside Syria as an institution with any command and control?"

Ever since a peace conference was first mooted there has been a strong element of hypocrisy in the Western approach. At first, Britain, among others, said that President Assad would not be part of any political transition in Syria and there were propagandistic discussions in the foreign media about where he and his family might seek refuge.

This was at a time he controlled all 14 Syrian provincial capitals (he has since lost one, Raqqa, to jihadi groups). The US is generally negative about whether Iran could attend a peace conference, as Russia insists, though negotiations which exclude any major player in the Syria crisis are not going to achieve anything.

Could the US and Russia force their respective allies to attend a peace conference, negotiate seriously and at least agree to a ceasefire? The chances here are better than they look because both the Syrian government and the opposition wholly depend on outside military and financial support. Look how quickly Assad agreed to the UN chemical weapons inspection team being

allowed to enter rebel areas in Damascus when Russia and Iran insisted that he should do so. Given the current chaos, the sniping at UN vehicles was predictable.

There is greater pessimism about the opposition having the coherence to negotiate and agree to anything. They continue to hope that the US and its allies will be finally forced to intervene militarily and they will be able to advance under an American air umbrella, like the opposition Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2002 or the Libyan militiamen in 2011.

One of the dangers of the air strikes now being considered by the US is that, unless they are accompanied by a fresh drive towards a peace conference, the opposition thinks it is half way to getting the Western powers to win the war for it. Nevertheless, the opposition can be pressured by their foreign backers, supposing they wish to do so.

Peace conferences have the best chance of succeeding when one side knows it has won and wants to formalise its victory while the defeated want the best terms possible. Alternatively, peace negotiations may be productive when both sides are exhausted and come to realise they are not going to win a complete victory. The danger of supplying more weapons to the opposition is that it is not going to enable them to win but will simply fuel the level of the fighting.

Syria has a failed government and a failed opposition. As the country disintegrates it is being overrun by warlords with no interest in peace. “They stole all our things, our home, our possessions so even the children start to hate life,” lamented one Syrian Kurdish refugee fleeing to Iraq this week. Another talked about those who had driven her from her village: “We don’t know them. They just come, take power and give themselves a name.”

28th August 2013

‘ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL’: NOW THE US IS FIGHTING ALONGSIDE AL-QA’IDA

By Robert Fisk

IF BARACK Obama decides to attack the Syrian regime, he has ensured - for the very first time in history - that the United States will be on the same side as al-Qa'ida. Quite an alliance! Was it not the Three Musketeers who shouted "All for one and one for all" each time they sought combat? This really should be the new battle cry if - or when - the statesmen of the Western world go to war against Bashar al-Assad.

The men who destroyed so many thousands on 9/11 will then be fighting alongside the very nation whose innocents they so cruelly murdered almost exactly 12 years ago. Quite an achievement for Obama, Cameron, Hollande and the rest of the miniature warlords.

This, of course, will not be trumpeted by the Pentagon or the White House - nor, I suppose, by al-Qa'ida - though they are both trying to destroy Bashar. So are the Nusra front, one of al-Qa'ida's affiliates. But it does raise some interesting possibilities.

Maybe the Americans should ask al-Qa'ida for intelligence help - after all, this is the group with "boots on the ground", something the Americans have no interest in doing. And maybe al-Qa'ida could offer some target information facilities to the country which usually claims that the supporters of al-Qa'ida, rather than the Syrians, are the most wanted men in the world.

There will be some ironies, of course. While the Americans drone al-Qa'ida to death in Yemen and Pakistan - along, of course, with the usual flock of civilians - they will be giving them, with the help of Messrs Cameron, Hollande and the other Little General-politicians, material assistance in Syria by hitting al-Qa'ida's enemies. Indeed, you can bet your bottom dollar that the one target the Americans will not strike in Syria will be al-Qa'ida or the Nusra front.

And our own Prime Minister will applaud whatever the Americans do, thus allying himself with al-Qa'ida, whose London bombings may have slipped his mind. Perhaps - since there is no institutional memory left among modern governments - Cameron has forgotten how similar are the sentiments being uttered by Obama and himself to those uttered by Bush and Blair a decade ago, the same bland assurances, uttered with such self-confidence but without quite enough evidence to make it stick.

In Iraq, we went to war on the basis of lies originally uttered by fakers and conmen. Now it's war by YouTube. This doesn't mean that the terrible images of the gassed and dying Syrian civilians are false. It does mean that any evidence to the contrary is going to have to be suppressed. For example, no one is going to be interested in persistent reports in Beirut that three Hezbollah members -

fighting alongside government troops in Damascus - were apparently struck down by the same gas on the same day, supposedly in tunnels. They are now said to be undergoing treatment in a Beirut hospital. So if Syrian government forces used gas, how come Hezbollah men might have been stricken too? Blowback?

And while we're talking about institutional memory, hands up which of our jolly statesmen know what happened last time the Americans took on the Syrian government army? I bet they can't remember. Well it happened in Lebanon when the US Air Force decided to bomb Syrian missiles in the Bekaa Valley on 4 December 1983. I recall this very well because I was here in Lebanon. An American A-6 fighter bomber was hit by a Syrian Strela missile - Russian made, naturally - and crash-landed in the Bekaa; its pilot, Mark Lange, was killed, its co-pilot, Robert Goodman, taken prisoner and freighted off to jail in Damascus. Jesse Jackson had to travel to Syria to get him back after almost a month amid many clichés about "ending the cycle of violence". Another American plane - this time an A-7 - was also hit by Syrian fire but the pilot managed to eject over the Mediterranean where he was plucked from the water by a Lebanese fishing boat. His plane was also destroyed.

Sure, we are told that it will be a short strike on Syria, in and out, a couple of days. That's what Obama likes to think. But think Iran. Think Hezbollah. I rather suspect - if Obama does go ahead - that this one will run and run.

28th August 2013

WEST SHOULD BEWARE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

By Kim Sengupta

THOSE STILL hoping that conflict may be avoided may choose to believe that US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel's declaration that plans were in place for Barack Obama to choose the best option for attack was the final ratcheting up of pressure on Bashar al-Assad. But all the indications are that it is now only a matter of days before the West enters Syria's civil war.

Voices of caution have included a number of senior defence figures in the US and Britain who have stressed that Syria will not be like Libya. The Damascus regime's anti-aircraft defences are a lot stronger and the public should be forewarned that there will be losses.

Nevertheless, the world's most advanced war machines should be able to hit chemical sites with the aim of preventing Assad using weapons of mass destruction on his people in the future. But those targets would not be the only ones facing Tomahawk barrages. The regime's command and control system, its missile and airbases, communications systems, will have to be "suppressed" to secure the safety of Western air crews, if warplanes are deployed.

This has certainly been the case on previous such missions.

The first major action following Nato's imposition of the "no-fly zone" on Libya was not shooting down Muammar Gaddafi's planes and helicopters, but the bombing of his armoured columns outside Benghazi. Those of us there were convinced that it saved the city from falling and the possible slaughter which may have followed; but there was also the realisation that this was the West's declaration of war on the Tripoli regime.

In Libya, the underlying agenda was regime change and the US, Britain and France have made repeated demands that President Assad steps down. However, senior members of all three administrations also privately acknowledge that a total victory for the rebels - with al-Qa'ida-linked groups among them the most powerful - is not a comforting scenario.

But the fact remains that the destruction of some of the Syrian regime's most important military assets would leave it considerably weaker. Destroying its aircraft and missiles would remove one of the key advantages it holds over the rebels. Similarly, among the targets supposedly being looked at is the 155th Brigade of the 4th Armoured Division of the Syrian Army, commanded by President Assad's brother Maher. The brigade has been blamed for last week's attack on Ghouta, but it is also one of the best-trained and equipped and its loss would have a significant impact on the course of the conflict.

The ones to benefit directly would be the extremist Islamists because they are the best equipped to seize ground. This would hardly correspond with President

Obama’s stated vision of a future Syria which is “peaceful, non-sectarian, democratic, legitimate and tolerant”.

Hanging over the mission is the warning of General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, that air strikes “would not be militarily decisive, but it would commit us decisively to the conflict”.

What, for example, would the US-led coalition of the willing do if there were signs that the regime’s troops were transporting stocks of WMDs by road? Under the aim of eliminating stockpiles, these convoys would have to be hit. What would happen if chemical and biological agents were placed in civilian areas where Tomahawk strikes would inevitably lead to unacceptable civilian collateral damage? The only means of securing the material would be to send in troops - which all the Western leaders are adamant that they are unwilling to do.

The ideal scenario, say British and American officials, would be that the air strikes would bring the regime to the negotiating table. “One of the reasons why Geneva 2 [proposed talks] have not taken place is because Assad has been making territorial gains. This will even things up,” said a senior diplomat. He went on to add: “But we are all, of course, aware of the law of unintended consequences.”

29th August 2013

HOW ACTION RISKS UNSETTLING FRAGILE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Patrick Cockburn

WHATEVER ELSE missile strikes on Syria do they will raise the political temperature in the whole region. What is unclear is whether or not the increased temperature will be temporary or permanent. Whatever the justification for the action by the US and its allies, it will be seen across the world as another American-led military intervention in the wider Middle East in the tradition of Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Lebanon over the last 35 years.

British and French military actions are being justified by David Cameron and François Hollande on purely moral grounds as an act of retribution for the use of poison gas against civilians in Damascus and to prevent it happening again. This may go down well with domestic audiences but it will find few believers in the Middle East. The former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was reported as saying in an interview: “I am struck by how eager Great Britain and France appear to be in favour of military action. And I am also mindful of the fact that both of these two powers are former imperialist, colonialist powers in the region.” The air strikes will only confirm suspicions of British and French motives.

Will air strikes help spread the Syrian conflict to other countries in the region? The important point here is to take on board how far it has already spread and the degree to which it already destabilising Syria’s neighbours. The al-Qa’ida-linked Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, which fights in both Iraq and Syria, has already become stronger thanks to Syria, and is responsible for bombings in Iraq more intense than anything seen since 2008. The same organisation is responsible for ethnically cleansing Syrian Kurds in north-east Syria, 40,000 of whom have already fled to the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq. If the Assad government becomes weaker then the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front and other jihadists, the most effective rebel fighting forces, will be strengthened.

Turkey is likely to support US actions, its importance depending on whether or not the US air base at Incirlik in south-east Turkey is used. Turkey has a 560-mile long frontier with Syria but it is vulnerable to Syria and Iran acting through Turkey’s Kurdish minority. Turkish government support for the rebels in Syria is also strongly opposed by the Turkish opposition who have been reinvigorated by mass street protests this summer.

Lebanon is already shuddering under the impact of the Syrian crisis with big bombs against a Shia district in south Beirut and two Sunni mosques in Tripoli. As many as a million Syrians have fled to Syria. Lebanon is not breaking apart yet but the air strikes will raise tensions further. But, despite occasional threats, it

is scarcely in the interests of Iran or Hezbollah to stoke the Syrian conflict, which endangers both of them, by action against Israel or Western interests.

Jordan is as usual trying to balance contending forces, with a spokesman saying: “Jordan will not be a launching pad for any action against Syria.” But there are well-sourced reports that Jordan is indeed a base for CIA training of Syrian rebels with support from Saudi Arabia.

Israel is in an ambivalent position: on the one hand it would be glad to get rid of President Assad and see the destruction of Syria which has been at heart of state opposition to Israel for 40 years. On the other hand, the forces most likely to replace Assad could be more anarchic and more dangerous. What also if the civil war ended with a weakened Assad still in power but even more dependent on Iran and Hezbollah?

President Obama faces a problem in his effort to decide on military action vigorous enough to show US military strength but not so strong that it radically changes the balance of power on the ground in Syria. He wants a broad-ranging coalition but some members of this such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey want to go much further than him in a campaign to overthrow the government in Damascus.

And whatever happens the balance of forces will be disturbed, affecting not only the struggle within Syria but regional confrontation between Sunni and Shia and between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

30th August 2013

SYRIA IS JUST A SCAPEGOAT. THIS WOULD BE A WAR ABOUT IRAN

By Robert Fisk

BEFORE THE stupidest Western war in the history of the modern world begins - I am, of course, referring to the attack on Syria that we all may yet have to swallow - it might be as well to say that the cruise missiles which we confidently expect to sweep on to one of mankind's oldest cities have absolutely nothing to do with Syria. They are intended to harm Iran. They are intended to strike at the Islamic republic now that it has a new and vibrant president - as opposed to the crackpot Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - and when it just might be a little more stable.

Iran is Israel's enemy. Iran is therefore, naturally, America's enemy. So fire the missiles at Iran's only Arab ally.

There is nothing pleasant about the regime in Damascus. Nor do these comments let the regime off the hook when it comes to mass gassing. But I am old enough to remember that when Iraq - then America's ally - used gas against the Kurds of Hallabjah in 1988, we did not assault Baghdad. Indeed, that attack would have to wait until 2003, when Saddam no longer had any gas or any of the other weapons we had nightmares over.

And I also happen to remember that the CIA put it about in 1988 that Iran was responsible for the Hallabjah gassings, a palpable lie that focused on America's enemy whom Saddam was then fighting on our behalf. And thousands - not hundreds - died in Hallabjah. But there you go. Different days, different standards.

And I suppose it's worth noting that when Israel killed up to 17,000 men, women and children in Lebanon in 1982, in an invasion supposedly provoked by the attempted PLO murder of the Israeli ambassador in London - it was Saddam's mate Abu Nidal who arranged the killing, not the PLO, but that doesn't matter now - America merely called for both sides to exercise "restraint". And when, a few months before that invasion, Hafez al-Assad - father of Bashar - sent his brother up to Hama to wipe out thousands of Muslim Brotherhood rebels, nobody muttered a word of condemnation. "Hama Rules" is how my old mate Tom Friedman cynically styled this bloodbath.

Anyway, there's a different Brotherhood around these days - and Obama couldn't even bring himself to say "boo" when their elected president got deposed.

But hold on. Didn't Iraq - when it was "our" ally against Iran - also use gas on the Iranian army? It did. I saw the Ypres-like wounded of this foul attack by Saddam - US officers, I should add, toured the battlefield later and reported back to Washington - and we didn't care a tinker's curse about it. Thousands of

Iranian soldiers in the 1980-88 war were poisoned to death by this vile weapon.

I travelled back to Tehran overnight on a train of military wounded and actually smelled the stuff, opening the windows in the corridors to release the stench of the gas. These young men had wounds upon wounds - quite literally. They had horrible sores wherein floated even more painful sores that were close to indescribable. Yet when the soldiers were sent to Western hospitals for treatment, we journos called these wounded - after evidence from the UN infinitely more convincing than what we're likely to get from outside Damascus - "alleged" gas victims.

So what in heaven's name are we doing? After countless thousands have died in Syria's awesome tragedy, suddenly - now, after months and years of prevarication - we are getting upset about a few hundred deaths. Terrible. Unconscionable. Yes, that is true. But we should have been traumatised into action by this war in 2011. And 2012. But why now?

I suspect I know the reason. I think that Bashar al-Assad's ruthless army might just be winning against the rebels whom we secretly arm. With the assistance of the Lebanese Hezbollah - Iran's ally in Lebanon - the Damascus regime broke the rebels in Qusayr and may be in the process of breaking them north of Homs. Iran is ever more deeply involved in protecting the Syrian government. Thus a victory for Bashar is a victory for Iran. And Iranian victories cannot be tolerated by the West.

And while we're on the subject of war, what happened to those magnificent Palestinian-Israeli negotiations that John Kerry was boasting about? While we express our anguish at the hideous gassings in Syria, the land of Palestine continues to be gobbled up. Israel's Likudist policy - to negotiate for peace until there is no Palestine left - continues apace, which is why King Abdullah of Jordan's nightmare (a much more potent one than the "weapons of mass destruction" we dreamed up in 2003) grows larger: that "Palestine" will be in Jordan, not in Palestine.

But if we are to believe the nonsense coming out of Washington, London, Paris and the rest of the "civilised" world, it's only a matter of time before our swift and avenging sword smiteth the Damascenes. To observe the leadership of the rest of the Arab world applauding this destruction is perhaps the most painful historical experience for the region to endure. And the most shameful. Save for the fact that we will be attacking Shia Muslims and their allies to the handclapping of Sunni Muslims. And that's what civil war is made of.

30th August 2013

BRITISH JETS HEAD FOR CYPRUS AS US AND RUSSIA SEND SHIPS TO REGION

By Kim Sengupta

THE UK has sent six RAF Typhoons to Cyprus as a “defensive counter” in case Bashar al-Assad decides to fire missiles at the sovereign base on the island, the Government announced yesterday. The warplanes, based at RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire, would be armed with Amraams (advanced medium air-to-air missiles) Asraams (advanced short-range air-to-air missiles) and a Mauser cannon.

An MoD spokesman said yesterday: “We can confirm that as part of ongoing contingency planning, six RAF Typhoon interceptor fast jets are deploying this morning to Akrotiri in Cyprus. This is a prudent and precautionary measure to ensure the protection of UK interests and the defence of our sovereign base areas at a time of heightened tension in the wider region.”

Although the move was a routine precaution, it also brought memories of the Blair government’s 2003 dodgy dossier, which provided details of how Saddam Hussein was able to launch missiles with chemical warheads within 45 minutes to Cyprus.

After various inquiries it was widely accepted the claim was false. There were various accounts of the origins of the information; one was that it came from a Baghdadi taxi driver who had two Iraqi generals in the back of his cab, and had overheard their conversation.

As the Typhoons were being deployed to Cyprus, the Russian news agency, Interfax, reported that Moscow is sending two warships to the eastern Mediterranean. Russian officials denied this meant it was beefing up its naval presence in the region. Interfax quoted a source in the armed forces’ general staff as saying Russia, Syria’s most powerful ally, was deploying a missile cruiser from the Black Sea Fleet and a large anti-submarine ship from the Northern Fleet in the “coming days”.

At the time, the USS Stout, a guided missile destroyer from the US naval fleet, was deployed to the eastern Mediterranean, according to US officials. It is now the fifth destroyer in the area.

While the House of Commons embarked on the slow process of deciding whether the UK joins projected air strikes, the Syrian regime evacuated personnel from key command and control centres, putting troops in built-up areas and docking naval vessels next to merchantmen in ports. There were also claims, unconfirmed, by the opposition that some chemical stock had been removed from sites.

Army units based around Damascus commandeered a number of trucks to transport weaponry to alternative locations, although movement was restricted

by heavy fighting near major highways.

Among the complexes reported to have been partially evacuated are the general staff command building on Umayyad Square and the nearby air force command and security compounds. The former had been operating with reduced staffing since it was targeted in a rebel bomb attack in 2012.

Activists in east Damascus claimed barracks and housing compounds for the Republican Guards and Fourth Division near the suburbs of Somariya and Mouadamiya had been evacuated and troops and their families had gone into the city.

Residents living in the foothills of Qasioun reported that the artillery of the 105th battalion of the Republican Guards, an elite unit, had fallen silent.

30th August 2013

BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT? EVIDENCE ON CHEMICAL ATROCITY FAILS TO CONVINCE

By Kim Sengupta

THE JOINT Intelligence Committee produced the dossier on Saddam Hussein's supposed WMD arsenal, used by Tony Blair's government to justify joining George Bush's invasion of Iraq; a deeply flawed document which became a byword for manipulation and fabrication, even of intelligence to suit a political agenda.

The report the JIC presented yesterday into another tranche of WMDs, this time belonging to Syria's Bashar al-Assad, was written in much more measured tones, acknowledging that much of it was from open source material - videos, testimonies of patients and medics - and not really revealing anything significantly secret.

In the process it failed to make a case for war. There was no evidence directly linking President Assad and his coterie to the attack, the blame attached to the regime was by default, inasmuch it was held the opposition did not have the wherewithal to mount such an operation. There is a key difference between the Iraqi and Syrian regimes when it comes to WMDs. There is little doubt the latter does have chemical stockpiles. And, as some of us witnessed on the ground, its forces are capable of startling, casual brutalities.

But the JIC document does nothing to answer the question asked by many: why would the Damascus regime launch such a sustained assault with chemical weapons with UN inspectors in a hotel a dozen miles away and its forces making advances on the ground using conventional weapons.

David Cameron's claim in the Commons that Assad was testing the boundaries makes little sense. He admitted that motivation for the attack was the issue which the JIC had the hardest task on reaching a conclusion. In a letter to Mr Cameron, the JIC's chairman, Jon Day, stated the committee had "high confidence" in the accuracy of all its assessments. But there was one significant qualification: "Except in relation to the regime's precise motivation for carrying out an attack of this scale at this time - though intelligence may increase our confidence in the future."

Persistent reports of intercepted telephone calls, said to be by the Israelis, portray a dysfunctional Syrian military command, battered by two and half years of savage conflict, in which questions are asked about who actually gave the order to fire. Does this point towards a rogue officer, or, if one is into conspiracies, the agents of an enemy state? The Saudis have been accused of being responsible by regime supporters, without any evidence to back it up. In any event mounting such a "false flag" operation, with multiple firing points, would mean a significant infiltration of Assad's military.

Mr Day stated he had seen “highly sensitive” intelligence to support the view the regime launched the attacks to clear the opposition from strategic parts of Damascus. Using chemical weapons? At such at a time, why? We are none the wiser. In fact the JIC adds there was “no obvious political or military trigger for regime use of CW [chemical weapons] on an apparently larger scale now” - given the presence of the UN inspectors.

Assad forces, said the JIC report, carried out 14 separate chemical attacks. Does this include Khan al-Assal near Aleppo, in March this year, which the regime blamed on the rebels and asked the UN to investigate? The JIC simply states that a number of (unidentified) opposition groups “continue to seek a CW capability”. It should be noted at this point, the Ghouta massacre, which triggered the proposed Western military action, was blamed by the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies on the rebels. They have so far failed to provide evidence of this.

One attempt at proving overarching culpability by the JIC is the statement that the use of chemical weapons had “probably been delegated” by President Assad to “senior regime commanders, such as [*]”. Who is the commander? Is it Maher, the President’s brother, whose 155th Brigade, 4th Armoured Division, was accused of firing chemical-weaponised artillery rounds?

Perhaps answers will emerge in a separate intelligence report due from the US administration - but its strength is already being questioned by some intelligence officials.

1st September 2013

IN SYRIA, IT'S A CASE OF ALL OR NOTHING

By Patrick Cockburn

THE DISCREDITED justifications that preceded the invasion of Iraq still dominate British and American perception of military intervention in Syria. In a similar way in the 1930s, popular revulsion at the lies and exaggerations of First World War propaganda meant that the first accounts of Nazi atrocities were treated with scepticism.

Unsurprisingly, people who feel they were swindled into war 10 years ago by bloodcurdling accounts of Saddam Hussein's non-existent weapons of mass destruction are dubious about their government's claim that President Bashar al-Assad's army used poison gas on a mass scale on 21 August. All the questions that should have been asked in 2003 about Iraq are being asked about Syria: what is the evidence for chemical weapons? How partial are the sources of information? Why should Assad do something so much against his own interests? Would a limited air assault on Syrian military bases deter him from using chemical weapons again, supposing he used them this time, or would it be the first step towards ever-deeper British and American involvement in the war?

All these are reasonable questions and many of them have reasonable answers. Unlike Iraq, it is known that the Syrian army has large supplies of chemical weapons such as sarin and that a mass attack took place. A hundred videos show the dead and dying. Doctors diagnosed the symptoms of gas poisoning. It is highly unlikely that the opposition had enough chemical weapons to simulate a government attack in order to provoke foreign intervention.

Of course, the use of poison gas was always likely to provoke the United States into action, something Damascus has been desperate to avoid for two years. But this does not mean they did not do it. Stupidity and miscalculation have shaped many wars. Recall that General Reginald Dyer believed he could quell Indian nationalists and strengthen British rule in India by ordering his soldiers to open fire at a demonstration in Amritsar in 1919, killing 379 people (other figures suggest 1,000 died). Whose bright idea was it to police a protest march in Derry with British paratroopers in 1972 on what became known as Bloody Sunday?

What is curious about the past week is the extent to which so many, especially the media and the British Government, misjudged the continuing rawness of the wounds inflicted by the Iraq war. I was in Baghdad for much of the conflict but I was always struck on returning to Britain by the lasting sense of outrage over the decision to go to war expressed even by the most conservative and non-political. As with the Munich Agreement in 1938, it has entered a deep layer of British historic memory, perhaps because people feel they were not only misled but lied

to by their own government.

The parliamentary vote and opinion polls show that British governments have exhausted whatever capital of public trust they possessed when it comes to military ventures in the Middle East. Intelligence reports confirming that Assad used chemical weapons simply jog memories of past deceptions such as the "dodgy dossier" of 2003. Credibility lost then has never been regained. The government is like the little girl Matilda in Hilaire Belloc's poem of that name who, having previously called the fire brigade falsely claiming her house was ablaze, burns to death when it does indeed catch fire:

Every time she shouted 'fire!'

They only answered 'little liar!'

Given the way the deceptions and failures of the Iraq war still resonate, no wonder David Cameron denies that military intervention in Syria today has anything in common with what happened in 2003. But the two countries are alike in their political make-up, with deep sectarian and ethnic divisions giving political convulsions an extra edge of fear and hate. Both were or are ruled by a single extended family or clan monopolising authority in a police state in which power is exercised through the intelligence and security services. They are tough nuts to crack: "Assad is as coup-proof as Saddam ever was," says an Iraqi leader, who has spent much of his life trying to get rid of the latter.

In one crucial respect Assad is in a stronger position than Slobodan Milosovic in Serbia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. These three leaders were internationally isolated, while Assad has powerful and committed foreign allies. Russia is standing firmly by Assad as it reasserts its status as a great power after 20 years of retreats and humiliations that culminated in the Libyan war of 2011. It feels it was double-crossed then into agreeing to humanitarian military intervention by Nato which swiftly became a campaign to overthrow Gaddafi.

Even more committed to the Syrian regime's survival are Iran and the Shia paramilitary movement Hezbollah in Lebanon. Both are highly conscious that the attempt to overthrow their long-term ally in Damascus is aimed at weakening them, and they are determined to repulse the threat. It makes sense for them to want to fight while Assad is still in power and not wait until he has been displaced by a hostile Sunni regime.

One important aspect of the Syrian conflict as it affects the US and Britain is lethally similar to the Iraq war. In each case any outsider intervening becomes involved in several inter-related but separate conflicts. In Iraq in 2003 the Iranians were glad to see the fall of their old enemy Saddam Hussein but fearful that an Iraq occupied by the US and Britain would provide a platform to

overthrow the Tehran government. They did everything to make sure the Americans and British never stabilised their occupation of Iraq. “The Iranians have a PhD in this type of covert warfare,” remarks an Iraqi specialising in national security.

So much of what US and British leaders or commentators say about Syria sounds phoney or unrealistic because they focus on only one of the four or five conflicts going on in the country as a reason for intervening. The struggle most often picked as a respectable motive for backing the rebels is the popular revolt against the brutal Syrian police state which started in March 2011. But this uprising swiftly became a sectarian war with the Sunni Arab majority pitted against the ruling Alawite Shia sect and other minorities, such as the Christians and Druze. The Syrian civil war is also part of the intensifying Sunni-Shia conflict that is being waged in the tier of countries between the mountains of Afghanistan and the Mediterranean. And this sectarian battle is linked in turn to the confrontation, dating from the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, between the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and their allies, and an Iranian-led coalition.

If the Syrian political and military battlefield sounds very complex, it is; and it’s getting worse. A savage ethnic war exploded in north-east Syria last month with the al-Qa’ida-linked al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant driving 50,000 Syrian Kurds into Iraq.

US and British leaders selling military intervention in Iraq and Syria seldom explained and often did not understand this mesh of conflicts. But these contradictory alliances determine the political map of the region and the reality of foreign involvement in it. It is easy, for instance, to advocate arming and protecting Syrian villagers whose children are being incinerated by napalm dropped by government aircraft. But what if those best able to help those villagers are the veteran jihadi fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, who have just chopped off the heads of Alawite prisoners and shot dead a teenager selling coffee for blasphemy? For all the disclaimers, US forces attacking the government in Damascus are in de facto alliance with al-Qa’ida. Likewise in Iraq 10 years ago, the US and Britain were pretending to be fighting for democracy and against the remnants of Saddam’s regime. The reality was that in 2003-06 they had imposed an old-style imperial regime and had become participants in a cruel Sunni-Shia civil war on the Shia side.

What can be done to end the appalling and ever-growing miseries of the 23 million Syrian people? The answer is to make either war or peace effectively. Limited missile strikes on Syrian military bases are not going to compel President Assad to negotiate his own departure from power. The only military action that might do this is a full-scale assault including a no-fly zone and a no-

drive zone. This means giving the rebels an air umbrella, as was done for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2001, the Kurdish peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq in 2003 and the anti-Gaddafi militiamen in Libya in 2011. And thus fighting a full-scale war with the likelihood that Russia, Iran and Hezbollah will increase their support for Assad. Anything less than this full-scale military commitment simply stokes the war and increases the violence. It gives the opposition hope (particularly since so many of its official leaders reside safely abroad) that one day there will be a Libyan-type intervention by Nato on their behalf.

Limited intervention means that the stalemate will continue. One of the best chances for peace - the day of mutual exhaustion and realisation that nobody is going to win on the battlefield - is postponed. The analogy with Kosovo in 1999 is shallow and misleading since defeat was only admitted by an isolated Serbia after a 78-day air bombardment and the threat of a Nato land invasion.

If all-out war is not feasible, could peace come by negotiation? Here America and Britain's stance has been hypocritical, publicly supporting peace talks while offering only surrender terms to the Assad government at a time when it controls most of Syria. This was largely the result of a miscalculation by world leaders in 2011-12 whereby they underestimated the staying power of the Assad government. Its collapse was gleefully predicted, a role for Assad in Syria's political transition ruled out, while Iran, an important player, was to be excluded. A peace conference so out of keeping with the real balance of power is not going to stop any wars. But bringing Iran in would undermine the US, European and Israeli effort to isolate it over its development of nuclear power. The US would effectively have to recognise Tehran as a regional power, which would infuriate the Israelis and the Gulf monarchies.

Even then, peace would not come easily, if at all. The best interim solution could be a UN-monitored ceasefire as briefly occurred under the Kofi Annan plan in 2012. All sides are dependent on outside backers, and even those who most want to fight need weapons, ammunition and money. Heavy pressure could be put on them to agree to a peace conference and a temporary ceasefire.

This would be a Lebanese-style truce - unsatisfactory but better than full-scale war. A peace conference on this basis could be the political and diplomatic counterpart to the limited US military strike President Obama is contemplating. In practice there has been a stalemate in most of Syria for the last year. If the Syrian army did use poison gas, it shows it does not have the strength to retake even the inner rebel-held suburbs of Damascus. It is better therefore for the battle lines to be frozen under some form of UN supervision. Long-term solutions will only begin to be feasible when Syrians are no longer at the mercy

of what Northern Ireland politicians used to call “the politics of the last atrocity”.

2nd September 2013

ONCE WASHINGTON MADE THE MIDDLE EAST TREMBLE - NOW NO ONE THERE TAKES IT SERIOUSLY

By Robert Fisk

WATERSHED. It's the only word for it. Once Lebanon and Syria and Egypt trembled when Washington spoke. Now they laugh. It's not just a question of what happened to the statesmen of the past. No one believed that Cameron was Churchill or that the silly man in the White House was Roosevelt - although Putin might make a rather good Stalin. It's more a question of credibility; no one in the Middle East takes America seriously anymore. And you only had to watch Obama on Saturday to see why.

For there he was, prattling on in the most racist way about "ancient sectarian differences" in the Middle East. Since when was the president of the United States an expert on these supposed "sectarian differences"? Constantly we are shown maps of the Arab world with Shias and Sunnis and Christians colour-coded onto the nations which we generously bequeathed to the region after the First World War. But when is an American paper going to carry a colour-coded map of Washington or Chicago with black and white areas delineated by streets?

But what was amazing was the sheer audacity of our leaders in thinking that they could yet again bamboozle their electorates with their lies and trumperies and tomfooleries.

This doesn't mean that the Syrian regime did not use gas "on its own people" - a phrase we used to use about Saddam when we wanted a war in Iraq - but it does mean that our present leaders are now paying the price for the dishonesty of Bush and Blair.

Obama, who is becoming more and more preacher-like, wants to be the Punisher-in-Chief of the Western World, the Avenger-in-Chief. There is something oddly Roman about him. And the Romans were good at two things. They believed in law and they believed in crucifixion. The US consititution - American "values" and the cruise missile have a faintly similar focus. The lesser races must be civilized and they must be punished, even if the itsy-bitsy tiny missile launches look more like perniciousness than war. Everyone outside the Roman Empire was called a barbarian. Everyone outside Obama's empire is called a terrorist.

And as usual, the Big Picture has a habit of taking away some of the little details we should know about.

Take Afghanistan, for example. I had an interesting phone call from Kabul three days ago. And it seems that the Americans are preventing President Karzai purchasing new Russian Mi helicopters - because Moscow sells the same helicopters to Syria. Well, how about that. The US, it seems, is now trying to damage Russian trade relations with Afghanistan - why the Afghans would want

to do business with the country that enslaved them for eight years is another matter - because of Damascus.

Now another little piece of news. Just over a week ago, two massive car bombs blew up outside two Salafist mosques in the north Lebanese city of Tripoli. They killed 47 people and wounded another 500. Now it has emerged that five people have been charged by the Lebanese security services over these bombings and one of them is said to be a captain in the Syrian government intelligence service.

His charge is “in absentia”, as they say, and we all like to think that men and women are innocent until proved guilty. But two sheikhs have also been charged, one of them apparently the head of a pro-Damascus Islamist organization. The other sheikh is also said to be close to Syrian intelligence. Typically, Obama is so keen on bombarding Syria for gassing that he has missed out on this nugget of information which has angered and infuriated millions of Lebanese.

But I guess this is what happens when you take your eye off the ball.

It reminds me of a book that was published by Yale University Press in 2005. It was called The New Lion of Damascus by David Lesch, a professor at Trinity University in Texas. Those were the days when Bashar al-Assad was still being held up as the bright new broom in Syria.

“Bashar,” Lesch concluded, “is, indeed, the hope - and the promise of a better future.”

Then last year - by which time the West had abandoned its dreams of Bashar - the good professor came up with another book, again published by Yale. This time it was called Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad, and Lesch concluded: “He (Bashar) was short-sighted and became deluded. He failed miserably.”

2nd September 2013

ACTIVISTS EXPECTED DELAY IN BEGINNING MILITARY ACTION

By Kim Sengupta

THE ACTIVISTS were not surprised by the vote in the British Parliament or Barack Obama's decision to delay. It was what they had expected: the Western leaders simply had not made a good enough case for military action in Syria.

Instead of charges which may have been expected, of betrayal by their supposed backers, they were of the view that while highly publicised but limited Tomahawk strikes may have symbolic value, they will change little on the ground.

"We can understand why things went the way they did. In Britain, in America, there is the history, Iraq and Afghanistan, so they were influenced by that, they voted in their own interests" said Naji Al Jarf, who runs a magazine smuggled into the country.

He fled Damascus after the publication's offices in the Syrian capital were raided and staff taken prisoner. "The American and British governments have had two-and-a-half years to show the people the terrible things that Bashar al-Assad has been doing, they have not done a good job in doing that," Al Jarf said.

He added: "But we do need constructive help from the outside, especially those who are trying to bring about a democratic Syria. A lot of the money is going to the extremists."

However, the opposition has noticed that since the threats of international action began and Western warships began arriving in the Mediterranean, the level of activity by Assad's forces has fallen.

"There are other ways of keeping pressure on the regime than just air strikes, which the politicians wanted to have. I suppose it looks good on TV," said a senior British military officer whose post involves liaising with the Americans.

"We have got to think on a strategic level. At the moment we are getting the regime's land, air and sea components pretty well boxed up.

The military officer added: "They may now think that they have a little window until the [US] Congress talks, but they have to be wary that if they do anything outrageous Obama might just decide to zap them.

"Anyway, we haven't noticed people hurrying back to C2s [command and control]. We suspect some of them will never go back."

The charge that the government failed to look at the broader picture was echoed by former Royal Navy Rear Admiral Chris Parry who stated that he had spoken to serving colleagues who thoroughly approved of the result of the House of Commons vote.

"They said they were being asked to deliver military means without any idea of the strategic outcome desired."

He was one of several former senior personnel deployed to get out the voices of serving officers who had deep reservations about “mini shock and awe”.

General Lord Dannatt, who is a former head of the British Army, described the outcome of the vote in the Commons as a “victory for common sense”.

He said: “The will of the people has been expressed through the House of Commons, that we don’t want to get involved in this, and that’s the right answer at the moment.”

Across the Atlantic in the United States, General Gregory S Newbold, who served as director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the run-up to the Iraq War, declared: “There’s a broad naivety in the political class about America’s obligations in foreign policy issues and scary simplicity about the effects that employing American military power can achieve.”

4th September 2013

THE GRAVES HAD RUN INTO EACH OTHER, MOUNDS OF RED EARTH WASHED BY THE RAIN, BLOWN BY THE WIND. THERE WAS A FRESH SET UNDAMAGED BY THE ELEMENTS, ONE OF THEM NO MORE THAN FOUR FEET LONG; IT WAS OF HANIA, A THREE-YEAR-OLD GIRL, THE YOUNGEST OF A FAMILY OF FIVE TO DIE...

By Kim Sengupta

...NONE WERE killed by chemical agents, the deaths were delivered by conventional weapons in one of the air strikes all too regular in this part of Aleppo Province; weapons of the type which had been responsible for most of the lethal toll of 100,000 in the two- and-a-half years of pitiless strife.

“I don’t want to live any more. Why did Allah spare me? I am old and I have no one left,” whispered Abdurahman al-Shibli. The grandfather, in his seventies, was out tending sheep early in the morning when the missile tore into the farmhouse in a village near al-Bab. He sat on his haunches by the little cemetery with apple blossoms drifting in the air, wiping his rheumy eyes.

This place of solitude and grief was a world away from high politics; of dramatic votes in the Commons and of US Congressional debates; of constitutional proprieties and geopolitics of whether or not military action was justified over the slaughter of 1,400 people with sarin gas.

The villagers here did not have details of Barack Obama’s red line, or David Cameron’s repeated threats of dire consequences for the regime if it resorted to chemical warfare or the pledge by French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, last year that use of weapons of mass destruction would lead to a “massive and lightning fast” response.

However, they have heard accounts - vague and garbled ones - of what is going on in London and Washington. But “none of that matters, only this, matters,” exclaimed Zeana, a neighbour peering out from under her black hijab, gesticulating at the shattered building where Hania, her parents and two brothers died. “How long has this been going on? How long we hear they are going to help, but nothing will happen, nothing.” She too has suffered, she said. Her own brother was taken away by the Mukhabarat, the secret police; he has not been heard of since. How recently? “Twelve-and-a-half years ago, in Hama”; the brutality of those who ruled is not new here.

But the pervasive, relentless level of violence is something new. “Now they don’t bother to arrest any more, they just kill, from tanks, from the air, they killed these poor people for nothing”, said 55-year-old Zeana. I have witnessed the regime’s warplanes fire down into opposition areas of Aleppo and Idlib City, blowing up homes. But there was no apparent reason why this village should have been targeted a week ago. There were no obvious military installations in the vicinity: perhaps rebel fighters were passing by or had been staying here? The residents denied this. “They just like killing people, I have not known a time like this in all my life,” said Abdulrahman al-Shibli, shaking his head.

The people around here, villagers and families seeking refuge from towns

which have been particular targets of President Assad's forces, fear more killings will follow Western military strikes. They are, on the whole, in favour of such strikes, but they are also resigned to the regime taking retribution; there has been a sharp increase in the numbers of refugees crossing the border into Turkey in the past few days.

"What do you think will happen? What are they going to hit?" asked Haji Mustapha Dosh, who had moved with his extended family to live with his brother. We confessed we did not know for sure. "It is Allah's will what happens to us," he said, raising his palms in supplication.

"Welcome to Syria, where death is a way of life" is painted on a wall in Kafranbel, a town in next door Idlib province, which has become known for the black humour of its graffiti. Another says "Obama! You send us 'weapons' to only continue this conflict! Send us weapons to win our revolution once and for all".

The weapons the rebels want the most are anti-aircraft missiles. These will undoubtedly have an effect on the balance of the conflict. But they are also something the West is the most wary of delivering. US agents are still trying to track down missiles taken out of Libya after Muammar Gaddafi's fall.

French forces in the recent intervention in Mali found their helicopter-gunships coming under fire from stocks looted from the Tripoli regime.

Half-an-hour on, as we travelled down a narrow, twisting road, a jet went by overhead, fast and relatively low. "See what we could have done with a rocket!" Grinned one of my companions, Jamal, imitating firing from a shoulder-held launcher. "Send us rockets and Obama and Cameron won't have to worry about bombing Assad."

The plane circled. It looked of the type I have met before, a Czech-made L-39 Albatros. Last July, riding on the back of a motorbike driven by a young activist called Bari, we had been chased along al-Bab by one of them after visiting a military base which had been taken by the rebels.

The plane repeatedly strafed but missed. It later fired a missile into a residential area, an 11-year-old boy, Abed al-Rahman, lost a leg. Nine months ago I saw him again as he was preparing to go to America for treatment, his dreams of being an athlete gone forever, vowing to return when able and help the revolution.

The al-Bab attack was one of the very first indications that the regime was prepared to use air strikes with impunity. Since then, of course, it has become a matter of grim reality, with dozens of deaths and maimings caused by a variety of weapons, including incendiaries.

There were muffled thuds in a valley a few hundred yards away, sounds of

ordnance landing, followed by a cloud of dark smoke. “It’s being received by the bearded ones,” said Jamal drawing his fingers under his chin. “They have checkpoints over there. Now we have two good reasons to avoid that road.”

In the past it was regime troops and the Shabiha, the militia of the Alawite community from which the country’s elite is drawn, we had to worry about while travelling in northern Syria, now it is also the rapidly growing number of jihadist bands.

“We have to be very careful with them, they are strict about religion” said Basel, 29, who spent eight months in Aleppo as a revolutionary fighter before returning, disillusioned, to help his father’s carpentry business.

“I saw some bad things being done by people who said they were fighting for the people. These Salafists are more disciplined but I saw them shoot people because they had said things they didn’t like. One was a 15-year-old boy.” Basel’s father implored him not to continue speaking of such things.

Jabhat al-Nusra has become the bogeyman of the revolution for the West and an argument for not carrying out strikes against President Assad. Its fighters are the best armed of the rebels, and it is they who would benefit the most from an opposition victory.

But now there is a group who should be even more frightening for the West. Al-Qa’ida in Iraq and Syria (known by the gentle sounding name of Isis) - whose leader founded Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011 - are now even more hardline and its fighters have built up a fearsome reputation for dedication to jihad.

Among the Islamists it is the fighting prowess of the Chechens which is currently most celebrated. They have, supposedly, become the stuff of international power negotiations. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi intelligence chief, is said to have described to Vladimir Putin how his country is using them as shock troops in Syria and, in return for the Russian president ending his support for the Assad regime, would ensure that Chechen militants did not attack the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

That, at least, was what was leaked to the Russian media and a Lebanese outlet; it added to the Chechen myth here. They have certainly been active, leading the assault on the Minakh air base, south of Aleppo last month which yielded an extensive arsenal. Earlier their efforts had also opened the way to an offensive against Latakia, the heartland of the Alawite community from which President Assad and the ruling elite are drawn.

It was during this campaign that a grim example came of the power of the jihadists. Kamal Hamami, a senior commander of the Free Syrian Army, who had gone for a planning meeting was shot dead by members of Isis and a video purporting to show his killing was put online. I had first met fighters from al-

Nusra last July in Aleppo when they were big on jihadist talk but were derided when they were among the first to cut and run when regime tanks came into the frontline at Salaheddine.

Now fighters from more moderate khatibas (brigades) like Jamal, a tough and resourceful fighter himself, are too nervous to talk openly about the Islamists. “You’ll see a lot more foreigners this time,” he said. “They have come to help; when it’s all over they will want to go back to their own countries. Syrians will rebuild Syria.”

We saw the Islamists at a distance. It was decided it would be wise not to make an approach, we took a different way. “We don’t know what instructions they have received for their emirs today,” said Yahya, another one in our group. “Their emirs are not Syrian they have their own ideas.”

There was sudden panic, our Albatros was back, now very low, seeking targets. We dispersed and dived to the ground. Jamal looked around at me and grinned: “Don’t look so worried, it’ll be alright, soon Mr Obama will be helping us.”

6th September 2013

RUSSIA'S PRESIDENT IS UNLIKELY TO LEND HIS SUPPORT TO LATEST US CRUSADE

By Robert Fisk

NOT MANY years ago, a Russian President held a late-night meeting with his special representative and asked him to fly at once to meet with an Arab dictator - to give him a personal warning on an impending American attack. If the Arab autocrat would step down from his post as President voluntarily and allow democratic elections, the Russian President's secret message went, he could stay on in his country and keep his party post. The dictator was Saddam, the date was February 2003, and the President's envoy was Yevgeny Primakov.

And the President was Vladimir Putin. Maybe this little tale should be in Barack Obama's file in St Petersburg. It was Primakov, who was former head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, a former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, who revealed the secret Putin initiative in his sadly neglected (in the West, at least) book, Russia and the Arabs, which contains many a cautionary tale for Arab leaders - and for arrogant Western ones - about Moscow's dealings with the Middle East, not least Putin's. The latter had instructed Primakov to give his warning directly and firstly only to Saddam, not to his Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz. Putin wanted the proposal to be put to Saddam "as dramatically as possible". It might, the Russian President said, be Saddam's last chance to avoid an American attack.

The Iraqi dictator came out with a stream of accusations against Russia: that it was trying to deceive him once again, just as it did when it told him that if he withdrew his troops from Kuwait in 1990 America would not attack Iraq. Primakov told him he waited too long to stage his withdrawal. Saddam did not say anything. He just patted Primakov on the shoulder as he left the room. Tariq Aziz called after him, loud enough for Saddam to hear: "Ten years from now, we'll see who was right - our beloved President or Primakov." Well, we know the answer to that one.

Now I suppose it is possible that Obama might like Putin to send his present Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, off to Damascus with a similar message for Bashar al-Assad. After all, Putin's reason for telling Saddam he could stay in his party role was to avoid post-regime instability in Iraq. The problem in Syria is that the instability started in 2011 and has since turned into one of the region's ugliest civil wars.

But Putin is not without his progressive side. It was he, after all, who talked of establishing uranium enrichment facilities on the soil of the recognised nuclear powers for nations which have nuclear facilities but don't want nuclear weapons - this was one of Putin's initiatives on the Iran crisis (which is partly what America's proposed attack on Syria is all about).

There is another side to Putin. In Cairo, several Egyptian politicians call him al thaaleb - “the Fox” - and you can almost see Putin in the snow, bushy-tailed and tough-whiskered, his narrow, slightly frightening eyes darting from his narrow face. He has no truck with Muslim politicians he distrusts. He replaced one dictator in Chechnya with another nastier one and Russia had no hesitation in letting the ruthless Mohammed Najibullah take over in Afghanistan when its army left. Why did the West support rebels, he asked not long ago, that eat their enemies? He was referring to the frightful video of an Islamist fighter apparently eating the liver of an executed Syrian soldier.

But Putin has never been squeamish about using extreme violence himself. His army’s outrageous behaviour in Chechnya has been little different from Saddam’s in the suppression of Iraqi rebels in 1991 or the Syrian regime’s war on its own rebels. And didn’t the Russians, not so long ago, use their own form of gas to fight their way into a Moscow theatre when armed Chechen rebels took it over? If the Syrian regime used sarin gas last month - and Putin still says he has seen no convincing evidence - would that really worry the Russian President?

Oddly, the Western television networks have fallen into a rut over St Petersburg, asking if Obama can “narrow the gap” between himself and Putin. I’m not at all sure if Putin wants to narrow any such gap. He knows that the US President’s “red lines” and “options on the table” and all the other Obama-isms that are talking the Americans into yet another war against Arabs, have given him a powerful card. He knows that the Syrian war is about Iran. And he was perfectly able to entertain Iran’s awful former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Moscow. His slouching figure beside Obama at the Fermanagh summit told you a lot about his feelings for America’s Punisher-in-Chief. After all, that was the role he himself adopted in Chechnya.

And as he looks south from the Kremlin, he can see Chechnya on the horizon and - just 800 miles further away - Syria itself, where Assad is fighting rebel forces that include Chechens. He may certainly point out that Obama is planning to fight on the same side as al-Qa’ida - which is perfectly true. But is he really going to line up behind America’s latest crusade? I rather suspect - since he’s a self-taught expert on fighting Islamist “terror” - that he might let Obama sweat it out.

He’ll be asking, no doubt, what America’s permitted 60 days of “limited” attacks will achieve. And what happens when it’s over and Assad is still in Damascus and gas is used all over again?

6th September 2013

‘WE DON’T WANT FOREIGNERS TO INTERFERE. WE WILL SETTLE DIFFERENCES OURSELVES’

By Kim Sengupta

HARDLINE ISLAMIST rebels in Syria are taking elaborate security precautions after becoming convinced that they, as well as the forces of Bashar al-Assad, will be targeted in the expected US air strikes.

The Americans will make use of the opportunity for military action to try to weaken the strong jihadist presence in the opposition ranks, these groups have come to believe. The blame for the hits will be put on stray missiles or retaliation by the regime, it is claimed.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis) and Jabhat al-Nusra, two organisations affiliated with al-Qa'ida, have begun to move their fighters and weapons from established bases. In some of the areas they have sought assurances that other rebel khatibas (brigades) would not take advantage of the situation to move forward and take territory.

Raqaa, Tal Rifaat and Manbij, three towns dominated by the Islamists in a stretch of northern Syria outside the regime's control, have seen numbers of fighters thinned out and some buildings vacated.

"There are still guards outside to [make it] look as if these places are important, but important people and things inside have gone," said Iyad al-Abdi, an activist who has worked with Jabhat al Nusra. "No one trusts the Americans, in Iraq they divided the resistance and they are trying to do the same here. They don't want either side to win, they want to keep Syria divided… A lot of the leaders [of the rebels] think they will be bombed."

Any US-led operation, aimed at the regime's chemical warfare capabilities, is also expected to target other military installations such as command and control systems, air bases and missile sites. In return for their support in Congress, advocates of intervention, such as the Republican senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham are reported to have extracted agreement from President Barack Obama for a more wide-ranging attack than previously envisaged.

One of the arguments against such an assault has been that the ones to benefit the most would be the jihadists, now the largest and best armed faction in the opposition. The more moderate elements have become progressively weaker through a lack of supplies and defection of members.

Training camps in Jordan run for the moderates by former military personnel - mainly American but also some British - were supposed to redress the balance. After more than eight months, the first trained fighters are ready to be sent into Syria.

However, there were only 50 of them and these camp graduates are unlikely to have any significant impact on the ground where the Islamists have driven

other khatibas away from towns and cities and killed commanders.

Kamal Hamami, a senior officer with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was shot dead by a member of Isis outside Latakia. Al-Farouq Brigade, one of the largest of the more moderate groups, was driven out of Raqaa by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist group, but seen as less extreme. In Dana, following clashes, Isis fighters seized leaders of the FSA-affiliated Hamza Assad Allah brigade, one of whom, Fadi al-Qesh, was beheaded.

Abu Mahmoud, a member of al-Farouq Brigade, agreed Islamists are taking precautions but dismissed the idea that his group would like to benefit from US air strikes against them.

“We have to wait to see if the Americans do anything, they haven’t done anything for the last two years. Some groups believe the Americans will try and kill them so it is not surprising they are being careful. We will not take their areas. We also don’t want foreigners to interfere… we will settle our difference ourselves.”

However, foreign interference is now very much part of the landscape. The regime has been supported in its campaigns by the Lebanese Shia group, Hezbollah, and, it is believed, members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, and the rebel ranks have seen an influx of international jihadists.

Accompanying conspiracy theories are plentiful. There has been a recent presence of Chechens among the rebels; the Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, allegedly told Russian President Vladimir Putin that his country was using them as shock troops against the regime. But here there are also dark rumours that many of them are former soldiers and some of them are agents of the FSB, the successor to the KGB, eliminating the moderate leadership on behalf of the regime.

In this febrile atmosphere, the notion of American air strikes against Islamists does not seem so strange. Unlike most of his fellow rebel fighters Khalid Abdullah holds there will soon be Western boots on the ground as well.

“These fighters they are sending from Jordan will not be able to cope, so the Americans will send special forces to help them. That is what we are hearing anyway,” he said.

7th September 2013

THE TEETERING BALANCE OF POWER HAS WHOLE REGION ON EDGE

By Patrick Cockburn

EVERY COUNTRY in the Middle East is reacting in its own egocentric way to the prospect of the US launching a military strike against Syria. For all their proclaimed concern for the human cost of the crisis, Syria's neighbours worry most about the effect of US actions on the regional balance of power and its impact on long-standing conflicts and confrontations such as those between Israel and its opponents, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Sunni Muslims against Shia and the US against Russia.

Israel's position is firmly based on its own self-interests: it wants a US-led strike strong enough to weaken President Bashar al-Assad and his armed forces, making it impossible for him to win the civil war in the long term. But Israel appears not to favour air attacks so powerful that they cripple the Syrian government military machine and hand victory to a militant Sunni opposition movement with links to al-Qa'ida.

Israel is now declaring publicly what many in the Middle East have suspected has been the real policy of the US and its allies. This is to see a continuing conflict in which the two sides wear each other down as a better outcome than the decisive victory of either. "This is a play-off situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at last you don't want one to win," said Alon Pinas, a former Israeli consul general in New York, in The New York Times. "Let them both bleed, haemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there's no real threat from Syria."

The Israeli view is of peculiar importance in determining US military action, if it occurs, because President Obama is looking to pro-Israel lobby groups for support in lobbying Congress in favour of military action. Israel does not want the US and its allies to ease off Iran over its nuclear programme in order to win Iranian cooperation in Syria.

Russia wants Iran to attend a peace conference in Geneva, which the US and Russia have planned since May, since it is a major player in Syria. Iran is adamantly opposed to US intervention and it is possible but unlikely that Iran, Syria or Hezbollah will retaliate against the US or Israel in the event of a strike.

The Iranians have hitherto fully backed Syria, seeing the war as being aimed at depriving them of a crucial political and military ally. Hezbollah likewise sent its forces to fight just across the Syrian border in Qusayr, but does not appear to want a deeper commitment.

Turkey is Syria's neighbour most directly involved in the war since rebel units and military supplies have been allowed to cross freely into Syria. The Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has called for an all-out US attack aimed at

overthrowing Mr Assad and his government. But this policy is unpopular among Turks and Mr Erdogan is paying a mounting political price for his unstinting support for the Syrian rebels.

8th September 2013

VIOLENCE BURSTS IN TO SHATTER CHRISTIANS' MOUNTAIN REFUGE

By Patrick Cockburn

AT THE end of last year I visited the ancient Christian town of Maloula in a deep gorge in the mountains 20 miles north-west of Damascus. It has been a place of refuge for 2,000 years, its cliffs riddled with caves and its buildings clinging to towering walls of rock. It is one of the few towns in Syria where Christians are a majority and the only place where Western Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is still spoken.

People in Maloula were nervous when I was there, wondering just how long they would remain immune or at least largely unaffected by the violence that had engulfed the rest of Syria. Already, they were feeling its impact, mostly in the shape of criminal attacks on well-off Christians.

Maloula's uncertain immunity from the civil war in Syria lasted for another nine months. But, at 5.40am last Wednesday, a suicide bomber in a vehicle packed with explosives blew himself up at the checkpoint, killing some eight soldiers. Then, 20 pick-up trucks with machine guns mounted in the back stormed into the town, firing into the air. They took over an ugly white-washed hotel on top of a cliff as their command post and told people to stay in their houses. There was no resistance and fighting only started when the Syrian army arrived later in the day, government aircraft bombed and the rebels finally retreated. Heavy fighting around Maloula was reported yesterday.

What happened during the capture of Maloula is revealed in convincing detail by Matthew Barber in the online newsletter Syria Comment. He has rapidly combined film and statements by the insurgents with phone interviews with local people. The result is that, unlike most episodes in the Syrian war, it is possible to follow events with a fair degree of accuracy.

Going by their own declarations, the rebel units were mostly from jihadi groups led by the al-Qa'ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and including the Ahrar al-Sham, the Baba Amr brigade and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) commando unit. Local people say they were aided by Sunni Muslim refugees from the militant town of Douma on the outskirts of Damascus.

This is not a story of sectarian bloodbath, but the Christians in Maloula must have worried that it could turn into one. One rebel group called the operation a case of "an eye for an eye" in retaliation for the poison gas attack on rebel-held Ghouta on 21 August. There are postings with quotes from the Koran saying "Allah give us patience and victory over the infidel". Pictures taken by the insurgents show the bodies of Syrian army soldiers killed by the suicide bomber. The insurgent fighters finally retreated, but not before they had demonstrated that they considered Maloula a stronghold of government supporters. As with

other such clashes, the government sent aircraft to bomb rebel positions, a tactic that has done so much to turn millions of Syrians into refugees inside and outside the country.

The occupation of Maloula illuminates other developments in Syria that differ markedly from what is being reported by the media or said by the Obama administration in an attempt to win Congressional assent for air strikes. On 5 September, the very day the al-Nusra stormed Maloula, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, told a Congressional hearing about the rebels: “I just don’t agree that a majority are al-Qa’ida and the bad guys. That’s not true. There are about 70,000 to 100,000 oppositionists... Maybe 15 per cent to 25 per cent might be in one group or another who are what we would deem to be bad guys.” Rebel commanders have been happily assuring American newspaper columnists that the supposedly moderate FSA is dominant around Damascus, unlike northern and eastern Syria.

The attack on Maloula is evidence of another aspect of the war: after its successes in the early summer in the battle for Qusayr, government forces have not been as successful on the battlefront as many expected. They have made some advances in Homs but still do not hold the whole city. If they did use poison gas against rebel-held suburbs in Damascus it may have been frustration at the army’s inability to capture them by other means and its lack of manpower to sustain the casualties inevitable in street fighting. Maloula is not far from the main Damascus-Homs road, emphasising that this crucial highway could be cut by the insurgents if they are prepared to take the losses.

Maloula used to be one of the safer places in Syria for Christians, who once made up 10 per cent of the population. Many have already fled from Aleppo and northern Syria. Their priests and bishops have been kidnapped and murdered. In their part of the Old City of Damascus they are under mortar fire from rebel districts leaving no doubt that they are being punished as government supporters. Those with money have mostly left the country. Even a previously secure place in the mountains such as Maloula, where persecuted Christians once sought refuge, is safe no longer.

Suppose US missile strikes take place, will they tip the military balance decisively towards the insurgents? It looks unlikely, though elimination of the Syrian air force would enable the rebels to gain ground. The stalemate will continue. Syria has a failed government and a failed opposition. Both still think they can win if they get enough outside support but have few ideas other than to fight on. The only good news here is that government and rebels have become so much the dependent proxies of foreign powers that the US and Russia could force them to negotiate at least a ceasefire. But this may come too late for

Maloula.

9th September 2013

WOULD OPERATION BIFFING THE ARABS BE THE BEST NAME FOR IT?

By Robert Fisk

ALMOST EXACTLY 30 years ago today, I was having breakfast with my landlord below my home on the Beirut Corniche. The date was 19 September 1983, but nothing has changed - neither Mustapha's little garden with its yellow and red flowers, my balcony two storeys above, nor the butterflies that settle on the flowers, nor the great bright blue Mediterranean in front of us. I am writing this on that same balcony. We were drinking our third or fourth hot sticky Arabic coffee that morning when we saw the American destroyer the USS John Rodgers making smoke as she moved along the seafront. She passed close to us. We could even see the naval crew on the upper deck and the Stars and Stripes drifting in the warm breeze.

Then there came from the vessel a hollow, popping sound. It was a very dull series of reports, as if someone were playing tennis under the sea. As I wrote later, there was nothing warlike about it. Mustapha fetched his binoculars and I focused on the warship. The glasses caught a puff of smoke, nothing more than a smudge near the for'ard 5in gun. A few seconds later, there was another pop and then I saw a shell case - a brass shell case glinting gold under the sun - bounce off the deck and spin right off the ship into the sea. Pop-pop. Another bright gold casing splashed into the water. Thus did the Americans go to war in Lebanon.

It made no sense to us. America was firing at Syrian-supported Druze militiamen in the Chouf mountains who were trying to destroy the (dubiously) elected government of President Amine Gemayel, whom President Ronald Reagan, and Israel, wanted to rule Lebanon. Washington had taken sides in a civil war and was now fully committed to preserving one bunch of Lebanese against another bunch of Lebanese. In the US, apparently, it all made sense. Reagan had backed Gemayel and now Reagan's honour was at risk. I shall not speak of parallels.

I was reminded of this Conradian scene by a deeply moving article by my old friend Rami Khouri which appeared last week in a local Beirut paper I rarely buy. I often quote my Arab colleagues by name but usually not in quotation. But Rami's piece in The Daily Star was brilliant.

He described how a few years ago, just before the Syrian war, he received a letter from Peggy Stelpflug, the mother of Lance Corporal Bill Stelpflug, a US Marine sent to Lebanon in May of 1983, and of how Peggy and her family "enjoy special credibility in asking about the appropriateness of American military attacks in the Arab world".

And Rami quotes a letter home from Bill, written in Beirut on 7 September 1983 - 30 years ago last Saturday. "I am alive and well," the young Marine told

his family. “Maybe a little dirty, tired and shell-shocked, but walking and talking. Our ‘war’ just lasted three full days so far. Two more Marines have been killed by rockets and more wounded… We have been taking rockets and bullets… We have been shooting back with some effect, mainly snipers or destroying rocket positions with artillery… I am filthy, and bone sore, and 100 per cent fit… It worries me more to know that ya’ll worry about me more than I worry about me… I think Beirut is just a realistic training base for the US Marine Corps… Won’t go out of my way to be a hero or anything like that. Just doing my time in this Mediterranean junk yard. Thinking of home. Love you all very much.”

The day after he wrote this letter, the USS Bowen - a close cousin of the USS John Rodgers, which was shooting off my home on the Corniche - opened fire on the same target: Syrian-supported forces in the Chouf. And on 23 October the same year, an Islamist truck-bomber drove to his suicide by exploding his vehicle in the US Marine headquarters beside the airport. I still remember how the air pressure changed inside my own home when that bomb went off. It killed 241 US service personnel. And I recall how I saw with my own eyes the bodies of many of the dead Marines laid out beside the rubble of their headquarters. Six days later, an officer visited the Stelpflug family home in Auburn, Alabama, and told Peggy and her husband that their son, Bill, had been killed by the bomb.

Rami wrote about his conversations with Peggy and spoke of how enlightened he was by the family’s “noble reactions”. He shared their feelings that “Bill’s life, service and death could enrich ‘our common desire to learn from each other in the cause of advancing our shared humanity… and that the lessons of his life and death would perhaps be illuminating for others’”.

But Rami’s penultimate paragraph deserves to be read in full: “It is appropriate today - 30 years after American ships shelled the Lebanese mountains - that all of us be very sure that, before American men and women are sent again to attack Arab targets, citizens like the Stelpflug family are credibly consulted on such an important decision. Those expressing scepticism in the opinion polls deserve a clear answer. So do the Syrian people. So does the world.”

Against journalism of this standard, I must remain silent. It says it all.

If - and I repeat “if” because I’m still not at all sure Barack Obama really is going to war in Syria on the back of his own words - there has to be a name for this ridiculous adventure, what will it be called? Churchill used to warn his lads that they should never, ever give a military operation a stupid name since widows would not want to hear that their husbands died in a ridiculous battle. So I suppose the most honest operational name - Operation Biffing the Arabs Again

- is out. So is Operation Bashing Bashar. In keeping with Obama's evangelical streak, Operation Punishment is probably a bit too revealing - but I suspect Operation Punitive Endeavour might do the trick. Most people will be too lazy to look up "punitive" in the dictionary and "endeavour" is a great work, hinting at enormous struggle hinged to deep morality (which is what Obama's rhetoric is supposed to be about).

And then - again, "if" America attacks - we must have a good string of excuses for the hospitals/buses/civilian targets we hit. "Collateral damage" will no doubt be churned out by defence correspondents but it is wearing a bit thin. If a cruise missile does hit the roof of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, however, I will remember well the lies we used when a plane fired missiles into a crowded Baghdad market during a sandstorm in 2003. It was not a missile. It was an Iraqi anti-aircraft rocket that had misfired and crashed into the people.

The same was said in Libya in 1985 when American weapons destroyed the lives of civilians in Tripoli. It was a Libyan anti-aircraft missile that killed them. This was swiftly disproved - so was the lie about the Iraqi rocket. But wait for the Syrian anti-aircraft rocket that kills its own people. It's an old one. But so is biffing the Arabs.

11th September 2013

HOW ASSAD CHOSE HIS KILLING FIELDS

By Kim Sengupta

THE REBELS had almost reached the border when the hidden explosive device was set off; minutes later came bursts of intense firing. Four were killed immediately; around a dozen injured, some of them unlikely to survive because of the severity of their injuries. Three of the men were captured and, their comrades fear, may not be seen alive again.

The target of the well-planned ambush by Bashar al-Assad's forces was a group of 26 opposition representatives from Ghouta, the place where a few days earlier a chemical attack had killed more than a thousand people, a massacre which had led to one of the most serious international crisis in recent times with threats of US air strikes. What happened on 21 August in the Rif Dimashq governorate will be, the revolutionaries want to believe, the catalyst for foreign intervention with immense impact on the course of the vicious civil war. Ghouta now craves a key role in the crucial next stages of the conflict; less than 10 miles from the centre of Damascus, it would be the ideal strategic point for the rebels to strike at the fraying heart of the regime. Little wonder it became the target of Assad's most vicious crime to date.

After two and half years of increasingly savage strife, at a cost of more than 100,000 lives, many rebels hope the killings in Ghouta are the turning point; at last the US and its allies will take action. Even if the bombing does not take place, they expect a rapid escalation of support. If the West does not step in even now, they are certain the flow of arms from the Gulf will increase.

The seeming willingness of President Assad to hand over his chemical arsenal to international control is, they hold, a stalling tactic. However, if the stocks really are removed from the battlefield, with it will be removed the primeval fear such weapons have inspired among his opponents.

The Independent has spoken to people from Ghouta - some still living there, some in northern Syria in areas outside regime control and others in neighbouring Turkey - in an attempt to piece together the circumstances surrounding the chemical attack and also what the opposition on the ground want to see unfold in its aftermath.

The group of rebels killed last week were approaching the Jordanian border from Syria. They were a mixture of senior fighters and civilians on their way to meet foreign supporters of the Syrian opposition and members of its exiled leadership in Amman. There are, they claim, more than 40,000 fighters in Ghouta waiting for supplies and a co-ordinated plan to mount an assault on the capital.

The regime is fully aware of the grave danger on its doorstep and infuriated

by the obdurate resistance it faces. The assault which had been going on for the last 10 months is continuing in Ghouta despite movements of its forces being restricted in other areas due to apprehension of American action.

“We are used to a hundred rockets and artillery [rounds] a day and that is still going on”, Abu Abdullah who has been trapped in the eastern part of the area for the last year was keen to stress. “We hear the Americans are going to be bombing, but the only bombing is being done by Bashar.”

An influential civic leader from Ghouta, using the name Mustapha Omar, maintained that the time of having to bear the constant pounding is coming to an end. He had arrived in Turkey from Jordan with a list of weapons needed to spring forward into the regime’s lair.

Mr Omar, a wealthy businessman, had spent a considerable amount of his own money equipping some of the khatibas (battalions) of rebel fighters in the area. He also helped facilitate the visit by UN inspectors to the sites of suspected chemical attacks in Ghouta by liaising with different groups of fighters. Mr Omar was now on a mission, in Jordan and Turkey, to obtain weapons from international backers. British officials have been among those he had been in contact with; they have not, he insisted, provided him with any arms. That is likely to come from sympathisers in the United Arab Emirates.

“We are really after the UK’s help in training, but we may have to turn to the Americans, there is a lot going on in Jordan”, he said. Barack Obama announced last week that a first batch of 50 trained in the country by former US forces’ personnel were being sent into Syria.

“We are not saying that we in Ghouta are the best fighters, the toughest ones. But we are the ones the nearest to the capital, there is nowhere else that is such a good location to go to Assad and his people,” Mr Omar maintained. “Of course, Assad and his people know that. And that is the reason they had surrounded us for months, continually attacked us, used chemical weapons.” The Russian proposal on the regime’s chemical arsenal proves that “they have been using this poison. It’s a manoeuvre to avoid strikes, but it’s also a confession.”

Whether the regime used its chemical arsenal is, of course, at the centre of the raging accusations and recriminations and the view of Mr Omar and his side is, inevitably, highly partisan.

The US, Britain and France, among others, have charged the regime with deliberately attacking with sarin gas; it is the side with the military capability to do so. President Assad’s regime and its allies, chiefly Russia and Iran, have disputed that any weapon of mass destruction had been present.However, if it was used, then the responsibility for it, they claim, lies with the rebels.

Soon after the news of the deaths broke, a Russian foreign ministry

spokesman stated that the nerve agent had been delivered by a home-made rocket fired from a rebel-held village. No evidence of this has been produced so far. Another account, widely circulated on the internet, is that Jabhat al-Nusra, a hardline Islamist group among the rebels, and foreign jihadists with them, were supplied with chemical components by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi chief of intelligence, and stored in a tunnel where it was fatally mishandled.

Testimony from residents of Ghouta - not all of them supporters of the rebels - together with maps they provided, some of them hand-drawn, calls these scenarios into question. They repeatedly recounted separate landings of "chemicals" at Kafr Batna, Zayina, Ein Tarma, Zamalka, Ain Tarma and Moadamiyeh Al Sham, at varying times, pointing out that a single home-made rocket could not have carried out multiple strikes.

The Jabhat al-Nusra "own goal" explanation is also hotly disputed. The group, which has declared itself affiliated to al-Qa'ida, has grown in size and power in northern Syria, but it has no presence of any significance in Ghouta. The largest Islamist group in the area are the Liwa al-Islam, which the activists say are not as hardline as al-Nusra or the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (Isis) - which is a branch of al-Qa'ida.

"Liwa al-Islam are not like al-Nusra, it is a different organisation, in a different area," said Mr Omar. "We hardly have any foreign fighters in Ghouta. There is a Libyan I know, two or three from Saudi Arabia and a Jordanian. No Syrian rebel would use chemical weapons on their own communities; foreigners? But would the Saudis or anyone give such a big task to these few, no."

Abu Abdullah was adamant: "Both east and west Ghouta are surrounded by the government. Do you think we would not know about some rebels bringing in chemical weapons? Do you think we would allow such things when we have our families, children there? Don't we have enough problems with regime's chemicals?"

The tunnels do exist and have been used to move about to avoid checkpoints, but any chemical accidents in them would not have reached the areas affected, the residents insisted.

Riadh Al-Nasri, a 23 year old medical student who was in eastern Ghouta on the night of the killings recalled: "There was a lot of shelling and rocketing, heavier than at many nights before, Moadmiyeh was particularly bad. We kept on hearing the word 'chemical' and people were suffocating. I went with friends to the field hospitals to help. We have seen lots of bodies, injured, dead, in this revolution. But these were different, there was no blood. When we were there they brought in more people, they were foaming at the mouth, through their

noses, like children who have taken in soap."

Sae'd, another medic, who was at Zamalka, said he was shocked: "The people brought in were vomiting, the pupils of their eyes were so small, they could not breathe, not just one or two, but dozens of them. I saw one whole row of people having muscle spasms, they had gone down to the cellars because they thought it was an ordinary bombing, neurotoxic agents fell through the air to them."

Mr al-Nasri continued: "We had been to the field hospitals other times when they said they had chemical attacks, there have been people suffocating, not being able to speak, but nothing like this. Most of the people could not be saved, but we knew how important it was, it was decided that we must document everything very properly."

He thought around 600 had died that night and morning, although "many more died because we did not have things like atrophine or biperiden". Different opposition groups had put forward the number of fatalities between 350 to 1,729, the higher end making it the biggest loss of lives from a chemical attack since Saddam Hussein's gassing of Kurds at Halabjah in 1988. The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, had repeatedly used a figure of 1,429, a precision which military and intelligence figures believe would have been impossible to pin down.

"Why does it matter, 500 or 5,000? You did not see what we saw, the mothers with dead babies, the mothers crying, the babies with their eyes just open," Mr al-Nasri said angrily. "What about all the people killed by the regime using just bombs and their planes? Do we need to achieve a certain total of dead children before America, Britain does something?"

Mr Omar held that even without game-changing strikes, the regime will collapse soon. "We are seeing more and more soldiers coming over to us. Others are just running away, ministers are still defecting " he stated. "Our friends need to back us so that this happens quickly. We want al-Ghouta to lead this not because we want revenge. It is to prevent revenge; we are not extremists. I know government officials who are technocrats who will be needed to rebuild the country; we don't want to chop their heads off like some of the Islamists."

Mr Omar and his colleagues feel that even with a rebel victory there has to be a negotiations. "We don't want Assad to be killed the way Gaddafi was killed, we are not like that. We want him to face a court," he said. "If that's not possible he should leave the country with 100 of those closest to him. Look, some of us are still materially alright despite all that's happened. What I say to the opposition who will form the next government is that when we negotiate to end this, we must not think of us, we must think of the mothers with poisoned babies in Ghouta."

14th September 2013

PLANNING, NOT RIFLES, IS WHAT REBELS SAY THEY NEED FROM THE FICKLE US

By Kim Sengupta

A REBEL group I was with in Syria got hold of their first Kalashnikov 18 months ago. It was regime issue, not captured, but bought from a soldier for $2,000. The ammunition cost $5 a round across the border in Turkey. This week, an opposition leader obtaining supplies for his fighters was offered 70 cents a round and the same type of AK-47 rifle at $200 each.

Reports that the CIA is supplying small arms to those fighting President Bashar al-Assad's troops, months after the US signalled its intention to do so, has not led to an outbreak of euphoria among the rebels. They are only too aware that the weapons that may actually be game-changers - anti-aircraft missiles - would not be forthcoming from the West.

Delegates meeting in Istanbul for a conference of the opposition's umbrella group were of the view that the news has come as an attempt to placate them after Barack Obama's failure to carry out military strikes despite acknowledging that the regime has crossed his declared "red line" by its use of chemical weapons.

In Istanbul, the Geneva meetings this week have not been viewed as paving the way towards a general peace settlement. Instead, many say that Assad, with the help of his main ally, is outmanoeuvring President Obama and escaping punishment.

Salem al-Meslet, a senior member of the Syrian National Coalition, said: "They are leaving the murderer and concentrating on the weapons he was using. It is like stabbing someone with a knife, then they take the knife away and he is free."

The revolutionaries say they must confront Assad themselves and obtaining light arms to do so is no longer as much of a problem as it used to be.

A wide variety of weapons, including anti-tank missiles, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, are now available thanks to a wider flow of cash from the Gulf states and especially, in recent months, from Saudi Arabia.

Sending semi-automatic rifles will not, there is general consensus, have much impact on this heavily weaponised conflict.

Mustapha Omar, a businessman who helped finance fighters at Ghouta, the area next to Damascus where the 21 August chemical attack took place, said: "What we need from the Americans is not rifles. There are plenty of others prepared to provide better, bigger weapons. What we need is planning and organisation. They are doing something about that, but it is not really satisfactory."

Training camps have been set up in Jordan with American, British and French

former service personnel as instructors.

Accounts of what the camps provide and the support given to them by foreign forces vary. Mahmoud al-Hamadi, a fighter who had attended one of the Jordanian camps, recalled a two-and-a-half week course “in which we were given training with light weapons which we didn’t need. There were also some paper exercises and lessons on how to find mines. Maybe things have changed, but that was the way three months ago.”

15th September 2013

WARS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN HAVE PUT RUSSIA BACK ON THE TOP TABLE

By Patrick Cockburn

RUSSIA'S RETURN to the status of a great power has been obvious for some time. A Middle East leader who asked a senior American general earlier this summer about US plans for military intervention in Syria was told that prospects differed from the past because "Russia is back" as a major player.

The agreement reached by Russia and the US yesterday calling for Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons to be removed or destroyed, represents the first time that Russia has been so centrally important on the international stage since the last days of the Soviet Union, when Moscow was marginalised in the months between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the US-led counter-attack in early 1991. I remember sitting with the Soviet chargé in the Al Rashid Hotel in Baghdad as he agonised over the fate of the Soviet Union, which preoccupied him far more than developments in Iraq.

Russia's status in Syria as a crucial ally of President Bashar al-Assad is uniquely favourable to the Kremlin. It does not mean that Russia can dream of emulating the influence and power of the old Soviet Union. But it does demonstrate that Russia's long retreat as a world power is coming to an end.

Only two-and-a-half years ago, the US and Nato felt free to double-cross Moscow by using its naive assent to Western military intervention for limited humanitarian ends in Libya as if it was permission to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi.

For Russia, its Libyan debacle was the latest in a series of humiliations stretching back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The US had assured the Kremlin that it would not expand its military alliances into Eastern Europe if Russian forces withdrew, but soon former members of the Warsaw Pact were joining Nato. In December 2001, President Bush withdrew the US from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty which had been central to arms control for 30 years. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined Nato.

What is different today is that the US is politically and militarily weaker than it was 10 years ago, because of its failure to win wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US position has been further undermined by a series of missteps in Syria, including the miscalculation that it would be as easy to get rid of Assad as Gaddafi. Washington and the West Europeans forgot that Gaddafi had only fallen because the Libyan rebels were backed by a full-scale Nato air campaign. Failing this, the Libyan rebels were never going to win on their own and the same is true in Syria.

US intentions in Syria are contradictory because Washington dislikes the opposition almost as much as the government. It fears that if Assad goes now he

might be replaced by anarchic forces in which al-Qa'ida-linked militias would be a powerful if not predominant component. Washington's attitude to Assad is like that of St Augustine towards sin: it would like to get rid of him but not quite yet, and certainly not until there is a force more sympathetic to the US capable of taking power in Damascus.

This dilemma may soon be out of date: the Assad government shows no sign of imploding. The al-Qa'ida-linked al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant are gaining in strength and are in the forefront of the fighting in close co-operation with the supposedly moderate Free Syrian Army. US Secretary of State John Kerry played down the influence of al-Qa'ida in Syria, leading Vladimir Putin to respond tartly: "He's lying. And he knows he's lying. It's sad."

Ideally, the US and its allies would like a coup within the Syrian government that would get rid of Assad and his family, but otherwise maintain the status quo. But Ba'athist regimes in Iraq and Syria were designed to be coup-proof: the intelligence services are too powerful and omnipresent for an anti-Assad plot to succeed. The rebels are probably relieved at this, as they do not want "Assadism without Assad", just as, 10 years ago, the Iraqi opposition was nervous that the US occupation authorities post-invasion would opt for "Saddamism without Saddam".

The Syrian civil war has so far produced many strange twists and turns and there may be more to come. Conventional wisdom had held that it was highly unlikely that the Syrian army would use poison gas because this would make US military intervention inevitable. The Russians and the Iranians still claim that the Syrian government would not have done something so self-destructive. But, amazingly, the crisis provoked by the use of chemical weapons in Damascus on 21 August has hitherto been to Assad's advantage, because it has exposed the overwhelming unpopularity in the US, Britain and France of further military adventures in the Middle East. Previously, politicians had spoken of the legacy of failure in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they had grossly underestimated the strength of public hostility.

It is easy to overstate the extent to which the US is less of a power in the Middle East than 10 years ago. The implosion of Syria since 2011 is in its interests since, whoever wins the civil war, Syria will be weak, divided and no longer an obstacle to American influence. Moreover, no other power or combination of powers is in a position to take America's place. When the US does not take the initiative in the region, nobody else does.

The Syrian rebels may sense that the game is slipping away from them. For all the US desire to keep the threat of air strikes against Assad in reserve,

President Obama’s ability to order an attack is in practice limited by its unpopularity at home and the need for co-operation with Russia abroad. Agreement on eliminating Assad’s chemical weapons requires Assad’s co-operation. Chemical weapons have become the central focus of diplomacy rather than, as had previously been the case, Assad’s departure. Having successfully confronted and then conciliated the US over Syria, a resurgent Russia cannot see its protégé go down to defeat.

16th September 2013

CUT! OBAMA'S HOPES FOR A HOLLYWOOD ENDING IN SYRIA WERE ALWAYS GOING TO END IN TRAGEDY

BY Robert Fisk

WHAT ON earth was going on in Washington and Geneva last week? I'm not trying to cheapen the unspeakable tragedy of Syria, nor the apparent common sense that suddenly gripped world leaders on Saturday when the US and Russia agreed a framework for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, but the Obama administration is still getting weirder and weirder. First - and let's remember the narrative of events - Obama last year was really, terribly, awfully worried that Syria's chemical weapons would "fall into the wrong hands". In other words, he was frightened they would fall into the hands of al-Qa'ida or the al-Nusra front. Seemingly they were still, at that moment, in the "right hands" - those of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. But now Obama and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, have decided that they are in the wrong hands after all, since they are now accusing the "right hands" of firing sarin gas shells at civilians. And that crosses the infamous "red line".

I am overlooking, for the moment, the almost magical moment when Kerry told the world that America's strike would be "unbelievably small", followed by Obama telling us all that he doesn't do "pin pricks". What does all this twaddle mean?

And then - wait for it - as the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, suggested an international collection of all the rusty old chemical shells in Syria, Pentagon "sources" said it would need up to 75,000 armed troops to protect the chemical inspectors. Seventy-five thousand! If that isn't boots on the ground, I don't know what is.

And all this amid yet more nonsense in America last week about Hitler and the Second World War. Maybe the Americans should offer 250,000 men and see if Putin won't pitch in with another quarter of a million and the two great statesman can recreate the Grand Alliance of Yalta - Cameron, I'm afraid, doesn't get to play Churchill this time round - and do a re-run of the Second World War in Syria with live bullets: D-Day, Arnhem - no, on reflection perhaps not Arnhem - Stalingrad, the Battle of the Kursk Salient, the whole shebang. Believe me, the convoys would stretch for miles.

Of course, Putin and Lavrov kept clear of references to the Second World War. Russia suffered too grievously from the real Hitler for that. I've said this before, but I really do suspect that leaders who have no experience of war - I am excepting McCain and the indefatigable UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi here - actually thought they were making a Hollywood movie. Kerry's preposterous "unbelievably small" strike is obviously a low budget film for recession-hit America. Obama promises wide-screen drama. Think Steven Spielberg. And

then the Russians, who can spot a dead cat when they see one, zap the whole project.

None of the above should cheapen the unspeakable tragedy of Syria. The world, I suspect, is not totally convinced that the regime was responsible for using chemical weapons in Ghouta on 21 August - though I bet the Russians know who did. Now we've got rebels chopping off prisoners' heads, I'm not sure what scruples they'd have about using sarin. But it was interesting to see the Syrian government agreeing to put their chemical weapons in international hands - I couldn't help noticing that they didn't demand the same of the insurgents…

But without dismissing the Geneva shenanigans out of hand, let's have a closer look at the Kerry-Lavrov timetable. The Syrians have to come up with a list of their nasties within a week. Inspectors are to be on the ground by mid-November. Then every chemical weapon has got to be destroyed (or "secured") by the middle of next year. And this amid a civil war! Peace in our time. O brave new world.

Of course, while the inspectors are battering their way through the front lines - if Assad hasn't got all his weapons in Tartous, Banias and Lattakia on the Mediterranean coast, which I suspect - the Syrians continue to kill each other, the Syrian government goes on trying to break the rebels and the Islamist insurgents go on attacking Christian towns and chopping off the heads of captives. Put bluntly, they can use rifles, shells, knives and swords to slaughter each other - but absolutely no sarin. There is something deeply offensive and deeply cynical about all this. Russia re-enters the Middle East, Obama is off the hook after playing World War 2 - and the Syrians go on dying.

I do hope that all this will work, that we will have a "Geneva 2" conference at last, and that America and Russia will no longer spat over the Syrian bloodbath. But I am not at all sure the rebels will go along with this, because Assad is clearly not leaving power. Not now, anyway. And the Saudis? And the Qataris? And any other Gulf Sunnis who've been funding and arming the rebels? And the whole timetable seems so hopelessly optimistic that I wonder what Kerry and Lavrov put in their coffee in Geneva before addressing the press. For there are fearful pitfalls along the way.

However, there is another story going on here, and that's Iran. For now, the leader of Iran appears to be a wise and sane man, Putin can surely resurrect his own ideas on Iranian nuclear material, and the Iranian-Syrian alliance could be hooked up together to end the whole miserable failure of politics and perhaps even the war in Syria. Then Obama can claim a world-shaking political victory (brought about only by his threat to use force, of course) and Kerry can go back to making peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

And now that the Egyptian army is helping the Israeli army enforce the siege of Gaza again, Obama could find a few old Dakotas and run a postwar Berlin-style airlift to drop food and fuel to the Palestinians below. Ah, just another movie.

A sinister warning for the Druze militia leader as his mother dies

A week ago, one of Lebanon's great ladies died. At 85 years old, Princess May Shakib Arslan was the widow of humanist, philosopher and politician Kamal Jumblatt, who was murdered in 1977 - so the family are convinced - by Syrian assassins. Ms Arslan was also the mother of Walid Jumblatt, the present Druze leader, head of the ruthless Druze militia in the Lebanese civil war and perhaps the bravest current critic of the Syrian regime. Thousands trooped to her funeral in Mukhtara, hundreds queued to offer their condolences.

But one sinister, indeed venomous letter arrived at the Jumblatt home from a certain General Jamil Sayyed, the former - and very pro-Syrian - director of Lebanon's General Security. General Sayyed is a man you listen to. Here is part of what he wrote: "I hope in these sad circumstances and in view of the genuine tears you have shed over your late mother, that you yourself remember… the thousands of mothers, widows and orphans that you made cry through the killings you perpetrated in your wars… I implore the mercy of God for [Princess May Shakib Arslan's] soul and his forgiveness for all sins that she accidentally or deliberately committed. It is not her fault that she made you as you are. It's not too late for Jumblatt to ask forgiveness or change who he is."

Is it a warning?

17th September 2013

SYRIA GAS ATTACKS: THE CLEAR AND CONCISE EVIDENCE

By David Usborne

A GRIM United Nations inspectors' report offered "clear and convincing evidence" yesterday that poison gas was used "on a relatively large scale" in the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus on 21 August when weather conditions - cold, falling air - ensured it would cause maximum death and suffering, seeping silently into basements and underground shelters.

While the document, submitted formally to the Security Council by the Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, does not explicitly assign responsibility for the attacks, it clearly suggests that in at least two instances rockets designed to release sarin gas were fired from the direction of territory held by government forces. One of those appeared to have come from the direction of a large Syrian army base.

The report "confirms the position of those of us who have said that the regime is guilty", French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said yesterday. "When you look at the facts, the quantities of toxic gas used, the complexity of the mixing, the nature and trajectory of the vectors, all that leaves absolutely no doubt as to the origin of the attack."

The US envoy to the UN, Samantha Power, noted that the regime has sarin gas and there is "no evidence" the rebels do. "The UN report confirms unmistakably that chemical weapons were used," she told reporters in New York. "The mandate of the chemical weapons team was, as you well know, not to investigate culpability. But the technical detail of the UN report makes clear that only the regime could have carried out this large-scale chemical weapons attack."

"This was no cottage-industry use of chemical weapons," said Sir Mark Lyall, the British ambassador.

First reports from residents and non-governmental groups of chemical weapons use set in train the crisis that saw the United States threaten military action and the negotiation at the weekend of the Russian-US pact to confiscate and destroy the weapons.

But yesterday was the first time in a quarter of a century that the United Nations formally declared the deliberate deployment of prohibited chemical weapons against soldiers or civilians.

President Bashar al-Assad, who agreed last week to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention, has applied to the US for a visa to attend next week's UN General Assembly in New York. The State Department declined to comment.

The UN team, which came under sniper fire the first time it attempted to visit the affected areas five days after the attacks, based their findings on an array of

evidence, including soil samples, examination of munitions fragments, analysis of blood, urine and hair from victims as well as extensive interviews with more than fifty exposed survivors including doctors and nurses who rushed to the scene.

“On the basis of the evidence obtained during the investigation of the Ghouta incident, the conclusion is that chemical weapons have been used in the ongoing conflict between the parties in the Syrian Arab Republic, also against civilians, including children, on a relatively large scale,” said the report, compiled by chief UN investigator who lead the team, Ake Sellstrom of Sweden.

It also confirmed that that assault involved rockets fitted to release quantities of Sarin gas. Of 34 blood samples analysed, 91 per cent were positive for sarin exposure. “The environmental, chemical and medical samples we have collected provide clear and convincing evidence that surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve agent sarin were used,” the report said.

The inspectors found parts of rockets and damage to buildings in the Moadimayah district of West Ghouta and the Zamalka and Ein Tarma neighbourhoods of East Ghouta, suburban areas that were largely under rebel control. By citing the weather conditions, the report implies careful forward planning; temperatures were falling between 2am and 5am. “This means that air is not moving from the ground upwards, but rather the opposite. Chemical weapons use in such meteorological conditions maximises their potential impact as the heavy gas can stay close to the ground and penetrate lower levels of buildings where many people were seeking shelter.”

Some of the witness testimony was taken from health care workers and first responders, many of whom lived in nearby neighbourhoods and rushed to help the victims. Nine nurses and seven doctors were interviewed and several of them suffered symptoms of having been exposed to sarin, “with one describing the onset of blurred vision, generalised weakness, shaking, a sensation of impending doom, followed by fainting.”

When the first responders reached the areas hit by the rockets they saw “a large number of individuals lying on the ground, many of whom were deceased or unconscious.

The report acknowledges that determining trajectories was only possible in two of the five rocket impact areas. “Impact site number one (Moadamiyah) and impact site number four (Ein Tarma) provide sufficient evidence to determine, with a sufficient degree of accuracy, the likely trajectory of the projectiles,” it said in an annex, which also offered pictures of the rockets as well as identifying markets in Russian lettering.

The regime and its allies, notably Russia, have claimed the atrocity was

carried out by the rebels to ‘frame’ President Assad. In that narrative one could say the opposition had deliberately used Russian made rockets. It would, however, be hard to explain how they managed to carry out the operation from several points inside regime territory. Mr Sellstrom moreover told envoys the sarin gas was of high purity and concentration.

Included in the report was confirmation that because so many of the victims were sleeping when the rockets came in, it often happened that single families lost multiple members. In Zamalka, two brothers who were interviewed said that of the 40 members of their family who were all living in the same building only they had survived.

19th September 2013

IN SYRIA'S CAPITAL, THE KILLING FIELDS REMAIN, AND TRUTH IS AS RARE AS HOPE

By Robert Fisk

AND SO the war goes on. Missile alerts may be over but the killing fields remain, untouched by Obama's pale threats or Sergei Lavrov's earnestness. The Syrian army fights on in the rubble and the shells fly over Damascus and the road from Lebanon is still littered with checkpoints. Only when you reach the city do you notice how many people have now built iron guard doors before their homes and iron gates on car parks. The claim that 40 to 50,000 rebels surround the capital is probably untrue but there are up to 80,000 security men and soldiers inside Damascus and, on this battlefront, they may well be winning.

It's a campaign that started long before the use of sarin gas on 21 August and continued long afterwards. But on that fateful night, the Syrian army did mount one of its fiercest bombardments of rebel areas. In 12 separate attacks, it tried to put special forces men inside the insurgent enclaves, backed up by artillery fire. These included the suburbs of Harasta and Arbin.

I was chatting yesterday to an old Syrian friend, a journalist who used to be in the country's special forces and he - quite by chance - said he was embedded with Syrian government troops on the night of 21 August. These were men of the Fourth Division - in which the President's brother Maher commands a brigade - and my friend was in the suburb of Moadamiyeh - the site of one of the chemical attacks. He recalls the tremendous artillery bombardment but saw no evidence of gas being used. This was one of the areas from which the army was attempting to insert bridgeheads into rebel territory. What he does remember is the concern of government troops when they saw the first images of gas victims on television - fearing that they themselves would have to fight amid the poisonous fumes.

Frontline Syrian forces do carry gas masks but none was seen wearing any. "The problem," my friend said, "is that after Libya there are so many Russian weapons and artillery pieces smuggled into Syria that you don't know what anybody's got any more. The Libyans can't produce enough of their oil but they sure can export all Gaddafi's equipment." But that doesn't necessarily include sarin gas. Nor does it let the Syrian government off the hook. The protocols on the use of gas and missiles are said to be very strict in Syria so, of course, we come back to the old question: who ordered those missiles fired during the awful night of 21 August?

Some questions are familiar. Why use gas when so much more lethal weaponry is being flung at rebel forces across the country? If the government wanted to use gas, why not employ it north of Aleppo where not a single government soldier or official exists? Why in Damascus? And why wasn't gas

used on this scale in the previous two years? And why employ such a dreadful weapon when the end result is that Syria - by giving up its stocks of chemical weapons - has effectively lost one of its strategic defences against an Israeli invasion? No wonder, another Syrian friend of mine remarked last night, that the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem had such a long and shocked face when he made his Moscow announcement. Wasn't Israel the real winner in all this?

Most probably Israel is also the winner in Syria's civil war, as its once great neighbour is smashed and pulverised by a conflict which may continue for another two years. Syria was never a wealthy nation, but rebuilding its smashed cities and railways and roads is going to take many years. Rumours in Damascus are thicker than the smoke which envelops part of the city. Among the latest is an allegedly secret Western demand that a new Syrian government be formed of 30 ministers - 10 of them regime figures and at least 10 others independents - and that there must be a total restructuring of the army and security services. Since the West no longer has the means of enforcing such ambitious plans, all this sounds unlikely. Unless the Russians are also supporting the idea.

North of Damascus, the Jabhat al-Nusra forces are now way back from the ancient, partly Christian town of Maaloula which was recaptured by the Syrian Third Armoured Division. But this poses another question. Why on earth did the Nusra fighters take Maaloula if they had no intention of holding it? Did they think that the Syrian regime would be so distracted by the thought of an American attack that it would lack the will to drive them out? Sadly both sides have ceased to care about the weapons they use or the immorality of using them. When an Islamist fighter can film himself eating the flesh of a dead soldier, all scruples have gone.

And here is one final thought. Not long ago, rebels in Damascus murdered a woman in Harasta. One of her sons is now serving in the Syrian army. He has never touched or fired gas in his life. But as a member of his family said to me, "if he was ordered to, he would not have the slightest hesitation. He would love to revenge himself on those who killed his beloved mother."

20th September 2013

THE DEATH TOLL CONTINUES TO RISE, WHOEVER IS DOING THE COUNTING

By Robert Fisk

AS THE MIGs raced over Damascus yesterday morning, two traffic cops - sweltering in white helmets on this hot autumn day - were issuing tickets on double parked cars near the Barada River. More than 100,000 dead - give or take a few thousand, if you believe the statistics - and they are still issue parking tickets.

Perhaps there is something fantastical about this city. As the rebel suburbs are blasted by the planes - these explosions can be heard all over Damascus like giant bursting balloons - the middle classes are sipping cold lemon juice on the terrace of the Plattorria café in Abu Rumaneh.

This isn't "blitz spirit" or any of the other hooray clichés with which we like to gift cities at war. It's about the willing suspension of disbelief, the idea that if you pretend the war is not there, it will not be there; that which has happened has not happened. War is the great illusion.

Behind the French-built children's college, old Joseph Battie - of Armenian origin, although he prefers "Syrian" or just "Christian" as his appellation - claims he now has an average of one customer a day. I am today's customer at the Ibn Sina Bookshop; yes, it really is named after the 10th Century Persian Shia doctor and philosopher from Bukhara.

So why does Joseph bother to open? "Because I've been here for 19 years," he says. The books are old and dusty, a pile of French paperback editions of Les Misèrables and far too many Jilly Cooper novels in English and a couple of books by Amin Maalouf. There's a tourist section with a brochure on the partly Christian city of Maaloula on the top, although the latest tourists to visit the town came from the al-Qa'ida-friendly fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra. A recording of the Lebanese singer Joumana Mdawar moans across the bookshop. When I leave Joseph gives me a stamp-sized portrait of the Virgin and Child with Angels. "People think of money rather than God". "This war is all about money".

But then we come to real war. I meet an Alawite friend for lunch. And a friend of his, whom I have never met before, one Khaled Mahjoub, who doesn't even like being called a Sunni - although that is what he is - but who calls himself a eco-preneur, an industrialist and a confidant of President Bashar al-Assad. And he is indeed close to the President. He also happens to be a cigar-maker - real Syrian cigars, believe it or not, with tobacco from Lattakia. He hands me one. It is about an inch in width. "So how many dead in Syria?" I ask him. "Perhaps 70,000," he replies.

My Alawite friend thinks it's closer to half a million, an astonishing figure.

But then I ask him, how many Syrians did he know personally who have died in the past two years. “At least 30 dead, all civilians, he replies simply. “One was a policeman from my village who was shot 10 months ago. Another was an employee at Furat Petroleum, who was a guard in Deir El Zour who was kidnapped and killed. Another was a money transporter for the local Syrian mobile phone network. He was shot for the money in Homs.”

I turned to Khaled. “At least 55,” he says bleakly. “Five of them because of their connections to me.” Two of the dead men were cousins of my Alawite friend.

Khaled speaks loudly and his support for the President booms across the restaurant. He is a man, I suspect, who has many enemies. He looks at me grimly. “Judge me for the enemies I made”, he says. And I think he is quoting Theodore Roosevelt because Khaled has been an American citizen since 1993.

Then comes the inevitable praise of Assad. “He is a leader, not a manager. He leads people and he manages things. What we need here is a Mandela-type reconciliation.” And who is Syria’s Mandela, I ask (naturally holding my breath) “Bashar al-Assad, of course”, comes the painfully expected reply.

His economic message comes in American sound-bites. And I’m not sure I understand all of it. “We have deliverable politicians. They are tactical retail politicians. It’s about vision, not about people. Today you need to be intelligent, not smart, effective but not efficient.”

And back we go to Bashar al-Assad. “I respect him for two things: insisting on keeping [President] Lahoud as President of Lebanon” [beyond his constitutional term]. I can almost hear the Lebanese screaming with anger at such a thought.

“The second strategical forte of Bashar al-Assad is that he refused to do non-institutional reforms. He refused to do short-cuts.”

I shake my head at all of this. I’m still trying to puff away on his massive cigar. But it worries me, this sense of vague optimism - within six months, he claims, things will have turned around in Syria. And I’m worried about his mere 50,000 dead. And I also remember curling up in bed the night before with Rise and Fall of the Third Reich in which William Shirer records the German bombing of Rotterdam in 1940.

“It was first reported and long believed that from 25,000 to 30,000 Dutch were killed,” Shirer wrote. That was the figure given in the next edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. But at the Nuremburg trials, the Dutch government gave the final figure as just 814 killed.

I have a feeling there is a lesson here for all those fatalities statistics we imbibe on Syria. Fifty thousand? One hundred and ten thousand? Half a million?

Assad’s jets were still flying over Damascus yesterday afternoon. I suppose the only sure fact is that the figures are definitely climbing.

21st September 2013

THE HUMANITARIAN HEADACHE OF BRINGING HOME SYRIA'S BODIES

By Robert Fisk

KHALED ERKSOUSSI is planning to leave Syria. The Damascus Secretary General of the Syrian Red Crescent - 22 of whose volunteers have already been killed in the war - was fired from his full time job with a Damascus telecoms company this week, probably because he spends too much time on humanitarian work.

The Red Crescent can't match his old salary. Besides, donor money is drying up, talented volunteers are already being poached abroad. And who wants to spend their time stuffing three-day old corpses into body-bags and negotiating with up to 12 different groups across the front lines?

For this is also a gruesome story. Reader beware.

"It looks like there is no money any more from the donor side," he says. "All our partners are suffering. Maybe politics is taking first note on the stage. Did you notice that when the chemical issue (sic) happened, in the UN Security Council, the first decision was to go in and investigate - but what about the medical side? It shows what is important: finding the guilty - the victim doesn't matter."

Mr Erksoussi is a difficult man to disabuse - the UN inspectors were not sent to point the finger at the guilty, but he has a good enough argument. Pointing the finger gets more credit than understanding the tragedy through which Mr Erksoussi's colleagues work.

Take the body retrievals, most of them of soldiers killed by rebels - dozens of them - often brought home three at a time. "Sometimes they [the insurgents] play tricks. Not long ago, we went to collect the bodies of three soldiers. But the last body we were carrying, our people thought something was wrong. One of the bodies seemed to have wires attached to it. We left it in place. Now we have demanded that all the bodies transferred to us must be examined before extraction. Both sides must take from the corpses what is on them, whatever it is, even ammunition. I don't want to deal with a hand grenade in an ambulance..."

Most recently, the Red Crescent has been ferrying cooked food into the hell-hole of Aleppo prison, a vast block held by government forces and guards but totally surrounded by rebels, in which hundreds of prisoners - common criminals, detainees and insurgent enemies of the government - are now held amid dirt and lack of sanitation and shellfire.

"We managed to get dozens of prisoners out who had officially finished their sentences and they just needed a safe passage out. But the first time we went there, one of the rebel groups fired a rocket-propelled grenade at one of our cars. They missed. Everything was in place and cleared with all the groups, but this

one said: ‘We are upset because you didn’t talk to us.’ We said, ‘well, we’ll shout next time - but just don’t shoot.’ But later insurgents wounded one volunteer and killed a government judge (who was) with us.

“Last time, we had a team in Deir el-Zour and they were detained by the al-Nusra forces for seven hours. We were with an International Red Cross team and Jabhat al-Nusra hate what they call ‘this damned Red Cross’. We said, well, you’ve been eating food with ICRC red crosses on without caring very much.”

Now the Red Crescent can supply even insurgent-held Raqaa with supplies, but not the centre of Aleppo city which has been besieged for a month.

Days of negotiations between government and rebel forces precede most body extractions. “They usually come out within two to three days. The rebels usually know the names of the soldiers they’ve killed. The deal is done between them on the front lines. They use us as mediators to cross the front lines and get corpses out. When they make the deal, we get in touch with both sides to make sure it’s correct. Often it’s supplies in return for bodies. Usually we put them in body bags. The bodies are sometimes left in the place where they were killed - most of them shot - but last time in Deraya (a suburb of Damascus), they (the rebels) just pulled them from the place where they died to a house nearby where they gave them to us.”

The last two Red Crescent volunteers to be killed were in Homs two months ago when a mortar shell fell outside the local Red Crescent office. The war came to them.

Khaled Erksoussi speaks with great care about some elements of the Red Crescent’s work. I can well see why. More than 15 volunteers remain imprisoned by the regime. The problem of what is lawful and unlawful in war has been a major problem. “The government still regards the finding of a make-shift hospital as a victory” - since it has usually been set up to help wounded insurgents who cannot go to a government hospital - “but this contradicts the fact that all wounded victims must be given medical assistance.”

Mr Erksoussi believes that the fighting around Damascus has become more ferocious but “you can’t win with force - this idea is on both sides now. What’s preventing both of them from stopping is ‘ego’. It’s not like they’re equal. When a government thinks it is fighting terrorists or ‘evil’, you still have to be responsible for civilians. But unless you close the tap - weapons and money - it will continue forever. I can’t say this place is going to hell - because it’s already there.”

22nd September 2013

GAS MISSILES ‘WERE NOT SOLD TO SYRIA’

By Robert Fisk

WHILE THE Assad regime in Damascus has denied responsibility for the sarin gas missiles that killed around 1,400 Syrians in the suburb of Ghouta on 21 August, information is now circulating in the city that Russia's new "evidence" about the attack includes the dates of export of the specific rockets used and - more importantly - the countries to which they were originally sold. They were apparently manufactured in the Soviet Union in 1967 and sold by Moscow to three Arab countries, Yemen, Egypt and Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's Libya. These details cannot be verified in documents, and Vladimir Putin has not revealed the reasons why he told Barack Obama that he knows Assad's army did not fire the sarin missiles; but if the information is correct - and it is believed to have come from Moscow - Russia did not sell this particular batch of chemical munitions to Syria.

Since Gaddafi's fall in 2011, vast quantities of his abandoned Soviet-made arms have fallen into the hands of rebel groups and al-Qa'ida-affiliated insurgents. Many were later found in Mali, some in Algeria and a vast amount in Sinai. The Syrians have long claimed that a substantial amount of Soviet-made weaponry has made its way from Libya into the hands of rebels in the country's civil war with the help of Qatar - which supported the Libyan rebels against Gaddafi and now pays for arms shipments to Syrian insurgents.

There is no doubt that Syria has a substantial chemical weapons armoury. Nor that Syrian stockpiles contain large amounts of sarin gas 122mm missiles. But if the Russians have indeed been able to identify the specific missile markings on fragments found in Ghouta - and if these are from munitions never exported to Syria - the Assad regime will boast its innocence has been proven.

In a country - indeed a world - where propaganda is more influential than truth, discovering the origin of the chemicals that suffocated so many Syrians a month ago is an investigation fraught with journalistic perils. Reporters sending dispatches from rebel-held parts of Syria are accused by the Assad regime of consorting with terrorists. Journalists reporting from the government side of Syria's front lines are regularly accused of mouthing the regime's propaganda. And even if the Assad regime was not responsible for the 21 August attacks, its forces have committed war crimes aplenty over the past two years. Torture, massacre, the bombardment of civilian targets have long been proved.

Nevertheless, it also has to be said that grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad's army. While these international employees cannot be identified, some of them were in Damascus on 21 August and asked a series

of questions to which no one has yet supplied an answer. Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later - and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in? Having thus presented the UN with evidence of the use of sarin - which the inspectors quickly acquired at the scene - the Assad regime, if guilty, would surely have realised that a military attack would be staged by Western nations.

As it is, Syria is now due to lose its entire strategic long-term chemical defences against a nuclear-armed Israel - because, if Western leaders are to be believed, it wanted to fire just seven missiles almost a half century old at a rebel suburb in which only 300 of the 1,400 victims (if the rebels themselves are to be believed) were fighters. As one Western NGO put it yesterday: “if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God’s sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?”

The Russians, of course, have made similar denials of Assad’s responsibility for sarin attacks before. When at least 26 Syrians died of sarin poisoning in Khan al-Assal on 19 March - one of the reasons why the UN inspectors were dispatched to Syria last month - Moscow again accused the rebels of responsibility. The Russians later presented the UN with a 100-page report containing its “evidence”. Like Putin’s evidence about the 21 August attacks, however, it has not been revealed.

A witness who was with Syrian troops of the army’s 4th Division on 21 August - a former Special Forces officer considered a reliable source - said he saw no evidence of gas shells being fired, even though he was in one of the suburbs, Moadamiya, which was a target for sarin. He does recall the soldiers expressing concern when they saw the first YouTube images of suffocating civilians - not out of sympathy, but because they feared they would have to fight amid clouds of poison.

“It would perhaps be going beyond conspiracy theories to say the government was not involved,” one Syrian journalist said last week, “but we are sure the rebels have got sarin. They would need foreigners to teach them how to fire it. Or is there a ‘third force’ which we don’t know about? If the West needed an excuse to attack Syria, they got it right on time, in the right place, and in front of the UN inspectors.”

23rd September 2013

INTO THE MINOTAUR'S CAVE OF DIPLOMACY: HOW RUSSIA BECAME SYRIA'S DETERRENT

By Robert Fisk

THE SYRIAN delegation to Moscow left Damascus on the night of Saturday 7 September, as much to find out its fate as to negotiate.

The US President Barack Obama and the Russian President Vladimir Putin had been hatching their plan to prevent American missile strikes and Walid Muallem, Syria's extremely shrewd Foreign Minister, had no idea what it was. Far from bringing specific proposals to Russia, he wanted to know what the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov knew - if he knew anything at all.

It was a weird situation. Syria did not want to be attacked by the US after sarin gas was used in Damascus on the night of 21 August, but it must have been clear that the Syrian regime - the principal target of American cruise missiles - had been cut out. Russia was making the decisions.

Muallem and his team - who are well-known in the Arab world and especially in Iran (and in the good old days, in London, Washington and Paris) - arrived at Sheremetyevo airport exhausted at dawn on Sunday 8 September, checking in, as they always did in Moscow, at the President beside the Moskva river, a cavernous and soulless hotel of the Brezhnev era. Their appointment with Lavrov was set for Monday at the Russian foreign ministry and Muallem and his delegation, still tired from their overnight flight, talked to Damascus and watched the satellite television shows out of Washington.

This was a moment in Syria's history of which Muallem and his colleagues were all too aware. The foreign policy of Syria - or perhaps its military policy - was being decided by others. And so it came to pass that on 9 September, Muallem sat opposite Lavrov in the ministry. The Russian Foreign Minister bluntly told the Syrians what he thought. It was obvious from the start that he believed that Obama was going to strike their country.

This was not good news, especially when Lavrov made it clear that the operation would "definitely" take place. There was some discussion before Muallem stated his own country's position: that "if the real reason for the proposed aggression against Syria was the chemicals, then diplomatic means have not been exhausted". The Syrians like Lavrov - they believe (with what proof I have no idea) that he writes poetry in his spare time, something which would naturally appeal to a people who often learn Arabic poetry by heart before they can write. "He is a good friend to the Arabs," is a constant refrain in Damascus. Readers must be left to decide if this is true.

Digging like a sleuth for the details of Russian-Syrian diplomacy - never mind the extraordinary military relationship - is like wandering the cave of the Minotaur. A wrong turning can put you in danger, a long-standing friend lost

forever, a contact angered, an official enraged by an understanding lost in translation. So as your correspondent in Damascus tip-toes through Russian and Syrian sources, he must remember the risks. This is the best I can do and I have every reason to believe it is spot on. It is a story that tells you about the future Syrian state.

In any event, Lavrov broke off the conversation by telling Muallem that he was going at once to see President Putin at the Kremlin. “I will get back to you,” he peremptorily told the Syrians. Muallem again insisted that “diplomacy is not exhausted”. He must have hoped he was right; after all, if he was wrong, he might not have a Damascus airport to return to.

The Syrians returned to the bleak President hotel for lunch. In Washington, John Kerry was blathering on with more threats. Syria must hand over chemical weapons. They only had a week to hand over an inventory. At 5pm Lavrov called Muallem. They should meet in an hour. There was to be a press conference.

All along, Muallem had insisted that Syria wanted to sign the treaty banning chemical weapons. Yet everyone - not least the Russians - knew that Syria’s chemical arsenal was its only deep strategic defence if the country faced a doomsday war with Israel. Still Muallem did not know what was in store for him. He and his colleagues had not slept for 36 hours. Lavrov was worried for different reasons. If the Americans hit Syria, they would destroy Bashar al-Assad’s army, Islamists might storm into Damascus and Russian forces - with a naval base and marines in the Syrian port of Tartus and other warships at sea in the eastern Mediterranean - would be “forced to react”. This, at least, is the Russian version of events.

Now Lavrov told Muallem of Putin’s deal: all Syria’s chemical weapons to be monitored, details handed over within days, all stocks to be under international control within a year. And the Russians would be most grateful if Muallem - at a press conference that evening - would be good enough to agree. Muallem called Damascus. He talked to the government and of course to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. He agreed. And so a long-faced, exhausted Muallem appeared in front of the world’s television cameras - apparently almost overwhelmed with exhaustion - to “say yes” (in the words of the Russians).

Syria wanted to save its people from aggression and placed complete confidence in its Russian friends. One of his assistants, Bouthaina Shaaban - who is also an adviser to Assad - looked equally overwhelmed.

Afterwards, Muallem told Lavrov that the agreement took from Syria its “No 1” weapon. And Lavrov replied: “Your best weapon is us.”

And that was it. Syria’s strategic deterrent had become Moscow. Kremlin

rules.

23rd September 2013

ASSAD'S FANFARE IS AN UNWITTING PAEAN TO THE ENEMY

By Robert Fisk

IN THE days of Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, Syria had only one TV channel - state-run, propaganda only, deadly boring. Then a wonderful joke did the rounds. Hafez had decreed a second channel, free and fair, to start broadcasting the following Friday.

So on the day, the entire population of Syria tuned in to Channel 2. And there on the screen was a senior Mukhabarat intelligence officer in a black leather jacket. He stared at the viewers and solemnly ordered: "Switch back to Channel 1 immediately." Under Omran al-Zoubi, the country's Information Minister, Syria's channels have been transformed. The war is graphically broadcast on pro-Assad channels, vivid camera-held shots of Syrian troops fighting for their lives, wounded soldiers dragged from the battlefield, even the cunning use of edited YouTube images of executions and throat-cutting by insurgents. No massacres, of course, unless they are committed by the rebels.

But playing out now on one pro-government channel are edited extracts of Bashar al-Assad's interview with Fox News last week. He is speaking in English, with Arabic subtitles for Syrian viewers. What I notice, however, is that each clip of it is introduced with a few seconds of some rather beautiful trumpet music.

It took me an hour or two before I thought I recognised it: Aaron Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man. A very popular classical piece by a very popular American Jewish composer.

24th September 2013

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE GRAND MUFTI

By Robert Fisk

“I MET those men who assassinated my own son - and they told me they didn’t even know whom they were killing.” Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, the Grand Mufti of Syria, sits in a straightbacked chair, his immaculate white turban atop a narrow, intelligent and very troubled face. His son Sania was a second-grade student at Aleppo University when he was shot dead getting into his car. “I went to see the two men in the court and they said they’d just been given the number of the car’s registration plate, that they didn’t know whom they had killed until they went home and watched the news on television.”

I ask for his reaction to the men’s confession, and the Grand Mufti puts his hands over his eyes and weeps. “He was only 21, my youngest son. It was 10 October last year. I am trying to forget that he is dead. In fact I feel as if Sania is still living. On that day, he was to be betrothed to his future wife. She was a student of medicine, he was in the politics and economics department. ‘Sania’ in Arabic means ‘the highest point’. The two men said that in all 15 were involved in planning my son’s death. They said they were told he was a very important man. I said to them: ‘I forgive you’ and I asked the judge to forgive them. But he said they were guilty of 10 times as many crimes and must be judged.”

Sheikh Hassoun holds up a finger. “That same day I received an SMS message. It said: ‘We are not in need of your forgiveness.’ Then I heard on one of the news channels that the gang’s leader had said he would ‘judge the Mufti first. Then let him forgive us.’ So I sent a message: ‘I have never killed any man and I don’t intend to kill any man but I regard myself as a bridge of reconciliation. A Mufti must be a father to all. So what do you want to kill me for?’

“All the men involved were Syrians, from the countryside of Aleppo. They said they received their command from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, that they were each paid 50,000 Syrian pounds. This shows that my son’s killing was not out of doctrine or belief. The two men were 18 or 19 only.”

So each man was paid the equivalent of £350; Sania Hassoun’s life was worth a total of just £700. “I had five sons,” the Mufti says. “Now I have four.”

Sheikh Hassoun is, you might say, government-approved - he prayed beside Bashar al-Assad in a Damascus mosque after a bomb warning - and his family, let alone he himself, was an obvious target for Syria’s rebels. But his courage and his message of reconciliation cannot be faulted. In whatever new Syria arises from the rubble, Sheikh Hussein should be there even if his President has gone.

And he speaks with remarkable frankness. When I tell him that I fear the

mukhabarat intelligence service in Syria contaminates all it touches, including the institutions of government, he does not hesitate for a moment before replying.

“I suffered from the mukhabarat. I was taken from my post as a preacher from 1972 until 2000. I was taken from my position as Friday speaker in the Aleppo mosque and from lecturing on four occasions. The intelligence services all over the world are the same: they never look after the interest of the human being - they only look after their own institution. Sometimes the intelligence service can be against the president himself.”

And he asks whether it is not also true that the American intelligence services do not also spy on Americans and all of Europe, a difficult question - it must be said - to deny. “Let us put aside the Prophet Mohamed, Jesus and Moses - all the rest of the world are controlled by intelligence services.”

Unlike most Syrians, the Mufti looks forward rather than back. He prays for a Geneva 2 conference. “I am the Mufti of all Syrians - Sunni Muslims, Christians, Alawites, Druze - of all the diversity of sects we had before the war. There is no choice other than reconciliation; it is the only way back. But to offer reconciliation, we must eliminate the ‘external hand’ first.

“And if the neighbouring countries like Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon don’t try to make this same reconciliation, they will burn - the fire of crisis will flow to them, especially Turkey. For all Syrians, we are open for them to come back. The problem is those who came from outside Syria - especially from Iraq and Turkey - who came without visas over smugglers’ trails either to meet death or to overthrow the authorities here.”

A tougher Mufti emerges now. His sons’ killers, it transpires, are not the only prisoners of the regime that he has met. “I saw men after they were arrested,” he says. “Some were in tears. They said they thought they were on their way to fight in Palestine, not to fight in Syria.”

There are times - when Sheikh Hassoun speaks of an “external hand”, “elimination” and “criminal gangs” - when one hears His Master’s Voice. And on the question of sarin gas, he takes the government’s side of the story. He quotes Bashar al-Assad as saying he would never use gas against Syrians - that if he had used it, the war would not have gone on for two and a half years.

The first major use of gas came in March at Khan al-Assal in Aleppo province, near the Mufti’s residence, when at least 26 civilians suffocated to death. This is his version of what happened.

“Some of the farm labourers reported to me that all the terrorists in the area had suddenly left - the night before the attack - and had evacuated all their people. So the civilians were happy - they were civilians and many were the

wives and children of soldiers - and so they went back at last to their homes. Then came the chemical missile attack. I said at that time, in March, that this event is just an experiment, that gas will be used again in other places."

This, of course, is not a story the Americans want to hear. Five months ago, the Mufti was invited to speak at George Mason and George Washington Universities in the United States and he travelled to Jordan for his visa. He says he was asked to go to the US embassy in Amman where he was interrogated by a woman diplomat from behind a glass screen.

"I was so insulted that I decided not to go and I left for Damascus the next morning." A wise move. Sheikh Hassoun says that, the same day, one of his sons, who was in Amman, received a call from the embassy denying him a visa. "To be a secular Mufti," the sheikh adds, "is dangerous."

And it is true that the Mufti is a most secular man - he was even once an Assembly MP for Aleppo. "I am ready to go anywhere in the world to say that war is not a sacred deed," he says. "And those who have fought under the name of Jesus, Mohamed or Moses are lying. Prophets come to give life, not death.

"There is a history of building churches and mosques, but let us build human beings. Let us cease the language of killing. Had we paid all the funds of war to make peace, paradise would exist now. This is the message of my Syria."

A dangerous man indeed.

25th September 2013

SYRIAN IMMORALITY TALES: TWO MEN IN THE CONFLICT WHO DIDN'T DESERVE THEIR FATE

By Robert Fisk

THIS IS a tale of two tragedies. One of them is of Omar, now a gardener in a public park in a Syrian village called Boeyda. The other story belongs to Captain Antun Maluhi of the Syrian army. Their terrible ordeals say much about Syria and its war and about both sides in the conflict, a morality tale if you like - perhaps immorality is the right word - for neither deserved his fate.

Let us start with Omar - his real name, although his family name must remain obscure for all the usual reasons - who is, or was, a doorkeeper on a block of apartments in Damascus, an illiterate, poor man with seven children who decided last year to return to his home village south of Damascus to work in the local park. But in January, his wife reported to a friend of mine that her husband had disappeared.

He was used to danger. One of his sons had already been kidnapped and then released. But now he had disappeared into the maw of army security. The family swiftly found out what had happened. Arrested by the military intelligence service, the cops found on his mobile phone two telephone numbers for his two brothers. And both of them were in the Free Syrian Army, the first rebel group to oppose the Assad regime. Why was he calling his brothers?

By now, the family was becoming desperate. Omar's wife was begging for money to keep her children fed. And she could not even find out where her husband was imprisoned. Jails in Syria now are fearful places; they lack adequate food for prisoners and many inmates are said to have died. Family friends pleaded with the intelligence services for news of Omar. Could they send him food? Could they visit him? Where was he being held?

The enquiries went all the way up to a Brigadier General who said merely that he did not know where Omar had been taken. Nor, it seems, did he care. And now, in September, nine months after he was "disappeared", we do not know if Omar is alive or dead. Was he supposed to refuse to speak to his own brothers? He is, for God's sake, illiterate. So what is this genius supposed to have done that he should be put in prison? Why not treat him as a human being?

The story tells much about the cruelty and culture of impunity of the "mukhabarat" which has always stained the Syrian regime. It is shameful and outrageous and, indeed, was exactly the reason why the whole crisis began in Syria at the height of the Arab awakening. If men like Omar were treated with respect, would Syria have slipped over the edge?

But now to Captain Antun Maluhi, whose cousin by chance happens to be a friend of mine. A regular soldier and a Christian, married with two children, he was based five months ago at Raqqa in Aleppo province, where the local Kurds

operated with the army. A safe posting. But then the Kurdish militia left Raqqa and the Free Syrian Army stormed the tiny government garrison, killing several soldiers and capturing others, including Captain Maluhi.

Being the venal folk they are, the FSA - Obama's favourite militia, let us remember, and friends of John McCain - called up the Maluhi family who live in the small Christian town of Mar Maritsa in Homs province, very close to the Krak des Chevaliers crusader castle known in the past to so many foreign tourists. The FSA offered to release Captain Antun Maluhi if the family would cough up five million Syrian pounds - about £18,000 - for his freedom. Alas, they could not. The Maluhis, like Omar's family, are dirt poor. They couldn't even borrow that much money.

Weeks passed and the FSA took Captain Maluhi up to the Turkish border from where they allowed him to call his family. He pleaded with them to find the money. We don't know if they were struggling to find the cash. But in the meantime, the al-Nusra Brigade, the fearful religious force which has allied itself to al-Qa'ida, took over the region from the FSA. And we heard no more of Captain Maluhi.

Until this past weekend. For on Friday, the Lebanese New TV channel broadcast a communiqué from al-Nusra that they intended to execute their prisoner because he was "a Christian, a kaffir, an infidel".

And then on Sunday, the television website carried a new story. Captain Antun Maluhi had been executed. Murdered. Because he was a Christian.

26th September 2013

IN SACRED MAALOULA, WHERE THEY SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF CHRIST, WAR LEADS NEIGHBOURS INTO BETRAYAL

By Robert Fisk

THE DIAB family can never return to Maaloula. Not since the Christians of this beautiful and sacred town saw their Muslim neighbours leading the armed Nusrah Islamists to their homes. Georgios remembers how he peered over his balcony and saw Mohamed Diab and Ossama Diab and Yasser Diab and Hossam Diab and Khaled Turkik Qutaiman - all from Maaloula - walking in the street with men whom he said were dressed in Afghan-Pakistani clothes. “One of them had a Kalashnikov rifle in one hand and a sword in the other,” he says, shaking his head in disbelief.

Twenty years ago, identical tragedies destroyed the villages of Bosnia. Now they are being re-enacted in Syria. “We knew our Muslim neighbours all our lives,” Georgios says. He is a Catholic. “Yes, we knew the Diab family were quite radical, but we thought they would never betray us. We ate with them. We are one people.

“A few of the Diab family had left months ago and we guessed they were with the Nusra. But their wives and children were still here. We looked after them. Then, two days before the Nusra attacked, the families suddenly left the town. We didn’t know why. And then our neighbours led our enemies in among us.”

It is a terrible story in this most beautiful of towns, with its 17 churches and holy relics and its great cliff-side caves. Now the fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra - a rebel group with links to al-Qa’ida - are surviving in the caves and shooting down at the Syrian soldiers in Maaloula’s streets with Russian sniper rifles. You have to run from house to house, and one bullet smashed the windscreen of a parked car scarcely 10 metres from the balcony on which Georgios was telling his awful story. Up the road, a mortar round - apparently fired by Nusrah men - has torn a hole in the dome of a church. The Syrian army says it has driven the Islamists from Maaloula, which is technically true; but to leave the town, I had to ride in the back of a military armoured vehicle. It is not a famous victory for anyone.

Not one of the 5,000 Christian residents - nor a single member of the 2,000-strong Muslim community - has returned. Maaloula is, almost literally, a ghost town. Only Georgios and his friend Hanna and a few other local Christian men who joined the “national defence” units to defend their homes, are left. At least 10 Christians were murdered when the Nusra militia began its series of attacks on Maaloula on 4 September, some of them shot - according to Hanna - when they refused to convert to Islam, others dispatched with a knife in the throat. And there is a terrifying historical irony about their deaths, for they were slaughtered within sight of the Mar Sarkis monastery, sacred to the memory of a Roman

soldier called Sergius who was executed for his Christian beliefs 2,000 years ago.

Hanna says that before the war reached Maaloula this month, both Christians and Muslims agreed that the town must remain a place of peace. “There was a kind of coexistence between us,” Georgios agrees. “We had excellent relations. It never occurred to us that Muslim neighbours would betray us. We all said ‘please let this town live in peace - we don’t have to kill each other’. But now there is bad blood. They brought in the Nusra to throw out the Christians and get rid of us forever. Some of the Muslims who lived with us are good people but I will never trust 90 per cent of them again.”

Could there be better evidence of Nusra’s desire - and that of almost every side in this conflict - to sectarianise the war? Georgios joined his armed government unit when Nusra gunmen returned two days later - on 6 September - and now carries a huge 75mm Czech pistol strapped to his chest. He fought alongside the Syrian army’s 3rd Armoured Division, which took three days to recapture Maaloula because, the soldiers say, they could not risk damaging the churches and shrines. And therein lies a major problem. A Syrian Second Lieutenant called Talal told me that the caves had now been surrounded and that the Nusra snipers would run out of supplies. But if this is true - given the number of bullets cracking down the streets during my visit - the insurgents still seem to have plenty of ammunition.

The problem, of course, is that there’s a simple military solution to Maaloula’s present agony: for the army to use shellfire from their Russian-made tanks to blow the caves to pieces. But that would only continue the destruction of the heritage of Maaloula, whose people still speak Aramaic, the language which scholars believe was spoken by Christ. Only five months ago, in an untouched Maaloula, I stood next to the church of Mar Taqla while a Catholic girl recited the Lord’s Prayer’s in Aramaic. No prayers now.

It is impossible, amid the bullet-whizzing streets of the town today, talking to armed Christians whose emotions are incendiary, to gather up the full - even accurate - story of the Maaloula tragedy. They say that the church of Mar Taqla has been badly damaged, the altarpiece smashed, Byzantine pictures destroyed, but even Syrian troops will not approach the monastery today. When they briefly tried to help some nuns return after the battle, they told me, Nusra snipers cut them down, many shot in the legs as they helped the nuns to run away.

Almost every soldier I met had been wounded. Lt Talal, who comes from Sweida, had been hit in both legs during the battles. Two Syrian soldiers were hit on Monday, one in the legs, another in the shoulder. From an earlier skirmish with Nusra men - apparently with another Diab brother - Georgios had been shot

in the arm, legs and ribs, and one of his fingers had been torn off by a bullet.

The Nusra men seemed to take a perverse pleasure, not only in destroying Christian icons, but household beds and chairs, perhaps in a search for cash.

Even the exact number of deaths cannot be confirmed. But it is impossible to believe, after these sectarian wounds, that Maaloula can return as it was, a place of worship for Orthodox and Catholic but also, intriguingly, for Shia Muslims, many of them Iranians who used to visit the town to see its monasteries and Christian shrines.

A Syrian general tried to explain to me later that I was not witnessing a civil war, merely a “war against terror” - the stock government quotation - and that Syrians were not sectarian. “In Latakia, we have 200,000 Sunni Muslim refugees living among Christians and Alawites and there are no problems between them,” he said. This is true. And outside Maaloula, several civilians claimed that the Nusra forces which invaded the town - and which numbered 1,800 men, according to the Syrian army - also killed local Muslims.

For several days, the Nusra gunmen held out in the wreckage of the Safir Hotel before taking to the caves. The Christians are now all refugees, some in the Christian Bab Touma district in the old city of Damascus, others in Lebanon. But some statistics, however loosely gathered, speak for themselves. Sixty per cent of the Christians of Syria are now believed to have fled their country.

29th September 2013

THE MAN WITH ASSAD'S EAR

By Robert Fisk

WHEN KHALED Mahjoub talks, he doesn't take his eyes off you. He is, in this sense, an interrogator (of which more later) but he is also a man who has great influence with Bashar al-Assad. He went to school with his brother Basel, he knows the family well, and today he communicates directly with the President of Syria. He may not be his "right hand" - that might be the role of Asma, the President's wife - but I suspect he would like to be. He talks passionately of environmentally sustainable houses and a new economy for the world, yet he adulates Bashar al-Assad. Mr Mahjoub (inset above), I can only conclude, is a weird mixture of Gordon Brown and Albert Speer.

He puffs on one of his massive cigars (he has a factory that makes them in Latakia and the cigars are also eco-friendly) and he doesn't stop talking. He wants a "Marshall Plan" for the rebuilding of Syria - the invocation of the US rebuilding of postwar Europe is merely symbolic, I am relieved to hear - and he talks, on and on and on, about the "Salafi-Wahhabi petrodollar". Syria is now fighting this very threat, the same awful combination that sent 19 hijackers to attack America on 11 September 2001.

There may be truth in some of this. But many believe cynically - and their contention also bears the merit of truth - that Mr Mahjoub is President Assad's point man in the West, his role to persuade its leaders and journalists that the Syrian regime is the only secular government left in the Middle East and that its enemies will strike at Europe if they win in Syria. It's no disadvantage that the 57-year-old has been a US citizen since 1993.

"There is something that's forgotten since the Salafi-Wahhabi petrodollar attack on the US on 9/11 - the dimension of ideology versus ideology," he says. "You need to have Syria's moderate Sufi ideology - you need to have Syria on your side to fight the Salafi-Wahhabi mosques in Europe. This is not a luxury, it's a necessity. It's a must. The only one to have this idea is Syria, which is working within UN Security Council Resolution 1373."

I'm not entirely sure that Syria is locked into Sufism, the ascetic, gentle, almost mystical Muslim sect which is so opposed to the Islamist ideology. But we must note that the 28 September 2001 UN Security Council resolution calls on all states "to refrain from organising, instigating, assisting or participating in terrorist acts in another state".

This is shrewd stuff. Who has been arming and encouraging the armed uprising against the Assad regime? Why, Turkey, Qatar and Salafist Saudi Arabia, of course. And are they not, in the words of 1373, "knowingly financing, planning and inciting terrorist acts"? Yet, there is another side to the President's

friend that suddenly emerged at a dinner in Damascus which I joined with one of his close friends, a lawyer whom I know personally. It was one of those moments that was as revealing as it was frightening.

“Earlier this year, you interviewed some prisoners in the military prison and one of them was a French-Algerian who was caught fighting for the rebels,” Mr Mahjoub said. “He told you he was confused, that he regretted coming here. But he was lying to you. I went to see him. He was lying. He is an out-and-out Islamist. He is a terrorist.” And then Mr Mahjoub described exactly where I was sitting during the interview - which appeared in The Independent on Sunday earlier this year - and knew exactly the moment when I asked the prison governor to leave the room before questioning the bearded inmate. Mr Mahjoub had been to see this prisoner, to cross-question him about what he told me.

So he must also - and he must forgive me if my suspicions naturally lead me to this conclusion - be a prison interrogator, reporting back directly to the President of Syria. That was the moment it occurred to me that Mr Mahjoub could be a very dangerous man. I tried to reason with him, to tell him that the prisoner’s divorced wife in Marseilles wants him home with her and their children, that she wrote me a most beautiful and moving letter asking for help. “Wrong!” boomed Mr Mahjoub. No, he was wrong, I said. And he shook his head with impatience.

But let’s return to his Marshall Plan. “Everybody promises money after destruction,” he says. “Everyone promised Haiti, they promised to rebuild Iraq. But the promise wasn’t fulfilled to Haiti. Iraq did not rebuild. It was a lie. Waiting for the donors is not going to help. Rebuilding requires coherent multi-programmes. It’s not sufficient just to reconstruct buildings. You have to start with the human being before you start rebuilding walls. When I talk about the Marshall Plan, I’m not talking about rebuilding. That’s a failure - like the ‘war on terror’. What will make Syria different is a different Marshall Plan.

“So who’s going to pay? By law, and respecting and enforcing international law, there are three countries which did not respect UNSC 1373: Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These countries - which were supporting, directly or indirectly, al-Qa’ida and its affiliates to come to Syria and destroy the socioeconomic fabric of Syria - they have to pay for what they have destroyed.

“The last thing they will pay for is the infrastructure. They must pay for the rebuilding of the socioeconomic fabric which is the immune system of Syrian moderate Sufism. The Emir of Qatar, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey are going to be the General Marshalls. They will pay because the law must be imposed on them.”

And Khaled Mahjoub is off again on his favourite subject. Why don’t the

Muslims in Europe integrate with the countries they live in? How come that even in the most generous and humane country in Europe - Sweden - they have problems with their Muslims? Europe doesn't understand that subsidies will not create an integrated Muslim society. Muslims in the West should be given loans. "There is in these countries no fundamental equilibrium between rights and duties. People don't recognise the 'duty' bit. President Assad is the best 'change agent'. He is the only one who can keep Syria as a state and not be systematised" - I think Mr Mahjoub meant "sectarianised" - "like Iraq. The army and the old government institutions must be kept in place."

The Syrian tragedy, he says, may last another two years, but the "war with terror" will take decades. "We're going to have to adapt to a new situation where the big cities will be saved but there will be continuous attacks and war in the suburbs." Once more, I am troubled by Mr Mahjoub. The elite will be safe in the city centre, it seems, but the poor will be traumatised in the wreckage around it. He talks about "the new urbanism", which I find rather frightening.

Then he turns to the 21 August sarin gas attack. What about the rebels who were caught by the Turks carrying sarin gas weapons, he asks. "They captured three or four of 11 men involved, one was a Syrian, another a Turk, a third a Libyan. Why don't you look up the indictment of the attorney general for Adana? They captured two kilos of sarin grenades. The indictment talks of the sarin coming from Libya."

I promise to try to obtain a copy of the Adana indictment, if it exists in printed form, but Mr Mahjoub is talking now of the "environmentally sustainable houses" he builds - and which he will build, I suppose, in an environmentally sustainable Syria with all that Turkish, Qatari and Saudi cash. After which, I guess, Syria will purge the fundamentalism from Europe's mosques and emerge as the West's best secular friend in the Middle East, led - no doubt - by his close friend Bashar al-Assad.

30th September 2013

SECRET APPROACH TO ASSAD COULD RESHAPE THE WHOLE WAR

By Robert Fisk

SIX WEEKS ago, a two-man delegation arrived in secret in Damascus: civilians from Aleppo who represented elements of the Free Syrian Army, the rebel group largely composed of fighters who deserted the regime's army in the first year of the war. They came under a guarantee of safety, and met, so I am told, a senior official on the staff of President Bashar al-Assad. And they carried with them an extraordinary initiative - that there might be talks between the government and FSA officers who "believed in a Syrian solution" to the war.

The delegation made four points: that there must be an "internal Syrian dialogue"; that private and public properties must be maintained; that there must be an end to - and condemnation of - civil, sectarian, ethnic strife; and that all must work for a democratic Syria where the supremacy of law would be dominant. There was no demand - at least at this stage - for Assad's departure.

The reply apparently came promptly. There should indeed be "a dialogue within the Syrian homeland"; no preconditions for the dialogue; and a presidential guarantee of safety for any FSA men participating. And now, it seems, another remarkable development is under way: in seven rebel-held areas of Aleppo, most of them under the control of the FSA, civil employees can return to work in their offices, and government institutions and schools can reopen. Students who have become militiamen over the past two years will be disarmed and return to their classrooms.

Some members of the FSA have formed what they call the "National Union for Saving Syria", although members of the political opposition in areas outside government control disrupted meetings by condemning the government army and, according to those involved in the "Union", making sectarian comments and condemning Shiites and Iran. Last week there were several defections of FSA units to the al-Qa'ida-linked al-Nusra Front, which has complicated matters still further. If the FSA is prepared to talk to the regime, how many are now left to take part in future agreements between the two sides?

For months now, pro-regime officials have explored how they might win the army defectors back to their side - and the growth of al-Nusra and other Islamist groups has certainly disillusioned many thousands of FSA men who feel that their own revolution against the government has been stolen from them. And in areas of Homs province, it is a fact that fighting between the FSA and the army has virtually ceased. In some government-held villages and towns the FSA are already present without being molested.

And the advantages to Assad are clear. If FSA men could be persuaded to return to the ranks of the regime's army in complete safety, large areas of rebel-

held territory would return to government control without a shot being fired. An army reinforced by its one-time deserters could then be turned against al-Nusra and its al-Qa'ida affiliates in the name of national unity.

The Islamist fighters in the Syrian opposition are certainly a source of deep concern to everyone involved in the war - not least, of course, the Americans, who continue to dither over whether they should give weapons to the rebels. Had the US administration followed John McCain's advice, for example, some of the arms that might have been given to the FSA would already be in the hands of al-Nusra now that three units within the FSA have gone across to the Islamists.The Islamist fighters in Syria are meanwhile turning into a serious threat to the very existence of the country's Christians. Bishops and patriarchs from across the region met in Beirut last Friday to lament the exodus of the Christians of the Middle East; Catholic Maronite Cardinal Bechara Rai of Lebanon described how for Christians, "the 'Arab Spring' had turned to winter, to iron and fire".

The prelates were particularly upset at the massive damage to churches in Raqqa - now under the control of the al-Nusra group - and at the al-Nusra attack on Maaloula. I saw myself last week how perverse was this assault on the largely Christian Syrian town north of Damascus. In Christian homes, crucifixes had been smashed, but the al-Nusra invaders seemed to take a perverse pleasure in wrecking their homes. In one basement flat they had emptied the fridge of food and stuffed it full of shoes.

Now that's something to bend your mind!

30th September 2013

CURIOUS FACTS COLOUR UN'S REPORT

By Robert Fisk

SO NOW the world has convinced itself that the Assad regime fired the sarin gas shells on 21 August, it really is time to read the full version of the UN chemical weapons inspectors' report from Syria. The details of the death and suffering of the innocents of the Ghouta area of Damascus are fearful. Two brothers, it transpires, were the only survivors of their family of 40 who all lived in the same building. But one or two paragraphs need re-reading.

"A leader of the local opposition forces (sic) who was deemed prominent in the area…was identified and requested to take 'custody' of the [UN] Mission," it says. Naturally the UN inspectors would want to be kept safe. But they were, in effect, in the hands of the rebels. A list of questions for survivors was also "circulated to the opposition contacts".

Rather more worrying, however, is a short paragraph on page 22. At the sites where sarin gas missiles landed, it says, the inspectors found that "the locations have been well traveled (sic) by other individuals prior to the arrival of the Mission… During the times spent at these locations, individuals arrived carrying other suspected munitions indicating that such potential evidence is being moved and possibly manipulated."

Manipulated? Odd, but I don't remember that quotation in the media accounts of the inspectors' report…

26th November 2013

AS THE WEST LOOKS AWAY, THE ISLAMISTS CLAIM SYRIA'S REBELLION FOR THEMSELVES

By Kim Sengupta

ONE OF the last scenes we saw heading out of Syria was a convoy near Aleppo, a long, snaking line coming from the east in a swirl of dust.

The passengers on the flat-bed trucks and cars, riding pillion on motor bikes, waved their Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenade launcher. They flew the black flag of al-Qa'ida.

These were the fighters of a group named Isis, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, returning after it had become quite clear that despite all the threats, Barack Obama was not going to take military action over the crossing of his "red line" on chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad's forces.

Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra, the other main Islamist organisation among the rebels, had convinced themselves that the US would take the opportunity of air strikes on the regime to target them as well. Elaborate security precautions had been taken, moving men, weapons and Western hostages away from their bases, in some instances all the way to Anbar province in Iraq.

That was two months ago. Since then, Syria's chemical stock, at least the portion of it that was in regime hands, is in the process of being destroyed. But no one knows when the supposed next stage in the process, the Geneva II talks aimed towards a negotiated settlement, will ever actually take place despite yet another date being set for January.

Meanwhile the killings have continued; hundreds of civilians and also of fighters on both sides. The rebels, however, are not just getting killed by regime forces, but also by Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra. This reached the ghoulish depths of farce when they executed a fellow Islamist, a member of the Ansar al-Sham "by mistake".

Mohammed Fares was captured and had the misfortune to think that his captors were the Shabiha, the militia of the Alawite community from which President Assad and the ruling elite are drawn. In a desperate hope of ingratiating himself, he took the names of the Shia imams, Ali and Hussein; the enraged Sunnis of Isis promptly beheaded him.

Other killings have not been through mistakes. Two of those I met in Syria in September, members of the relatively moderate Farouq Brigade, have died fighting against Isis. Kamal Hammami, a senior officer in the Free Syria Army (FSA), which is supposedly in charge of the opposition militias, had gone to try and prevent a sectarian massacre by besieging rebels and was shot dead, also by members of Isis.

Last week, one of the highest profile of the rebel commanders was eliminated - this time not killed by fellow rebels but the regime in an air strike. But the life

and death of Abdulkader al-Saleh, who most of us knew as Hajji Marea, was intrinsically linked to the deep divisions in the opposition. We had first met him last year as a co-leader of the Tawhid, one of the largest brigades taking part in the battle for Aleppo. His fame grew rapidly and we would often see the tall and rangy figure, a former honey merchant, at the front lines of fighting in the city.

I travelled with him on a number of occasions when he would maintain that, with international help for the revolution, President Assad could be toppled within weeks.

But as the power of the Islamist groups grew, the power of Tawhid declined. Many of its members were killed or driven out by Isis. Hajji Marea did not confront the Islamists, insisting that doing so would have just led to more bloodshed, and he believed that he could achieve more through mediation.

Not everyone supported his stance. One of them, Abu Haitham, who left Syria disillusioned and is now staying across the border in Turkey, reflected: “I felt sorry, of course, on a personal level for Hajji Marea’s death, but at the end many of us felt that he gave up what we as a khatiba (battalion) stood for, he gave in to the Salafis. Who knows who gave his location to regime so they could kill him?”

But others also bear much responsibility. George Sabra, until recently the acting president of the Syrian National Coalition, the opposition government in exile which replaced the dysfunctional National Council, gave a fulsome public eulogy for the dead commander.

But the disunity of the opposition politicians has ensured they lack authority in the rebel-held parts of the country, allowing the extremists to hold sway.

And what of the Western states which encouraged Syrians to rise up and then did little while the Gulf states armed al-Nusra and Isis?

In an interview with my colleague from The Daily Telegraph Richard Spencer, Hajji Marea had been scathingly dismissive of the type of aid that was being given to the rebels by Britain. “Mr Hague after all this bombing of the city said he would send us ‘communications devices’. It’s like coming to a man who is dying and offering him sunglasses.”

There is a price to pay for this. Syria has now superseded Pakistan as the first choice of Muslims from the UK seeking terrorist training. They post messages on social networks inviting other to join the “five-star jihad”.

The head of MI5, Andrew Parker, has echoed his predecessor in pointing out the risk that this development poses to Britain.

The moderate fighters in Syria, meanwhile, feel that they have been abandoned by the West where public opinion increasingly sees all the rebels as extremists.

The West has ensured that Bashar al-Assad has got the enemy he wanted.

4th December 2013

ENEMIES MAY UNITE, FACED WITH THE GREATER FOE OF FUNDAMENTALISTS

By Kim Sengupta

THE SPECTRE is looming of a second Syrian civil war with the head of the opposition's official forces declaring that he is prepared to join regime troops in the future to drive out al-Qa'ida-linked extremists who have taken over swathes of rebel-held territories.

General Salim Idris, the commander of the Free Syrian Army warned that in particular Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), with thousands of foreign fighters in its ranks, was "very dangerous for the future of Syria" and needs to be confronted before it becomes even more powerful.

Western security agencies now believe that Syria poses the most potent threat of terrorism in Europe and the US from where hundreds of Muslims have gone to join the jihad. MI5 and Scotland Yard's anti-terrorist branch recently tackled the first case of men sent from there specifically to carry out attacks in London.

One senior Western intelligence official stressed that the Syrian regime's forces must be preserved for the battles ahead against the Islamists and the need to avoid the mistakes made in Iraq and Libya, where the army and police were disbanded with the fall of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, allowing terrorist groups to rise in a security vacuum.

The official held that talks between the regime and rebels set to take place in Geneva in January could be the beginning of the formation of an anti-al-Qa'ida front in Syria, along with a negotiated settlement to end the conflict which has claimed more than 117,000 lives so far and made millions refugees inside and outside the country.

Speaking in Istanbul, General Idris, a former officer in the regime's army, said he and his associates were dropping the precondition that Bashar al-Assad must leave power before the Geneva meeting takes place. Instead they would be satisfied if his departure were to take place "at the end of the negotiation process" when General Idris will join forces with the remainder of the regime to mount an offensive against the Islamists.

However, the opposition would like to see evidence of good faith from the regime, which would include allowing supplies to get to communities trapped by the fighting.

General Idris complained his men were having to fight a war on two fronts: they have, he claimed, fought al-Qa'ida at 24 different locations in the last six months while at the same time facing poundings from President Assad's warplanes and artillery.

What is left of the moderate opposition forces are bitterly critical of Western powers, including Britain, for encouraging people to rise up against the regime,

but then doing little to help. Meanwhile, Isis and another Islamist group, Jabhat al-Nusra, have grown in numbers and influence due to money and arms from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

There was particular disillusionment when no military action was taken by the West despite the crossing of Barack Obama's "red line" with use of chemical weapons in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta by the regime in August. Moderate groups complained this was followed by some of their younger members defecting to the jihadists.

The jihadists have been occupying areas in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib with moderate fighters being killed or forced to flee. Senior officers in the FSA have been among the casualties, one of the most high profile Kamal Hamami, a commander who was shot dead when he travelled to Latakia, an enclave of the Alawite community from which President Assad is drawn, to try and avert a sectarian massacre by the besieging Sunni Islamists.

The FSA has now produced an intelligence dossier charting the rise of the jihadists with Isis "seeking complete domination in liberated areas". The document estimates that Isis alone now has 5,500 foreign fighters, who "form its main backbone in sensitive operations" as well as 2,000 indoctrinated Syrians from the northern part of the country. In addition there are 15,000 others who provide support to the group.

The foreign fighters are recruited by a network headed by Abu Ahmad al-Iraqi who, as the name suggests, had served in Iraq. The "most dangerous and barbaric" of these are 250 Chechens based in Aleppo under Abu Omar al-Chechen. Once they reach Syria the foreign volunteers are "fitted with explosive vests and threaten all who dare to confront them", says the report.

"Isis employs the policy of kidnapping in the areas in which it is deployed," the dossier continues, pointing out its prisons now hold more than 35 foreign journalists as well as 60 political activists, and more than 100 FSA members. It has set up ambush points in the routes from the Turkish border for abductions.

5th December 2013

THE ROAD FROM IRAQ TO DAMASCUS

By Patrick Cockburn

IN DAMASCUS, Shia men from Iraq fight to the death to defend the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, the daughter of Ali and Fatimah and the grand-daughter of the Prophet Mohamed. They battle with less enthusiasm, however, for the Baathist government of President Bashar al-Assad, which reminds them of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Sattar Khalaf, an Iraqi wounded in Damascus, says: “Fighting in Syria is to defend the shrines of the Prophet’s family and not the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Baath Party.”

This is not always a distinction easily made. Shia leaders say that at any one time there are between 3,800 and 4,700 Iraqi fighters in Syria, but new volunteers have not been registered for the last five months. The 20 million Shia Mulims in Iraq feel threatened by the Sunni-dominated opposition in Syria’s bid to overthrow the regime there, and its repercussions in Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), the al-Qa’ida umbrella organisation which has been fighting against Syrian regime forces, draws no distinction between its attacks on the Syrian army and non-Sunni Syrians. In Iraq, Shia and Kurdish civilians are its main target.

But the Shia political and religious leadership in Iraq is reluctant to be drawn into the war next door despite Iranian promptings. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Shia religious establishment have refused to issue a fatwa calling for Iraqi Shia to go to fight in Syria, though they have not condemned those who do volunteer. In contrast to the Iranian religious authorities in Qom, the message from their Iraqi counterparts in Najaf is more emphatic that Muslims should not fight Muslims.

Iraqi fighters cross into Syria by land, though the road via the Sunni Anbar province is so dangerous that they fly instead by plane to Damascus from Baghdad or Najaf. Flights have been easier since the Syrian army cleared the area around the international airport. Sattar Khalaf, a 43-year-old from Baghdad who was part of 200-strong detachment travelling on five buses, says, “When we got into Syrian territory we were escorted by Syrian troops along the long road that was under the control of the army.”

He joined a group whose overall leader was an Iranian colonel. “The day I entered the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab I joined a group of a dozen fighters and our job was to plant bombs on road sides surrounding the area where the shrine is.” Other fighters with him were told to make hit-and-run attacks using rocket-propelled grenade launchers or to take part in street fighting.

He says, “In April I was hit in my shoulder while fighting near the airport and

was taken back to Baghdad. Once I recover from my wound I will continue jihad in defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab." He reckons between 12 and 20 Iraqi volunteers are being killed in Syria every month.

The Iraqi volunteers fighting in Syria are not as significant militarily as the experienced and battle-hardened Hezbollah units from Lebanon. They have played an important role as assault troops in capturing the strategic town of Qusayr near Homs, and in aiding the Syrian army in its advance into rebel-held parts of south Damascus.

Overall, foreign volunteers are less numerous among the pro-Assad forces than they are among the rebels. But the Iraqis' presence underlines the degree to which Syria has become the main battle ground in the conflict between Shia and Sunni that is raging across the Muslim world. Last week, a jihadist group in Derna in Libya released a video of the shooting of an Iraqi Shia professor, Khalaf Hassan al-Sa'idi, shot in revenge for Sunni insurgents being executed by the Shia-led government in Baghdad.

Iran has been keen to encourage Iraqi Shia to fight in Syria and many of those who have done so come from Iranian-influenced groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq with between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters in Iraq in addition to some 800 combat-experienced troops from Hezbollah in Iraq (different from the Lebanese group of the same name). The motives of the men who volunteer for service are a mixture of ideology and poverty. "Ordinary fighters were offered a $700 (£427) a month salary, ex-fighters were paid according to their rank," says Sattar Khalaf. "The non-commissioned officers with battle experience were offered $850 monthly and former officers' salaries depended on their rank, starting from $1,500 per month."

These are tempting sums in a society like Iraq where so many are jobless. Ghafil Khayoun Khadim is a 38-year-old unemployed construction worker with a wife and two children who lives in a tough Shia neighbourhood in east Baghdad. His story is worth recounting at length because it explains why so many men with little desire to fight anybody join militias not only in Iraq but in Syria, Lebanon and Libya.

Ghafil says he had no work in July and "I found myself penniless, my kids hungry and my wife in need of money, so I came around to the idea of fighting in Syria." Another motive was that he is self-consciously Shia and "it is my duty to defend the shrine of the Sayyida Zaynab." He received $500 up front and some military training.

Ghafil says he learned early on that there were two types of fighter: the ideologues who belonged to political parties and were well-trained, and the less political recruits who are taught "to disassemble and reassemble weapons."

His group was flown to Damascus airport from where he was driven to the Sayyida Zaynab district. Next morning they were split up into units of 12, with his units consisting of seven Iraqis, two Iranians, a Lebanese leader, a Syrian captain and a civilian Syrian fighter.

What happened next was unexpected. Ghafil, who seems a little naive, said Iraqi militiamen at the shrine were praying for six martyrs killed in the fighting who had not died near the shrine itself. He says, “I showed astonishment, saying our mission is to defend Sayyida Zaynab shrine, not the Syrian regime and its army, but nobody listened to me.” A Syrian army vehicle took Ghafil’s unit to a position an hour’s drive away to the airport road where they took up positions: “They told us that the enemy might attack us at any time and we should shoot at anybody.”

Ghafil refused to fire his gun, saying he would only fight for the shrine and, if this did not happen, then he demanded to be taken back to Iraq, which was what ultimately happened. He says his friends and relatives in Baghdad are unsympathetic and believe he should have stayed and fought.

But he is adamant he did the right thing saying, “The reason I came back to my country is that I volunteered to fight in defence of Sayyida Zaynab shrine and not in defence of the Baathist regime in Syria.”

12th December 2013

WEST SUSPENDS AID FOR ISLAMIST REBELS IN SYRIA

By Patrick Cockburn

BRITAIN AND America decided to suspend deliveries of non-lethal aid to Islamist rebels operating in northern Syria yesterday after fighters from the Islamic Front drove the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) out of bases and warehouses containing American-supplied equipment in the north-western Syrian province of Idlib.

The significance of the British and US action is that it underlines their disillusionment with the Syrian rebels opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, whom they once lauded as the future rulers of Syria. Washington and London have been trying to target aid to groups opposed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the umbrella group for al-Qa'ida in Iraq and Syria, and the al-Nusra Front, another extreme jihadi Sunni military organisation.

In this case Britain and the US are moving against the Islamic Front, an alliance of leading rebel groups including Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haq, Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic Front, all with good relations with the al-Nusra Front.

Saudi Arabia has started to take a stronger leadership role in funding Syrian rebels since last summer, replacing Qatar which previously cooperated with Turkey in supporting the insurgency in Syria. Saudi willingness to spend seemingly limitless funds and the creation of the Islamic Front has inevitably weakened the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council and the Western-backed National Coalition, and is likely to increase fragmentation among rebels inside and outside Syria's borders.

Louay Meqdad, a spokesperson for the FSA, said the move by the US and Britain yesterday was rushed and mistaken. "We hope our friends will rethink and wait for a few days when things will be clearer," he said.

American intelligence officials estimate that there are around 1,200 rebel military units operating in Syria, ranging from groups based on extended families to those able to field several thousand fighters.

15th December 2013

BRITAIN'S POLICY ON SYRIA HAS JUST BEEN SUNK, AND NOBODY NOTICED

By Patrick Cockburn

THE FINAL bankruptcy of American and British policy in Syria came 10 days ago as Islamic Front, a Saudi-backed Sunni jihadi group, overran the headquarters of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) at Bab al-Hawa on the Syrian side of the border with Turkey. The FSA, along with the Syrian National Coalition, groups that the United States and Britain have been pretending for years are at the heart of Syrian military and political opposition, has been discredited. The remaining FSA fighters are in flight, have changed sides, or are devoting all their efforts to surviving the onslaught from jihadi or al-Qa'ida-linked brigades.

The US and Britain stopped the delivery of non-lethal aid to the supply depot at Bab al-Hawa as the implications of the disaster sank in. The West's favourite rebel commander, General Salim Idris, was on the run between Turkey and his former chief supporter and paymaster, Qatar. Turkey closed the border, the other side of which is now controlled by the Islamic Front. The so-called moderate wing of the Syrian insurgency has very limited influence, but its representatives are still being urged by Washington and London to attend the peace conference in Geneva on 22 January to negotiate Bashar al-Assad's departure from power.

Confusion over what is happening is so great that Western leaders may not pay as much of a political price at home as they should for the failure of their Syrian policy. But it is worth recalling that the Syrian National Coalition and the FSA are the same people for whom the US and UK almost went to war in August, and saw as candidates to replace Assad in power in Damascus. The recent debacle shows how right public opinion in both countries was to reject military intervention.

Who are the winners in the new situation? One is Assad because the opposition to him - which started as a popular uprising against a cruel, corrupt and oppressive dictatorship in 2011 - has become a fragmented movement dominated by al-Qa'ida umbrella organisation the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil); the other al-Qa'ida franchisee, the al-Nusra Front; and the Islamic Front, consisting of six or seven large rebel military formations numbering an estimated 50,000 fighters, whose uniting factor is Saudi money and an extreme Sunni ideology similar to Saudi Arabia's version of Islam.

The Saudis see this alliance as capable of fighting pro-Assad forces as well as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, but Riyadh's objections to the latter appears to be based on its independence of Saudi control rather than revulsion at its record of slaughtering Shia, Alawi, Christians, Armenians, Kurds, Turkomans or any dissenting Sunni.

The allegation of Saudi control is becoming easier to substantiate. Until a year ago, the Saudis stayed somewhat in the background when it came to funding the Syrian rebels, in which the leading role was played by Qatar in association with Turkey. But the failure of the rebels to win and US anger that the Qataris and Turks had allowed much of the aid to go to jihadis led to an important change this summer, when Saudi Arabia took over from Qatar as chief supporter of the rebels.

An interesting example of just how hands-on this Saudi direction has become is illustrated by a fascinating interview given by a top defector from the FSA to Isil, Saddam al-Jamal. Commander of the Liwa Allah Akbar battalion, he was until recently the top FSA commander in eastern Syria, much of which is under rebel control. He recalls that "we used to meet with the apostates of Qatar and Saudi Arabia and with the infidels of Western nations such as America and France in order to receive arms and ammo or cash". He says Western intelligence operatives had of late been worried about the growing influence of al-Qa'ida affiliates and repeatedly asked him why he was growing a beard.

Jamal gives an account of a recent three-day meeting between the FSA commanders from northern and eastern Syria with Western, Saudi, Qatari, Emirati and Jordanian intelligence operatives. This appears to have been soon after the Saudis took over the Syria file from the Qataris. He says the FSA commanders, including General Idris, had a meeting with Prince Salman bin Sultan, the Saudi deputy defence minister who was the leading figure at the meeting. Jamal says that Prince Salman "asked those who had plans to attack Assad positions to present their needs for arms, ammo and money".

The picture that Mr Jamal paints is of an FSA that was a complete pawn to foreign intelligence agencies, which is one reason why he defected. The Saudis subsequently decided that the FSA would not serve their purposes, and were frustrated by America backing away from war in Syria and confrontation with Iran. They set about using their limitless funds to attract into alliances rebel brigades such as the Islamic Front which would be Sunni fundamentalist, committed to the overthrow of Assad, against political negotiations, but distinct from al-Qa'ida. In reality, it looks highly unlikely that Saudi money will be enough to bring down or even significantly weaken Assad though it may be enough to keep a war going for years.

The old, supposedly moderate, opposition has been marginalised. Its plan since 2011 has been to force a full-scale Western military intervention as in Libya in 2011 and, when this did not happen, they lacked an alternative strategy.

The US, Britain and France do not have many options left except to try to control the jihadi Frankenstein's monster that they helped create in Syria and

which is already helping destabilise Iraq and Lebanon. Turkey may soon regret having given free passage to so many jihadi on their way to Syria. Ankara could close its 500-mile border with Syria or filter those who cross it. But Turkish policy in Syria and Iraq has been so dysfunctional in the past three years that it may be too late to correct the consequences of wrongly convincing itself that Assad would fall.

The Geneva II peace conference on Syria looks as if it will be born dead. In so far as the FSA and its civilian counterparts ever repres-ented anyone in Syria they do so no longer. The armed opposition is dominated by Saudi-sponsored Islamist brigades on the one hand and by al-Qa'ida affiliates on the other. All US, British and French miscalculations have produced in Syria is a re-run of Afghanistan in the 1980s, creating a situation the ruinous consequences of which have yet to appear. As jihadis in Syria realise they are not going to win, they may well look for targets closer to home.

17th December 2013

THE BIGGEST EMERGENCY IN THE UN'S HISTORY

By Patrick Cockburn

AS SYRIAN society teeters on the edge of final collapse after three years of ferocious warfare and economic devastation, the UN is making its biggest-ever appeal for £4bn in aid to help the country's starving civilians.

Three-quarters of Syria's 22.4 million people will need humanitarian aid to survive by 2014, according to a UN study. Bread in some areas costs five times what it was at the start of the conflict, and 80 per cent of Syrians say their greatest fear is shortage of food.

The former Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, who is now chief executive of the relief charity International Rescue, warned that the refugee crisis in Syria is "the biggest humanitarian test of the century" - a test that the international community is failing. The relief effort is being crippled by a lack of funds from donors and increasing danger for relief workers, he said.

Snow is worsening conditions for the 2.4 million Syrian refugees who have fled to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and elsewhere, while another four million people have been displaced within Syria.

Doctors are trying to stop a polio epidemic with an emergency immunisation campaign. Whole districts have been rendered uninhabitable by the government bombardment that inevitably follows a rebel takeover in urban and rural districts. Many people inside and outside Syria are reaching the end of their savings after three years in which many have been without a job. The violence is still getting worse, sending more people fleeing for safety elsewhere.

On Sunday, government air raids, using explosives packed into barrels, killed at least 76 people, including 28 children, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Relief workers said that as many as 50 more people might be trapped under the rubble but they did not have heavy equipment to rescue them.

Meanwhile, the Observatory said that 28 people from the Syrian minorities - in this case believed to be Alawi and Druze - had been killed by rebels in the town of Adra north-west of Damascus.

As the Syrian conflict enters its third year, many parts of the country are besieged and cut off from supplies of food, electric power and water. The UN sent a plane on Sunday from Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan with food and other supplies for the winter to the Kurds of Hassakeh in north-east Syria - where fighters from among the 2.5 million Syrian Kurd population have been battling against al-Qa'ida-linked affiliates seeking to get possession of the oil wells in the north-east of the country.

The flights will bring in 400 tonnes of food and 196kg of medical equipment. There is great variation in the degree of impoverishment, with people in state-

controlled areas much better off because they are able to get bread at very low prices from government bakeries - though they often have to queue for a long time.

In central Damascus, Tartous and some other government-held areas it is possible to have a near-normal life. But food bought in the market, such as lamb, cheese, eggs and margarine, have all soared in price because they are not being produced or the roads are too difficult for food supplies to be easily or cheaply transported. Even where people have jobs, salaries have often fallen below £100 a month.

In rebel-held areas the situation is much worse. Food is in short supply and government salaries and pensions, however inadequate, are not being paid. A recent graduate from the University of Damascus, writing for Irin, the UN news agency, said that there were few doctors in the besieged town of al-Hajar al-Aswad in south Damascus - and those that remained said that mothers were too undernourished to produce breast milk for babies and there was no powdered milk available.

One doctor said that adults “are getting by on small amounts of seasonal stocked traditional Syrian foods like olives, thyme and marmalade - and in some cases cats and dogs”. He expected adults to start dying of starvation in the near future.

19th December 2013

THE DEATH OF DR KHAN SHOWS HOW ASSAD SHARES POWER WITH RUTHLESS AND ERRATIC HENCHMEN

By Patrick Cockburn

WHY DID Dr Abbas Khan die? Nobody takes seriously the obvious lie that he committed suicide four days before he was to be released from prison. Who gave the orders for his murder? And why?

It would be difficult to think of a more self-destructive act by the security services of the Syrian government and leads to questions about who really holds power in Damascus. Just at the moment when President Assad's government is seeing the first signs of being reengaged by the US and West Europeans there is an atrocity for which it will be blamed.

Napoleon famously said that battles go to those who make the least mistakes and recently the Syrian opposition has been making more mistakes than the government. Western governments have been appalled to see al-Qa'ida affiliates and equally sectarian Sunni brigades backed by Saudi Arabia assume the dominant role in the rebel military forces. The former US ambassador to Damascus, Ryan Crocker, said there would have to be confidential contacts between the US and the Assad government about how to deal with al-Qa'ida. Exiled opposition members are reportedly being told by Western diplomats that the deposition of President Assad will not be the objective of the peace talks in Geneva on 22 January. Just as Assad's government wants to give an impression of moderation by releasing Abbas Khan, his death is announced. A PR coup turns into a self-inflicted wound. But in some ways it is not so surprising, though it remains shocking, when one considers the Syrian government's recent history.

Most striking is the attack with Sarin gas on rebel controlled districts in Damascus for which it is difficult to think of any explanation other than that it was carried out by the Syrian armed forces. It is beyond belief that bands of rebel gunmen would be able to obtain or make the poison gas in quantity and then simultaneously release it different parts of Damascus amid their own supporters and to do this, moreover, without anybody finding out. The use of sarin against civilians might have precipitated foreign and primarily American military intervention. Close air support by the US air force is the one development that might have led to the opposition winning a purely military victory. As well as being a horrific crime the use of poison gas was an act of extraordinary stupidity since it almost led to an American, British and French air assault. Mr Assad was only saved because of the popular determination in the US and Britain not to see a repeat performance of the Iraq and Afghan wars.

In many respects the excessive and self-defeating use of violence by the state has been one of the main motors driving the Syrian civil war from its beginning in 2011. There are deep social and economic frustrations behind the Syrian

revolt, but the trigger for explosion of dissent was the arrest and alleged torture of children in Deraa. The head of local security responsible for their mistreatment was not court-martialled. Brutal collective punishment created martyrs, delegitimised the government and ultimately turned peaceful protests into an armed revolt. The government claimed - and probably came to believe - that armed militants were there from the beginning but if the aim of some of the opposition was to provoke the state security forces into an excessive response then they succeeded beyond their dreams.

Power in Syria is in the hands of the Presidency and the security services. The rest of the government scarcely matters in terms of determining security policy. Where else could the prime minister of a country defect and officials smoothly say this did not matter because he had no power? Real power-sharing with the opposition in Syria will have to include deconstructing the security forces.

As the revolt gathered pace in the summer of 2011 the International Crisis Group published a report entitled “The Syrian Regime’s Slow Motion Suicide”. It concluded that “the security services brutal and often erratic performance has created more problems than it has solved, as [their] violence almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest-movement’s growth and radicalisation.” The same mindless and uncontrolled violence by the security services probably explains the death of Dr Abbas Khan.

18th December 2013

WHY WOULD HE KILL HIMSELF?

By Robert Fisk

DESPITE THE outrage of his grieving family and persistent questions from the UK Foreign Office, Syria had by last night failed sufficiently to explain the “suicide” of a young British doctor in a Damascus prison - only four days before he was to be released on the personal orders of President Bashar al-Assad.

The death of 32-year-old Abbas Khan while in the hands of the country’s state security police was described by the Foreign Office minister Hugh Robertson as “very suspicious” and “in effect murder”, but it also raises questions about the degree to which Assad commands the loyalty of his own security services after almost three years of civil war.

Last night, the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad claimed that a government post-mortem examination proved that Dr Khan had hanged himself. But his death in the Ksar Soussa prison near the centre of Damascus, revealed by his family yesterday, is a scandal likely to embrace Assad, who had personally arranged that the MP George Galloway should travel to Damascus and take Dr Khan home to London before Christmas.

Indeed, given the growing belief - in Damascus as well as in London - that Dr Khan was murdered, his “suicide” may well necessitate an explanation from the President himself.

Dr Khan was arrested by Syrian government forces while working as an orthopaedic surgeon in the Aleppo region in 2012 and was held incommunicado for almost a year.

His mother, Fatima, who was in Damascus and had seen her son four times in the last four months, was eagerly awaiting his release at the weekend when she received a telephone call from a Syrian official to say that he had hanged himself in prison. His family in London - where Dr Abbas was born - had received a bundle of letters from him in the last few weeks expressing his delight at his imminent release.

“He was saying, ‘I can’t wait to be back with you guys’,” his sister Sara told me. “He did not commit suicide.” Dr Khan leaves a young wife and two children.

Even in Damascus, his death elicited expressions of shock and disbelief. Unable to bring herself to identify her son’s body, his mother told her family she was leaving Damascus at once for Beirut.

George Galloway was flabbergasted. When I telephoned him, he described Dr Khan’s death as “inexplicable”. He had just booked his air ticket to Damascus when he heard the news from Dr Khan’s family - and then from the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister himself.

“As yet, no satisfactory explanation has been given to me. The idea of a man committing suicide four days before he was to be released is impossible to believe. The Syrian government knows my stand on the war and on [American] intervention.

“A Syrian minister called me on behalf of the President to come to Damascus before Christmas and take Abbas Khan home. We need an explanation.”

A spokesman for the Foreign Office said: “We are extremely concerned by reports that a British national has died in detention in Syria. We are urgently seeking clarification of this from the Syrian authorities.”

Quite apart from the grief and outrage of Dr Khan’s own family, Syria is now certain to become embroiled in a political crisis that suggests President Assad may not be able to control his own security authorities.

Dr Khan was a London-born doctor and no longer had any political importance - he had been arrested after treating women and children in rebel-held areas of Aleppo well over a year ago - yet he was taken from the Azra prison where he was being held last week to the Kfar Soussa interrogation centre, a jail where inmates are held just after arrest and just before their release.

A tragedy of this importance - a British citizen whose release has been ordered by President Assad found dead in state security police custody - will require a full explanation not only from the Syrian government but from Assad himself.

Repeatedly, Assad has claimed that he is solely in charge of Syria, and - despite disquiet among Syrians at his decision to hand over his chemical weapons to the United Nations last summer - nothing has hitherto suggested that Assad’s word might be crossed.

Yet the death of Abbas Khan now raises the possibility that there are those in authority in Damascus who want to challenge the power and prestige of their own President.

It is clear the Syrians intended to make a conciliatory gesture towards the West by releasing Dr Khan - yet his death suggests there are those who wish to destroy Assad’s chances of a reconciliation with Western powers which only a few months ago were set on destroying his regime in a military attack.

Mr Mekdad has reported that guards visited Dr Khan at 7am to take him his breakfast but that, when they returned to take him for exercise at 9am, he was hanging by his pyjamas. The wife of another prisoner at Azra had told Dr Khan’s family last week that he was taken from his cell by national security police who “wanted to ask him a few questions” before his release.

When originally arrested in 2012, Dr Khan was believed to have been severely tortured - or so he managed to inform his family - but later received

better treatment.

Yet his very detention was difficult to explain. He had apparently argued with rebel supporters in Aleppo about the medical equipment he had brought to Syria after crossing the border illegally from Turkey. Some thought he should sell the provisions but Dr Khan apparently insisted that they should be given away free.

Dr Khan's brother, Afroze, was flying to Beirut yesterday to meet his mother at the Lebanese-Syrian border. Last week, Afroze did say that he feared for his brother's mental health - but the family explained on Monday that he was referring to Dr Abbas's feelings when held incommunicado, and that this did not refer to his current mental state.

Afroze had been trying to put pressure on the Syrian authorities to bring forward the date of Dr Abbas's release - although the family realise that this original statement may now be used by others to "prove" that Dr Abbas may have taken his own life.

In private, the family complained at the unwillingness of the UK authorities to make any serious gestures on Abbas Khan's behalf.

Mrs Fatima Khan had spent weeks in Damascus pleading for her son's release, even hiring a lawyer to represent him in court.

18th December 2013

THE LAST TIME I SPOKE TO ABBAS'S FAMILY HE WAS ALIVE. WHAT WENT WRONG?

By Robert Fisk

I FIRST met Fatima Khan in the Syrian embassy in Beirut early this year. She was pleading for a visa so that she and her daughter Sara could visit Damascus and seek news of her missing son. I knew nothing of Abbas Khan, but - aware that I had a visa waiting for me - I promised to find out anything I could once I reached the Syrian capital.

Sara told me the story of her brother, his birth in London, his marriage and children, and of how - moved by compassion for the suffering of civilians in rebel-held areas of Syria - he crossed the frontier from Turkey to take medical equipment to Aleppo last year.

There had perhaps been an argument with others there as to whether the equipment should be sold or given away. Abbas was donating the medicines free. He was taking a walk down a road he thought safe when he was seized by Syrian government forces.

I made my way to Damascus and raised the disappearance of Abbas Khan with Syrian government officials. They wanted to help. I said that if we could establish that he was alive and in a security prison, I would like to see him - so I could tell his family that he had not been killed. But after several weeks, I was informed “state security” was handling the matter, that Abbas Khan’s case was in the hands of higher officials in Syria, and that - an assumption on my part - the Syrian government might be trying to deal directly with the British authorities.

I decided to step back. Not least when I heard that Fatima Khan had been offered a visa to Damascus and was able to see her son and ensure he was transferred to a more lenient prison, and to hire a lawyer. Mrs Khan visited various ministries and the Czech and Russian embassies. As she obtained further visas, it seemed that Abbas Khan was safe. However long it took, he would be returned home.

And it became increasingly evident that President Bashar al-Assad himself was involved in the case. Mrs Khan would never have obtained access to her son without his permission. And it was not difficult to see how, after the West abandoned its military options against Syria under Russian duress - and after the British and American people expressed their refusal to embark upon another Middle-East war - Syria’s international status was, to some extent, redeemed.

There were no more calls from Barack Obama for Assad to “step aside” or “step down”. There were no more claims by John Kerry that Bashar was Hitler or worse than Hitler. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius no longer announced - as he did more than a year ago - that Bashar no longer deserved “to

live on this planet". Assad's enemies were increasingly identified with al-Qa'ida - an enemy of the West infinitely more frightening than the Syrian regime. Assad was in a perfect position to release a British citizen - to George Galloway whom he knew personally - and obtain the gratitude, however churlishly given, of the British government.

And then it all went wrong. Abbas Khan was dead. And Faisal Mokdad, the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister - a decent and intelligent man - was forced to explain a suicide which I frankly do not accept that he himself believed. What happened?

Back in 2005, when former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Beirut, the world blamed Bashar al-Assad. Bashar denied this - and an American journalist who was with him when he heard the news of Hariri's death described Bashar's surprise. Then word got around that Syrian state security had their own reasons for wanting Hariri dead - they believed he was plotting with the French to destroy Syrian power in Lebanon and thus decided to kill him - even if this provoked an outcry which would force Syrian troops to leave their satrapy in Beirut. Treachery is a more powerful emotion than realpolitik.

But if this is true, then the implications are now made manifest in the death of the young and brave Abbas Khan. A man whose life last week was more valuable to Assad than any other foreigner's in Syria was suddenly "found" dead in a state security prison, on the very eve of his release to a British MP who is a trusted figure in the Assad household. Was someone trying to destroy the Syrian President's steadily improving, if still frozen relations with Britain and the US? Who would want to prevent such an improvement? Saudi Arabia? Of course. Qatar? Absolutely. Israel? Why not? But to suggest than any of these three could engineer the killing of a young Englishman in a Damascus prison is surely preposterous.

In the coming days, we shall assuredly find out more. Assad will be among the keenest to know what happened in the cell in the Kfar Soussa prison where Abbas Khan ended up hanging from his pyjamas on the eve of his freedom. How did he die? is one question. Who killed him? is quite another.

23rd December 2013

THE SYRIAN REBELS HAVE TAKEN ICONOCLASM TO NEW DEPTHS, WITH THEIR DESTRUCTION OF SHRINES, STATUES AND EVEN A TREE - BUT TO WHAT END?

By Robert Fisk

ECCENTRICITY MARKS the path to heaven or hell. Take the Takfiri rebels trying to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. They have chopped off the heads of their enemies, eaten a few human entrails, massacred Christians and Alawites - the Damascus government, of course, has done its share of civilian bloodletting and war crimes - and even gone to war on the Kurds. But of all the activities of the al-Qa'ida/al-Nusra/Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria insurgents in Syria, surely the weirdest has been an iconoclasm worthy of both Henry VIII and the Taliban: the destruction of shrines, tombs and the statues of poets and caliphs.

Take, for example, Abu Tammam Habib ibn Aws who was born near Damascus AD804. He was assistant to a weaver and the son of Christian parents - an obvious provocation to the Nusra lads 2,213 years later - but travelled to Egypt to study poetry. He went to Armenia and Iran, and produced an anthology of other poets' work known as the Hamasah, an anthology of bravery, courage in defeat and revenge.

A work, you might think, that could appeal to the Salafists anxious to rid Syria of its infidel president. But no. In his native town of Jasim in the countryside of Deraa this year, the Islamists destroyed his statue. They simply blew it up with explosives. Was it because he had Christian parents? Unlikely, surely, since some of the current followers of al-Nusra are Muslim converts. Or was it because Abu Tammam brazenly compared the composition of poetry to the sex act? May he be turned to dust!

So let's move on to Abu al-Ala Ahmad ibn Abd Allah al-Ma'arri, who was born almost 170 years after Abu Tammam near Aleppo, the ancient city currently split between rebel and government fighters.

Like Milton, al-Ma'arri was almost blind, but produced a popular collection of poetry called The Tinder Spark and later, in Baghdad - where he was adored by writers but lived in almost hermit-like isolation on a vegetarian diet - wrote Unnecessary Necessity, which complained about the rhyming scheme of poetry. More dodgy, however, al-Ma'arri also described a Dante-like visit to heathen poets in paradise. And a later work was described as a parody of the Koran. He believed, so we are told, in "social justice" - whatever that was in the 9th century - but thought a world without children would spare future generations the pain of life.

Well, you can understand why the al-Nusra boys scratched their heads when they saw al-Ma'arri's turbaned statue. For the poor chap is also credited with telling his readers: "Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true…

The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have…" So off with his head! The al-Nusra guys decapitated the statue in al-Ma'arri's home town of Maarat al-Numan.

Then we come to Harun ar-Rashid himself, the fifth Abbasid caliph of One Thousand and One Nights fame, who ruled Islam's greatest empire, putting down revolts - Assad-style - in Syria, Egypt and Yemen, even bringing Tunisia under his rule. He became an immensely wealthy man whose wife insisted that only gold and silver would hold food on the family table. The palace was packed with singing girls, concubines and servant girls. But… word had it that he maintained a homosexual relationship with Jafar, one of his principal administrators, who was later executed. Luxury, concubines, vice. No chance, then, for Harun's statue in the city of Rakaa - the only town in Syria currently under total Islamist control. His image, in the city's Ar-Rashid Park, no less, was destroyed.

Need one go on? The shrine of the Prophet's companion Hujr ibn Adi has been destroyed in Rif Damascus (the countryside around the capital) and a shrine to a Sufi sheikh in Busaira has been blown up. The Islamists have even announced the cutting down of a 150-year-old tree in the town of Atmeh - next to another shrine which the Salafists had taken over. "Thank God Almighty, the tree… has been removed, after people were worshipping it instead of God," an Islamist informed a French news agency.

But what's new? Didn't the Taliban destroy the Buddhas of Bamiyan, just as the Saudis have reduced every old building in Mecca to rubble and the Islamists hundreds of shrines in Pakistan? Not to mention the destruction in Timbuktu. Think Henry VIII. Think Oliver Cromwell - who would surely have understood the cruelty of the Syrian war. And beware graven images. Pity about the tree.

2014

7th January 2014

THE RISE OF AL-QA'IDA IN SYRIA MAY PUSH THE OTHER REBELS TO SEEK PEACE

By Kim Sengupta

THIS TIME last year the name Isis was better known as that of the ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility, rather than a group of jihadist fighters engaged in extreme violence and instilling fear even by the bloody standards of Syria's savage civil war.

Those following events in the region certainly know about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria now. This extension of al-Qa'ida has emerged as the most powerful and effective among the rebels fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime. Heavily armed, with a sizeable contingent of foreign jihadists, it had overrun some of the most well-defended of the regime's military bases. And, at the same time, it had killed or driven out much of what was left of the moderate opposition.

Isis now also provides the shock troops of a resurgent al-Qa'ida in Iraq, leading the offensive in Anbar province and capturing large parts of Fallujah and Ramadi, places synonymous with the insurgency against US forces during the occupation. Such is the worry about this that the US had rushed over Hellfire missiles and drones, with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki asking for more.

Back in northern Syria last autumn, after a break of several months, I was taken aback by the sheer dominance of Isis. It had supplanted Jabhat al-Nusra as the leading Salafist group, taking over towns, imposing the harshest form of sharia law, commandeering aid distribution and using food to spread its influence.

At the time, however, it was in temporary retreat. The Syrian regime had crossed Barack Obama's "red line" by the use of chemical weapons at Ghouta; air strikes were imminent and Isis was convinced that the US would take the opportunity to have a swipe with Tomahawks at its fighters as well. We saw it moving its men, weapons and hostages away for its bases, in some instances all the way to Iraq.

The American military action did not, of course, take place. We watched the same convoys return and, in the time since then, expand Isis's fiefdom in Syria, mainly at the expense of other rebel khatibas, or brigades, rather than the regime. At the same time, its presence in Anbar, where its men are fed and watered and

through which it got a lot of its supplies, had grown rapidly with the blessing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor of Osama bin Laden, with whom it has had an uneasy relationship at times in the past.

But are we, in fact, seeing a major strategic mistake by Isis? Has it overreached itself? Occupying cities, as it is doing in Anbar, may be of symbolic value and generate publicity, but it is taking, and will continue to take, heavy casualties, especially in a conflict where state forces are prepared to accept a high level of collateral civilian casualties in carrying out ground and air assaults.

Isis has been forced to reinforce its fighters in Anbar from those in Syria. But there, for the first time since it began to hold sway, the group has been attacked by the rebels it had previously marginalised. The first reports of these could be treated with a degree of scepticism; these groups had been long on talk and short on military muscle in the past. But fighters I have spoken to in the more credible of these khatibas insist that they are taking the fight to Isis and will continue to do so.

This has been lent credence by an unprecedented exposure of weakness from Isis itself. It has complained of betrayal by fellow fighters in the jihad, of being stabbed in the back, its members have been killed, taken prisoner. If this continues, came the warning, it will leave Aleppo, allowing the regime to retake the half of the city currently outside its control.

There have been at least a half-dozen places where Isis has come under fire. The Syrian Opposition Coalition, a cobbled-together umbrella group of those in the "mainstream" opposed to President Assad, has been emboldened enough to declare that the Free Syrian Army, its military arm, will prosecute the campaign against "al-Qa'ida, which is a threat to the Syrian people and humanity as a whole".

A sustained campaign both sides of the border will certainly weaken Isis and al-Qa'ida. But there are caveats. In Iraq, the Americans need to use their new leverage with Mr Maliki and his Shia-centred government to address the justified resentment in the Sunni communities at his policies which the Islamist extremists have exploited. The tribal militias will have to be reactivated and paid, which Baghdad has ceased doing.

In Syria there are doubts on just how long the other rebels would be able to maintain pressure on Isis. The second most powerful Islamist brigade, Jabhat al-Nusra, has so far remained "neutral" in this battle. It will be highly important which way it goes. It has a far larger proportion of Syrians, rather than foreigners, in its ranks than Isis - young men who, the people in Aleppo and Idlib believe, can be assimilated back into society if and when the current madness ends.

Then there is the issue of whether President Assad's forces would seek to take advantage of the situation to push forward? If they do so, the rebels may decide to patch over their differences to face the threat. Would the Russians, with their own problems with Islamist terrorism, try to stop the regime it sponsors from taking such action?

Lastly, with the battle lines being redrawn, Geneva II, the face-to-face talks between the Damascus regime and the opposition scheduled for later this month, may not be just a talking shop, as some have feared, but an opportunity to form alliances. Isis, and the need to deal with it, may provide the first hesitant steps towards peace sometime in the future.

11th January 2014

SYRIA'S THREE-WAY WAR

By Kim Sengupta

THE REGIME'S attacks came from ground and air. The initial losses were among the rebels, around 50 of them, some of their best fighters, who had been defending Homs's old city against the odds. The casualties after that were mainly civilians as missiles, mortars and artillery shells pounded into the broken buildings, what was left after months of violence.

Across the country in Aleppo were 50 more dead bodies, many with their hands tied behind their backs, some bearing marks of torture; prisoners executed in one of the last vengeful acts by jihadists linked to al-Qa'ida, retreating in the face of an offensive by revolutionary brigades who have turned against them.

Syria's civil war lurches from one bloody episode to another, continuing to take its toll among the men with guns and an exhausted population suffering hunger and disease as well as bombs and bullets. But amid the carnage, significant moves are being played out with new battle-lines are now being drawn and advances made, with Homs among the prizes sought.

This comes before the first face-to-face talks in Geneva between the regime and the rebels as the uprising enters its third year. No one expects peace to break out immediately, but there are flickering hopes that this was the start of a process which may result in a deal.

But there is recognition that any deal will, at best, be a partial one. Members of the opposition umbrella group, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) have been meeting over the last week to work out what lies ahead. Isis (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), the al-Qa'ida extension, has declared that anyone who agrees to a ceasefire is a traitor; a number of other Islamist groups have agreed.

The attacks on Isis by some of the other groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is backed by the West, is the most open manifestation yet of a war within a war which is likely to continue. The forces of Bashar al-Assad have stepped up action in an attempt to take advantage of the schism.

Over the last 10 days the regime had slowly extended control of the main highway from Damascus to Homs which had been closed due to heavy fighting in the Qalaman mountains along the Lebanese border. After capturing parts of the town of Nabak, with atrocities carried out against civilians according to human rights groups, the troops were able to move heavy weaponry towards its

targets.

The old city of Homs, with around 4,000 residents, has been under siege for over 18 months. Much of it has been destroyed. There is widespread malnutrition, especially among the children; six people are reported to have died of starvation.

Capturing Homs would be of immense strategic, as well as symbolic, value, lying at a crossing linking the capital to the coastal region of the Alawite community, from which President Assad and the ruling elite are drawn.

The assault focused on the Matahan area guarded by around 150 young fighters from Al Bayada Martyrs and Ansar and Ahrar al Sham brigades. Regime forces attempted to force their way through, but were driven out. But reinforcements, including armour, were seen heading down from Damascus yesterday.

Opposition reinforcements would be more difficult to supply, say their commanders, with fighting continuing against Isis in Aleppo and Idlib provinces in the north. To fighters like Abu Murad, a member of the Farouq Brigade, viewed as in the moderate wing of the opposition, the evidence of killings carried out by the Salafists, many of them foreign, is an incentive to continue.

"Most of the prisoners were not Bashar's men, but those who had been campaigning for the revolution, made sacrifices, long before al-Qa'ida came here" he said. "But they have also been shooting people saying they are against religion, when they are just ordinary people doing ordinary things. This shouldn't be happening in our country."

One such case earlier this week was in Idlib province where a diesel merchant had jokingly asked an Isis fighter, who had complained about impurities in his product, if he was "the god of fuel". That was enough for him to be arrested and executed for blasphemy.

There is a prevailing view among the opposition that the regime was secretly in league with the extremists. Some Chechen members of Isis had served in the Russian military in the past, leading to claims that they were Kremlin agents, acting as agent provocateurs.

Abu Murad says: "We have seen Bashar attack other khatibas (battalions) but Isis, he has left alone. Why? It is in his interest to let them win; then he can say all the revolutionaries are al-Qa'ida. The regime is not getting rid of Isis, we are clearing out Isis"

It remains unclear if Isis will remain cleared out. Currently it is also under attack by Iraqi security forces in Ramadi and Fallujah and its resources are stretched. If the situation changes across the border, al-Qa'ida's Syrian branch may re-establish itself.

Luay Mekdad, the FSA's political and media coordinator urged: "It's time for Isis to withdraw to their original strongholds, represented by Assad's security branches who created this group to try and infiltrate the ranks of revolutionaries." But most of areas Isis had pulled out of had passed to the Islamic Front, an Islamist alliance, rather than the Free Syrian Army.

The Front had stated its opposition to Isis. Hassan Aboud, one of its senior officials, said "Isis has attacked many other groups, stolen their weapons, occupied their headquarters and arbitrarily apprehended activists, journalists and rebels. It has tortured prisoner. Some of these people have attacked Isis positions, but Isis was the first to attack in other places, bringing this on itself."

However, just one member group in the alliance, Ansar al-Sham, has acknowledged taking part in the attack on Isis and the Front itself does not recognise the SNC. Jabhat al-Nusra, another powerful Salafist group, has so far declared itself to be 'neutral'.

There will be rounds of meeting between the SNC and its international backers before surrounding the Geneva talks. The opposition will be urging the Western states once again to supply the FSA with arms. The failure to do so, they say, will mean that the advantage gained against Isis will not last for long."

14th January 2014

BRITAIN THREATENS TO WITHDRAW SUPPORT FROM SYRIAN REBELS

By Kim Sengupta

BRITAIN AND the US have threatened to withdraw support from the Syrian rebels unless they attend forthcoming peace talks, a senior member of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime has claimed.

The official revealed that there were divisions among the international backers of the opposition. While London and Washington issue ultimatums, France, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have pledged solidarity - whether or not the regime's opponents attend the negotiations scheduled for next week in Geneva.

"The US and UK are telling us 'you need to go to Geneva'. France is asking us to go but saying 'we are with you whatever your decision is': that is the same as the Saudi and Turkish stance", said the official during a visit to London.

The French have stated they will continue to supply aid and equipment, but not weaponry, he added. The Saudis are providing arms to the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the military arm of the main opposition group, the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), while other countries are arming extreme Islamist groups. "Not all the suppliers are on the same page", he said.

The US and UK suspended the sending of "non-lethal" military items to the opposition after a number of border crossings from Turkey fell into the hands of Islamist groups and the supplies were stolen. William Hague told the Commons last night that Britain is reconsidering the ban.

The Foreign Secretary also announced that a warship, HMS Montrose, will join a convoy transporting the first consignment of weapons from President Assad's chemical arsenal and stated the UK would assist the US to "neutralise" the most dangerous material. Mr Hague insisted that the only way ahead was a diplomatic solution, and the Geneva talks were imperative. "It is vital for both the regime and the opposition to attend. We will do everything possible with other nations to help it succeed," he said.

The opposition will formally decide whether it attends on Friday. It remains divided over the talks, with some members disappointed that the US and Britain are pushing it to turn up while confidence-building measures, asked for prior to the talks, have been ignored.

The official pointed out that a humanitarian corridor to provide aid to the

swathes of the population trapped by the fighting is yet to materialise, as is the mooted release of female prisoners. President Assad's forces, meanwhile, have stepped up attacks, including air strikes, on civilian areas.

Asked whether being present at Geneva would lead to further fracturing of the opposition, with possible resignations from those opposed to the process, the official acknowledged that was a possibility, before adding: "We have always had resignations, it is the Syrian way."

The Assad regime, the survival of which has depended on the Kremlin's support, openly questioned the credibility of the meeting, casting doubts on whether any of the objectives could be achieved. It said in a statement that decisions in Paris were "closer to illusions than reality and taken by people who are detached from reality and extremely far from any acceptable political logic."

14th January 2014

RUSSIA AND US UNITE TO PUSH FOR SYRIA CEASEFIRE

By Patrick Cockburn

THE US and Russia have discussed a ceasefire in Syria and the delivery of humanitarian aid to besieged rebel-held areas, as the civil war between rival rebel groups intensifies.

After a meeting between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Paris, Mr Kerry said "we talked about the possibility of trying to encourage a ceasefire. Maybe a localised ceasefire in Aleppo." Mr Lavrov said that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is willing to allow humanitarian aid to enter devastated rebel-controlled districts such as East Ghouta, a substantial enclave east of Damascus.

The Russians and Americans held discussions in the lead up to the Geneva II peace conference to be held on 22 January and their cooperation is a positive sign that the war in Syria might be brought to an end. But there are still differences over whether Iran should attend. Mr Lavrov said it should, while Mr Kerry said that could do so only if it agreed that a purpose of the Geneva meeting is to arrange for Mr Assad to leave power in Syria.

This looks increasingly unlikely as Mr Assad's forces are advancing near Aleppo and the bitterly divided rebels are fighting their own civil war in which 700 people have died in recent days.

Isis launched a successful counter-attack over the week-end as it recaptured Raqqa on the upper Euphrates, the only one of 14 Syrian provincial capitals ever taken by the rebels, as well al-Bab and Tel Abyad on the border with Turkey. Local activists say that as many as 100 opponents taken prisoner by Isis have been killed. "About 70 bodies, most shot in the head, were collected and sent to Raqqa National Hospital," a rebel militant told Reuters. "Many of those executed had been wounded in the fighting." Prisoners shot included those from Jabhat al-Nusra, a rebel group affiliated with al-Qa'ida, and the Sunni Jihadi group Ahrar al-Sham.

The internecine warfare in the highly fragmented rebel movement, which has as many as 1,200 different groups, will further discredit them at home and abroad. A principal reason why the US is now starting to agree with Russia on ending the war in Syria is its worry that al-Qa'ida-linked or other jihadi fighters are now the main rebel military force. The larger rebel units have been

combining over the last two months mainly to receive finance and arms from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. Saudi leader have said they want to organise an opposition that is directed at overthrowing Mr Assad and reducing the role of al-Qa'ida.

A central feature of the war in Syria is the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia who support opposing sides fighting there and also in Yemen and Lebanon. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah have been essential supporters for Mr Assad, whom the US, Saudi Arabia and their allies had imagined would be easy to overthrow in late 2011 and in 2012.

The rebels were never strong enough to defeat the Syrian army themselves but believed it would be possible with help from US and Nato, airpower as happened in Libya. But the rise of Isis, Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadi groups made the West increasingly dismayed at the idea they might become the new powers in Syria after the fall of Mr Assad. The recent advance of Isis in Anbar and Ninveh provinces in Iraq has increased the incentive for the US and its allies to try to end, or at least de-escalate, the war in Syria.

The US and Russia would have to bring Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey on board to bring an end to the Syrian conflict. An open border with Turkey which recruits, arms and ammunition can cross without hindrance has been crucial for the success of the rebels in northern Syria.

Newly formed rebel groupings like the Islamic Front are reported to be Saudi-funded, and Saudi Arabia has been taking a stance more independent from the US since President Obama and David Cameron, lacking public support for another war, failed to launch air strikes after chemical weapons were used in Damascus in August. Nevertheless, the Saudis would find it difficult to act in direct opposition to American efforts to end the war.

17th January 2014

A CAMP WITHOUT HOPE FOR A PEOPLE WITHOUT A LAND

By Robert Fisk

NOT LONG after the start of the Syrian civil war, from the heights of the Qasioun mountain north of Damascus, I watched with Syrian friends as the first shells exploded upon the Yarmouk Palestinian camp. The Syrian army artillery behind us fired lazily, maybe one round every five minutes, and a little puff of smoke would rise over the distant heat haze. "So they're mixed up in another war!" one of my Syrian acquaintances said unkindly. "They don't know whether they are rebels or Bashar men."

Pity the Palestinians. They are eternal refugees; from Palestine in 1947-48, from Jordan in 1970-01, from Lebanon in 1982, from Kuwait in 1991 and now from Syria. Expelled from their lands in mandate Palestine, opposed to King Hussein's army in Jordan's mini-war, taking sides with the Muslim left in Lebanon and with Saddam after he invaded Kuwait, Syria's political divisions have doomed the Palestinians again in the country that once regarded itself as the vanguard of the Palestinian people.

Treated with comparative respect in Syria - they could hold passports, own homes and take jobs - Palestinians benefited from the Baath party's absolute support. But once Bashar's rule was challenged, the old dogmas and rivalries drove the Palestinians into despair. Hamas, which had maintained its notional headquarters in Damascus under Khaled Meshaal, decamped to the fleshpots of Doha and opposed the Syrian regime. Fatah, forgetful of its own vast diaspora, hoped its supporters would do what Yasser Arafat failed to do: stay out of the war.

But the Syrian Baath party does not forgive traitors; those who tried neutrality and those who stood against Sister Syria would pay the price. Only the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command - who in reality may have been responsible for Lockerbie, let alone the murder of Rafiq Hariri, (speak this not in The Hague just now), remained loyal.

And of course, the Free Syrian Army, the nationalist Nusra fighters and the "moderate" Islamists moved into Yarmouk as they took over other Damascus suburbs.

There were signs yesterday that Palestinian intervention from Beirut might

allow a few Palestinians to leave Yarmouk, but it has long been a place of starvation and rubble. Of its 250,000 Palestinians, scarcely 18,000 now remain; up to 1,500 are dead, many of them due to hunger. Of Syria's registered 540,000 Palestinian refugees, 270,000 are homeless inside the country and 80,000 have fled, two-thirds of them to Lebanon. Up to 11,000 are in Jordan, 5,000 in Egypt, a few in the midden of the Gaza Strip. Yarmouk and other camps in Syria - the refugees from Raml camp north of Homs are now surviving in surrounding villages - were created, like the other great pits of misery in the Arab world, for the Palestinians who were driven from their homes in what was to become Israel. But in the midst of the Syrian slaughter, who now cares about the Palestinians?

In Lebanon, Palestinian NGOs speak with deep feelings about their history, of how Ariel Sharon's death last weekend re-awoke the suffering of Palestinians under Israel's rule in Lebanon and in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila in 1982. "Even the bourgeoisie of the Palestinians are now becoming involved," one leftist Palestinian "Democratic Front" member said yesterday. "Everywhere there are demonstrations."

In the West Bank and in Israel, too; although Christian Palestinians - remembering the fate of Syrian Christians at the hands of Islamist rebels - are none to keen to condemn Bashar al-Assad. The Palestinian Authority, which sent its own envoy to Syria, has little interest in the Palestinian diaspora. The "right of return" has long been a dead card when the Israelis are already concretising the West Bank with their own colonies.

With crucifying irony, the US - which has for decades given Israel carte blanche in its treatment of Palestinians and colonisation of the Occupied Territories - has now expressed its concern for the "dreadful" situation of the Palestinians in Syria. "We are punished now by the Arabs as well as by the Israelis," the leftist Democratic Front man said. "And now the Americans feel sorry for us!"

19th January 2014

PEACE POSSIBLE AS POLITICAL LANDSCAPE SHIFTS

By Patrick Cockburn

GLOOMY PREDICTIONS precede this week's Geneva II peace talks aimed at ending the three-year-old war in Syria. US Secretary of State John Kerry says the meeting is about a mutually agreed political transition in Damascus, while the Syrian government insists it should focus on how to deal with "terrorism". Nobody expects President Bashar al-Assad to share power, still less step down, when he controls most populated areas of the country. Meanwhile, his opponents, fighting their own bloody "civil war within the civil war" inside Syria, are killing more of each other - more than 1,000 in the first fortnight of the year - than they are of the Syrian Army. Amid scenes of almost farcical rancour and division, the Syrian National Coalition decided at a meeting yesterday in Istanbul to attend the meeting in Switzerland.

But the sceptics could well be wrong in underestimating the significance of what has changed in Syria and internationally over the past year. Making peace in Syria is so difficult because of the sheer number of players with conflicting interests, but a change for the better is that far fewer of those players now expect to win a clear victory or fear suffering a calamitous defeat. The US and its European allies have become more interested in containing the conflict than in getting rid of Assad. By the same token, Iran and Hezbollah no longer fear his overthrow, an outcome that, in the recent past, they considered an existential threat. The tipping point was last year's decision by the US and Britain not to launch air strikes against Syria in the wake of the chemical weapons attacks in Damascus on 21 August, which might have escalated into the kind of air war waged by Nato against Libya's Gaddafi in 2011.

There are further reasons behind pressures for de-escalation, even if the conflict cannot be brought to a complete end. It is evident that the US and its allies are more frightened of an Assad defeat, which could open the door to an assortment of jihadis, than they are of his victory. It is not surprising that European intelligence services have been talking with their Syrian counterparts about the 1,200 European jihadists operating in Syria. It may be a little late in the day for such worries, but there is no concealing the depth of their concern about the speed and strength of the resurgence of al-Qa'ida-type movements in Syria and Iraq. The Europeans claim the discussions in Damascus were narrowly

focused, but rebels of every stripe will be wondering what information is being given to a Syrian government that will kill them if it can catch them.

The US and the Europeans now genuinely want to end the war, something they have claimed to want since 2011 but which - for all their lamentations - always sounded somewhat hypocritical. Put another way, they wanted the war to end but only if Assad was overthrown or stepped down; and, since his forces have never held less than 13 of the 14 provincial capitals, this was a recipe for the war to continue. Until early last year, many foreign politicians, diplomats and intelligence officials believed that Assad was bound to go. But this was never likely to happen without a regime split or full-scale foreign military intervention.

At the time, the states and movements being weakened by the war were the Syrian government, Iran and Hezbollah - all enemies of the US, western Europe, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. As for the jihadi groups, it seemed preferable to Western intelligence for them to be heading for Syria rather than to Afghanistan, and their ability to flourish there was underestimated. This was the private view of many Middle Eastern politicians such as Mowaffak al-Rubaie, the former Iraqi national security adviser, who told me last summer that the Syrian civil war "is the best option for the West and Israel because it knocks out Syria as an opponent of their policies and keeps Iran busy. Hezbollah is preoccupied by Syria and not Israel".

There was a further piece of self-deception on the part of the US, western Europeans and, to a lesser degree, the Saudis: this was to draw too great a distinction between the al-Qa'ida of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other jihadi groups. The former was demonised as the epitome of evil; but jihadis who avoided the Osama label might be used opportunistically as convenient allies against Gaddafi and Assad. Thus American officials in Benghazi in 2012 seem to have had no problem in having friendly chats with people who soon after were involved in the storming of the US Consulate and the killing of US ambassador Chris Stevens.

The comforting belief in a radical difference between al-Qa'ida, with its ideology of armed struggle against the Christian West, and the rest of the jihadis who want to focus on transforming the Muslim world may have been true once but, as US analysts have begun to recognise, is out of date. Certainly, that picture is not true of Syria or of the civil war raging within the rebel movement, in which media reports frequently suggest that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) is under attack by more moderate movements but, strangely, includes among those elements Jabhat al-Nusra, the official al-Qa'ida affiliate in Syria.

In fact, some members of the anti-Isis rebels, such as those grouped in the

Islamic Front, have a record of equally extreme sectarian violence. It was reportedly Jabhat al-Nusra and members of the Islamic Front who, in December, massacred 32 Alawites, Christians, Druze and Ismailis in the town of Adra, to the north-east of Damascus. And when it comes to fighting the Kurds in north-east Syria, the supposedly moderate, secular Free Syrian Army has been happy to fight alongside Isis, sending tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds fleeing into northern Iraq.

It is difficult to be optimistic in the face of such butchery, but the US and Russia are now closer than ever before on an agreement over ending the war. The Syrian proposal made in Moscow last week for a ceasefire in Aleppo, along with a prisoner exchange and an aid delivery to besieged rebel enclaves, may be propagandistic and made to wrong-foot the opposition. But the very weakness and disarray of the rebel groups means it has become easy for Damascus to make such offers because the opposition is no longer a serious competitor for power. Just possibly, the war may soon begin to wind down.

21st January 2014

THE GENEVA TALKS ARE THE ONLY HOPE FOR SYRIA - AND IRAN SHOULD HAVE BEEN PART OF THEM

By Kim Sengupta

THERE WAS absolutely no chance of the Geneva II talks on Syria taking place without last-minute dramas and this has, inevitably, happened. Some of it is expected posturing, but the latest act, Ban Ki-moon's decision to rescind the invitation to Iran to attend, is of great significance.

Tehran's participation was needed for a future peace deal. But the UN Secretary-General withdrew the invitation on the same day it was unexpectedly issued, following the threat of a boycott from the Syrian opposition and pressure from the United States.

There were expressions of surprise in Western capitals at the initial invitation. The point is that the 30 international participants (in Montreux on the first day because a watch conference has grabbed all the facilities in Geneva) all agreed at the first set of Syria talks, Geneva I, that the discussions will be for a transitional administration without Bashar al-Assad: Iran has not signed up to that.

The UN's view, however, had been that Tehran should have a place at the table. There were talks between American and UN officials over the weekend on the issue. Mr Ban was convinced by the Foreign Minister Javad Zarif that Iran has privately agreed to the tenets of Geneva. But until Iran agrees publicly, the West's official position is that Iran cannot attend.

There has been acknowledgement for a while in the Western states backing the Syrian opposition that Tehran's influence was necessary to bring the violence to an end. At the weekend the Foreign Minister of a major European power stressed at a gathering that Iran will play a part in the Syria talks, if not in the basis of the Geneva I declaration then in other ways.

A senior British diplomat pointed out that although Russia was the key in organising the talks, Iran has been playing a constructive role since President Rouhani came to power.

Syria's Opposition Coalition had stated that it would withdraw from the negotiations unless the Iranian invitation was retracted. Many of its members in Istanbul yesterday indicated privately they were more likely to turn up than not, but the public stance had to be different.

For those of us reporting from northern Syria's killing fields, the need for

talks was not a surprise. There was no other way for the main protagonists, the regime and the official opposition. Neither can hope for a military victory. The only winning side, despite a few recent reverses, has been al-Qa'ida-linked groups, in particular the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis).

A lot has been taking place behind the scenes. Western intelligence agencies have been to Damascus to liaise with the regime about prisoners it is holding as well as the overall jihadist threats. At the same time regime officials have met those from the West in neutral venues to discuss life after Mr Assad; there is anxiety to avoid what happened in Iraq after the invasion, when security forces were disbanded.

Western backers of the official opposition are not without means of contact with Islamist rebels inside Syria - this is being done with Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front through their sponsors, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.

The Geneva II talks have the framework for deals eventually bringing the terrible bloodshed to an end.

Even if this is now delayed, a long-term peace deal will have to take place, and it will take place with Iranian involvement. It appears that on this occasion Mr Ban made a call to Tehran just a bit too soon.

21st January 2014

MOMENT OF TRUTH FOR SYRIA - BUT IRAN STILL LEFT IN THE COLD

By Patrick Cockburn

A LONG-AWAITED peace conference on Syria is likely to go ahead without one of the major participants of the conflict after the United Nations withdrew an invitation to Iran to attend the talks in Geneva.

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, rescinded Iran's invitation on the same day it was unexpectedly issued, following the threat of a boycott from the Syrian opposition and pressure from the United States.

That the conference would take place at all looked in serious doubt through much of the day yesterday, with Iran's participation being a major sticking point for the opposition.

The meeting, arranged with strong US and Russian backing, is the only opportunity available for de-escalating, if not ending, the civil war in Syria.

Iran is a main backer of President Bashar al-Assad and has supplied him with arms, money and military advisers during the three-year-old conflict. Critics argue that holding a peace conference with some main regional players, such as Saudi Arabia, but not others, like Iran, is unrealistic and would limit chances of achieving peace.

The invitation to Iran to attend the Geneva II meeting came from Mr Ban and did not appear to have been expected by American officials. Mr Ban had earlier argued that a successful conference "needs all players at the table" and said that the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif had assured him that Iran accepted that "the goal of the negotiations is to establish by mutual consent a transitional governing body with a full executive powers".

The Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), the exiled opposition political grouping that narrowly decided over the weekend to attend the talks, expressed its shock at the invitation to Iran. The Western and Gulf-backed political arm of the rebels, which is the only part of the opposition planning to go to Switzerland, threatened to pull out if Iran was to attend. Its spokesman, Louay Safi, said that "the Syrian Coalition will withdraw their attendance in Geneva II unless Ban Ki-moon retracts Iran's invitation."

The UN later announced that urgent discussions were under way to ensure the talks went ahead. Later, when public statements from Iran made clear that it did

not agree to preconditions for the talks, a spokesman for the Secretary-General announced that the conference would proceed without Iran's participation.

Russia says there would be little point in holding a conference without Iran present. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that "not to ensure that all those who may directly influence the situation are present would, I think, be an unforgivable mistake".

The chaotic diplomacy that followed Iran's invitation and subsequent withdrawal from the talks within the space of a day appears have been caused by a supposition that the terms under which the conference is held are less woolly and ambiguous than they are.

The US and Russia have always disagreed since the first Geneva meeting in June 2012 about whether the departure of Mr Assad was an immediate aim or an ultimate long-term goal. In practice, since he controls almost all Syrian cities and his forces are advancing, albeit slowly, it is unlikely that Mr Assad would agree to step down or even seriously share power with the opposition. This was underlined when Mr Assad said in an interview yesterday that he might seek re-election later this year.

It is surprising that a diplomat as cautious as Mr Ban would not have cleared his offer to Iran with American officials at a senior level. A UN invitation would have freed the US of the embarrassment of issuing an invitation itself. Already, in insisting that the conference take place, the US and Russia have shown a determination to bring the war to an end which has not previously been in evidence. The new mood of co-operation between the two countries stems from their joint success in removing Syria's chemical weapons peacefully after the US and Britain came close to launching air strikes last September in retaliation for poison-gas attacks in Damascus. The Syrian civil war involves many other outside players, notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have been locked in confrontation since the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979.

Syria has also become the battleground for a deepening religious war between Sunni and Shia that is spilling out into Iraq and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are more determined to see the civil war end with the defeat of Mr Assad than are the US and West Europeans who are increasingly fearful of the expansion of jihadi Islam and the growing strength of al-Qa'ida-type movements in Syria and Iraq. Americans were particularly shaken to see the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) once more take control of Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad, from which they were driven in a battle by the US Marines in 2004.

Meanwhile, in Damascus Mr Assad sounded confident in an interview with AFP, saying: "I see no reason why I shouldn't stand [in a presidential election this year]. If there is public desire and a public opinion in favour of my

candidacy, "I will not hesitate for a second to run for election." He added that having members of opposition in his government was "not realistic" and that the talks in Switzerland should focus on fighting terrorism.

Mr Assad may be overconfident because political and military developments have been running in his favour. The opposition is not only split but is fighting a savage "civil war within the civil war" in which over 1,000 rebels were killed in the first two weeks of the year. But the military stalemate on the ground remains very much where it was since last summer and the government has failed to capture rebel-held districts in Damascus. The long-term future of Syria is one of geographical division with each side holding on to well-defended enclaves.

The Geneva II negotiations were never expected to end the war in Syria, but they might de-escalate it significantly through local ceasefires and humanitarian assistance to besieged areas. These have often collapsed in the past but might be more stable under greater international scrutiny. If even a small section of the opposition does turn up in Geneva then its presence validates for the first time negotiations between the warring parties that have hitherto simply wanted to eliminate each other.

The complexity of the Syrian war that has drawn in so many foreign players and become the focus of so many other conflicts - such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar vs Iran, Sunni vs Shia, the US and Israel vs Iran and the US against Russia - that it will be difficult to end. But there are some signs that the political temperature in the region is dropping. Turkish President Abdullah Gul has called for a "recalibration" of Turkey's hostile policy towards Syria where it has done all it can to help the rebels overthrow Mr Assad but without success. The open 500-mile-long border between Turkey and Syria has been crucial to the success of the rebels in the north of the country. Turkey is therefore in a strong position to mediate or force concessions from both sides if it takes a more evenly balanced position. It is also seeking to improve its relations with Iran.

A further incentive for Turkey and others - such as state and private donors supporting rebels in the Gulf - to think about bringing an end to the conflict is the apparent success of Isis in counter-attacking other rebel groups that seemed to be making headway against it a fortnight ago. Isis has recaptured Raqqa, the one provincial capital held by the rebels, and taken important towns on the border with Turkey. Powerful rebel groups like the Islamic Front, reported to be funded by Saudi Arabia, have failed to make any decisive headway against Isis. This puts in doubt Saudi hopes of establishing an Islamic military force capable of defeating both Mr Assad and al-Qa'ida.

The fate of the Geneva II conference is still in doubt, but several powerful participants in the Syrian war have an interest in bringing it to a conclusion or at

least ensuring that it does not spread further. The endgame may not be yet at hand but opportunities for de-escalation are greater than ever before.

22nd January 2014

A HORROR SHOW WON'T DECIDE SYRIA'S FUTURE

By Robert Fisk

THE PICTURES are horrific, the torture details revolting, the numbers terrifying. And the integrity of the three former prosecutors who have effectively accused the Syrian government of war crimes with their report published this week is beyond doubt.

Shrivelled, blood-spattered corpses provide unstoppable evidence of regime cruelty - just as the video tapes of Syrian rebel executions tell us what kind of Syria may soon exist if the insurrection against President Bashar al-Assad succeeds.

Everyone knows that the Assad regime - from father Hafez onwards - has employed torture and executions to preserve the doubtful purity of the Baath party. So why not, indeed, talk of war crimes?

Well, let's just remember that the 11,000 prisoners reportedly done to death by the Syrian regime are only just over half the total number of Syrians - 20,000 - reportedly killed by Hafez's brother's troops in the besieged Syrian city of Hama in 1982.

So how come we are not demanding war crimes trials for those responsible for that even greater massacre? Could it be that we have just forgotten this atrocity? Or could it be that we don't have the inclination to pursue that particular bloodbath?

No, that's not to say that the evidence from the Qatar-funded report - and we shall come to the matter of Qatar shortly - is not true. But we should be asking a lot more questions than we have been asking about this portrait gallery of pain, unleashed only hours before an international conference in Switzerland which begins today, in which we in the West - but perhaps not Qatar - hope to end the civil war in Syria.

How long, for example, have the Qatari authorities been in possession of this terrible eye-witness material? A couple of weeks, just enough time to rustle up the lawyers for the prosecution? Or a couple of months? Or six months? And, more to the point, why now? For it would be difficult to imagine a better way for Qatar - whose royal family viscerally hates Bashar al-Assad - to destroy his hopes of a future role in Syria, even in a "transitional" Syrian government, than by releasing these snapshots of terror just before the Swiss talks.

Indeed, one is reminded - in terms of political purpose rather than historical parallel, of course - of Nazi Germany's disclosure of the mass graves of 22,000 Polish officers and civilians murdered by the Soviet secret police in 1940 at Katyn, in that part of Russia newly occupied by German troops. The Nazis claimed the Soviets were responsible - in the hope that this would divide Stalin's alliance with America and Britain. The Allies denounced the Nazis for the massacre - although it was indeed committed by the Soviets. Does Qatar now hope to divide Syria's alliance with Russia and Iran with similar evidence of Syrian government mass murder?

There are other questions to ask. How come Qatar's brilliant plaything, Al Jazeera - the Arab satellite channel to beat them all - didn't get the exclusive on the Syrian executions report? I'm told that Al Jazeera did not even get advance warning of the revelations, which were handled by a lawyer acting for the Qatari authorities in London.

The involvement of solicitors Carter Ruck - may their name be praised, as every journalist would say at once - may seem quite obvious, but how come the Qataris did not involve the obvious NGOs in such disclosures? Human Rights Watch (HRW), it turned out, knew nothing about the photographs - and did not even have time to identify them - and Amnesty International fared no better. If you really want to point the finger at a dictator, why not bring in the heavy guns of HRW and Amnesty?

And Bashar's reaction so far? Zilch. His delegation in Switzerland can sit down today to chat about the need to destroy "terrorism" and offer a few local ceasefires, humanitarian supply convoys and prisoner releases to mark time. The regime's enemies can parade those terrifying pictures, which Qatar has made available. But war and peace in Syria will not be decided by this horror show.

23rd January 2014

SYRIA: THE WAR OF WORDS BEGINS

By Kim Sengupta

PEACE NEGOTIATIONS between the Syrian regime and the opposition - which had for so long seemed doomed never to take place - finally started yesterday, bringing flickering hopes of ending the bloodiest and longest conflict of the Arab Spring.

The future of President Bashar al-Assad was always going to be the most difficult issue in the proceedings, with the fundamental demand of the opposition and its Western backers that he must leave power. The regime's delegation rejected this at the outset, leading to apprehension that the talks may founder.

At the close of the day's session, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, said he "was not surprised" by the stance from Damascus, but insisted there was a momentum building to bring the strife, now entering its third year, to an end. The US President, Barack Obama, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, have had a lengthy conversation about the matter and "parallel moves" were under way which could not be disclosed at present, Mr Kerry said.

He also left the door open for Iran to participate in the talks, acknowledging that, as a staunch supporter of the Syrian regime, it could help to broker a ceasefire. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, had to rescind an invitation to Tehran to attend the current talks, known as Geneva II, after vociferous objections from Washington. But Mr Kerry said: "Iran does certainly have an ability to be helpful and make a difference. We hope they will decide to be constructive and make a decision to operate in a way forward that can allow them to do so. There are plenty of ways that that door can be opened in the next weeks or months, and my hope is they will want to join in a constructive solution."

Despite this, the bitter accusations and recriminations which have accompanied the remorseless violence on the ground in Syria could not be kept out as the conference got under way in Montreux, Switzerland.

Walid Muallem, the Foreign Minister from Damascus, and Ahmad Jarba, the head of the opposition coalition, attempted to match each other with accusations of atrocities committed. Seldom have diplomatic negotiations been visited by such graphic descriptions of murders and mutilations, rapes and torture - the deadly vendettas of Homs and Aleppo coming to the shores of Lake Geneva.

The foreign backers of the respective sides came in for their share of the blame for the dismemberment of Syria, with Mr Muallem accusing them of sponsoring terrorism. "Seated among us are representatives of countries who have the blood of our people on their hands," he said.

Mr Kerry and William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary, countered that initial peaceful protests had been met with brutal repression by Syrian security forces. They pointed out the millions of dollars spent by the international community in attempting to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and help refugees flowing into neighbouring countries. Ahmed Davutoglu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, tried sarcasm, saying: "Yes we have 700,000 terrorists from Syria in our country - 8,500 child terrorists. Some of them are just a few months old."

Mr Muallem rounded on Mr Kerry, who had stressed that a previous meeting about the Syrian crisis, Geneva I (which took place without the regime's participation last year), had stipulated that Mr Assad would have no role in a new political landscape. "No one, no one, Mr Kerry, has the right to withdraw legitimacy of the President other than Syrians themselves. We shall be holding a referendum on whatever happens here," he said. "The West claims to fight terrorism publicly while they feed it secretly."

He said other supporters of the rebels were "princes and emirs living in mud and backwardness", by which he meant Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The "backstabbing neighbour" - Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister - also got a namecheck.

The opposition's Free Syrian Army, declared Mr Muallem, was "free to cannibalise human hearts and livers, barbecue heads, recruit child soldiers and rape women". There were, he added, "Syrians here in this hall [who] participated in all that has happened, they implemented, facilitated the bloodshed and all at the expense of the Syrian people they claim to represent".

He went on: "If you want to speak in the name of the Syrian people, you should not be traitors to the Syrian people or agents in the pay of enemies of the Syrian people."

Mr Ban, hosting the meeting, attempted to restore calm, saying: "We have to have some constructive and harmonious dialogue. Please refrain from inflammatory rhetoric."

Then, as Mr Muallem overran his allocated speaking time, the UN Secretary-General repeatedly asked the Foreign Minister to "wrap up". But Mr Muallem was not prepared to give up the microphone. "I came here after 12 hours in the airplane. I must finish my speech," he said. "I have the right to give the Syrian version here in this forum, after three years of suffering. This is my right. You live in New York, I live in Syria."

Mr Jarba, when his turn came, stuck to the time limit. He held up photographs from a report published on the eve of the conference which sought to show that the Assad regime had tortured and killed up to 11,000 prisoners. The real "terrorists and mercenaries" were the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, whose members had been fighting on behalf of President Assad, the opposition leader said.

"It is we who are engaged in a struggle against terrorism. The revolution is facing al-Assad's terrorism - the terrorism he has brought into Syria", said Mr Jarba. "Al-Assad cannot stay on his throne. We cannot have so many people dying because one man wants to stay on the throne. We want the al-Assad delegation here to be a free delegation and help us build a peaceful Syria. Have we got such partners?"

There are no reasons to think there will be defections en masse from either side. But with the death toll climbing to 130,000 and the number of refugees reaching two million, there was acknowledgment that the talking should continue. "Time is like blood for the Syrian people," said Mr Jarba.

Everything Mr Muallem said was couched in terms of "fighting terrorism" but he acknowledged the need to start "rebuilding Syria's social and material structure" and agreed that "dialogue is the foundation of this process".

Face-to-face talks between the two sides are due to start tomorrow. Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN mediator, said both sides had shown willingness to engage on humanitarian access, local ceasefires and exchanges of prisoners.

The acrimony in the fractured and wounded Syrian society was not restricted to the delegations. Out on the street, a small group of activists chanted "in spirit and fire, we will redeem you, oh Bashar" as they waved the Syrian flag, but also that of Hezbollah. A little bit further along was another protest, by the human rights group Avaaz, in which "corpses" lay in a "burnt and destroyed house", with a man in an Assad mask standing over them.

Murad al-Nouri had wandered from one to the other; the financial analyst, 54, had made the train journey from Geneva, where he lives, to the conference with his nine-year-old grandson, Qais. "We always thought we would go back to Syria to live, but would you go back now [and] take this boy to live there?" he asked. "My father was imprisoned by Bashar's father's people and I had always felt there was need for reform and proper democracy, but both sides are behaving now in a way which is inhuman. It will be criminal if the people holding these talks cannot achieve an end to all this suffering. The Syrian people will never forgive them."

24th January 2014

SYRIA REBELS SAY RUSSIA IS PREPARED TO DROP ASSAD

By Kim Sengupta

THE TWO sides in Syria's civil war are due to start talking today after three years of savage strife.

Although an overall settlement is seen as some way off, both the regime and the rebels are said to be receptive to the establishment of humanitarian corridors for aid, localised ceasefires and exchanges of prisoners.

The protagonists will be in separate rooms in the morning with the United Nations mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, acting as messenger, with the plan they will meet face to face in the afternoon.

Meanwhile, the opposition claims there are signs that President Bashar al-Assad is losing in his attempts to cling to power. Last night Ahmad Jarba, the leader of the Syrian opposition, claimed that Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, has assured him that the Kremlin would not keep propping up Mr Assad.

Separately, the Foreign Minister of China, an ally of the regime, when asked about the Syrian President's future, stressed that all options were under consideration.

"We met Mr Lavrov in Paris last week and he assured us that Russia would not hold on to Assad," said Mr Jarba. "He said that the negotiations should be between the Syrians themselves and they should reach a solution."

The Geneva I Communiqué, issued after a previous meeting stipulated that the President cannot play a part in the post-conflict political future.

The regime, which was not present at those talks, had repeatedly rejected this; Walid Moallem, the Foreign Minister, reiterated this on the first day of the conference in Montreaux in a belligerent speech.

Nevertheless, there was a distinct change of tone from Syrian officials in the course of Wednesday's session. Mr Moallem's final remarks were more measured than the opening statements.

Opposition members and international diplomats stated that they appreciated that the initial outbursts were partly for official consumption in Damascus.

The Syrian Foreign Minister was prepared to stay "not one or two or three sessions", but for a long-term dialogue, "whatever it takes".

25th January 2014

SCEPTICISM ON THE STREETS AS AL-QA'IDA POSES AS PEACEMAKER

By Patrick Cockburn

SYRIANS IN Damascus say they are resigned to the talks in Geneva not doing much to end the violence or improve their living conditions. They point out that the opposition delegation does not have enough support in rebel-held areas of Syria to deliver on any promises it might make on ceasefires, safe passage for foreign aid or prisoner exchanges.

"So what if Geneva II does not succeed?" said a Syrian woman who did not want her name published. "If they did agree anything, would it really mean less blood or more electricity? People are fed up with politics." She said Syrians feel that their country is only a small player in determining the outcome of the conflict compared to the US, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Expectations of international diplomacy are low, but in Damascus, conditions are a little better than six months ago in government-held parts of the city. There is less outgoing artillery on the government side aimed at rebel districts, and people in central Damascus say there are fewer mortars being fired at them by the rebels. The mood is more relaxed than last summer.

There are adequate supplies of bread, gasoline and cooking gas, though the latter two items were in short supply when the rebels captured the industrial area off Adra north east of the capital six weeks ago - they have since been driven back. The rebels were accused of killing 32 members of minorities - Allawi, Christians, Druze and Ismaili - in the town.

One reason for reduced violence is that there are many local ceasefires and accommodations in place in the capital and elsewhere. These vary from place to place, but in the district of Barzeh, long an opposition bastion in Damascus, rebels have reached an understanding with the government forces, by one account giving up their heavy weapons and promising to observe a truce. Other observers in Damascus say that in some cases the local rebels give up their weapons in exchange for arms from the government and act as a sort of local militia.

These local ceasefires are what the Syrian government says it would like to see extended. They are easier to reach in Damascus because many rebel enclaves have been besieged and cut off for a long time and are in desperate need of food

and medical supplies.

It would be difficult, however, to agree such ceasefires where jihadi or al-Qa'ida type groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) and Jabhat al-Nusra, the official al-Qa'ida affiliate, are in control, as they are in much of the northern and eastern parts of Syria.

Exactly who holds power in these towns and districts after a local ceasefire agreement is a moot point and varies from place to place. Even if the government forces are more than holding their own, they do not seem to have the strength to inflict a permanent defeat on the rebels.

For instance, Jabhat al-Nusra has retaken the historic Christian town of Maloula, whose inhabitants have fled to Damascus. It is not far from the crucial road linking Damascus to Homs, the third largest Syrian city, a route which was cut for 17 days a couple of months ago. Jabhat al-Nusra rebels are still present in the town of Yabrud just off the main road.

The biggest change in the military and political situation in the last six months has been "the civil war within the civil war" fought with varying degree of enthusiasm by rebels opposing the Isis, which is notorious for extreme violence to anybody who opposes it. The civil war got going on 3 January after the torture and murder of Abu Rayyan, a popular commander of the Ahrar al-Sham jihadi group.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in London says that, since then, 1,395 people have been killed in the internecine rebel fighting, including 760 anti-Isis fighters, 426 Isis and 190 civilians. In one battle at Jarabulus Turkish border crossing, Isis won a victory, cut off the heads of ten of its prisoners and put them on spikes.

One man was executed for having given a glass of water to a member of the Free Syrian Army, the supposedly secular military group supported by the US and Britain that is now disintegrating.

Such has been the ferocity of the fighting between the jihadists in Syria that they have attracted a mediator not previously known for his moderation. This is none other than the head of al-Qa'ida and successor to Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who this week pleaded in a speech posted on YouTube for a peaceable solution to intra-jihadi differences internecine struggle.

Mr Zawahiri asks for "every free person in Syria seeking to overthrow (President Bashar) al-Assad... to seek an end to fighting between brothers in jihad and Islam immediately." The brothers in question are primarily the Jabhat al-Nusra and Isis whose attempt to dominate rebel-held areas by detaining and murdering its opponents has provoked the present backlash

So far neither side has landed a knockout blow, Mr Zawahiri saying "jihadist

groups are our brothers whom we refuse to accuse of apostasy". Absorbed in their own struggle, the rebels have largely stopped attacking government forces.

25th January 2014

THE LONG ROAD TO PEACE?

By Kim Sengupta

TWO YEARS, 10 months, and three weeks after the start of the protest marches which would spiral into a vicious civil war threatening to engulf the region and beyond, Syria's regime and rebels will today begin the peace negotiations which will supposedly help to end the bloodshed.

The face-to-face talks were delayed for 24 hours after last-minute differences of the type which had plagued the proceedings from the outset. The opposition demanded that the regime must first sign up to the Geneva I protocol, issued following a previous conference, which calls, among other things, for the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power. This was followed by the Syrian foreign minister, Walid Muallem, threatening to return to Damascus unless "serious discussions" took place.

But after a hard day of shuttle diplomacy the UN mediator for the talks reported that the two sides were prepared to meet and the negotiations would continue through the weekend until the end of next week. A tired and drawn Lakhdar Brahimi said: "We have tried for a long time to get these talks started, no one thought it was going to be an easy process. The delegations here, from the government and the opposition, know what is at stake, their country is in a very bad shape. We have now agreed that we shall meet in the same room. The discussions I had with the two parties were encouraging.

Although the fact that the direct meetings were rearranged so soon after the initial cancellation was an impressive testament to those driving for a negotiated settlement, deep chasms remain on fundamental issues, and one in particular - the fate of Mr Assad.

Mr Brahimi insisted that everyone present at the talks was there "without preconditions and on the basis of the Geneva I communiqué of 30 June 2012". But the key point of that is the establishment of a transitional administration by "mutual consent". The opposition and its international allies insist that Mr Assad and those closest to him cannot play any part in this. The regime has declared repeatedly that any attempt to remove the President would be crossing a "red line" and would not be countenanced.

The regime is highly unlikely to accede to the demands for a written undertaking of adherence to Geneva I, something the political representatives of

the rebels were insisting yesterday was imperative for the talks to move forward. Asked about these issues, Mr Brahimi argued, without much conviction it seemed, that "there were different interpretations on some of those items. I think the two sides understand that very well and accept it".

The opposition backed the arrangements, claiming that it showed that the regime had now endorsed Geneva I. Anas al-Abdah, a delegate, said: "We are satisfied with Mr Brahimi's statement today and that the regime has accepted Geneva I; and on this basis we will meet the Assad delegation tomorrow morning. It will be a short session in which only Brahimi will speak, to be followed by another session, a longer one, in the afternoon."

The failure to hold the direct talks yesterday was greeted by some as a collapse of the process. But a lot of the statements from both sides were posturing. Syrian expatriate advisers to the regime acknowledged that Mr Muallem's threat was a tactical move aimed at getting the opposition to focus on the task ahead.

"There will be elections... next year, we feel the Syrian people should be allowed to decide what happens to President Assad. Why not wait for that? Mr Muallem, maybe it was not translated properly, but it was not meant the way it came out, the government does not want this thing to collapse, there are others who don't want this to collapse", said one of them, a German national.

The Russians, without whose backing the regime would probably not have survived in the conflict, are said to have warned the Damascus delegation against pulling out. The rebels, too, were under pressure, from Western backers not to jeopardise the process. Just a few hours after boycotting the scheduled face-to-face talks, one, Burhan Ghalioun, said: "We will not withdraw from Geneva until the demands of the Syrian people are met." Another, Louay Safi, added: "We want a commitment from the regime on Geneva I [but] we will be patient this week."

At the end it appeared to boil down to the opposition not physically being in the same room as the regime, but continuing talks by proxy. The convoys of the two groups were on the same road, they caught sight of each other across the courtyards of the Palais des Nations, but there would be no dialogue.

On the eve of the talks, Ahmad Jarba, head of the opposition alliance, after the standard denunciation of the regime, stressed the long road ahead to reach an agreement. This was echoed by Mr Muallem at the end of a preliminary international conference earlier in the week in Montreaux, a day he had started with a rant against the rebels, the West, the Gulf states and Turkey, all allegedly engaged in a criminal conspiracy against the Syrian state.

Western diplomats insist the regime had been forced to moderate its position

by the reaction to Mr Muallem's initial outburst, even allies such as Russia and China, and influential states which were deemed to be sympathetic, had distanced themselves from the regime's rhetoric.

But in these constantly changing negotiations it is far from clear what has been chaotic and what was choreographed and it remains difficult to predict who will seize the advantage from Geneva II in the days ahead.

26th January 2014

UN DOWNBEAT ON OPENING OF SYRIAN TALKS

By Kim Sengupta

HUMANITARIAN AID reaching desperate people trapped by the fighting in Syria could be the first tangible step resulting from the talks between the regime and the rebels, with a convoy moving to besieged Homs, possibly within 48 hours.

The news of the possible breakthrough came as the two sides met for the first time, although they addressed all remarks through the UN mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi.

Approaching its fourth year, the civil war has killed more than 130,000 Syrians and almost six million have become refugees.

Work to set up the corridor to Homs, a city which has symbolised the suffering brought about by relentless violence, has been carried out behind the scenes by the Americans and the Russians. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is said to be ready to deliver food, water and medicine as soon as it gets clearance from the regime - which may happen relatively quickly, say diplomats, with the Kremlin keen to push the effort ahead.

There is also a possibility that the regime may start to release prisoners as part of an exchange deal. Unconfirmed figures of 5,500 have been mentioned. If progress is made in such "confidence-building measures", especially on humanitarian corridors, the two sides will start the groundwork on forming a transitional administration, according to diplomatic sources.

The two teams at the negotiations have refused to speak to each other in person during two sessions at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva. But one Western official said: "We should be pleasantly surprised they are not actually trying to brain each other with the chairs."

"We haven't achieved much," said a downbeat Mr Brahimi last night. "Tomorrow morning we will discuss the issue of prisoners, people who have been kidnapped, and see whether something can be done to secure the freedom of at least some who have been deprived of freedom."

Monzer Akbik, chief of staff to the leader of the opposition, said: "Today we had the chance to speak to the regime …. Dictators, usually, they don't like to listen. But today they had to listen to us and the voice of the Syrian people that they want transition from dictatorship to democracy." Anas al-Abdah, a delegate

for the opposition, proposed a ceasefire in the Homs area, to allow the aid to get through.

Everyone involved with the talks has repeatedly stressed the difficulty in making progress. The problems were highlighted by the stance of the regime's information minister, Omran Zoabi, who rejected the very notion of a transitional government - the key target of a communiqué on which the current negotiations are based - before the first session had started. "There is an enormous gap on this; those who talk about President Bashar al-Assad are talking about removing the man who is leading the war against terrorism," Mr Zoabi said.

The acrimony and bitterness that has accompanied the escalating violence on the ground was never far from the surface. Mr Abdah said: "It was not easy for us to sit with the delegation that represents the murderers in Damascus, those with blood on their hands, but we did it for the sake of the Syrian people."

26th January 2014

SPLITS AMONG REBELS ALLOW RARE LULL IN VIOLENCE

By Patrick Cockburn

I WAS just thinking that Damascus was a lot quieter than six months ago - at that time the sound of government artillery pounding the rebel-held districts resounded daily across the capital - when there was the crash of a mortar bomb exploding a few hundred yards away. Fired from a rebel area, it had landed in Bab Touma, a Christian part of the Old City, where I am staying. It turned out not to have killed anybody, unlike the last time I was here, when a couple of mortar rounds landing in Straight Street killed four people.

"Things have not changed much since last summer," said a local businessman. "The biggest change is that people are more used to living in a permanent state of war in which survival is the main objective in life. After all, we are entering the fourth year of fighting." He also admitted that there were fewer exchanges of fire between government and opposition districts in which the Syrian Army uses by far the heavier weapons. But he did not expect the present military deadlock to change radically and he added: "We do not expect much from the Geneva II talks."

The fighting has eased somewhat around Damascus in recent weeks. This is in large part because the rebels are fully engaged in fighting their own "war within the civil war", pitting a disparate coalition of rebels against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) in a struggle that killed 1,395 people in the first three weeks of January. Isis has retaken the one rebel-held provincial capital, Raqqa, and is insisting that women wear the niqab, the all-enveloping cloak and veil, and has banned music, pictures and cigarettes.

But when fighting does take place between government and rebel forces, it has lost none of its previous viciousness. When jihadi fighters stormed Adra on the north-eastern outskirts of the capital in December they reportedly killed workers in a local bakery by cooking them in their own ovens, while doctors and nurses in the local clinic were executed for working for the government. Heytham Mousa, the head of the legal department in the Ministry of Information, was taken away with his wife and daughter by rebels. None has been heard from since and calls made to his phone are answered only by a voice saying it is now in the possession of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian al-Qa'ida

affiliate.

The government has gained a little from the rebel groups murdering each other and, such is the intensity of hatreds within Syria, has probably lost little credit domestically from the disclosure of pictures allegedly showing 11,000 prisoners tortured or starved to death. Syrians on both sides are inured to atrocities. But the depth of division within the opposition is now so great that it is difficult to see how its negotiating team in Geneva could deliver on practical questions such as ceasefires, prisoner exchanges and the delivery of aid. Indeed, the rebel negotiators would risk of execution as traitors if they set foot in much of rebel-held north and east Syria.

But the government also has its weaknesses: it has not taken advantage of the rebel civil war to advance, except in a few areas around Aleppo and limited parts of Damascus. One explanation for this might be that it does not want to threaten the rebels and unite them while they are doing the government's work for it by killing each other. But it is also true that the government's forces are already over-stretched, without enough troops and not capable of launching offensives on very many different fronts. There is evidence for this in that Jabhat al-Nusra has reportedly captured, for the second time, the ancient Christian town of Maloula. This is just off the crucial main road north from Damascus to Syria's third city, Homs, and the fact that the government cannot permanently secure this important route shows that it is not strong enough to counter-attack. The Homs-Damascus road was also shut for 17 days recently when the opposition's forces took the town of Nabq half way along it and is till not wholly secure.

The government has been besieging rebel-held districts in the capital with the aim of starving them out. Some, such as Barzeh in Damascus, are once again partially under government control after deals in which heavy and sometimes light weapons are handed over by rebels. But these agreements are fragile because terms, such as those to do with freeing prisoners, may not be abided by. Some rebel bastions such as Douma, north-east of Damascus, have big reserves of food to hold out for a long time. In most of these much fought over districts, the population has largely fled and shows no signs of returning. The people who left are sleeping rough in parks or are crammed into apartments while, just across the border in Lebanon, businessmen are charging $200 a month in rent for tents in which Bedouin and seasonal labourers once lived.

By contrast, the government-held districts maintain what on the surface looks like a normal life. There is a plentiful supply of bread at subsidised prices, as well as gasoline and cooking gas. Traffic is appalling because of numerous checkpoints and what used to be a 10-minute journey can take an hour; but the government still pays salaries and pensions to its employees, even if prices have

soared in the markets. It remains less dangerous in central Damascus than it is in Baghdad, with its daily onslaught of bombs aimed at civilian targets.

Overall, it is difficult to see ceasefires being put in place and maintained without the presence of UN monitors who can act as mediators and conduits for the exchange of information between people who have been trying to kill each other for three years. Under the plan of the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2012, UN monitors played a significant role in reducing the violence, but at the time both sides were still hoping for a military victory and saw the ceasefire as a temporary truce. The best that can be hoped for probably is temporary ceasefires and truces but these are not to be sneered at. One Lebanese academic notes that in the 15 years of civil war in neighbouring Lebanon, between 1975 and 1990, there "were over 600 ceasefires, which may sound ridiculous but a lot of people are alive because of them who would have died if they had not been there".

The government now looks to be in a stronger position than the rebels. The US and the Europeans have become increasingly worried by the successes of Isis and Jabhat al-Nisra, as well as the jihadi groups that have come together to form the Islamic Front. Though the various jihadis may differ in their tactics, their world view is very much the same. One close observer of the opposition, who recently returned from travelling in the rebel-held areas of northern Syria, says that "you could go an awful long way talking to these jihadi groups before you met any fighters who did not thoroughly approve of 9/11 as a well-deserved blow against the US". American efforts to talk to jihadis who they deem to be free of al-Qa'ida links look as ill-considered in Syria as they turned out to be in Benghazi before the US ambassador was murdered.

27th January 2014

SYRIANS RETURN TO THEIR BADLY DAMAGED HOMES AS CEASEFIRE MAKES STREETS SAFE AGAIN

By Patrick Cockburn

FOR THE first time in the Syrian civil war a ceasefire agreement in a Damascus district sees rebel fighters keep their weapons and control of their own neighbourhood in return for an end to the fighting. If repeated in other parts of Syria, such agreements have the potential to de-escalate violence that has left 130,000 Syrians dead.

A ceasefire was taking hold over the weekend in the district of Barzeh in north Damascus, which has been besieged for at least nine months. A Free Syrian Army leader, who gave his name as Abu Hamzeh, said: "We made a reconciliation agreement to stop the rivers of blood that have flowed in Barzeh."

Most buildings in Barzeh, which once had a population of 50,000 people, have been badly damaged or destroyed by bombs or shells, which have left apartment blocks gutted by fires and thick concrete floors smashed to pieces. Hundreds of refugees who returned to Barzeh yesterday after months away were visibly distraught at the massive damage to their homes, which had in many cases been looted.

A senior leader of the Free Syrian Army, called al-Kal, said that under the terms of the agreement, "I am expecting the government to release about 350 prisoners from Barzeh, but all we have got so far is three dead bodies." He complained that the government checkpoints around Barzeh were not letting through trucks containing foods as promised. On the other hand, government soldiers have pulled backed from some strong points.

Al-Kal said the shooting could start again, but the FSA, Syrian army soldiers and the returning refugees did not look as if they expected more fighting. Municipal employees were working on pylons so electricity supplies could be reconnected after months without it.

A doctor, who did not want to give his name, said that during the siege there was food from the stocks of those who had fled, but no fresh vegetables or fruit. He showed a picture of a baby wounded in an explosion whom he had tried to treat with inadequate medical supplies. Abu Hamzeh said about 250 people including women and children had been killed in the siege.

What has happened in Barzeh is important because Damascus has many

rebel-held districts blockaded and bombarded by the Syrian Army. In most cases much of the civilian population has fled, though in Barzeh, FSA commanders claimed that 25,000 had remained. Given the scale of the destruction this looks like an over-estimate. Though food supplies had been limited, nobody on the street looked malnourished and al-Kal said they had not been starving.

There have been many truces and unofficial ceasefires in the Syrian war, but this appears to be the first time FSA men keep control of their district. In theory they are part of the National Defence Force but they spoke of themselves as belonging to the FSA. Asked if his men had given up their heavy weapons, al-Kal said: "It was the government that asked for an agreement, not us, and we keep our weapons." He said local fighters would keep out "foreigners" which may be a reference to other rebel fighters.

Although the ceasefire had been in force for some days we did not find it easy to enter Barzeh despite official government permission. Ultimately, we drove down a road through a rocky ravine on Mount Qassioun, overlooking Damascus. There were FSA men standing with Syrian Army soldiers at a checkpoint, one of whom took us to a badly damaged mosque inside Barzeh. Here we met Abu Hamzeh and later al-Kal, who was at first suspicious, but later took us on a tour to see the destruction.

It is all the more striking because rebel-held Barzeh is surrounded by undamaged neighbourhoods where life goes on as normal.

Could similar agreements be reached in other parts of Syria? The Syrian government has proposed a ceasefire in Aleppo, but after three years of war the two sides are divided by hatred and fear. It would be difficult to reach an accommodation where jihadi groups are an important element of the local opposition.

27th January 2014

HOMS BREAKTHROUGH IN GENEVA

By Kim Sengupta

WOMEN AND children trapped by the Syrian regime's siege of the city of Homs will be given a chance to leave, in the first tentative signs of a breakthrough at the Geneva negotiations between the Assad regime and rebels.

The development was announced by Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations mediator, at the end of the second day of talks between the two sides as part of "confidence building measures" before moving on to attempts to form a transitional administration.

Men trying to get out of the same area in Homs would be allowed to do so only after a list of names had been submitted to Bashar al-Assad's security forces to ensure they "were not members of armed groups", Mr Brahimi said. He denied there were dangers of parallels with Srebrenica in the Balkans in 1995, when a similar list was used by Serbian troops to arrest and kill thousands of Bosnian men and boys.

"There are so many horrible things happening in Syria, we don't want a Srebrenica situation to add to this," said the mediator, who added that efforts were continuing to secure the release of prisoners.

The opposition produced a list of more than 47,000 detainees they wanted freed, about 2,500 of whom were women and children, they said. In turn they agreed to provide the names of those being held by the rebels to Mr Brahimi and the delegation from Damascus.

However, disputes began immediately on the issue. Monzer Akbik, the chief of staff to the head of the opposition coalition, said of the detainee release: "We are seeking the end of the nightmare of our country. There are thousands of families wondering where their loved ones are. They are crying every day wondering if they are being tortured. Their loved ones have been kidnapped by the regime police forces and they don't know where they are."

But Faisal Makdad, the deputy foreign minister, insisted that "we don't hold any children prisoners at all. We categorically deny that." He claimed that the list supplied by the opposition was full of errors. "I have studied this list; 60 to 70 per cent of the names are not in prison, 20 per cent have already been freed. About the rest, we don't know anything."

There were also fundamental difficulties with the concept of prisoner

exchanges. The coalition representing political opponents of the Assad regime have no power over extremist Islamist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Isis) and Jabhat al-Nusra, which hold most of the hostages.

However, officials of the international states which have been backing the opposing sides in the conflict said the fact that the talks had not collapsed, as some had predicted, and that limited progress was being made, were significant signs of encouragement.

Attempts were continuing last night to get around a stalemate over plans to establish a humanitarian corridor into Homs. Convoys carrying food and medicine were stuck on the road waiting for permission from Damascus to pass regime checkpoints and continue to the city. Senior international diplomats and officials, including Mr Brahimi, had stated that the aid could reach civilians trapped amid the relentless violence within 48 hours.

The Russians and the Americans had been working behind the scenes, speaking to both sides, and the International Committee of the Red Cross was ready to move. But the regime is said to have professed surprise at the proposal, claiming it knew nothing about it; this was directly contradicted by senior diplomatic sources who insist that the Russians had presented the plan to Damascus more than a week ago.

Mr Brahimi acknowledged that the failure to get aid into Homs had disappointed him. But he stressed that "to bring Syria out of the ditch where it has fallen will take time." More than 130,000 people have died so far in the civil war, while nine million have been made homeless inside and outside the country.

Homs had a population of more than one million before the start of the conflict. Many have died, many more have fled, and about 800 families are now trapped with little access to food, medicine and water.

Mr Makdad maintained that his administration had been trying to send essential supplies to help the beleaguered residents. Not as much as he would have liked had got through, for two reasons: "The armed groups had kept firing at those who tried to take in aid and the weather has not been conducive to making the movement.

"As for the trapped women and children, that was the result of the armed groups not allowing a single child to get out. Now if they allow the women and children to get out, we shall provide them with shelter, food and all the needs of life."

Influential members of the regime's delegation objected to the whole concept of the Homs aid efforts. Bouthaina Shaaban, an adviser to President Bashar al-Assad and a member of the delegation, declared: "This is a matter which should be dealt with through the Red Cross, Red Crescent, though OCHA [the UN's

Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs]. This is not something for this conference with [political] delegations. We do not like this 'humanitarian corridor' because they can also be used as military corridors to get control.

"Anyway, our local authorities are doing all they can, not just for the people of Homs, but Aleppo, Daraa, Adra. The other side came here to discuss a small problem here or there, we came here to discuss the future and security of Syria, not to bring relief to a region here or there." The Information Minister, Omran Zoabi, added: "They proposed Homs. We say all Syrian cities are equal and as important".

The talks are now due to move on to the setting up of a "transitional administration", the key aim of the Geneva I Communique, issued after a previous meeting on Syria. The rebels and their Western backers have consistently held that Mr Assad can play no part in this; the regime is equally adamant that the President's position is sacrosanct.

Still, the current talks are expected to move on to discussions about a transitional government. Both sides say they will take part in the talks on transition, but Mr Zoabi declared on their eve: "If anybody thinks there is a possibility of the stepping down of President Bashar al-Assad, they live in a mythical world and let them stay in Alice in Wonderland."

28th January 2014

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE OF THE SIEGE OF ADRA

By Patrick Cockburn

"THEY CAME through the main sewer at 4.30am and caught us by surprise," says a Syrian soldier, who gave his name as Abu Ali, describing the rebel capture of part of the industrial town of Adra, just north of Damascus. "They chose a cold day in December to attack when there was snow and you could not see more than 2ft in front of you."

Adra, with its giant cement, steel and car plants, has now become one more Syrian town where the army and rebels confront each other but neither side has the strength to win a decisive victory. As they skirmish, locals either flee or cower in their houses with little or no electricity or water.

The rebels who stormed the workers' housing complex at Adra on 11 December belonged to two much-feared jihadi groups, Jabhat al-Nusra, the official al-Qa'ida affiliate in Syria, and the Jaysh al-Islam.

Khalal al-Helmi, a frail-looking 63-year-old retired employee of the oil ministry, says: "Three men came into our building and shouted 'Go down to the basement'. We were down there three days."

What went on in the streets of Adra immediately after the rebel occupation appears to add another grisly page to the list of atrocities in the Syrian civil war. Survivors say at least 32 members of religious minorities - Alawi, Christians, Druze and Shia - were killed immediately or taken away by gunmen who went from house to house with lists of names. They are also reported to have killed doctors and nurses in a clinic and workers in a bakery who were thrown into their own ovens. Given that the jihadis still hold this part of Adra, the exact details cannot be checked, but survivors who have taken refuge in an enormous cement plant three miles away have no doubt that a massacre took place.

It is not easy to get to Adra, even though it is close to Damascus. We took a highway through the mountains west of the capital and then suddenly drove off it on to a precipitous earth track down which an enormous orange truck with a trailer carrying a bulldozer was driving in front of us. The bulldozer turned out to be one of several making tracks through the scrub and heaping banks of earth to offer some protection from rifle fire. "Drive fast because there are many snipers about," said an army officer escorting our small convoy.

Our destination was the giant cement plant which a former worker, now a

refugee, said once employed 937 workers and produced 3,000 to 4,000 tonnes of cement a day. It now looks like an enormous, dead mechanical monster with pathetic clothes lines carrying refugees' washing strung between big concrete columns. Nearby was a small party of displaced people from Adra looking bedraggled and depressed. They said the army brought them bread but they were short of everything else.

The fall of part of Adra turned out, like almost everything else in the Syrian civil war, to be more complicated than first accounts. The town was always vulnerable because it is just north of Douma and Eastern Ghouta, both rebel strongholds. An English teacher called Billal said he had been a refugee for a year because the rebels had first taken the old town of Adra in February last year. He and his father took refuge in housing near the cement plant. It was only months later that Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam launched a second well-planned attack down a sewage tunnel that had outflanked the army defenders.

Syrian Army officers said they thought there were some 500 rebels in the big new housing complex at Adra. It is doubtful if they really know because they also said the rebels were digging tunnels so they could move without being fired on. They had local help, according to a former Adra resident, Hassan Kassim Mohammed, who said refugees from Douma and East Ghouta had been living in half-completed apartment blocks. These had acted as "sleeper cells" for the rebels and had given them lists of government employees. An employee of the information ministry, Heytham Mousa, has disappeared with his wife and daughter and his mobile phone is answered by a man who says he belongs to Jabhat al-Nusra.

I asked several officers why they did not counter-attack and retake Adra. They answered that there were thousands of civilians there whom the rebels were using as "human shields" and they denied an alternative explanation that they were short of soldiers. Even so, it was striking how few Syrian Army troops there were yesterday, either at the cement plant or in the front line, where there had been fighting around a bridge earlier in the week.

"They captured it and we took it back in five hours fighting," said Abu Ali. An explanation as to quite why small rebel enclaves persist in Damascus and Homs is that government forces cannot afford to suffer the casualties inevitable if they stormed them. They have therefore relied on sieges and artillery bombardment to wear down rebel-held districts.

There may be doubts about the exact number of people murdered in Adra but not about the suffering of those who have fled to the industrial zone. It is cold even in the middle of the day and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent yesterday issued a statement saying it "was deeply concerned about the plight of the Adra

residents who had fled the area". It had distributed 31,000 blankets and 7,000 mattresses and was trying to provide clean water to 30,000 people.Adra is now surrounded by sand and rubble with occasional Syrian army outposts on top. Even so, the exact position of the front line was worryingly uncertain. At one point, a couple of Syrian army soldiers seem to have mistaken us for the enemy and fired a couple of shots.

A soldier in the vehicle in front of us jumped on to a heap of rocks and waved furiously in the direction from which the firing had come. Around the corner we came on what appeared to be an entire Syrian armoured division but we turned out to have stumbled on a tank cemetery where the Syrian army disposes of obsolete tanks which are left to gradually rust away.

29th January 2014

WAR WOUNDED WHO FACE A STRUGGLE TO FIND PEACE

By Patrick Cockburn

"I WAS shot by a sniper in Aleppo last year," says 21-year-old Mohammed Diab, a soldier in the Syrian Army, as he lies in bed in Mezze Military Hospital in Damascus with his shattered left lower leg held in an external metal splint.

He described how five months earlier he was taken in an armoured vehicle to a hospital in Aleppo and had later gone to recover in his home village of al-Rahiya in Idlib province.

It is what happened then that illustrates the extent to which Syria is today saturated with violence and for those wounded in battle, the danger is not over. After three years of civil war, hatred and fear permeates Syrian life and destroys the element of trust necessary for compromise or reconciliation.

"For Syrians it is World War III," says General Ghassan Haddad, the director of the Mezze hospital, who recalls that he spent four years training in Charing Cross Hospital in the 1980s.

In returning to his home in Rahiya, Mohammed Diab must have known he was taking a risk since Idlib province is largely dominated by the rebels. He recalls that "somebody in the village told them there was a wounded soldier there and they took me prisoner and held me for five months."

They also took the metal splint holding the broken bone in his leg and gave him a piece of wood to replace it. "I think they thought they could sell the metal," he says.

At first he was with two other soldiers also held prisoner, but then was kept alone. Eventually, his family paid 150,000 Syrian pounds (about £600) to the men holding him and he was freed, but by now the bone in his leg had become infected so he was readmitted to hospital with a new metal splint.

General Haddad says that during the heaviest fighting last year he remembers "one single day when we admitted 300 wounded soldiers to Mezze hospital, though most of them were only slightly injured."

He says the number of casualties has gone down in the last two or three months as the severity of the fighting has eased. But, as we entered his office, he pointed to two men who were just leaving, saying "they have just come to pick up the body of their brother."

Patients in the hospital are in one of the safest parts of Damascus and probably receive better treatment than anybody else injured in the Syrian war. General Haddad says there is no shortage of medicines or doctors. Even so, there is something deeply depressing in visiting the beds of young men whose bones have been shattered by bomb blasts and bullets. The recently wounded look as if they are still in shock from their gaunt faces and slightly fixed eyes.

Ali Ibrahim, aged 20, whose left leg had been badly shattered by a bomb blast, described how he and seven other soldiers had been fighting for control of a building in one Damascus suburb. He said: "When we reached the roof there was a bomb and we tried to defuse it, but it blew up and one of us was killed and all the others wounded."

The hospital receives the wounded from Damascus and everywhere to the south of the capital. Many of the injured had been hit by snipers or wounded in house-to-house fighting. I did not ask what religion they belonged to but from their names, it was clear there were a mixture of Sunni, Allawi and one Druze.

It is the figures for the dead in the civil war - currently put at 130,000 - that attract the most publicity. But it is the wounded whose injuries and disabilities shape their lives over many decades who may do more to determine people's attitudes to the conflict.

I asked to see an officer since all the others I had interviewed were private soldiers and I was taken to the room of Colonel Mohsin, a burly middle-aged moustachioed man who at first appeared to have only a leg injury.

He told me how he had been shot, three years after he retired, on 1 March 2012. He was walking to his car when he was surrounded by rebels who shot him seven times - four in the legs, twice in the back and once in the hand. I asked him if he had been carrying a gun: "I never did because I was running a small shop and we had some land so I did not think I was in any danger," he said. His wife, who was standing by his bed, said: "He is only alive because they left him for dead."

Leaving the hospital there was a sick-looking man with a metal crutch standing with the guards by the gate. They asked us if we would give him a lift back into the centre of the city. He said he had been shot in Adra, a much fought over city just north of Damascus. He said an operation to repair his leg had not gone well and added bitterly: "Now I am afraid I will be like this for the rest of my life."

30th January 2014

'PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRAPPED FOR 185 DAYS - THEY ARE EATING WEEDS'

By Patrick Cockburn

"BREAD IS a dream for children inside Yarmouk Camp," says Fuad, a Syrian Palestinian music teacher who tries to help bring food to the 20,000 Palestinians besieged inside Yarmouk. Standing by a barrier of sand and rubble that blocks an entrance to the camp in south Damascus, he adds that "people have been trapped in there for 185 days and are sick because they are eating weeds we used to feed our animals".

Syria is dotted with sieges and blockades of cities, towns and districts which in some cases are producing mass starvation. International attention is currently focused on the Old City of Homs where between 2,500 and 4,000 civilians are besieged along with several thousand rebel fighters.

A World Food Programme convoy waits for permission to enter from the Syrian government. It says it does not want the aid to go armed opposition fighters.

Unnoticed by the outside world, the largest single community currently besieged and on the edge of starvation in Syria lives in two Shia towns west of Aleppo, Zahraa and Nobl, with a combined population 45,000. In this case the besiegers are Sunni rebels who accuse the Shia townspeople of supporting the government of President Bashar al-Assad and are seeking to starve them into submission.

Zahraa and Nubl form an isolated Shia pocket in an area where most of the people are Sunni supporting the rebels. The towns have received no supplies from the outside apart from an occasional delivery by a government helicopter. Raul Rosende, the head of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Syria said: "We are concerned about the situation in Zahraa and Nubl where 45,000 people are under siege." A few Shia have escaped into Turkey and then crossed back into Kurdish-controlled north-east Syria.

The politics of starvation are complex in Syria and open to manipulation for propaganda purposes. The problem stems primarily from the government forces' strategy of sealing off areas that have been captured by the armed opposition and not letting people or goods in or out.

Electricity and water is usually cut off, then the Syrian Army bombards the

area with artillery and from the air, leading to a mass exodus of refugees. This approach has the advantage from the government point of view of avoiding house-to-house fighting in which their best troops would suffer heavy attrition.

Not all sieges are as tightly maintained as Homs Old City, Yarmouk, Zahraa and Nubl, but blockades still cause serious deprivation and intense suffering. People may not be dying in the streets but the very young, very old and very sick pass away earlier than would otherwise have happened. The biggest opposition-held area near Damascus is the Eastern Ghouta to the east of the capital, where 145,000 are estimated by the UN to be cut off from the outside world, but this rebel bastion is so large that it difficult to seal off entirely.

The Old City of Homs is a small part of a city, large parts of which were once held by rebel fighters, but these have gradually been squeezed out. Although the government has sought to seal off the Old City for a long time, its defenders were able to bring in supplies through a network of tunnels until last summer.

They also had a supply line running through the town of Qusayr to Lebanon, but this was lost after an assault by Syrian Army and the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah in May and June of last year. An estimated 400,000 Sunni in Homs have taken refuge the al-Waar district in the west of the city where they are penned in but not completely confined by government checkpoints and barricades. But in the Old City, Mr Rosende says: "The situation is very bad and getting worse and worse, especially when it comes to food and medicines."

In places like Homs where the two sides have been shooting at each other so long, UN agencies have to agree the exact minutiae of every movement by an aid convoy. Even where the Syrian Foreign Ministry has agreed that aid should be allowed through, local army commanders may be obdurate and uncooperative. Though Homs does not have many jihadis from al-Qa'ida-type organisations like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIS) as there are further north, the rebel leadership in the Old City is fragmented. As for the civilians, these are a mixture of fighters' families, very poor people who have nowhere else to go and people who simply do not want to move.

Every siege and blockade in Syria involves suffering for the victims but otherwise every situation is distinct. The siege of Yarmouk, the Palestinian area in Damascus once called "Little Palestine" and home to 160,000 people, is only one element in the disaster that has hit the half-million Palestinians in Syria. Fuad, the music teacher who is trying to emigrate to Egypt, says "it is a second 'al-Nakba' for us", the first al-Nakba or catastrophe being the Palestinian expulsion in 1948 from what became the state of Israel.

All the Palestinians in Syria are caught up in this new disaster because their

camps after 1948 were usually built on the outskirts of cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. They were therefore right in the path of Syrian rebel forces advancing from the countryside in 2012 and five camps have some presence of the armed opposition.

Palestinians living in a swathe of camps in south Damascus fled first to Yarmouk and then fled again when the rebels took most of it over. Palestinians tend to be poorer than Syrians.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinians believes that "440,000 Palestinians need help and half of them are displaced within Syria." Between 30,000 and 50,000 have become refugees in Lebanon. The network of schools and hospitals that was administered by the UNRelief and Works Agency A has collapsed.

There was not much fighting yesterday around the northern end of Yamouk near the al-Majid mosque, though walls were pock-marked from past skirmishing.

The Syrian government backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command, has secured the far northern end of the Yarmouk, but beyond this a medley of opposition armed groups are in control. Here a kilo of rice cost $40 compared to $2 a kilo outside the besieged area. Dogs, cats and stray donkeys are being killed and eaten. There has been no electricity for nine months and only four hours of water every three days.

An UNRWA aid convoy was told by the government to use the southern rebel-controlled entrance to the camp - rather than the safer northern entrance - and found it was in the middle of a gun battle. In eight days, UNRWA was only able to distribute 138 parcels of food each weighing 30 kilo and miserably inadequate given the number of people to be fed.

31st January 2014

'DESTROYED IN A SECOND': ENTIRE NEIGHBOURHOODS DEMOLISHED BY SYRIAN ARMY

By Patrick Cockburn

THE MAIN road entering Damascus from the north runs for several miles through a sea-scape of ruins. On each side of the road there are smashed buildings with collapsed concrete roofs and heaps of rubble, without a person in sight, in places that used to provide housing and workplaces for tens of thousands of people.

I drove up and down this road two years ago and districts such as Harasta, Qaboun and Jobar looked battered by fighting but were essentially intact. There were big car showrooms whose owners had built rough concrete walls in front of them in a vain attempt to protect their large, glass windows. Today these places look as if they have been carpet-bombed, with scarcely a habitable house visible from the road.

In fact, these areas in north Damascus as well as others in the south and west of the capital have been systematically pounded into ruins by Syrian army artillery, or bulldozed into extinction. The reason is that they were seen as opposition strongholds and were strategically located on access routes for rebels, or close to important roads. A further motive is collective punishment by the government which wants to show that any opposition will be met with inevitable and merciless retribution.

The government itself claims that it carried out the demolitions because, in the middle of a savage civil war, it suddenly decided to demolish houses that did not have full planning permission.

The destruction of these districts is recounted in a report by Human Rights Watch called Razed to the Ground: Syria's Unlawful Neighbourhood Demolitions in 2012-13. It shows satellite pictures of six districts, two in Hama, four in Damascus, before and after destruction, and has interviews with eyewitnesses. The rights group estimates the total built-up area destroyed at 360 acres, equivalent to 200 football pitches, and said many of the buildings were apartment blocks of up to eight storeys.

Masha al-Arb'een, a poor district in north Hama, had been used by rebels to get in and out of the city and was close to the Hama-Aleppo highway. It was demolished between 27 September and 13 October 2012. One woman says:

"When the bulldozers approached.... My husband was begging [the soldiers] to spare our house, but they shouted: 'We want to destroy, we want to destroy'."

Another Hama neighbourhood, Wadi al-Jouz, was bulldozed in April-May last year. Afterwards the army toured a nearby district announcing, according to a resident, that it would be destroyed like "Wadi al-Jouz and Masha al-Arb'een should a single bullet be fired from here". It does not seem to have made any difference that in many places residents could do nothing about rebel fighters firing from their buildings.

Qaboun in Damascus had seen fierce fighting between rebels and government forces in July 2012 and was destroyed over a lengthy period. A restaurant owner called Walid says: "I saw the bulldozer demolishing my shop. The shop was opened by my grandfather many years ago... all of my family's hard work was destroyed in one second."

Walid told HRW that the demolition took place over 50 days: "The army demolished 1,250 shops and 650 homes. 1,800 families had to evacuate. There were two or three families in every house. The Syrian army gave the shop-owners 24 hours to empty their shops. Homeowners were given only three hours to pack their stuff and leave. It was not enough time. People barely took anything with them."

Demolition by bulldozer was not the only means of destruction. Anywhere seized by the rebels was cordoned off by government forces, bombarded by artillery and effectively depopulated.

1st February 2014

GRAVEDIGGERS STAY BUSY IN SYRIA AS PEACE TALKS END IN FAILURE

By Patrick Cockburn

THE FIRST session of the Geneva II peace negotiations, which ended yesterday, were more of a failure than they look. It was the sort of international conference of which the sponsors say that useful spadework was done and sceptics respond that the only spades in evidence were those of the grave diggers: some 1,870 Syrians were killed during the week of the peace talks.

For negotiations to have any hope of success they must reflect the balance of power on the ground in Syria. It is all very well for US Secretary of State John Kerry to state that the meeting would be entirely about political transition in Syria during which President Bashar al-Assad should leave power. But why should Mr Assad do anything of the sort when his forces hold 13 out 14 Syrian provincial capitals and are slowly retaking districts in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo captured by rebels in 2012?

If Mr Kerry is sincere in believing that peace can only come if Mr Assad goes, then he is in practice assuming a radical change in the present balance of forces in Syria which could only happen through a long war or full-scale foreign military intervention. The approach of the US and its European allies so far dooms Syrians to devastation and a repeat performance of the Lebanese civil war which lasted 15 years between 1975 and 1990.

It is not that Mr Assad's forces are likely to win a decisive victory. They may be inching their way forward but the rebels still hold great swathes of territory in the north and east of the country. The Syrian Army is short of troops, which must explain why it is blockading rather than recapturing small opposition enclaves in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. Overall, there is a military stalemate that is unlikely to be broken.

The opposition is in a worse state than ever. It is not only divided but since 3 January is fighting its own civil war within the civil war. The ferocious Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) holds territory to the east and their opponents to the west of Aleppo, while they battle for control of supply lines to Turkey to the north. No outright winner is emerging. The only chance for the opposition to change their military fortunes would be a very long war in which they were fully backed by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey.

These states might calculate that since the majority in Syria is Sunni Arab they will eventually win. But keep in mind that the supposedly "moderate" wing of the Syrian opposition is currently fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, the official Syrian representative of al-Qa'ida. The Alawi, Christians, Druze and Shia - possibly together with the Sunni Kurds - know there is no place for minorities in a Syria run by the present opposition. The Syrian Army may have difficulty getting enough recruits, but in the Christian area where I am staying in Damascus, the young men volunteer to fight Jabhat al-Nusra, attacking their co-religionists in the mountains west of the capital.

So-called confidence-building measures like food being distributed to besieged places like the Old City of Homs and Yarmouk Camp in Damascus are good in themselves. Hungry people get to eat. Sick children live who would have died. But it is doubtful how much confidence is really created between two sides that hate and distrust each other so much. The crimes are not all on one side. The opposition is calling loudly for food and medicine for 2,500 starving people in the Old City of Homs besieged by the government, but it keeps quiet about the rebels' own siege of 45,000 Shia in the towns of Zahraa and Nubl outside Aleppo.

Any attempt at transitional government at this stage in the conflict will not work because power cannot be shared by people who want to kill each other. The only way that power can really be shared at this moment is on a geographical basis whereby each side holds the territory it currently controls under a ceasefire agreement. Given the fragmentation of the rebels this would probably mean a series of local ceasefires in different places.

The days leading up to and during the peace talks were marked by accusations of war crimes against the Syrian government: there were the pictures of tortured and starved prisoners and a report on the demolition of whole neighbourhoods by government forces. But it would be a mistake for foreign observers to imagine that the unpopularity of the Syrian government translates into support for the rebels. As one Syrian in Damascus put it: "These days the people hate them both equally for having ruined our country and are desperate for the war to end."

2nd February 2014

STALEMATE ON SYRIA'S FRONTLINES, BUT THE HATRED AND HORROR STORIES GROW BY THE DAY

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SYRIAN army was in a triumphant mood. It claimed that it had beaten back a rebel assault in the al-Qadam district of south Damascus aimed at cutting the main road to Jordan. An army commander, who gave his name as Abu Yusuf, said: "The attack started at 10 in the morning last Sunday and was intended to coincide with the Geneva conference." He said the rebels had lost 120 dead and had burned the bodies of 40 other fighters to conceal the fact they were foreign jihadis.

All this was impossible to check yesterday morning, as I was standing in a command post defended by two tanks on the other side of the road from al-Qadam. The only point that could be verified was that traffic was flowing freely in both directions and that drivers and passengers did not look apprehensive. The reason I had been brought there appeared to be that the Syrian army was annoyed by reports on al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya satellite television channels that the main highway south had been cut.

It is intermittent skirmishing like this, with large and inflated losses claimed as having been inflicted on the other side, that is the day-to-day reality of the Syrian war. Houses and shops in al-Qadam facing the road had chunks of cement gauged out of them by explosions and were clearly abandoned. The rusty television satellite dishes on what was left of their roofs seem to show that their inhabitants had fled months ago.

The fact that the army was so pleased over such a small victory underlines the fact that there is a military stalemate in Syria. Government forces are making some gains, particularly in Damascus and Homs, but they are not winning decisively. Their main tactic is to seal off rebel districts with checkpoints and then bombard the area so most of the civilian population flees and those that remain are isolated. The front lines change very slowly.

Damascus is getting used to this kind of war. People no longer automatically flinch in government-held sectors when they hear the distant explosion of a mortar shell. In the early evening, people crowd the bustling streets - in contrast to a year ago when most went home early.

There are sudden flare-ups as in al-Qadam last week, but the fighting is

further from the centre than it was six months ago. Both sides in Syria are able to make gains only where they were already strong. Despite the opposition fighting its own intra-rebel civil war, the Syrian army has not done much to take advantage - though possibly its commanders see no reason to launch an offensive when their enemies are busily killing each other.

A further reason for the greater sense of normality in government-controlled Damascus is that, after three years of war, Syrians are accustomed to living with a high level of violence. The shock effect of hearing explosions and gunfire is less than it was. Damascenes are becoming like Beirutis who, during the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990, became expert in assessing the degrees of danger and knowing the most effective way to stay safe.

The Syrian capital is a complex patchwork of jurisdictions. There are large areas under government control and smaller ones held by the rebels. The latter areas are often largely depopulated, as their inhabitants flee unrelenting artillery fire while others have been systematically bulldozed. There are some changes in where you can drive and where you cannot.

The last time I drove north out of Damascus to Homs, six months ago, our journey had to begin with an inconvenient hour-long detour into the mountains to avoid snipers in the northern districts of Qaboun, Harasta and Jobar. But I drove along the main road last week, and these districts had been completely laid waste and whole neighbourhoods were reduced to mounds of broken concrete.

The political geography of Damascus is now getting even more complicated. In a few of the more isolated rebel enclaves, "reconciliation" agreements have been signed or are under discussion. I drove to a former rebel bastion called Barzeh - though part of the district was never under rebel control - that had just reached such an agreement. Some 200 members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had surrendered and been pardoned, but the remainder kept their weapons and a degree of local control since the army did not enter Barzeh.

Getting inside the district was complicated. In theory, we had permission to enter, but for an hour no checkpoint would take the responsibility for letting us through. Finally, we drove down a ravine to a checkpoint consisting, uniquely for Syria, of Syrian Army soldiers and their rebel counterparts in the FSA. They seemed to be mixing amicably, and one of the FSA took me inside Barzeh to talk to rebel commanders who showed me around their devastated district. Returning refugees must have been prepared for the worst but, even so, they looked appalled by the extent of the damage.

Could the Barzeh agreement be emulated elsewhere in Syria? The government would like to think so, but it is unlikely that the larger rebel enclaves will give up or agree to ceasefires, particularly if the government has not

succeeded in tightly besieging them. Meanwhile, there is a joke among Syrians that they are quite used to keeping two sets of papers assuring them of safe passage at government or rebel checkpoints. But what papers should they show if they are stopped at a mixed Syrian Army/FSA checkpoint?

The government is not making gains everywhere. I went to Adra, an industrial city just north of Damascus, part of which was taken in a surprise assault led by an al-Qa'ida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, in December. The rebels had crawled through a sewer to outflank government forces. They are then reputed to have gone from house to house with lists of names, taking away and killing government employees and members of minorities such as the Alawi, Christians, Shia and Druze.

Enough of the worst atrocity stories in Syria turn out to be true for all to have some credibility. In the case of Adra, bakery workers were reported to have been stuffed into their own ovens and roasted to death. Doctors and nurses in the local clinic were slaughtered. True or false, these gruesome tales provide the justification for real atrocities.

A couple of days later, I was interviewing wounded soldiers in Mezze military hospital in Damascus. On leaving I gave a lift to an injured man with a crutch standing by the entry gate to the hospital. He came from Adra and seemed to be a low-level intelligence officer who had been shot in the leg several months earlier - a wound he explained that was not getting better. He spoke of how the mother of a friend of his had been raped by the rebels in Adra and she was now in a mental hospital while others had been decapitated.

The intelligence officer was obviously not going to take any prisoners in future. This illustrates a further difficulty in arranging any compromise in Syria. Both sides have a hard core who have suffered so much that they do not want to make the smallest concession to their enemies.

4th February 2014

THE REBEL STRONGHOLD IN THE SKIES

By Patrick Cockburn

THE BATTLE lines of the Syrian civil war are edging closer to Krak des Chevaliers, the most famous Crusader castle ever built. The massive walls and towers of the great fortress on its hilltop glistened white in the sunshine yesterday, as the Syrian Army fought rebels in the valleys below.

The rebels hold the castle and the two nearby villages of al-Zara and al-Hosn while much of the rest of this area, 25 miles west of Homs city and just north of the Lebanese border, is inhabited by Christians who support the government. The 13th century castle was damaged by a Syrian air force attack and mortars last year and the Syrian government says it is eager to prevent further damage.

"We launched an operation to retake this area last week," the governor of Homs, Talal al Barazi, told The Independent. He said that so far the army had taken 50 per cent of al-Zara "and we think the rest of it will be in our hands within a week." Syrian army officers on the spot were more cautious on how long the fighting was going to last, saying it might be a week or two.

The reason why the Syrian army is attacking has less to do with Krak des Chevaliers' strength as a defensive position and more to do with strategic importance of the area in which it stands. This commands the main road between Homs and Tartous on the coast, just as it did in the 13th century when the castle was rebuilt in its present form by the Knights Hospitaller (its original and less romantic name was Crac de l'Ospital).

But Mr Barazi says of more immediate importance is the gas and oil pipelines and electric power lines that run through al-Zara which the rebels can sever at any time. They blew up the Homs-Tartous oil pipeline at al-Zara on 3 January and recently cut the power line leaving Homs city without electricity for 24 hours.

The fighting has led to losses on both sides. Mr Barazi said he had just come back from a hospital in Tal Kalakh, a town just south of Krak, after a day's fighting in which the army "had lost 10 dead and 27 wounded, while we killed 65 terrorists and captured five of them." The battle had eased off yesterday, a day of intense cold for Syria which saw part of the country under snow.

A further reason for the army's push towards Krak and the land around it has to do with the sectarian geography of this part of Syria. The two centres held by

the rebels, al Zara-and al-Hosn, the latter just below the castle, are Sunni Muslim and sympathetic to the rebels, but the other villages are Christian and support the Syrian government, often joining the National Defence Force militia.

This part of Syria is much like Lebanon when it comes to sectarian diversity and long-held animosities exacerbated by the civil war.

Syrian army officers said that these worsened recently when two Christians, a man and a women, had a late dinner at a hotel called the Alwadi and were stopped by armed men as they drove home. "As soon as they said they came from a nearby Christian village called Marmarita they were killed," said an officer. In another sectarian killing a Muslim from al-Hosn village was reportedly killed by Christian militiamen.

These stories of sectarian atrocities by all sides may be exaggerated in the telling, but there is no doubt about the extent to which they produce an atmosphere of hatred. An officer in Tal Kalakh produced a picture on his phone of the severed heads of two men being held by what he says were two young rebels inside al-Zara.

The army is getting closer to Krak des Chevalliers but will they try to take it? And, given the way in which the Syrian army relies on its artillery and aerial bombing, might it be destroyed?

Mr Barazi says they are conscious of Krak's historic significance and will do everything to avoid damaging it. But the castle used to hold a garrison of 2,000 men at the height of its power before it was captured by the Mamluk Sultan Baibars in 1271. It could probably give a good account of itself still. On the other hand, the Syrian army strategy has been to blockade places held by the rebels but only to launch ground attacks against those that are strategically important. This is true of the town of al-Zara with its proximity to gas pipelines and electric power lines. Krak might well be spared for the moment but no monument - however famous - is safe in Syria as was shown by the destruction of the medieval market and Ummayad Mosque in Aleppo.

Fighting in Syria has an on-and-off quality because the Syrian army does not have the numbers to sustain heavy losses from ground attacks.

In the battle for Qusayr it was Hezbollah who fought house-to-house and suffered serious casualties. The rebels are fragmented in organisation, lack heavy weapons and are too short of ammunition to launch big offensives. But though the fighting is intermittent, it very seldom stops. On our way back to Homs from Tal Kalakh a tank briefly blocked the road as it took up position and fired a shot from its gun into the al-Wa'ar district of Homs city, whose 400,000 people are Sunni and where government and rebels dispute control.

Army officers based in Tal-Kalakh in charge of the operation were not saying

much yesterday. A burly colonel in his command said "the attack is a military secret." But he did explain the reason for launching it was that "this area is strategically important because it is so close to Lebanon."

Last June the government and its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, had one of its few clear cut victories when they captured the rebel town of al-Qusayr a few miles east of Tal-Kalakh.

4th February 2014

ASSAD AND THE REBELS MAY BE DEADLOCKED BUT THEIR BACKERS AREN'T

By Kim Sengupta

AS SYRIA'S Foreign Minister, Walid al-Moallem, ranted at the start of the Geneva peace talks, repeatedly shouting down UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's protestations that he was way over the allocated time, another person on the panel could be seen tapping his wristwatch. It was not John Kerry or William Hague: the man with the expression of exasperation on his face was Sergei Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of Russia, the power that has kept Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapse.

A few days later Mr Lavrov was stating that a humanitarian aid convoy, blocked by the regime, should be allowed in for the people trapped in Homs. A few days after that came the news that the head of the Syrian opposition has been invited to Moscow for talks. Ahmad Jarba, in turn, was eager to assure Russia that the "historic" ties between the two countries will continue long after Mr Assad has gone.

Last week, Turkish forces carried out military strikes across the border in Syria. It was not aimed at the Syrian regime, whose supposed threat led to Nato positioning Patriot missile batteries on the border at Ankara's request, but the most potent of the rebel groups.

It was the second time in recent months that the Turkish military has attacked the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), a group inspired by al-Qa'ida. It came days after a visit by Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Iran, describing it as his "second home": Tehran, of course, has been a staunch ally of Damascus and been denounced for being so by Ankara.

As the talks in Geneva adjourned last week there are readjustments, small but important, in the international realpolitik behind the Syrian civil war. Calculations are being made as the conflict enters its third year about gains and losses, what can be salvaged by who after the bloodshed ends.

Geneva II concluded its opening chapter without, as the UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi pointed out, any substantive gains. He went on to say that he was satisfied with proceedings so far. He was entirely justified in saying the fact that the two sides turned up to talk was itself a huge achievement. That they did so sitting in the same room without trying to brain each other was also a mark of

success, as was the fact that neither side stormed off. They are due to meet again in around 10 days.

There has not been, of course, a sudden outbreak of amity. They were there because of heavy pressure from their foreign backers. According to senior rebel figures, the US and UK threatened to withdraw support if they failed to attend; and they did not want to be beholden to Saudi Arabia as their sole big sponsors. Moscow has huge leverage over the regime, as arms suppliers and the wielder of UN vetoes.

American and British diplomats acknowledge that Geneva II would not have taken place, and President Assad would not have given up his chemical arsenal, had it not been for the Russians. The opposition, too, now recognises the advantage of cultivating the Kremlin. Mr Jarba holds: "Our army has been trained by their army, so our relations will be maintained with Russia." This will include, he added, Moscow keeping its only Mediterranean port of Tartus.

"When it is in Russia's interest to throw Assad under a bus, they'll throw him under a bus", was the view of a Western diplomat in Geneva. That may be wishful thinking, but it is unsurprising that the outside backers of the two sides are also talking to each other. Perhaps the most significant is the rapprochement with Turkey. As guests of the Indonesian government in the Bali Democracy Forum of international leaders, in November 2012, I watched as Mr Erdogan refused even to look at Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as he lashed the Assad regime and its backers over the conflict. Iran's then-President was seated as far away from him as possible, at the other end of the podium.

Last week Mr Erdogan, in his visit to Iran, spoke effusively about his hosts. Although the primary focus was economic, Syria was also under discussion. Afterwards, the Turkish Prime Minister stressed his foreign ministry will liaise with its Tehran counterparts; the Iranian government had expressed deep concern, he said, about extremists going into Syria through Turkey. The Turkish action against Isis was not undertaken to accommodate just the Iranians; the threat of terrorism has been an increasingly worrying factor. Western governments have repeatedly expressed alarm at the prospect of their nationals returning from jihad in Syria to carry out bombings: James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence in the US the latest to do so.

Ankara had been accused in the past of turning a blind eye to foreign jihadists getting into northern Syria, as well as allowing supplies to flow to al-Qa'ida-linked groups fighting the Kurdish PYD militia. But security agencies have now begun to make arrests after the alleged discovery of bomb plots inside Turkey; among the offices raided were those of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, some of whose members have been accused of carrying out work for the

extremists.

Geneva II will not end the conflict in Syria in the immediate future. And, even when it does end, al-Qa'ida and its allies will have to be tackled. The dialogues taking place behind the scenes now will shape the alliances being formed over Syria's second civil war.

5th February 2014

THE BATTLE FOR HOMS

By Patrick Cockburn

THE SOUND of shellfire boomed every few seconds from the besieged Old City. The rebels, surrounded in the densely packed quarter, replied with mortars of their own. Each of them detonated with a sharp crack, shaking the walls of the building I was in, a kilometre from the front line. In between shell bursts the regular chatter of machine guns rang out, lasting for at least six hours before subsiding in the early hours of yesterday morning.

The intensity of the fighting in the battered city of Homs, which began unexpectedly on Monday evening, was greater than anything the people here had experienced in months.

The city is one of the centres of the original uprising and has seen some of the most destructive fighting. Even when there is no fighting the city is tense. The streets clear as soon as darkness falls, unlike Damascus where the shops stay open late and heavy traffic in the government-held centre does not subside until after 8pm.

A few hours before the shooting intensified, I spoke to Captain Mohammed, who said his frontline position in the Bab al-Sebaa district was 30 metres from where the rebels were dug in. "We are completely surrounding them. There is fighting every day but they can't get out." He guessed that the rebels - whom the government side invariably refers to as "terrorists" - numbered over 1,000 fighters.

Contrary to what Captain Mohammed said there are occasional pauses in hostilities. We were standing in a dark, deserted street in the early evening in the Bab al-Sebaa district of Homs, but I did not hear more than a few shots fired in over an hour. But marks of total destruction are everywhere since this is one of Homs's "ghost districts", where the buildings have been torn apart by shell fire and their walls are pock-marked with bullets so that they look as if they had been gnawed by enormous rats. Where buildings survive, their doorways and windows are boarded up and they look abandoned.

Captain Mohammed said he had been fighting in Homs for two-and-a-half years and turned up his right trouser leg to show where he had been wounded by a sniper's bullet. He thought the enemy was penned into the warren of streets that make up the Old City but they had made use of tunnels to get access to the

outside world. He said that "some months ago they came through a tunnel that came out behind where our men were positioned and attacked them from behind, but we killed them all." He claimed that for all the international furore about starvation in the Old City "they are not short of food, but weapons and ammunition".

Whatever the Syrian government, under increasing international pressure to allow humanitarian aid into Homs, may want, army commanders on the spot like Captain Mohammed are reluctant to allow their enemies, whom they have been fighting for years, off the hook. Contrary to his belief, aid officials are convinced that people in the Old City are starving.

Sectarianism explains much about the new geography of the city and its hinterland. Homs City and province are much like Lebanon in the number and diversity of their religious sects and ethnic groups including Sunni, Alawi, Christians, Shia, Yazidi, Kurds, Armenians and many other communities. Alawites, the backbone of the National Defence Force militia, are accused of moving into formerly Sunni neighbourhoods. Sunni from the Old City and the "ghost districts" who have not fled to Lebanon or elsewhere in Syria have moved mostly to the al-Wa'ar district of Homs, where 400,000 people have taken refuge. Al-Wa'ar is blockaded and subject to intermittent gunfire. On the main road near Homs oil refinery I saw a tank manoeuvre to position itself facing al-Wa'ar and then fire its cannon towards the modern apartment blocks which are common in the district. I asked the governor's office if I could visit a military hospital on the edge of al-Wa'ar and they said the road was very risky. They added that I could go by myself "but we frankly can't get anybody to go with you there because it is so dangerous."

Sectarian dividing lines and animosities have overlaid the democratic ambitions of those who led the original uprising in 2011. Many of the 1.7 million people in Homs governorate are on the move and fighting for survival. The local head of Unicef, Godfrey Ijumba, says that there are 600,000 internally displaced persons in Homs governorate, adding that "Unicef has distributed winter clothes for half a million of them".

Violence is frequent and the reasons for it not always obvious. I was looking for soldiers wounded in fighting at al-Zaraa, west of Homs, when I came across a wounded man called Ahmed Mohammed in Tal Kalakh hospital. He had been shot through the hand and the upper leg. I asked him who had shot him. Gasping with pain from a leg wound that doctors were examining, he said: "I don't know who shot me. I was milking cows in a field near my village when somebody shot me and killed an old man."

The siege of the Old City of Homs became an international issue at the

Geneva II peace conference due to reconvene on 10 February. Ending or at least alleviating the siege has become a test case of whether or not the negotiations could succeed in de-escalating the Syrian conflict. The effort seemed several times to be on the verge of success, but neither government nor opposition wants to hand the other side a real or symbolic victory.

The governor of Homs, Talal al-Barazi, told The Independent that the government will "receive all people from the Old City as refugees who are women, children and old men and they are free to go anywhere." He says the government will give those who stay what they want. The "terrorists" who are Syrians can give up their weapons and also go.

All this sounds good, but the besieged fighters in the Old City do not want to surrender after so long a struggle. The defence of the Old City has become a heroic symbol of their resistance. And those fighters who do want to surrender may well wonder just how far they can trust the Syrian government once they have given up their arms.

There are 30 different armed groups in the Old City, making any agreement with them a problem. But diplomats familiar with the talks say that there are not many jihadis or foreign fighters there, making negotiations at least possible. Mr Ijumba of Unicef in Homs says that "the main stumbling block is that the 30 groups want guarantees that the aid will still be delivered to the Old City once the civilians are evacuated."

Complications are piled on complication. Nobody knows how many civilians and fighters are besieged, so how much food should go in after an evacuation? The government does not want to feed armed opponents. At the same time the Syrian government is feeling the international negative publicity from its strategy of besieging and blockading rebel enclaves across Syria. A less obvious difficulty, say diplomats, is that the rebel negotiators in Geneva have never had much connection with the rebels inside the Old City and the diplomats have to bring the two supposed allies together.

The fighters in the Old City are the defenders of the last bastion of the rebellion in Homs and their determination has a symbolic value for the opposition.

Almost all the rest of the city has fallen or was always controlled by the Syrian army or is, like al-Wa'ar, quite literally under the gun. But, given the level of hatred and fear in Homs, the UN is quite right to believe that a negotiated solution here might open the door for compromise elsewhere in Syria.

8th February 2014

AN END TO TERROR FOR CHOSEN FEW IS EARLY SIGN OF SYRIAN PEACE

By Patrick Cockburn

EVACUATION HAS begun of an initial 200 women, children and the elderly from the besieged Old City of Homs under a UN-brokered agreement by which civilians leave and aid enters the rebel-held enclave. It is taking place during a three-day ceasefire and is one of the first signs of a de-escalation of the Syrian conflict.

A small group of 11 civilians were the first to leave the Old City that has been pounded into ruins by Syrian Army artillery. Government and armed rebels blamed each other for the wounding of a man being evacuated.

Yacoub El Hillo, the UN Resident Co-ordinator in Syria, told The Independent in Damascus earlier in the week that the biggest sticking point previously had been "deep distrust" between the government and the armed groups inside the Old City.

Speaking of the negotiations, Mr El Hillo said: "In the past two weeks it has been an incredible back-and-forth process to bridge the very wide gap between the parties."

Talal al-Barazi, the governor of Homs, told The Independent that an agreement was in place under which women, children and males under 15 or over 55 could leave. Civilians remaining inside the Old City would receive what aid they wanted. The number of civilians is not known precisely but the UN believes it is between 2,500 and 3,000. Some 30 wounded will be treated. Rebel fighters can give up their weapons, reconcile with the government and go where they want. The UN says that there are not many foreign jihadi fighters inside the Old City, unlike further north in Syria. This has eased negotiations.

Mr El Hilla said the UN had been in touch with rebel leaders in the area by phone and Skype. He revealed rebel commanders had all made commitments in writing to abide by the terms of the peace agreement. Other sources say there are some 30 armed groups within the besieged area, which has made negotiations difficult in the past.

Implementation of the agreement is important because it is the first time that peace talks have achieved anything on the ground. Mr El Hilla speaks hopefully of other truces and ceasefires. Another reason for guarded optimism is that Syria

yesterday announced that it would return to Geneva for the second round of peace talks on 10 February. Overall, Mr El Hillo said "this is a clumsy conflict with no predictability to it."

Elsewhere, the civil war continues apace. A rebel assault on a prison in Aleppo on Thursday, which began with a suicide bombing, freed hundreds of prisoners. There were conflicting reports on the nationality of the bomber, who made way for the assault by blowing open the gates.

Terrorism expert Shiraz Maher, a senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College in London, claimed to have made contact with British citizens in Syria, who confirmed that a man known as Abu Suleiman al-Britani carried out the suicide bombing. He was said to belong to the al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Other reports suggested a Chechen suicide bomber was behind the blast. According to one account, the rebels were unable to breach the inner wall and eventually retreated under air attack.

9th February 2014

AN ORDINARY FAMILY, A TERRIBLE WAR

By Patrick Cockburn

IT IS a terrible story but it throws a grim light on the terrors of the Syrian war. It is told at first in a calm, precise voice by Nusair Mahla, a middle-aged government employee, until he finally has to choke back tears as he speaks of the last moments of his sister Maysoun Hala and her husband Nizar along with their two children, Karim and Bishr. He says that many other Syrians have suffered similar tragedies, but in few cases is it known so precisely what the victims themselves thought about their fate.

Nusair, a neatly dressed man in a brown suit, says the first he knew about his sister's family being in danger was an early morning phone call. He recalls it came after 6.30am and was from neighbours who said that insurgents, whom he invariably calls "terrorists", had entered the industrial town of Adra 12 miles north of Damascus and were taking hostages. This happened on 11 December when fighters from the al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front, another Jihadi group, had captured the main employees' residential complex at Adra using an old sewer to outflank government forces.

Nusair recalls: "I immediately called my sister and told her to get out and come to my house in Mezze." Nizar worked as a public relations specialist for the state oil company while Maysoun had qualified as an engineer at Damascus University and was a housing manager at Adra. As state employees they were at risk of being killed by Jihadi rebels, but what made their execution certain was that, though very secular in life-style, they belonged to the Alawite sect, a variant of Shi'ism to which President Bashar al-Assad and many of the Syrian ruling elite belong.

In the event, the Jihadis who had taken Adra believed that state employment or membership of any religious minority - Alawite, Christian, Druze - was enough to merit death. Maysoun told her brother that she didn't dare follow his advice to leave her apartment building because the rebels were "in front of the door of the building and they are they are also on the roof tops". Even so, Nusair suggested she go with the two children, Karim, 16, and Bishr, five, and maybe the Jihadis would let them pass.

She answered that "they look so terrifying and I am afraid. I was looking out the window and I saw the terrorists killed one of the NDF [pro-government

National Defence Force militia] with a big knife". Maysoun explained to Nusair that she and Nizar planned to try to wedge the door of their apartment shut. But if this failed and the Jihadis broke in, then the whole family had taken a momentous resolution: rather than face torture and inevitable death at the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, they would die as a family by detonating grenades that Nizar had somehow acquired (he does not seem to have had a gun).

The rest of the day was chaos, according to Nusair. All the relatives of the trapped family were calling them on landlines and mobiles to try to comfort them. At about midnight, Nusair's 25-year-old son William, who lives in Aleppo, called his aunt and asked about the situation. Maysoun replied: "They are trying to get into the house." William heard two gunshots. Maysoun repeated that if the rebels got in the family would blow themselves up. Then she cried out: "They are inside the house, William, they are inside the house! We should say goodbye. Please forgive us." Then he heard an explosion.

Nusair breaks off telling the story and puts his hands over his eyes as he tries to suppress his sobs. After a few moments he goes on to say that William phoned him and said: "They are now in the hands of God." Nusair called the landline and mobiles of the family in the apartment in Adra and there was no reply. He stayed at home with his own family and Damascus and told them "we can't do anything. They are now martyrs."

Nusair gives some background about Nizar and Maysoun: "They were a wonderful family. They were like a small democracy. Anything they wanted to do they discussed and, even if five-year-old Bishr was against doing something, they didn't do it." Nizar was very secular - "I used to call him a secular extremist" - and pictures of the family together show Karim with long hair and his mother with her hair dyed blond and without a headscarf. She had been working hard trying to get ready housing for refugees from Douma, a rebel stronghold not far from Adra. Much of this emergency accommodation was in a half-built residential complex with no glass in the windows and no furniture. Nusair, evidently very close to his sister, says: "I used to call her every night and she would say, 'I am so tired preparing these houses that aren't ready for people to live in'."

The story does not end with the explosion and the apparent death of the family. At 3am the next day, Nusair got a call from Nizar's brother who said: "Nizar just called me but the line was cut." Nusair immediately called the Adra apartment on the landline and it was answered. He asked: "What happened, Nizar?" Nizar replied in a slurred voice as if in pain: "Bishr died and Maysoun and Karim are badly injured and bleeding. They are not moving. It is too late for me but please try to do something for them." Nusair talked and tried to say

encouraging things but, he says, "finally the phone must have fallen from his hand. Those were the last words I heard him say."

As to what happened next, Nusair says the details are unclear. Some neighbours in Adra said in the single telephone call they were able to make that they had gone to the apartment and found Nizar, Karim and Bishr dead, but that Maysoun was alive, although her leg was severed. They took her to their apartment.

Then comes a final horrible twist to the story. Nusair's daughter Senna is at school in Damascus. Some of the children whose parents were able to escape from Adra are now being taught there. She asked one of them if he knew Maysoun. He said: "She was the woman with one leg cut off they [the insurgents] dragged behind a car." Nusair says that Senna fainted as soon as she heard this.

The cruelties of the Syrian civil war get worse by the week. Each side belittles its own atrocities and claims them as retaliation for something even worse done by their enemies. Nusair explains why his sister, brother-in-law and their children decided to kill themselves: he says they believed that "the Jihadis would kill the youngest child in front of the mother and rape the mother in front of the husband. They would torture the men and then kill them all anyway. Better to die by their own hand."

Accounts of what happened to the rest of the population of Adra are confused. I spoke to some of the 5,000 refugees who had been allowed to leave by Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front on 30 December and some of whom are now squatting in a giant cement factory. They said the Jihadis had ordered them to their basements and had kept them there. The number singled out for execution is put at between 32 and 80. There are accounts of the doctor in the local clinic, a Christian known locally as Dr George, being decapitated. Bakery workers who resisted their machinery being taken away were roasted in their own oven. Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic Front fighters went from house to house with a list of names and none of those taken away then has been since. This includes the head of the legal department at the Information Ministry who disappeared with his wife and daughter and whose phone is now being answered by a man saying he belongs to Jabat al-Nusra.

The story of how Nizar and Haysoun's family died together is well known in Damascus. The many Syrians who work for the government or belong to minorities wonder what they would do if the Jihadis were at their door. It is tragedies like this one that provide the fuel for an ever more savage civil war.

12th February 2014

DESTRUCTION OF THE IDOLS

By Patrick Cockburn

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS in Syria have started to destroy archaeological treasures such as Byzantine mosaics and Greek and Roman statues because their portrayal of human beings is contrary to their religious beliefs. The systematic destruction of antiquities may be the worst disaster to ancient monuments since the Taliban in Afghanistan dynamited the giant statues of Buddha at Bamiyan in 2001 for similar ideological reasons.

In mid-January the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), an al-Qa'ida-type movement controlling much of north-east Syria, blew up and destroyed a sixth-century Byzantine mosaic near the city of Raqqa on the Euphrates. The official head of antiquities for Raqqa province, who has fled to Damascus and does not want his name published, told The Independent: "It happened between 12 and 15 days ago. A Turkish businessman had come to Raqqa to try to buy the mosaic. This alerted them [Isis] to its existence and they came and blew it up. It is completely lost."

Other sites destroyed by Islamic fundamentalists include the reliefs carved at the Shash Hamdan, a Roman cemetery in Aleppo province. Also in the Aleppo countryside, statues carved out of the sides of a valley at al-Qatora have been deliberately targeted by gunfire and smashed into fragments.

Professor Maamoun Abdulkarim, general director of antiquities and museums at the Ministry of Culture in Damascus, says that extreme Islamic iconoclasm puts many antiquities at risk. An expert on the Roman and early Christian periods in Syria, he says: "I am sure that if the crisis continues in Syria we shall have the destruction of all the crosses from the early Christian world, mosaics with mythological figures and thousands of Greek and Roman statues."

Of the mosaic at Raqqa, discovered in 2007, he says: "It is really important because it was undamaged and is from the Byzantine period but employs Roman techniques."

Syria has far more surviving archaeological sites and ancient monuments than almost any country in the world. These range from the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus with its magnificent eighth-century frescoes to the Bronze Age Ebla in Idlib province in north-west Syria, which flourished in the third and second millennia BC and where 20,000 cuneiform tablets were discovered. In eastern

Syria on the upper Euphrates are the remains of the Dura-Europos, a Hellenistic city called "the Pompeii of the Syrian desert" where frescoes were found in an early synagogue. Not far away, close to the border with Iraq, are the remains of Mari, which has a unique example of a third-millennium BC royal palace.

Unfortunately, many of the most famous ancient sites in Syria are now held by the fundamentalist Islamic opposition and are thereby in danger. Professor Abdulkarim says that it is not just Isis but "Jabhat al-Nusra [the official affiliate of al-Qa'ida] and the other fundamentalists who are pretty much the same".

He emphasises at the same time that he approaches his job of trying to preserve Syria's heritage during the civil war from a politically neutral point of view. The civil war has inflicted heavy damage, notably in Aleppo, where the minaret of the Great Umayyad Mosque was destroyed along with seven medieval souks, or markets, with over 1,000 traditional shops burnt out.

Homs Old City has suffered serious damage and is still held by the rebels, while the immense Crusader fortress of Krak des Chevaliers has been battered by government air strikes. The great church at St Simeon has been turned into a military training area and artillery range by rebels.

Syria's museums are generally secure and moveable items have been taken elsewhere for safe-keeping. Museum staff say they saw what happened in Iraq after 2003 and moved quickly. A folk museum at Deir Atieh between Damascus and Homs was taken over, but the rebels were after old pistols and rifles on display that they intended to put to military use.

The most devastating and irreversible losses to Syria's rich heritage of ancient cities and buildings are the result of looting. Much of this is local people looking for treasure, though in many cases they are obliterating the archaeological record by using bulldozers. Two looters were killed when they used a bulldozer to excavate a cave at Ebla, causing its roof to collapse.

What worries Professor Abdulkarim and his staff is that over the last year the looting has become large scale. He says that there is "a mafia from Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon hiring hundreds of people to strip sites". Among what are known as the Dead Cities in Idlib province in northern Syria, once prosperous and then mysteriously abandoned 1,000 years ago, there are signs that thieves have brought in antiquities experts to advise them about the best places to dig, going by the orderly nature of the excavations.

Theft of antiquities is particularly bad in the far east of Syria at Mari where an armed gang numbering 500 has taken over the site. An official report says that the looters have been focusing on "the Royal Palace, the southern gate, the public baths, Temple of Ishtar, the Temple of Dagan and the temple of the Goddess of Spring".

Even worse is the situation at Dura-Europos where 300 people are excavating. A report by the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums says that efforts by local communities to stop the digging here have failed and heavy machinery is being used. The report says that illegal excavations have "led to the destruction of 80 per cent of the site as perpetrators are digging holes that can reach three metres in depth".

For some Syrians, often well-armed in war-ravaged, impoverished areas, the looting of antiquities has become a full-time job. In great stretches of the country outside state control there is total disorder with banditry and kidnapping common. Rebel commanders, even if they wanted to, are not going to give priority to protecting ancient monuments.

Professor Abdulkarim complains that he has received little international help in preventing the looting of Syria's rich heritage. The deliberate targeting by Isis and other jihadist groups of mosaics and statues seen as profane will accelerate the speed of destruction. Antiquities that have survived invasions and wars for 5,000 years may soon be rubble.

13th February 2014

FEARS GROW FOR MEN MISSING AFTER HOMS EVACUATION

By Patrick Cockburn

THE FATE of dozens of men detained by the Syrian security forces as they left the besieged city of Homs is continuing to cause international concern. Some 190 are being held in a school while 111 have been questioned and released according to Talal Barazi, the governor of Homs.

The UN gives a higher figure of 336 men and boys detained and 41 released while others are being questioned under the "general monitoring" of UN staff. Robert Colville, the UN human rights office spokesman, said "it is essential they do not come to any harm."

It was always unclear what would happen to men of military age, under 55 but over 15, under the UN-brokered agreement whereby civilians are leaving Homs and aid is going in. In theory Syrian fighters who give up their weapons would be pardoned and released but it is not clear that this is in fact happening. The treatment of non-Syrian fighters in Homs was similarly not spelled out nor a clear distinction made between men who had been fighting and those who had not.

The Foreign Secretary William Hague called it "outrageous" that evacuees were being detained. "We need answers urgently about what is happening to them," he told The Independent.

The Syrian government said that screening had to take place to weed out "terrorists", a term used by the government to describe all its opponents. It is in the government's interest to see an end to the siege of Homs, which is the focus of international attention, but its day-to-day control of different sections of the Mukhabarat (secret police) has always been shaky. Units of the National Defence Force (NDF) pro-government militia, often drawn from the Alawite sect, appear to be opposed to the present agreement in Homs and may be responsible for shooting at UN aid vehicles over the weekend.

The deep distrust between government and opposition is making it very difficult to mediate any agreement. The government is not going to give up its siege of the Old City and does not want fighters who have not surrendered to benefit from aid supplies. Rebels will not want to lay down their arms if they expect to be imprisoned, tortured or shot.

Many other areas are besieged or blockaded in Syria, including some by the opposition in the north. The government is short of combat troops to storm rebel-held districts and normally surrounds them with a ring of checkpoints curtailing or stopping people leaving or entering.

The Syrian army and Hezbollah are reported to be planning to attack the town of Yabroud just west of the Damascus-Homs road. Hitherto Yabroud has been held by Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel brigades and the town still contains many Christians who have reached an accommodation with the opposition. The government is keen to increase its control over the Qalamoun mountains on the Syrian-Lebanese border, not least because it wants to starve rebels in the greater Damascus region of supplies.

20th February 2014

ENEMIES CROSS THE FRONT LINES IN DAMASCUS. BUT WILL THE TRUCE HOLD?

By Patrick Cockburn

BY IT is a surprising sight but one that may become more common in Damascus. Under the terms of a local ceasefire in the outlying district of Babilla in the south of the capital, armed members of the rebel Free Syrian Army mingle with Syrian soldiers and appear on friendly terms. The images show fighters from both sides talking and joking together.

Residents of the neighbourhood were said to be "overjoyed" by the truce. According to the AFP news agency, a group began chanting: "One, one, one! The Syrian people are one!"

The inside of the district, long under siege and bombarded by the army, will be policed by the FSA. Inhabitants who appear on the streets look overjoyed that for the moment the danger is over.

The terms of the truce in Babilla, assuming it is similar to that negotiated in other former rebel strongholds like Barzeh and Muadamiyat, provide for the FSA to hand over heavy weapons, but its fighters will stay in Babilla or can join the army. There will be a mixed FSA/army checkpoint at the entrance to Babilla and the army will not enter the district where the FSA will retain some of its positions in case the truce is broken. The government guarantees a rebuilding programme.

The main street is full of half-ruined buildings hit by artillery, but the government has agreed to reconnect the water and electricity supply and reopen roads.

How far are these ceasefires and truces the shape of things to come? There are some aspects of these agreements that are very important, such as the release of prisoners in Barzeh, which late last month the local FSA commander told The Independent the government had not complied with. In most of these areas the majority of the people fled the shelling long ago and are likely to return to find their houses in ruins. It is not clear how far they will be compensated. The government's main strategy in dealing with rebel-held areas in Damascus has been to surround them with checkpoints, cut off water and electricity and bombard them. They have not, except when they are close to strategic roads, sent in ground troops to storm them; that would lead to casualties that government

forces can ill-afford. Local people are weary and generally eager to see an end to the fighting.

The truces are taking places in the smaller and more isolated rebel enclaves. Bigger ones, like Eastern Ghouta, with a present population estimated by the UN to number 145,000, are more likely to continue to resist because the rebel fighters may be hardcore Islamists such as al-Qa'ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra. Bigger areas are also more likely to have better supplies of food and are more difficult to isolate effectively.

23rd February 2014

LOCAL TRUCES ASIDE, THE INGREDIENTS FOR A LONG SYRIAN WAR ARE ALL STILL IN PLACE

By Patrick Cockburn

THE POLITICAL winds in the Middle East are changing but they still bring crisis and war. The two most important developments so far this year are the failure of the Geneva II peace talks and Saudi Arabia's replacement of its intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, as director of Syrian policy, with a member of the royal family notably close to the US and hostile to al-Qa'ida.

The reasons for the failure at Geneva are obvious enough and so are the consequences of that failure. The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, made it clear from the beginning that Washington wants peace negotiations to be primarily about "transition" and the end of the government of President Bashar al-Assad. But, since Assad's army controls most population centres and main roads in Syria, this radical change in the balance of power will not happen until the rebels stop losing and start winning on the battlefield.

Given that the rebels are at present divided, lacking popular support and on the retreat, it may take years of warfare before they and their Western and regional backers can dictate surrender terms to the other side. It could happen more quickly only if the Assad government and the Syrian army were shorn of support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, something that, so far, is not happening. If anything, the struggle for the Ukraine between the West and Moscow is likely to make the Russians even more determined not to see their status as a great power eroded by defeat in Syria.

I spent two weeks in Damascus and Homs at the end of January and the beginning of February and came away with the impression that the government is in a stronger position, politically and militarily, than at any time since the tide in the fighting began to turn in its favour in about November 2012.

The opposition enclaves in Damascus, Homs and the country around them are being severely squeezed by blockades and sieges, to the point where some have signed local ceasefires or truces. Bigger enclaves such as Eastern Ghouta, the area east of the capital which the United Nations says has about 145,000 people in it, are more capable of defending themselves.

The Syrian army is on the front foot, but it also looks overstretched and is husbanding its combat troops for strategically important operations. I saw two of

these: one was at al-Kadam, in south Damascus, where the rebels had attacked and briefly held the main road south from the capital, in the direction of the border with Jordan. It was not a big battle and the army had cleared the road at the cost of some casualties to itself, whom I met at Mezze military hospital, and rather greater losses to the rebels. The second operation was an army advance against the village of al-Zara, in the shadow of the great Crusader fortress of Krak des Chevaliers, west of Homs, a battle sparked by the rebels periodically cutting oil and gas pipelines as well as electric power lines that run by the village.

Short of combat troops, the government has expanded the National Defence Force militia, the hard core of which are Alawites and Christians, as well as using Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon. Its strategy is to seal off and isolate rebel-held districts, cut off electricity, water and food, and then pound them with artillery or barrel bombs dropped from helicopters, so that they become depopulated. So far, this strategy has worked at the cost of an international outcry, to which the government replies, privately, that nobody pays much attention abroad when its supporters are massacred.

What is not in doubt is that the rebels have failed to overthrow the government, though the government appears incapable of defeating them. This explains our second important development of the year which is the sidelining of Prince Bandar, who, as the head of Saudi intelligence, was in charge of directing, supplying and financing the rebels. This role has now been taken over by the Interior Minister, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who has been in charge of actions against al-Qa'ida inside the kingdom and is considered one of the most pro-US of the royal family's inner circle. Also assuming a role in determining Saudi policy towards Syria is Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, King Abdullah's third son and head of the Saudi National Guard.

These appointments do not mean any reduction in direct Saudi support for the rebels but they do denote a policy more closely aligned with the US. Prince Bandar had openly objected to President Obama's decision to reject military action against Syria after it used chemical weapons against rebel districts of Damascus last August. With Prince Mohammed, whom an al-Qa'ida suicide bomber slightly wounded in 2009, determining Syrian policy, the Saudi-supported rebels will more than ever be fighting on two fronts: the government and, presumably, the al-Qa'ida-type movements within the rebellion, even though they are often at the cutting edge of actions against the Syrian army.

For the US and the Saudis, intervention in Syria could be more difficult than it appears. The rebels are even more divided than they look and they have lost much of the popular support they once enjoyed in 2011 and 2012. This does not

mean that the government has mass backing, but, for many Syrians, Assad is preferable to a rebel takeover.

The "moderate" opposition - support for which was reportdly discussed at a two-day meeting in Washington of Western and Arab intelligence chiefs this month - is supposedly going to overwhelm the extreme jihadis and fight the government all at the same time. But repackaging some rebel warlords as moderates, simply because they are backed by the West and its regional allies, will be large-ly a PR ploy and unconvincing to Syrians.

It is naive in these circumstances to imagine that the dispatch of shoulder-held anti-aircraft or anti-tank weapons, as is now predicted, is going to make the rebels more successful. Journalists, intelligence officers and rebels tend to be over-impressed by the idea that arms such as these make much difference. This may stem from a belief that they somehow turned the tide in guerrilla war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which history clearly shows that they did not. A few years ago, I asked a senior Afghan general of that era how far the Stinger missiles had been a problem. He looked a bit mystified by the question and replied that they really had not made much difference: "All that happened was our helicopters had to fly lower and faster and we used our artillery more."

The appointment of Prince Mohammed may mean less emphasis on military assault on Syria and more diplomatic pressure on Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to abandon Assad. One of the big mistakes of the opposition and its backers has been to allow the question of who rules in Damascus to become part of the hot and cold war between Iran and its enemies, and between Shia and Sunni, conflicts that have been going on since the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Saudi Arabia could try to de-escalate some these conflicts, but so far there is little sign of it doing so. Sadly, none of the ingredients for a long war in Syria has disappeared.

8th March 2014

SYRIA’S ROAD TO HELL

By Patrick Cockburn

IN EVERY war there is a city, a town, a mountain, a river or a road that all sides see as crucial if they are going to win, or at least avoid defeat. In the Syrian civil war, it is the road linking Damascus to Homs, Syria's third city, 100 miles to the north, which then goes west for 64 miles until it reaches the port city of Tartous on the Mediterranean coast. The route is so important because it connects the parts of Syria held by the government. If it is ever cut off permanently, it will be a crippling blow to the rule of President Bashar al-Assad.

It is a road I have got to know far too well in the past two years. When I think about driving it, I feel a tightening of the muscles in my stomach. There is nothing suicidal about the journey, but the risk is always there, and even after I have discussed the dangers involved with my careful, highly-informed and courageous driver George, a Syrian Christian, I wonder if there is something nasty ahead we don't know about.

We watch for signs that will give us advanced warning of danger, such as a lack of traffic coming towards us on the other side of the road, which could mean vehicles are being stopped by some trouble we cannot yet see. A good flow of traffic probably means that all is well, particularly if there are a lot of buses, since Syrian bus drivers go everywhere and are skilled in assessing risks. Heavy vehicles loaded high with valuable goods are also excellent news, because the driver would not be risking his cargo if he thought it might be stolen or destroyed.

I was last on this road in early February and I knew it had been closed for 17 days a month earlier after rebels captured most of the town of An Nabk, halfway to Homs. But George's mother comes from Nabk and he assured me that government troops were firmly back in control and there was no need to worry. Not everybody was so positive: an experienced foreign journalist advised me to fly to Latakia on the coast in north-west Syria and then drive south to Homs. He said that if I was going to drive to Homs from Damascus, it was worth hiring a second car to drive behind my own to make sure I was not followed. He had got through all right, but the second car had been stolen by armed bandits on the way back to Damascus.

It is the first few miles of the main highway north which make me most

nervous. They go past districts such as Qaboun, Harasta, Barzeh and Douma that were or are rebel strongholds, but have been ravaged by artillery fire or systematically bulldozed. Viewed from the car window, I see a landscape of ruins with broken walls and concrete floors sandwiched on top of each other. Most of the time there is nobody to be seen as we speed past mile after mile of ruins, but that does not mean that a sniper is not looking at us through the sights of his rifle. The car showrooms that used to line this road are now burnt out and abandoned. The Mercedes building was a focus for rebel resistance and has taken a terrible battering.

We drive very fast and only stop once at a government checkpoint under a bridge. These are regular troops in uniform and not the National Defence Force (NDF) militia, because the area is still a potential battleground. As in most places in Syria - and this reminds me of Lebanon during the civil war 30 years ago - there is an intricate jigsaw puzzle of zones held by forces loyal to the government and zones controlled by rebels. Even this oversimplifies the situation on the ground, because in places like Barzeh there is a negotiated ceasefire, with rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters and government soldiers jointly manning checkpoints, while inside Barzeh armed FSA men are still in charge.

The military geography of Syria often follows its sectarian geography. We drive past tall buildings which are undamaged where most of the inhabitants are Alawites, the Shia sect to which President Assad and much of Syria's ruling elite belongs. As we exit the northern outskirts of Damascus, George looks more relaxed and says encouragingly, "That is 80 per cent of the dangerous parts of this journey over". Somehow, I don't feel comforted. A little to my surprise, he is not too worried about the proximity of Ma'loula, a Christian village built in a spectacular ravine in the mountains just off the road to the west that we had visited last summer. These days, all the Christians have fled and it is partly in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qa'ida, which has gunmen in buildings and caves overlooking the town. I thought it would not take much for these jihadis to push down from the mountain and block the road.

A strange aspect of the war in this part of Syria is how close the combatants are to each other. In a few cases there are negotiated ceasefires, but others seem to be local truces (or a live-and-let-live understanding between the adversaries) that are always fragile and vulnerable to somebody breaking it. This is particularly true of the part of the road which George and I were about to drive down, because clearly visible on a hill off to the left is the town of Yabroud, which is held by Jabhat al-Nusra, but mysteriously still has a large population of Christians who have not fled. Some deal is evidently in operation, but nobody

quite knows what it is. The deal does not apply to strangers, and somebody had fired a shot at us 18 months earlier in just this area, and the bullet had whistled by uncomfortably close to our car. The Syrian Army had been bombarding Yabroud, but this did not necessarily mean it would launch a ground assault. The government is short of combat troops and uses them sparingly, usually to keep open roads vital to itself, or to block routes important to the rebels' supply network.

I had heard a lot in Damascus about the army's coming offensive against Yabroud, but had decided that I would believe it when I saw it. On the other hand, the brief capture of Nabk, a few miles beyond Yabroud, by the opposition in December, might have made the government decide that it was time to secure this important piece of the road, possibly in a combined attack with the Lebanese paramilitary Hezbollah movement, whose forces were just across the border in Lebanon.

Nabk was firmly back in government hands at the time we were there, and the authorities had arranged a victory celebration in the undamaged centre of the town. We turned off the main road to have a look. I am not a great fan of this type of demonstration, with school children playing the main part, because local people are under the gun and do not have any alternative but to take part.

The rally did show, however, that the government was pretty confident that it was in control. I also learnt an interesting fact, which was that the NDF militiamen policing the demonstration had previously been members of the rebel FSA until a couple of months earlier. They had simply switched sides, though nobody knew on what terms.

Unfortunately, nobody should imagine that these deals mitigate the violence of the war anywhere in Syria. In Nabk, there were mutual accusations of atrocities, and just north of the town, at Dayr Atiyah, there was a hospital on a hill where the rebels were said to have killed the doctors. I learnt later that they had also broken into a folk museum and stolen ancient firearms and tried to make them battle-worthy again. Buildings close to the main road were pock-marked with bullet holes and some had been hit by shells, but the damage was not as bad as in Damascus.

Two other points need to be made about this journey. Every six or seven miles, there was a government checkpoint which George and I were likely to get through because we had the right papers and authorisations, but our swift passage was not a complete certainty and a single suspicious soldier might delay us for hours. Secondly, on this road, all the while we were just to the east of the Qalamoun mountain range, which marks the border with Lebanon. It is traditionally a smuggling region and, until last year, nothing much had changed

other than the fact that these days, it was men, weapons and ammunition which were being transported. Then in June, the government had won one of its few decisive ground battles of the war, thanks to Hezbollah, whose fighters had stormed al-Qusayr, a rebel-held town on the plain through which the rebels had reinforced and re-supplied their fighters in Homs. I had been in Qusayr just after it had fallen to Hezbollah and it was badly hit, though not wholly destroyed.

I spent the night in Homs and then turned west, taking the road to Tartous, a city where there are many Alawites and which is firmly on the government's side. After success at Qusayr, the government is tightening its grip here.

As we leave Homs, on our right is a big area of tall modern buildings called al-Wa'ar, whose 400,000 inhabitants are Sunni and where Sunnis from the rest of Homs have taken refuge. Wa'ar is blockaded and it is difficult to get in or out, though it is not quite so tightly besieged as the Old City of Homs, which has been at the centre of international attention. Jacoub El Hillo, the head of the UN humanitarian effort, told me later: "I wish that people would understand that there are other sieges in Syria aside from the Old City of Homs."

This is an important strategic area. Homs oil refinery is just to the south of the road and had been hit by mortar fire, though not badly damaged. Later in the day, I saw a Syrian Army tank manoeuvre on the road before firing a shell into Wa'ar. A little further west, the road passes through the Homs Gap, with low mountains on either side of the highway, making this a much-fought-over route down the centuries. Control of the Homs Gap is why the Knights Hospitallers spent so much money in the 13th century building the Krak des Chevaliers, the greatest Crusader castle in the world, with its massive towers and huge concentric masonry walls. I was trying to pick out the fortress on its distant hill when its white stones were suddenly illuminated by a shaft of sunlight - like a castle in a Renaissance painting. I was sorry I could not get closer, but it is held by rebels based in two Sunni villages, al-Zahra and al-Hosn, at its base. The villages have been blockaded for months, but what makes Zahra important are the oil and gas pipes, as well as the electricity lines that go through it - the rebels had been blowing them up.

I visited a hospital in Talkalakh, a town just off the road and close to the Lebanese border, where I hoped to find soldiers wounded in a government attack on Zahra. The doctors denied any wounded were there, but I met a civilian called Ahmad Mohammed, who said he had been shot in the hand and thigh while milking a cow. The old man who was with him had been killed. He appeared to come from an Alawite village and I wondered if he had been shot for sectarian reasons. This part of Syria is very much like Lebanon, with villages with different sectarian allegiances - Sunni, Christian, Alawite - turning into armed

camps. A little further west and we were in Tartous, a fine, peaceful city and a government stronghold, but with one wall in the centre covered with pictures of some 2,000 of its young men who have been killed serving in the Syrian Army.

My journey showed that in this part of Syria, the government is expanding its control and the rebels are under pressure. But the expansion is slow and the army is overstretched. The road was more secure than it had been six months earlier, but it was still vulnerable to a sudden attack.

It also reminded me that Syria is more than ever a patchwork of different circumstances, depending on the military situation and which sects predominate. Much of what I had heard in Beirut and Damascus about what was happening turned out to be mistaken, and media reporting has been full of certainties that melted away in the face of reality. In Syria, more than most places, only eyewitness information is worth much and even then it swiftly becomes outdated. That being so, sometime in the course of the year, I am likely to find myself back on the risky but always interesting road from Damascus to Tartous
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15th March 2014

AN UNHAPPY ANNIVERSARY: WHY THE END OF ASSAD IS AS FAR AWAY AS EVER

By Patrick Cockburn

AS THE first wave of the Arab uprisings broke in early 2011, President Bashar al-Assad sounded confident that Syria would be immune to the turmoil. He was not alone: at a meeting of 10 foreign ambassadors in Damascus in February that year the diplomats without exception dismissed suggestions that the revolutionary turmoil in Egypt and Tunisia might spread to Syria.

The conviction that Syria was more stable than other Arab states was rooted in the belief that Mr Assad was relatively popular; Syria's long opposition to Israel and the US gave it powerful nationalist credentials; abject poverty was less than in Egypt and Yemen. Yet, within a month of the ambassadors' meeting, protests began to gather pace and the government responded brutally and with extreme violence, treating dissent as a revolutionary attempt to overthrow the state, similar to the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency of 1979-82 which concluded with the slaughter of some 20,000 people in Hama. Many believe that it was the government's overreaction that turned protests into an insurgency. The government claims that from the beginning it was facing an armed Islamist revolt funded and supplied by the Gulf monarchies allied to Western intelligence services.

With what, in retrospect, seems like embarrassing speed, foreign governments - and many Syrians - swung from saying nothing would happen to treating the departure of President Assad as a foregone conclusion.

They cited the precedent of Libya where Muammar Gaddafi had just been overthrown, but this was based on a basic misunderstanding of the situation in both Syria and Libya. The Libyan regime was isolated internationally and had fallen because of the Nato air campaign, not the strength of the rebels. Syria was allied to Russia, which blocked any UN-mandated action, and Iran, which was not going to see its most important ally in the Arab world overthrown.

The decisive year was 2012 when the rebels captured swathes of countryside and took parts of Damascus and Aleppo. But by the end of the year, the government still held all 14 provincial capitals and the most important roads.

One local capital, Raqqa, which lies on the Euphrates, did fall a year ago, but its captors were not the Western-backed Free Syrian Army but jihadi groups,

notably the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis).

The higher profile of the jihadists was much in the interests of the government, which had long claimed that the opposition was dominated by al-Qa'ida (true to the spirit of Middle East conspiracy theories, the opposition then claimed that Isis was in league with the government, asserting, against much evidence to the contrary, that the Syrian army and Isis seldom fought each other).

By the end of 2012 it was clear that the rebels could not win without full-scale foreign military intervention. But to many, this was not obvious at the time because government forces pulled back from outlying positions and concentrated on holding strategic areas. A problem for the opposition was that the whole purpose of their exiled movement was to provoke a Libyan-type intervention. When this did not happen, it had no plan B to fall back on.

The current situation is a political and military stalemate. One of the many problems facing any peace talks is that power in Syria is highly concentrated on the government side in the presidency and the security services. Any political "transition" implies power-sharing which would be impossible to implement in the central government given the levels of distrust and hatred. The only feasible power-sharing is on a geographical basis, with each side holding the territory where they are strongest.

If the opposition failed to win in 2011-12, what are the chances of the government winning now? It is advancing in important areas such as the Qalamoun mountains on the Lebanese border and in and around Aleppo, but it is doing so at a snail's pace and its forces are overstretched. Its main tactic is to seal off rebel-held enclaves and bombard them with artillery and from the air, so that people are forced to flee. This is hardly a way to win the hearts and minds of the population, but the rebels have not found an answer to it.

A strength of the Syrian government is that it has maintained its unity, and its opponents have not. Unlike in Libya, there have been few high-level defections and, while there have been many desertions from the army, whole units have not changed sides. In many revolutions the insurgent side has split after victory and civil wars have followed. But in Syria the opposition has already been fighting its own bloody civil war since 3 January. This tends to discredit all the armed opposition and is, in any case, unlikely to produce a clear winner.

The battle between Isis and the rest of the armed opposition has been good news for President Assad over the past few months. So, too, is the furious dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have been the main funders and suppliers of the rebels. It adds a new layer of complexity to the struggle for Syria, since Saudi Arabia has now declared the Muslim Brotherhood, Jabhat al-Nusra and Isis to be "terrorists", as President Assad did long ago. It is difficult to

see how the Saudis and the Americans can successfully create a rebel army capable of fighting both the Assad government and the jihadi insurgents.

To survive is not to win. President Assad remains ruler of a ruined land and does not have the resources to win a decisive victory. But unless the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and their allies are prepared to fight a long war in order to exhaust the government in Damascus, there is no reason he should not stay in power.

18th March 2014

ON THE MARCH WITH ASSAD'S ARMY

By Robert Fisk

THE BATTLE for Yabroud is over, but its Greek Catholic church has been savagely vandalised by its former rebel occupants, its streets carpeted with cartridge cases, its houses smashed with shell holes. Syria's soldiers - along with a host of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon - watched General Badi Ali raise the government flag yesterday, too late to save the beautiful frescoes slashed into ribbons by the men of the Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front in Syria's oldest church.

The Greek Catholic Church of Our Lady is a place of shame, of burnt copies of the New Testament, paintings slashed with knives - many were lying in strips of gold and red fabric beside the altar's broken cross - and mosaics chiselled from the walls. Sceptics may ask if the regime performed this act of sacrilege - for the benefit of cameras - but it must have taken weeks to have wrecked this place of worship with its ancient columns and to have gouged out the eyes of the mosaic saints.

The Islamists had attacked a mosaic of St George and the Dragon - and had even gouged out the dragon's eyes as well as those of the unfortunate knight. You cannot call such sacrilege an infamy. But you have to ask how Syria can ever repair relations between its Muslims and Christians after such vandalism. Perhaps the answer is never, although in an act of immense courage, the Muslim civilians of this ancient town protected their Christian neighbours to the end.

As for Syria's soldiers, they poured into the town in their thousands. There were no corpses left - though there were rotting animals aplenty - but the men I talked to yesterday were tough fighters, their faces burnt by the mountain air after 13 days of fighting. So were the Hezbollah members who stared with amazement at the English reporter, demanding that their photographs not be taken but cheerfully agreeing that they had come from the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, on the other side of the mountain range above Yabroud.

Their equipment was new, including their sniper rifles and radios. No ragtag army this. The Syrian army and Hezbollah appeared to be operating semi-independently of each other and kept apart in the streets, though they shared their food and stood to watch two new Russian-made tanks drive into the main square.

How can you record the history of the past 13 days - or indeed the story of the little boy who had lived all of his 15 months under the rule of Islamists - when no one save those who live here and the rebel fighters among them were witnesses to the more than two years Yabroud has endured?

The road into the town was torn up, its buildings, shops and stores ransacked, its people hiding in fear. I found one woman only in a street of Ottoman houses so old that their walls were made of clay and water. She still kept cows in her basement. Um Qusai - hers was the little boy - talked of how she and up to 70 other women staged a demonstration in the street against the Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, some of whom did not even speak Arabic.

"They threatened us and surrounded us and told us we could not demonstrate. They said we were not to use the name of Bashar al-Assad but we said we wanted no foreigners in Syria. Then we had another demonstration and there were only 10 of us and they surrounded us with 200 of their fighters. Then the fighters staged their own demonstration. And they made a tape and played it on their radio, claiming the leader of our demonstration was a government agent. They put a gun to her head. But the tape was fake."

There were other comments which were deeply disturbing. Um Qusai claimed that the Jabhat al-Nusra fighters - who like her were Sunni Muslims - forced the people in the town to pay high prices for the food they brought in. The Christians had to pay even higher prices as a tax because of their religion. And much of the food, she said, was UN humanitarian aid from across the border in Lebanon - presumably from the refugee camps in which supporters of the rebels have sought safety.

At the corner of one street, I came across the Syrian army field commander who had battered his way into Yabroud, Colonel Median Abbadeh. He described a two-stage battle - the shellfire was still banging away in the foothills above us as we spoke - which will inevitably now move on to the town of Rankous, where Jabhat al-Nusra is still holding out. But of one thing he was insistent: the Lebanese town of Arsal - from which the rebels had brought so much ammunition into Syria - was now cut off behind the Lebanese border. Another blow to Assad's opponents.

Abbadeh's soldiers had been fighting for two days without sleeping but they looked like men who believed they were winning - and that may indeed be the truth. Unless they lose Yabroud - as they did Maaloula last year after recapturing it for the government - the Syrian army looks set on staying here. Hence the flag-raising and all the references to "victory", "courage" and "heroism". General Ali's speech went on and on - why do all generals make the same speeches? - but the old posters still remained on the walls.

One was entitled "The People's Liberation Party of Yabroud". It read: "If you are patient and you are devoted to God, the cunning of your enemies will not harm you." But a lot of harm did come to the rebels in Yabroud. Unusually the Syrians took prisoners. Ominously, I saw none.

The Syrians officers said they had found Egyptian and Emirates passports in the town. They were real, they said, and were taken from the corpses of their dead owners - they could, alas, not produce them for me to see - although they had names.

Abdul-Rahman Mehrez was the commander of the Ahrar al-Sham brigade. And there was a Tunisian called Mahmoud Osman al-Barsha. Mohamed al-Qudaini, leader of the Maghawiral-Qalamoun brigade. Omar Sulieman Khaznah, leader of the Fajr al-Islam brigade. The list went on and on.

Yabroud is - or was - a rich town. Its many families who left Syria include that of President Carlos Menem of Argentina, who revisited his home town on 23 November 1994. There's even a monument to the event, covered in the green, white and black flag of the rebels. Perhaps those families will pay to rebuild this town. But who will pay to rebuild Syria?

Yabroud now looks like much of Syria. Trashed, gutted, fought over, rubbled. And it will, no doubt, be counted a famous victory.

19th March 2014

FAITH, HOPE AND £40M CHARITY? RELEASE OF THE KIDNAPPED NUNS IS STARTING TO COST SYRIA'S REGIME

By Robert Fisk

THEY MUST be the most expensive nuns in the world - if, that is, a poisonous press and the ferocious rumours of civil war are anything to go by.

Qatar, according to the Lebanese, paid Bashar al-Assad's enemies £40m for the nuns' freedom. The figure goes up to £43m in Syria. Or, if you listen to the 13 Greek Orthodox nuns freed by the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra after three months' imprisonment, absolutely nothing at all was paid.

No one gets freed in Syria without a price. For Syria's security services, in this case, the price was the release of 152 female prisoners, including relatives of rebel fighters. And for the nuns, closeted now in a church orphanage in central Damascus, the cost is rising.

"We are safe now in this place," Sister Irene - one of the unlucky 13 - said yesterday in the hallway of the St Gregorius Orthodox Society Orphanage in the al-Qassa Christian district of central Damascus. "I am happy here."

But when I asked the diminutive lady in her black gown and cape to ask her superior, Mother Plagia Sayyaf, to talk about their experiences, she returned with a rather unsaintly message. Mother Plagia had been profoundly hurt by an interview broadcast by the pro-regime Al-Dounia television channel, she said. "She swore in front of God that she will never talk to the press again."

Nonetheless, having taken a peek at the rather well-appointed - if now damaged - villa in which the nuns and their three maids were held in Yabroud until their release a week ago, a few questions have to be asked about this extraordinary episode. The nuns and their assistants, as the Christian community was appalled to announce last December, had been kidnapped from the ancient Christian town of Maaloula - where, as every guidebook tells you, Aramaic, the language of Christ, is still spoken - and taken to the nearby town of Yabroud which had been under Islamist control for more than two years. Some said they were dead, but a videotape later showed the nuns being well treated, one of them laughing with her captors. Then came their release.

Lebanese security services were involved - they said no ransom was paid by them - but when the nuns emerged from captivity, to the astonishment of all,

they thanked their kidnappers for looking after them so well, personally expressed appreciation for one of the Islamist leaders, thanked Qatar - the supposed money-men - and then put in a good word for Bashar al-Assad.

Much more serious was the growing number of reports in Damascus that in some infernal deal, they had been freed not only with an awful lot of Qatari cash, but with the help of Lebanese Christian parties opposed to Assad. The arrangement was said to be all too simple: as Syrian forces and Hezbollah members prepared to storm the town of Yabroud two weeks ago, the nuns were freed in return for the Syrian government allowing the hundreds of Islamist fighters a safe corridor to flee the town to the neighbouring village of Rankous.

Perish the thought, the regime says. But if true, this would account for the fact that I saw no corpses in Yabroud when the army eventually captured the old Ottoman - and Roman - town this week. Syrian officers confirmed that the next battle would be for Rankous, which Jabhat al-Nusra is still in possession of. Wasn't the regime, its own supporters have been asking, supposed to be destroying the foreign Islamist groups rather than freeing a group of nuns - when thousands of Syrian women have been abducted and hundreds raped? It's one thing to pray for the nuns' safety - and most Christians in Syria are undoubtedly on Assad's side - but to have them quietly handed over by their captors when the mosaics and paintings of the Church of Our Lady, 200 yards away from their place of captivity, had been vandalised seemed to be a bit much.

Mother Plagia was Lebanese, a growing congress of angry Syrians said (others say she is, in fact, Syrian) and was close to members of the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea, which loathes the Assad regime. And Qatar, whom the nuns profusely thanked for their liberty, is funding Assad's ruthless Islamist enemies. In other words, what's going on? Why didn't the nuns also thank the Syrian army for arranging their liberation - if that is what happened - rather thanking Jabhat al-Nusra?

There are, of course, rather a lot of prisoner-swaps in Syria just now - that's what happens in civil wars - and private ceasefires and "reconciliation" committees, and Lebanon appears to have become ever more involved, perhaps because it still wishes to keep the Syrian war away from its frontiers. The word in Damascus is that the negotiations were led "from beginning to end" by the head of the Lebanese internal security forces, General Abbas Ibrahim, who in the past has courageously talked to al-Qa'ida representatives in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein Helweh, outside Sidon in southern Lebanon.

So is Qatar, which has called for the overthrow of Assad dozens of times, now trying to spite its old adversary Saudi Arabia - also funding the Islamists in Syria - by very quietly opening a gentle dialogue with the Assad regime after years of

rage and fury at Damascus? Certainly, Saudi Arabia has been grimly silent. Oh, to be a Syrian conspiracy theorist in these days of war. Or to be a nun.

20th March 2014

SYRIA'S SECULAR UPRISING HAS BEEN HIJACKED BY JIHADISTS

By Patrick Cockburn

JUST AFTER the sarin poison gas attacks on rebel-held districts of Damascus in August last year, I appeared on an American television programme with Razan Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer and founder of the Violations Documentation Centre, who was speaking via Skype from the opposition stronghold of Douma in East Damascus.

She gave a compelling, passionate, wholly believable account of what had happened. "I have never seen so much death in my whole life," she said, describing people breaking down the doors of houses to find everybody inside dead. Doctors in the few medical centres wept as they vainly tried to treat gas victims with the few medicines they had. Bodies were being tipped, 15 to 20 at a time, into mass graves. She contemptuously dismissed any idea that the rebels might be behind the use of sarin, asking: "Do you think we are crazy people that we would kill our own children?"

Ms Zaitouneh, 36, had been defending political prisoners for a dozen years and was the sort of credible advocate that won the Syrian opposition so much international support in its first years. But on 8 December, gunmen burst into her office in Douma and kidnapped her, along with her husband, Wael Hamada, and two civil rights activists, Samira al-Khalili, a lawyer, and Nazem al-Hamadi, a poet. None of the four has been heard from since. The group suspected of being behind the kidnapping is the Saudi-backed Army of Islam, although it denies being involved. Ms al-Khalili's husband, Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, told the online publication al-Monitor: "Razan and Samira were part of a national inclusive secular movement and this led them to collide with the Islamist factions, who are inclined towards despotism."

The kidnapping and disappearance of Ms Zaitouneh and the others have many parallels elsewhere in Syria, where Islamists have killed civil activists or forced them to flee. Usually, this has happened when the activists have criticised them for killings, torture, imprisonment or other crime. All revolutions have notoriously devoured their earliest and most humane advocates, but few have done so with the speed and ferocity of Syria's.

Instead of modernising Syrian society in a progressive and democratic

manner, the Salafi-jihadists want a return to the norms of early Islam and are prepared to fight a holy war to achieve this.

Why has the Syrian uprising, whose early supporters demanded that tyranny should be replaced by a secular, non-sectarian, law-bound and democratic state, so totally failed to achieve these aims? Syria has descended into a nightmarish sectarian civil war as the government bombs its own cities as if they were enemy territory and the armed opposition is dominated by Salafi-jihadist fighters who slaughter Alawites and Christians simply because of their religion. Syrians have to choose between a violent dictatorship in which power is monopolised by the presidency and brutish security services, and an opposition that shoots children in the face for minor blasphemy and sends pictures of decapitated soldiers to their parents.

Syria is now like Lebanon during the 15-year-long civil war between 1975 and 1990. I was recently in Homs, once a city known for its vibrant diversity but now full of "ghost neighbourhoods" where all the buildings are abandoned, smashed by shellfire or bombs. Walls still standing are so full of small holes from machine-gun fire that they look as if giant woodworms have been eating into the concrete.

Syria is a land of checkpoints, blockades and sieges, in conducting which the government seals off, bombards but does not storm rebel-held enclaves unless they control important supply routes. This strategy is working but at a snail's pace, and it will leave much of Syria in ruins.

Aleppo, once the largest city in the country, is mostly depopulated. Government forces are advancing but are overstretched and cannot reconquer northern and eastern Syria unless Turkey shuts its 500-mile-long border. Government success strengthens the jihadists because they have a hard core of fighters who will never surrender. So, as the Syrian army advances behind a barrage of barrel bombs in Aleppo, its troops are mostly fighting the official al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham, backed by Qatar and Turkey.

The degenerate state of the Syrian revolution stems from the country's deep political, religious and economic divisions before 2011 and the way in which these have since been exploited and exacerbated by foreign intervention. The first protests happened when they did because of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain. They spread so rapidly because of over-reaction by state security forces firing on peaceful demonstrators, thereby enraging whole communities and provoking armed resistance. The government insists that protests were not as peaceful as they looked and from an early stage their forces came under armed attack. There is some truth in this, but if the opposition's aim

was to trap the government into a counter-productive punitive response, it succeeded beyond its dreams.

Syria was always a less coherent society than it looked to outside observers, and its divisions were not just along religious lines. In July 2011, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) wrote in a report: "The Syrian authorities claim they are fighting a foreign-sponsored, Islamist conspiracy, when for most part they have been waging war against their original social constituency. When it first came to power, the Assad regime embodied the neglected countryside, its peasants and exploited underclass. Today's ruling elite has forgotten its roots."

In the four years of drought before 2011, the United Nations noted that up to three million Syrian farmers had been pushed into "extreme poverty" and fled the countryside to squat in shanty towns on the outskirts of the cities. Middle-class salaries could not keep up with inflation. Cheap imports, often from Turkey, forced small manufacturers out of business and helped to pauperise the urban working class. The state was in contact with whole areas of life in Syria solely through corrupt and predatory security services. The ICG conceded that there was "an Islamist undercurrent to the uprising" but it was not the main motivation for the peaceful protests that were mutating into military conflict.

Compare this analysis of the situation in the summer of 2011 with that two and a half years later. By late 2013, the war was stalemated and the armed opposition was dominated by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis), the former official al-Qa'ida affiliate now displaced by Jabhat al-Nusra.

Ideologically, there was not much difference between them and Ahrar al-Sham or the Army of Islam, which also seeks a theocratic Sunni state under Sharia law. Pilloried in the West for their sectarian ferocity, these jihadists were often welcomed by local people for restoring law and order after the looting and banditry of the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), the loose umbrella group to which at one time 1,200 rebel bands owed nominal allegiance. In Afghanistan in the 1990s the iron rule of the Taliban had at first been welcomed by many for the same reason.

The degree to which the armed opposition at the end of 2013 was under the thumb of foreign backers is well illustrated by the confessions of Saddam al-Jamal, a brigade leader in the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigade and the former FSA commander in eastern Syria.

A fascinating interview with Jamal, conducted by Isis and translated by the Brown Moses blog, was recorded after he had defected to Isis and appears to be reliable, ignoring his self-serving denunciations of the un-Islamic actions of his former FSA associates. He speaks as if it was matter of course that his own group, al-Ahfad, was funded by one or other of the Gulf monarchies: "At the

beginning of the Syrian revolution, the file was handled by Qatar. After a while, they switched to Saudi Arabia."

Jamal says meetings of the FSA military council were invariably attended by representatives of the Saudi, UAE, Jordanian and Qatari intelligence services, as well as intelligence officers from the US, Britain and France. At one such meeting, apparently in Ankara, Jamal says the Saudi Deputy Defence Minister, Prince Salman bin Sultan, the brother of Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan, addressed them all and asked Syrian leaders of the armed opposition "who have plans to attack Assad positions to present their needs for arms, ammo and money". The impression given is of a movement wholly controlled by Arab and Western intelligence agencies.

The civil war between jihadist groups that started with a co-ordinated attack on Isis positions on 3 January is damaging the standing of all of them. Foreign fighters who came to Syria to fight Assad and the Shia find they are being told to kill Sunni jihadists with exactly the same ideological views as themselves.

The Islamic State sent a suicide bomber who killed Abdullah Muhammad al-Muhaysani, the official al-Qa'ida representative in Syria, and also a leader of Ahrar al-Sham (evidence of how al-Qa'ida has links at different levels to jihadi organisations with which it is not formally associated).

Returning jihadists are finding the way home is not easy, since governments in, for example, Saudi Arabia or Tunisia, which may have welcomed their departure as a way of exporting dangerous fanatics, are now appalled by the idea of battle-hardened Salafists coming back. An activist in Raqqa, seeking to speed the departure of Tunisian volunteers, showed them a video of bikini-clad women on Tunisian beaches and suggested that their puritanical presence was needed back home to prevent such loose practices.

It is a measure of Syria's descent into apocalyptic violence that the official representative of al-Qa'ida, Jabhat al-Nusra, should be deemed more moderate than Isis. The latter may be on the retreat but this could be tactical and it has a vast territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq into to which to retreat and plan a counter-attack. In any case, Jabhat al-Nusra has always sought mediation with Isis and does not want a fight to the finish. The jihadist civil war has made life easier for the government militarily, since its enemies are busy killing each other, but it does not have the resources to eliminate them.

Crucial to making peace is bringing an end to the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran which is intertwined with the vicious conflict between Shia and Sunni. Russia and the US need to be at one in ending the war, as they briefly seemed to be at the end of last year. Syrians gloomily say the outcome of their civil war is no longer in Syrian hands, but in those of the US, Russia, Saudi

Arabia, Iran, Turkey and their various allies.

Peace, if it ever comes, will come in stages and with many false starts such as the failure of the Geneva II peace talks.

21st March 2014

AN ASSAD GENERAL'S SYRIAN CHARM OFFENSIVE

By Robert Fisk

GENERAL YUSSEF Swaidan was doing the Syrian army version of hearts and minds, standing behind a fruit stall surrounded by a couple of dozen shopkeepers on the very edge of Daraya. See how well the army treats you. See how the lies of the terrorists about army brutality are wrong. I had heard this before.

The three-star general's sunglasses reflected the midday heat, the crowd appropriately - or obediently - roared their support. There was even a civilian with a beard who opened the back of a van and distributed Syrian flags to passing schoolchildren. Then came a tremendous blast of outgoing artillery fire.

There were others who merely watched and listened; the general's giant conscript bodyguard, Tamer - steel helmet covered in camouflage, Kalashnikov cradled in his arms - was watching the length of the street and the surrounding alleyways, and glancing towards the rooftops. In ordinary life, he is a shepherd from Deir ez-Zour, but now he was watching a different kind of flock.

The general was quite frank about it. "Who knows if the terrorists did not leave people behind here when they left?" he pondered later. "There could be spies. If we continued down this road, you could be taken hostage. Your life depends on just one phone call out of here. Who knows what is in the hearts of the people?"

Grim words, but the 45-year-old general has a tough job. As field commander of Daraya - a place of constant battle and at least one massacre 18 months ago - he is, like other Syrian generals around Damascus, trying to talk his soldiers' way back into the rebel-held suburbs, meeting "reconciliation committees" of doctors, shop-owners, religious sheikhs who live under the rule of Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups. "Syrian fighters who surrender their weapons will be given a clean record," he told me. "The foreigners who are here must go, or their grave will be in Syria."

It's a hard sell, but it clearly worked just down the road in Lawan more than a year ago. The rebels have left and the shops are open and this little bit of Damascus was quiet. The soldiers were offered falafel - ground and fried chickpeas - by a local vendor. But then, he would do that, wouldn't he? Who knows whom he gave his falafel to a couple of years ago when the rebels were

here? The general watched all this with proprietary interest. This is, after all, his territory.

A balding man with a grey moustache, General Swaidan, of the Syrian army's 4th Brigade, comes from Latakia (I think he is an Alawite, but he refuses to acknowledge any sect) and claims he has no ceasefires with "terrorists".

I suspect this is true in one sense, and yet it is clear that the army is trying to use words as well as bullets to recover the lost suburbs around Damascus. As he talked peace, sitting on a chair in the weird environment of a long-disused nursery garden, a 155mm field gun fired off an artillery round over our heads, the shell hissing off on a range of 14 miles to protect, the general said, a military checkpoint under attack south of Damascus.

He is a political as well as a military man, accusing Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Israel and America of struggling to weaken Syria. "All made a mistake in thinking they could break the unity of the Syrian people."

So how come the new weapons which the rebels are using - new radio equipment, new sniper rifles and new missiles - are crossing the border from Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon? "No nation in the world can control its borders when all countries conspire against it. The US cannot even control its border with Mexico. So how could Syria in these circumstances?"

Sitting beside General Swaidan was another officer, also wearing shades, who nodded from time to time and occasionally made a few comments of his own. Colonel Samir listened intently to all we said and I suggested, rather pointedly, that while Swaidan was the field commander, Samir must be from military intelligence - an idea fervently denied but with enough laughter to suggest I might be right.

There was much talk of how the military and political leadership of Syria knew that Israel was waiting for this moment to hit Syria, and how they were ready to defend the country against this kind of attack. The general claimed - and he said the same to the people outside the fruit stall - that the Syrian army could take over all rebel territory in seven days but refrained from doing so because it did not want to kill its own civilians. "The terrorists are using the people as human shields," he said. Now where, I wonder, have I heard that before? It is exactly what Israel says when it bombs civilians all over Lebanon.

"There will be no ceasefire with terrorists. I can't trust them. They would use a truce to get more arms supplies." These, he says, include weapons made in Israel, Ukraine and Belgium - the latter is certainly true, since I have seen captured Belgian pistols in Aleppo - and are regularly shown on state television. "No army in the world can defeat a conspiracy unless the people stand with the soldiers," the general adds. "When we enter some villages which have been in

the hands of terrorists, we often find pictures of Bashar al-Assad hidden behind closets. We get much of our information from civilians living in the terrorist areas."

And that, of course, is exactly what the British Army used to say in Northern Ireland when it was also searching people's homes. As for General Swaidan's soldiers, they arrive to salute their general and are invited to talk to me: a group of conscripts who give their full names and their civilian jobs - one was a tailor, another a carpenter - and cheerfully say they are Sunni Muslims. Assad, of course, is an Alawite, but the general is careful of percentages, saying that 60 to 65 per cent of the 4th Brigade are Sunnis. "There is no sectarianism in this army, not in our brigade, and if you tour the checkpoints around the city, you will find most of the soldiers are Sunnis."

The rebel forces in Syria, of course, are almost all Sunni Muslims, and that was the general's point: Syrian Sunnis also fight for the army. And when I did stop at the general's checkpoints and rather cruelly demanded to know their religion, almost all of them were indeed Sunni, some conscripts, many regular soldiers.

General Swaidan launches himself into a tale of the Prophet Mohamed. "He was sitting by the road one day with his friends and a funeral went by. The Prophet stood up and told his friends to pay their respects. One of them turned to the Prophet, peace be upon him, and said: 'But don't you know this is a funeral for a Jewish man?' And the Prophet said: 'Don't you realise that the dead body is that of a human being?' This is the essence of Islam." To which I had absolutely no reply.

22nd March 2014

THE KILLING OF A SOLDIER AND HIS SON SHOWS THE LIMITS OF RECONCILIATION

By Robert Fisk

IN THE great Syrian military residential complex on the road to Lebanon, some very serious men are gathering to talk about the killing of a young army captain and his six-year old son. There are many soldiers, a cluster of generals and colonels, the dead man's brother and a man from the Damascus suburb of Qudsayya - where the captain and his little boy were murdered - with an extraordinary message: the killer's parents have told him he is no longer their son.

Younis Mustafa, the 39-year old army captain who died as he went shopping with his little boy on 21 February, stares down at us from a martyr's poster - bearded, solemn, a photograph of six-year-old Ammar to his left, smiling confidently into the camera. Everyone in Damascus knows the story of Younis Mustafa, but when his brother Hassan talks about the killing, it acquires a distressing human edge.

"It was 3.30 in the afternoon when I received a phone call from his wife. She was with him and their other two children when he was surrounded on the street outside a supermarket. She had borrowed another woman's mobile phone at the place where it happened to call me. All she said was: 'They have killed your brother and my son.' I didn't answer and she closed the line."

Usaima Ali Ghanem is 34 but she was now at home, her brother-in-law representing her closest family at this "reconciliation" meeting, a negotiation between the dead man's next of kin and the group of men from Qudsayya who would arrive to offer their condolences on behalf of the neighbourhood in which Captain Mustafa was killed.

February 21st was a Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, and he and his family had felt safe in Qudsayya; although armed men still moved around the district, it contained one of the "reconciliation committees" of well-known local figures who have managed to talk to rebel leaders as well as the army.

But as his wife and his other two children, Hala and Hassan, watched from the family car, they saw a group of men surround the army captain. They had a rifle, and fired first at the six-year old - in his back - and, as the father tried to hold his dying child, they shot him too. Then the killers ran away. Several local

people rushed to protect Usaima and the two children in the car. One report says the men took the captain's body away, leaving the child on the pavement. Half an hour later, "reconciliation committee" men brought the body back.

This "reconciliation committee" - and it deserves the quotation marks - had given confidence to the family's shopping expedition. But alas, one of the mourners told me that the very man who shot Captain Mustafa had been freed from a government prison in a recent amnesty arranged by the committee.

In a hall decorated with Syrian flags and containing plastic chairs and tables set in a rectangle for the condolences, the family sat grimly, waiting for the delegation of men who would sit opposite them. Then a general received a mobile phone call to say that the delegation could not arrive because of a bombardment.

But one man made it through, Nazzir Halimeh, sorrowful but his hair tangled, clearly still fearful from the shelling he had to drive through. "We are so sorry," he said. "It is our duty to express our condolences to this family. And we have to tell them that the family of the man who killed Captain Mustafa have now disowned their son. They told him that he would never be their son again. All the families of the men involved have told their sons to leave their homes."

There were names to these men. One was called Ghandour, another al-Rifai and - probably the murderer - a man called al-Halibi. Being a soldier in civilian clothes did not save the captain. The army regard soldiers killed in fighting as casualties of war. But this was different.

By chance, among the military mourners was Colonel Omar Shaaban from the Tel Besih district in Homs, wounded three times in battle, refusing an offered retirement from the army, the marks from one bullet still visible on his face - the round passed through his left cheek through his mouth and out through his right cheek.

His story, however, was darker than his wounds. When insurgents took over his home area in Homs, the family fled but his brother, a schoolteacher, stayed behind. "They tried to use him to get me to defect, but I refused," Colonel Shaaban said. "They told him they wanted him to join the terrorists and he also refused. So for both reasons - because of me and because of his refusal - they shot him dead." Some military and civilian friends of Captain Mustafa were listening to Colonel Shaaban in silence. I did a reporter's duty. What were their religions? And they told me. Sunni, Christian, Alawite, Druze and Ismaeili.

Reconciliation is a rich fruit which must be consumed all over Syria in the years to come. For generations.

24th March 2014

ASSAD IS ALREADY COUNTING ON SOLDIERS STILL AT SCHOOL TO FILL THE GAPS LEFT BY 30,000 CASUALTIES

By Robert Fisk

WE WERE driving down the main road from Homs - fast, of course, as the Syrian war now requires - when, just outside the Damascus suburb of Harasta, a government soldier asked for a ride into town. I have always stopped for hitch-hiking soldiers, especially in time of war - Egyptian soldiers, Lebanese soldiers, Israeli soldiers, Algerian soldiers, you name it - because they're usually poor, often exhausted, occasionally frightened. And they always want to talk.

But this time, our guest was silent. We drove past acre after acre, mile after mile of suburban ruins, greater than I have seen before outside the capital. And then the soldier said to my driver: "I am one of four brothers, all in the army. The other three have been killed. I am the only one left." One out of four. I checked that I had heard him correctly. My driver repeated it. What does that tell you about casualties in Bashar al-Assad's army?

We dropped the soldier off near the old Ottoman Hejaz railway station and carried on round Umayyad Square to the dark interior of the Sheraton Hotel. The moment I walked up to reception to tell them I was back, a huge explosion echoed across the empty marble lobby. An incoming mortar round from the rebels around Damascus. It crashed into the square, where three policemen lay in pieces. The suddenness and speed of this war quickly wears you down. An interview - long sought-after - swiftly becomes an obligation of annoyance at the end of a day in which you watch a MiG jet bomber as it races north to drop its ordnance on the Syrian army's next rebel target at Rankoos, along the road from the town of Yabroud. Assad's soldiers - with a plentiful legion of Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon - recaptured the town from their opponents last week.

But I meet a very old friend who knows pretty well just how the war fares. The government army has now lost more than 30,000 soldiers in three years - that's more than a fifth of the total casualties of the conflict, most of whom are civilians if you believe those who oppose Assad. But the government in Damascus now calculates that the next three years of military conscription will raise a new generation of 20,000 extra soldiers.

There is something Douglas Haig-like about such calculations - adding up your reinforcements by counting soldiers who are still at school. But, in one

sense, this is a war unlike any other.

There are intriguing hints that the conflict is changing. There are dozens of mini-ceasefires now, between the remains of the defectors of the fractured Free Syrian Army (FSA) and their former comrades in the government forces. That's one reason why the battle for Yabroud last week did not claim quite as many lives as Assad's men would have us believe. When the army and Hezbollah captured Qusayr in the previous big battle along the Lebanese border, the rebels in Qusayr fled to Yabroud. So when the government surrounded Yabroud, they were able to call up the rebels on their own mobile phones and talk to them - by name. Release the 13 Christian nuns held hostage there, the insurgents were told, and clear out of Yabroud... and we'll briefly hold our fire.

The Islamist defenders of Yabroud apparently executed several fighters who wanted to leave - but leave the defenders did, to live and fight again in the next battle-to-be at Rankoos. But the army won, and it is this increasingly formidable force - let us, of course, remember that the West claims war criminals are among them - that is the one institution in Syria upon which Assad must rely. He knows it, too. When he visited the wreckage of Baba Amr in Homs, soldiers surrounded the President with the usual cries of self-sacrifice in the cause of Assad. But Assad himself immediately walked over to the state television crew and ordered them to cut the sequence from the evening news. This was the army's victory, not his.

Only a few months ago, the Free Syrian Army was trying to find an accommodation with the regime, sending middle men to Damascus to talk to representatives of the President. But the government abandoned such contacts when the FSA decided to grab at the American offer of more arms at Geneva - a conference at which US diplomats expressed their displeasure not at the enthusiasm of Assad's opponents for more weapons, but for their insistence on flying to Switzerland business class - all at the expense of the American taxpayer.

Among the Islamists opposed to Assad, there is now considerable debate - almost to the point of hostility - about their future activities. A new al-Qa'ida faction wants its people to leave Syria and go to fight in Yemen, which is far closer to Saudi Arabia and its oil fields and holy Muslim cities. This, it says, is far more relevant than squandering resources in the wilds of Syria and Iraq.

At the same time, new power relationships are congealing around Syria. President Rouhani has visited Iran's old friend Oman, and Qatar is just - slightly - beginning to allow its suspicion and contempt for Saudi Arabia to outweigh its enthusiasm for the war against Assad. If it's true that it paid $60m for the release of those nuns - clearing them out of the way of the Syrian government

bombardment at Yabroud - then the Emir of Qatar was doing Assad a favour.

And not without reason. The Americans have abandoned the Syrian war as a lost cause. The US will leave the Gulf. They may well close most of their huge airbases in Qatar, leaving the Emir grimly exposed to the territorial greed of his Arab Gulf brothers. Who else to guard him - and Oman and the other small Gulf states - other than that former policeman of the Gulf, namely Iran?

With a Russian-Iranian-Qatari guarantee of "fair" elections in Syria - please hold your breath, readers - who better to rebuild Assad's rubbled country than Iran and Russia, backed by Qatar's wealth? Why, they could even invite the workers of Crimea to give them a hand…

Putin beware! The latest offering of Obamery

As a student of linguistic garbage, I marvelled at last week's Obamery. The world concentrated on his interview with a tin-pot San Diego channel - President Obama uses small-town media to avoid giving massive and boring interviews to The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN and other crippled giants of American journalism.

So it was that we learnt, via Obama-speak, that "we are not going to be getting into a military excursion [sic] in Ukraine." But it was not this Chamberlain-like determination which caught my eye. It was Obama's follow-up threat to Vladimir Putin - totally ignored by the press or, when it was recorded at all, reported without comment - that fascinated me.

"What we are going to do," quoth Obama, "is mobilise all our diplomatic resources to make sure that we've got a strong international correlation that sends a clear message."

Gadzooks! Achtung! All those mobilised correlations packed with clear-cut messages crashing down upon Russia! Surely the walls of the Kremlin will now come tumbling down.

4th May 2014

FOREIGN JIHADIS IN SYRIA PLEDGE THEIR OWN 9/11

By Patrick Cockburn

IT IS only a matter of time before jihadis in al-Qa'ida-type groups that have taken over much of eastern Syria and western Iraq have a violent impact on the world outside these two countries. The road is open wide to new attacks along the lines of 9/11 and 7/7, and it may be too late to close it.

Those who doubt that these are the jihadis' long-term intentions should have a look at a chilling but fascinating video posted recently by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), formerly al-Qa'ida in Iraq. It shows a group of foreign fighters burning their passports to emphasise their permanent commitment to jihad. Many of the passports thrown into the flames have grass-green covers and are Saudi; others are dark blue and must be Jordanian. Some of the fighters show their faces while others are masked. As each one destroys his passport, sometimes tearing it in half before throwing it into the fire, he makes a declaration of faith and a promise to fight against the ruler of the country from which he comes.

A Canadian makes a short speech in English before switching to Arabic, saying: "It is a message to Canada, to all American powers. We are coming and we will destroy you." A Jordanian says: "I say to the tyrant of Jordan: we are the descendants of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi [the Jordanian founder of al-Qa'ida in Iraq killed by US aircraft in 2006] and we are coming to kill you." A Saudi, an Egyptian and a Chechen make similar threats.

The film is professionally made, and was probably shot somewhere in northern or eastern Syria. It is worth looking at carefully, and keeping in mind that these are not an isolated band hiding in desert wastes or mountain caves. Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra, the official affiliate of al-Qa'ida, now control, or can easily operate in, a great swathe of territory from the Tigris to the Mediterranean, and from the Jordanian border to southern Turkey.

Threats, such as those made by the group burning their passports, are creating something near panic among Iraq's neighbours, who were slow to take on board last year that Syrian armed opposition had come to be dominated by al-Qa'ida or its clones. A report by the International Crisis Group (ICG), "The Rising Cost of Turkey's Syrian Quagmire", published last week, cites a Turkish official saying: "The armed al-Qa'ida element will be a problem for the Turks. As a secular

country, we do not fit with their ideology. What happens if they can't get what they want in Syria? They will blame Turkey and attack it." Bear in mind that the thousands of foreign jihadis who have poured into Syria and Iraq mostly got there by crossing the 510-mile-long Turkish-Syrian border. The head of an influential Turkish think tank is quoted by ICG as saying that "When Turkey starts arresting them [jihadis], which it will do, we know what will happen. There will be bombs all over Turkey."

Jordan is also showing signs of extreme nervousness over support being given to the Syrian armed opposition, just across its border in southern Syria. American, Saudi and Jordanian intelligence have been working on creating a "southern front" around Daraa, the southern city where the Syrian revolt began, a front supposedly made up of moderate, secular fighters, who are both anti-Assad and anti-jihadi. This is deceptive, since an important force in such operations would be Jabhat al-Nusra which, on this front, is reportedly acting in coordination with a Jordanian, Saudi and US intelligence joint operations room in Amman.

But the Jordanians have got cold feet over the idea of a southern offensive launched from their territory. They are no longer as confident as they were in 2011 and 2012 that President Assad is bound to lose. They worry about an estimated 2,000 Jordanian jihadis in Syria, and what happens when they return to Jordan. There was a mysterious Jordanian airforce attack destroying vehicles entering Jordan from Syria on 16 April in which the Syrian government denied any involvement. The Jordanians also forbade an opposition offensive at Daraa timed to coincide with a rebel assault in Aleppo.

Even the US State Department's annual report on terrorism, issued last week, has noted that al-Qa'ida-type groups are getting stronger. Its image of al-Qa'ida in the past has been along the lines of a bureaucratic entity somewhat similar to the State Department itself. It therefore takes heart from the belief that because of organisational and leadership losses "AQ's core leadership has been degraded, limiting its ability to conduct attacks." The word "core" is useful here since it can mean either "a central command" or simply "at the centre of". In practice, al-Qa'ida since 2001 has primarily been an ideology and a method of operating, not a cohesive organisation. The State Department has finally noted this, speaking of "the rise of increasingly aggressive and autonomous AQ affiliates and like-minded groups".

In reality, the situation is worse than the State Department admits, since over the last year Isis has taken over much of Sunni Iraq. It levies taxes in cities such as Mosul and Tikrit and has substantial control in Fallujah and along the Euphrates valley, through western Iraq and eastern Syria up to the Turkish

border. It has captured the Fallujah dam on the Euphrates, and can flood or deny water to areas further south; at Baiji on the Tigris, north of Baghdad, it has blown up an oil pipeline, polluting the river which had been used, after treatment, to supply drinking water to Baghdad. On the western outskirts of Baghdad at Abu Ghraib, Isis has held a military parade and the famous prison was hastily evacuated. A comforting theory explaining the surge in Isis's strength in Iraq is that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki exaggerated its power to frighten Shia voters before last Wednesday's parliamentary election. He thereby diverted attention from his administration's appalling record of corruption and incompetence by focusing on the danger of a Sunni counter-revolution. The outcome of the election will show if this strategy had worked.

Unfortunately, all the signs are that the political and military incapacity of the Iraqi government is all too real. Its armed forces are said in Baghdad to have suffered 5,000 casualties including 1,000 dead in fighting in Anbar province in the last four months. Whole battalions are reported to have melted away because the men were not being paid, or they have not received supplies of food and ammunition. According to one report, even the job of army divisional commander can be bought for $1m with the assumption that whoever takes the job can show a profit by making $50,000 a month through protection money and levies on vehicles passing checkpoints.

After the election the government may try to repeat the US strategy of successfully using the Sunni tribes against al-Qa'ida groups such as Isis. The difficulty is that for the moment Sunni communities hate the Iraqi army and security forces more than they do al-Qa'ida.

4th June 2014

THE BARREL BOMB AND THE BALLOT BOX: HOW ASSAD HELD ON TO POWER IN SYRIA

By Robert Fisk

IT'S REALLY all a question of proportion. The former Field Marshal Sisi's 93.7 per cent presidential electoral victory in Egypt last week must surely have been outshone by Bashar al-Assad yesterday, albeit the skies of Damascus were filled with howling fighter jets and the thump of explosions as its citizens shouted and danced outside the voting booths.

Two dull and obedient politicians, one a former minister - both born losers - were added to the hitherto one-man presidential voting list for the first time in Baathist history, so when I asked the Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, if there was any danger of Bashar losing, he wisely replied: "This is up to the Syrian people."

Ah, the Syrian people. Crushed, humiliated, tortured, imprisoned, slaughtered, forever crying for freedom from terror - note how these words of tragedy are used by both sides against each other in Syria's agony - they were invited to participate, at the height of their agony, in a little lesson in Middle Eastern democracy. Some 60 per cent of the population were able to vote yesterday in the 40 per cent of Syria firmly controlled by the regime, in more than 9,000 voting stations, most of which were vulnerable to the gunfire of Bashar's largely Western-supported opponents.

These rebel forces, fading secularists, frightening Islamists - groups so fractured they look like a broken windscreen - promised a rain of rocket-fire into the country's cities to destroy an election which American and European leaders had condemned as a farce. From dawn, mortar bombs and rockets crashed into central Damascus - until Bashar's MiG fighter jets swept over town and blasted their suburbs and all within them in the most persuasive form of electoral violence suppression in the history of democracy.

Or not, as the case may be. Bashar and his wife Asma - yes, in a bridal white jacket - pushed their vote into an equally white box before Syrian television. In the Starship Enterprise interior of the Syrian foreign ministry - a vast white Christmas cake palace on the edge of the suburbs, echoing to the bomb explosions - a clutch of his ministers gathered to produce their identity papers, garlanded in Syrian flags, eager to place their signatures beneath the portrait of

Bashar on the ballot paper.

At least, one must assume that such loyal men - they included Mr Muallem (newly recovered from a serious operation), his eloquent deputy Faisal Mekdad and Syria's canny (and, with the regime's opponents, ferocious) Minister of Information Omran al-Zoubi - voted for a third seven-year term for Bashar. There were indeed curtains to protect the privacy of the voting booths and the foreign ministry - whose massive walls make it one of the best-defended buildings in Damascus - was a suitable venue for the event.

The polling stations for the masses included frontier posts, schools, government ministries and even airline offices. I spent several minutes yesterday buying a local air ticket in a Damascus room thick with militiamen and voters, the walls plastered with pictures of the electoral winner - guess who? - while those jets raced over the rooftops outside. "Do you want to vote?" a clerk asked me with double-edged humour. I got the point. Was I to vote for Sisi, perhaps?

But there were some differences between the Pharaoh and former Field Marshal who now rules Egypt and the former optometrist who now - and surely for years to come - rules Syria. For just as Sisi's election was marked by grimly empty polling stations and an electorate weary of its heat-wave revolution, Syria's electorate turned up in their thousands with bands, newly-published posters of That Man - head-to-toe black suit, in full commander-in-chief costume or smiling against a roaring Mediterranean - and long queues of young men in tribal headdress. Spontaneous? Never. Coerced? Up to a point. Happy? Who could read behind the smiles and forlorn cries of "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice ourselves for you"? And everyone knew who "you" was.

Rumours flooded across borders just as thousands of Syrians crossed the Lebanese frontier yesterday to vote a few hundred metres inside their country. In Lebanon, the word went out that Syrians who went home to vote would not be allowed to return and would lose their refugee status. An expensive vote, in other words, for Syria's poor. In Damascus, I was told that the Lebanese authorities were charging $200 to Syrian citizens if they wished to return to their own country. Both were untrue. Syrians waited to receive a printed yellow sheet of paper from Lebanese immigration men, allowing their return within 24 hours. I saw no money changing hands.

But now to the Department of Home Truths. Add together most of the Christians, Druze, Alawites and a substantial number of Sunni Muslims in that 60 per cent of the population locked into the 40 per cent of Syria which constitutes Assadland, and wouldn't a majority of them have voted for Bashar?

The militant opposition, of course, were not represented - the Islamists would not wish to be, and many of them are not even Syrian - and Hassan Abdullah al-

Nouri and Maher Abdel Hafiz Hajjar, the two has-beens-to-be whose pictures also adorned the voting papers and who have no criticisms of Assad, didn't stand a chance. Mr Nouri, by the way, has a master's in public administration from the University of Wisconsin and holds a PhD from Kennedy University in California; Hajjar is famous for telling Syria's Christians that they remained "neutral" when their country faced a foreign conspiracy.

Twenty-four candidates originally presented themselves for the presidency but they were whittled down to the lonely three for the elections, including - deus ex machina - Bashar himself. So will historians interpret all this as a political punch by the President to match the military victories which his armies - including rather a lot of Hezbollah fighters and Iranian Revolutionary Guards - have clocked up?

Among the most excoriating of journalistic attacks on the Syrian elections - outside Syria, of course - came in the Saudi-financed Al-Hayat, in which Hazem Saghieh wrote that Bashar's decision to hold this election was more brutal for Syrians than the savage repression visited upon them. "The violence struck their bodies yet respected their brains, but this electoral farce is a humiliation without parallel." A smile, Saghieh concluded, "is all this masquerade is worth."

So when I asked Mr Muallem how he defended the "farce", he replied with characteristic bluntness. "I don't need to defend myself," he said. "I ask those people to look at the television … and see what the Syrian people want. This is a democracy of the Syrian people when they vote."

What I really wanted to know - what we all want to know, I suspect - is why these elections, Egypt last week, Syria this, actually take place. Are they an attempt to follow - or mimic - the imperfect but powerful system of democracy in Europe and then outdo it in grotesque percentages?

Is it by chance that the Arab peoples who were influenced by European politics over the past 150 years - the ones who generally wear Western clothes rather than Arab robes and whose forefathers read Voltaire and Rousseau and the great Victorians - imbibed the ideals of representative government? And does this explain why the Gulf Arabs, proud in their abayas, largely - but not entirely - show little interest in parliamentary democracy?

Certainly, Syria was a revolutionary nation even under Ottoman rule. Independence is part of its historical birthright. But is that individual independence we are talking about? Or just national independence? And what statistic are we going to hear of in Damascus this week? A few here have talked to me of a credible but secure 62 per cent for Assad. But others - I predicted 90 per cent - are saying we shall see 95 per cent for Bashar. A paper victory amid bloody war.

5th June 2014

HARDLY A BREATH OF WIND: THE SILENCE THAT EMPHASISES A CITY'S FATE

By Robert Fisk

DEEP BENEATH the city of Homs, in the last days of the Syrian army's siege, a desperate Islamist rebel wrote on the wall of a tunnel. "I have a question for all our commanders," he lamented. "When will the road be open? If someone has an answer, please give me one. And tell me when the siege will be lifted. If no one answers, this means that all our commanders are…" The final word is obscured. Liars? Bastards?

But the lonely gunman's suspicions were correct. The last rebels surrendered - to be given safe passage from Homs under the eyes of the UN - and left behind a city destroyed, its ancient streets pulverized, its shops crushed beneath tons of masonry, its 7th-century Mosque of Khalid ibn al-Walid blasted by shellfire and bullets. Even the grave of ibn al-Walid himself, a Companion of the Prophet Mohamed no less, lies amid rubble in one corner of the mosque, a green and gold cloth over his last resting place, the corners held down by breeze blocks. Rumour has it that the Wahabi Islamists who fought here stole his body long before they left.

Now today - at last - the full extent of Homs' martyrdom can be seen, street after noble street shattered by bombs, tank-fire, rocket-propelled grenades and Kalashnikov rounds, stately Ottoman offices gutted by flames, Roman columns tossed into gardens of shell-shorn tree trucks. The great modern shops and city-centre offices are reduced to rubble-filled skeletons. Tunnels run beneath many of the roads and, for the first time, visitors can clamber through the snipers' alleys which bisected the city for two years.

One tunnel beneath a wrecked department store was ground out through hard rock almost two years ago, built - as the proud amateur engineers inscribed in paint beside their tunnel entrance - by a group of Islamist fighters. "This tunnel was dug by the hands of jihadis, Abu Bashir, Abu Odai, Abu Aleil, Abu Iskander, 15 July 2012," it says. The tunnel is only four feet high. I crawled its length, beneath pipes and alongside drains, and emerged in the centre of a road beside the ancient mosque to find myself in a sniper's position.

The front lines between Syrian and rebel forces are still in place, concrete barrels and barbed wire and sofas and steel-framed chairs across blackened

streets drenched in broken water mains and sewage - a panorama familiar to anyone who witnessed the years of civil war in central Beirut or parts of Baghdad. Government soldiers now laze in the sun at makeshift checkpoints where tens of thousands of civilian demonstrators gathered in the early days of the rebellion in 2011 - joined on one tumultuous day by the American and French ambassadors - to demand the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, who was yesterday said to have been re-elected president with 88.7 per cent of the vote.

After that peaceful protest, the armed defenders of Homs arrived, to be replaced by the jihadis and the al-Qa'ida men and the Nusra fighters, who struggled for years against an army which had earlier shot down unarmed demonstrators. From that moment, Homs was doomed.

It is the silence which emphasises the city's fate. Scarcely a breath of wind moves the giant hoardings of Assad that now hang in triumph down the front of the destroyed facades of shops and factories. In the sky, hundreds of swifts dart across the dead city and its roofless buildings, a symbol of an almost heavenly life amid the disgrace of these ruins. We wandered this place for hours, past the little places of humanity that make up any living society, a broken pharmacy, a doctor's surgery, a dress shop with the inevitable dummies long congealed into the street rubble in the streets, the remains of a cheap hotel - the "Forgiveness Hotel", a wardrobe store and a shoe shop whose boxes - along with hundreds of shoes - lay mouldering in the gutters.

It was a unique moment, too, because already government trucks were removing the tens of thousands of tons of concrete and stone from the city, and in months - perhaps weeks - this place may be a wasteland, ready for post-war reconstruction (with billions of Qatari cash?), its recent tragedy as erased as the centre of Hama after its Islamist rebels rose up in savage rebellion against Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, in February 1982. You could save many of the older buildings of Homs. The fluted columns, the old clocks, the arched windows of Ottoman rule and French mandate do not have to be turned to rubble just because their roofs have been flung into the streets.

And then there is the Mosque of Khalid ibn al-Walid, which dates from the 7th century. Its walls are scarred with bullets and shell fragments, its fountain is twisted into a Daliesque art form, part of its exterior is sandbagged and its interior is carved out by shrapnel and smeared with graffiti. Renovated it must be - and can be - but its desecration is a disgrace. There is no way, in Homs, to apportion blame for this architectural disaster.

Both Syrians and Islamists held the mosque at different times. The Islamists used it as a redoubt, just as their comrades - or perhaps they themselves - did amid the ruins of Fallujah in Iraq's "city of a thousand minarets" when the

Americans besieged that city.

Some tall buildings have been sliced in half by air attacks - clearly by the Syrian air force - others, including the city's French-built museum, have been spotted by a plague of rifle rounds and rocket-propelled grenades that must have come from rebel-held lines. Around the city, middle-class apartments and villas stand untouched close to the university of Homs, but the streets deteriorate into fire-burned walls the nearer one reaches the suburb of Bab al-Amr, a place of great death and suffering under Syria's ruthless bombardment.

Oddly, as the summer heat builds up across Homs, there is no smell of decay, no hint of the thousands of deaths which were inflicted here. There must be bodies aplenty under the cascade of concrete walls sandwiched on top of each other in the old city. But most of the dead were buried after battle or during those cruel semi-ceasefires which marked the great siege of Homs.

I found an interior ministry fighter in Omar bin al-Khattab Street, wearing - and he was no patsy left for journalists to find, since I came across him at a checkpoint hidden by rubble - a miniature double-edged sword of Shiite Islam around his neck and a wristband depicting the heads of Christian saints. I asked "Khaled" what he thought when he gazed upon the destruction of Homs.

"I feel as if a brother has lost his life," he said. "All the victims are our brothers. All this blood is our brothers' blood. I am young, but the defence of your country doesn't wait until you get old." He laughed. There was no patriotic talk of the Baath party, no reference to President Bashar al-Assad.

The only words from the Islamist fighters - apart from the tunnel literature - were spray painted on the walls. "There is a mine in the next alley," a Nusra man had obligingly written at a street corner. Another ominously inscribed the words: "When the night comes, the killing begins."

A Christian Syrian asked me why men wrote such words. Behind him, in a roofless Orthodox church, was the bust of a cleric. There were bullet holes in his face and shoulders. Potshots? Target practice? Or another shameful sign of Homs' wartime degradation?

7th June 2014

DEATH ZONE: THE SYRIAN INDUSTRIAL ESTATE TURNED INTO A SUICIDE FORTRESS BY AL-QA'IDA

By Robert Fisk

AL-QA'IDA CITY was an industrial zone, a vast plain of concrete and stone factories, cattle sheds and homes, 10 miles north-east of Aleppo.

When Bashar al-Assad's army crashed up the main highway from Hama, lifting the rebel siege of Aleppo and careering on towards the Turkish border, the soldiers and tank crews were suddenly confronted by the biggest and most sophisticated fortress ever built by followers of the late Osama bin Laden.

Today, Syrian 155mm guns fire northbound shells from the olive and walnut orchards around what was one of the country's economic powerhouses, now reduced to square miles of smashed factories and burned chemical plants. There, according to Syrian commanders who had to smash their way into this place of pulverised iron, rubble and ash, hundreds of Islamist suicide fighters blew themselves up rather than surrender.

Colonel Saleh, sunglasses wrapped round a burned, lean face, stared at one heap of sandwiched concrete in the middle of the grey wasteland and made a rare admission of loss for an officer of the Syrian army in this dangerous place. "The terrorists all blew themselves up with suicide belts," he said. "They brought the buildings down on top of them as we attacked. I lost 27 of my soldiers storming this one area."

Miles of tunnels still lace their way beneath what was the Sheikh Najjar Industrial Zone. Above them, men from al-Qa'ida, Jabhat el-Nusra, the al-Sham Brigade and remnants of the old "Free Syria Army" - all struggling to overthrow Assad's regime - had spent two years mining the buildings, hacking lorry-wide passageways between walls and cutting out sniper's nests in every street and every floor. What had been one of Syria's newest industrial estates was transformed into a place of death; food stores and grain mills were turned into arms depots, their basements into dormitories for the hundreds of rebels who lived here.

It should take seven minutes on the highway from Aleppo to reach this extraordinary city of ruins, but the front lines of the Islamist forces north-east of the city so encroach on the countryside that we had to drive 30 winding miles along earthen lanes and beneath the grass-covered tracks of the old railway line

to Turkey, once the final stretch of track on Agatha Christie's famed Oriental Express to Aleppo.

But there is nothing romantic about this battlefield. Just outside the rooftop headquarters where Colonel Saleh sits, surrounded by squawking radio sets, is a blasted Syrian tank. Captured in the early months of the war, it was used by two suicide fighters in a vain attempt to smash the vehicle - packed with explosives - into the huge walls of Aleppo prison. The jail, in which hundreds of inmates are reported to have died of disease, hunger and ill-treatment over two years - and which was never taken by the rebel forces - was not breached. "There were two suiciders inside," Colonel Saleh says. "One was Syrian, the other Egyptian."

His colleagues are eager to talk of the huge number of foreign fighters who were based in this industrial complex - Chechens, they say, and Afghans and Egyptians, Saudis, Qataris, Algerians - and only rarely do they admit to the Syrians who also fought here against the government army. It is now a familiar format: Bashar al-Assad's army are fighting "foreign terrorists".

But this was not just a geopolitical battle for the land north of Aleppo. You only have to drive a few miles east of the ruins to find a deserted but undamaged motorway with its signposts to Raqqa, the one large Syrian city still totally under rebel control.

The colonel and his men led me through acres of crushed factories, all surrounded by deep trenches, most of them gouged out by shell-fire and explosives. A headquarters dormitory had been built beneath a towering cereal feed mill whose outer walls had been smashed down, apparently by air attack, although the colonel denied this.

Next to it was a factory for producing a spice called zaatar - piles of crushed grain still lay across the floor amid cartridge cases. Tunnels had been dug up to five metres deep beneath the surrounding buildings, shorn up by earthen sandbags made out of animal feed sacks.

There was one salient fact about this grim city of death: it was built and defended by technical men, by strategists, by experts in design and defence whose interests went deeper than Islam. Did they come from Turkey? Afghanistan? Pakistan? Or were they local men trained outside the Muslim world, perhaps originally aided by Western supplies, initially so promiscuously dispatched to anyone fighting the Assad regime?

For young men supposedly fixated by submission to God, the hundreds of Islamists who died here had been remarkably self-regarding about their own identity. "Abu Mohamed" and "Hassan of Raqqa" had spray-painted their names beside an empty sheep and cattle market. "The Heroes of Yasser" - a suburb of Damascus - had proudly painted their names next to a bunker. The Syrian army

spoke only vaguely of survivors; there was no mention of prisons for those who may have surrendered - one must imagine that few did - and there is no final figure for the hundreds of al-Qa'ida dead. Colonel Saleh's 27 men were just a few of the Syrian soldiers who also perished. "Our sacrifice was very great," one man said bleakly.

9th June 2014

ISIS MAKES ITS MOVE

By Patrick Cockburn

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS have opened new fronts in their battle to establish an Islamic state across Iraq and Syria as they launch attacks in cities which were previously under the control of the Baghdad government.

A multi-pronged assault across central and northern Iraq in the past four days shows that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) has taken over from the al-Qa'ida organisation founded by Osama bin Laden as the most powerful and effective extreme jihadi group in the world.

Isis now controls or can operate with impunity in a great stretch of territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria, making it militarily the most successful jihadi movement ever.

Led since 2010 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Dua, it has proved itself even more violent and sectarian than what US officials call the "core" al-Qa'ida, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is based in Pakistan. Isis is highly fanatical, killing Shia Muslims and Christians whenever possible, as well as militarily efficient and under tight direction by top leaders.

In Iraq in the past four days, it has fought its way into the northern capital of Mosul, sent a column of its fighters into the central city of Samarra and taken over Iraq's largest university at Ramadi, in the west of the country. In addition, it launched devastating bombings targeting Shia civilians in Baghdad that killed at least 52 people.

The creation of a sort of proto-Caliphate by extreme jihadis in northern Syria and Iraq is provoking fears in surrounding countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey that they will become targets of battle-hardened Sunni fighters.

The well-coordinated attacks appear designed to keep the Iraqi security forces off balance, uncertain where the next attack will come. They started on Thursday when Isis fighters in trucks with heavy machine guns stormed into the city of Samarra, which is mostly the city of Samarra, which is mostly Sunni but contains the golden-domed al-Askari shrine sacred to Shia. Destruction of this shrine by al-Qa'ida bombers in 2006 led to wholesale massacres of Sunni by Shia.

The Isis tactic is to make a surprise attack, inflict maximum casualties and

spread fear before withdrawing without suffering heavy losses. On Friday, they attacked in Mosul, where their power is already strong enough to tax local businesses, from family groceries to mobile phone and construction companies. Some 200 people were killed in the fighting, according to local hospitals, though the government gives a figure of 59 dead, 21 of them policemen and 38 insurgents.

This assault was followed by an early-morning attack on Saturday on the University of Anbar at Ramadi that has 10,000 students. Ahmed al-Mehamdi, a student who was taken hostage, told a news agency that he was woken up by the sound of shots, looked out the window and saw armed men dressed in black running across the campus. They entered his dormitory, said they belonged to Isis, told everybody to stay in their rooms but took others away.

One leader told female students: "We will teach you a lesson you'll never forget." They turned the science building into their headquarters, but may later have retreated. On the same day, seven bombs exploded in an hour in Baghdad, killing at least 52 people.

Isis specialises in using militarily untrained foreign volunteers as suicide bombers either moving on foot wearing suicide vests, or driving vehicles packed with explosives. Often more than one suicide bomber is used, as happened yesterday when a vehicle exploded at the headquarters of a Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the town of Jalawla in the divided and much fought-over province of Diyala, north-east of Baghdad. In the confusion caused by the blast, a second bomber on foot slipped into the office and blew himself up, killing some 18 people, including a senior police officer.

The swift rise of Isis since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its leader has come because the uprising of the Sunni in Syria in 2011 led the Iraqi Sunni to protest about their political and economic marginalisation since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Peaceful demonstrations from the end of 2012 won few concessions, with Iraq's Shia-dominated government convinced that the protesters wanted not reform but a revolution returning their community to power. The five or six million Iraqi Sunni became more alienated and sympathetic towards armed action by Isis.

Isis launched a well-planned campaign last year including a successful assault on Abu Ghraib prison last summer to free leaders and experienced fighters. This January, they took over Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad, and have held it ever since in the face of artillery and air attack. The military sophistication of Isis in Iraq is much greater than al-Qa'ida, the organisation out of which it grew, which reached the peak of its success in 2006-07 before the Americans turned many of the Sunni tribes against it.

Isis has the great advantage of being able to operate on both sides of the Syrian-Iraq border, though in Syria it is engaged in an intra-jihadi civil war with Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other groups. But Isis controls Raqqa, the only provincial capital taken by the opposition, and much of eastern Syria outside enclaves held by the Kurds close to the Turkish border.

Isis is today a little more circumspect in killing all who work for the government including rubbish collectors, something that alienated the Sunni population previously. But horrifically violent, though professionally made propaganda videos show Isis forcing families with sons in the Iraqi army to dig their own graves before they are shot. The message is that their enemies can expect no mercy.

The violence continued yesterday as at least 18 people were killed in two explosions at the headquarters of a Kurdish political party in Iraq's ethnically mixed province of Diyala. Isis claimed responsibility.

Most of the victims of Sunday's attack were members of the Kurdish security forces who were guarding the office of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party in the town of Jalawla.

The explosions were the latest in a show of strength by militants who in recent days have overrun parts of two major cities, occupied a university campus in western Iraq and set off a dozen car bombs in Baghdad.

Jalawla lies in disputed territory, and is one of several towns where Iraqi troops and Kurdish peshmerga regional guards have previously faced off, asserting their claims over the area. Both are a target for Sunni Islamist insurgents.

28th June 2014

THE SYRIAN 'MODERATES' WHO AREN'T SO MODERATE IN IRAQ

By Robert Fisk

WELL, GOD bless Barack Obama - he's found some "moderate" rebels in Syria. Enough to supply them with weapons and training worth $500m. Congress wants to arm these brave freedom fighters, you see. And Obama, having sent his 300 elite Spartan lads to Iraq to help Nouri al-Maliki fight the rebels there, needs to send help to the rebels in Syria - even though most of them are on the side of the rebels in Iraq whom Obama wants Maliki to defeat.

Confusing? You bet. So first steps first. Who are the "moderate" rebels whom Obama wants to train and arm? He doesn't name them - and he can't, because the original "moderates" whom America swore to arm (with the help of the CIA, the Brits, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) were the so-called "Free Syrian Army", mostly composed of deserters from Assad's government forces. But the FSA - briefly beloved of John McCain until he discovered a pro-al-Qa'ida fighter sharing a photo-op with him in northern Syria - has decomposed.

Its men have gone home, switched to the bearded Islamists of the Nusrah or Isis - or Isil if we heed the latest acronym - or re-deserted to the government army and taken up arms for Assad again. Some freedom fighters! They weren't given enough weapons, we are told. Now they'll get more. And no doubt sell them - as they did the last lot. For it is a sad fact of war that whenever a gun crosses a border, it represents not loyalty but cash.

Give an FSA man - if you can find one - an anti-aircraft missile and it will be sold to the highest bidder. In all the civil wars I've covered, I've never seen a weapon in the hands of a militia which hasn't bought it from someone else. In a humiliating interview on Channel 4, our own Defence Secretary admitted that weapons given to Syrian rebels had fallen into the hands of the bad guys. How do you monitor all the guys whom you give a gun to? Send them off with a personal drone to make sure they don't sell it?

Besides, how do you actually find a "moderate" these days in Syria's war? The Islamist rebels fight to the death. No "moderates" they. And - accursed facts now intervene - these are the very same Islamist rebels now threatening the Iraqi state. And just to make things even more confusing, Maliki has just been thanking Assad's boys for air-raiding his own rebel enemies on the Iraqi-Syrian

border on the grounds that Syria and Iraq are "friends".

So now to our own real friend, the Department of Home Truths. What's left of the FSA has been fighting the Islamist Isis-Isil forces. So have the Kurdish militias in northern Syria. So have a few village militias. And the Syrians have a suspicion that this is Obama's half-baked plan: to arm the anti-Islamist Syrian rebels to fight the pro-al-Qa'ida rebels and thus - indirectly - keep both the Assad and Maliki regimes in power.

The problem is that Obama must do this without revealing that the Syrian-Iraqi battle against Sunni Wahabis is one and the same war, that Assad's Syrian army - using Russian jets - is struggling against exactly the same enemy as Maliki's Iraqi army, also soon to be augmented (if we are to believe Maliki's blather to the BBC Arabic Service) with Russian jets. In other words, Assad not only has the public support of Moscow; he has the private support of Washington (and therefore, of course, of Israel).

Why else would the White House say that the money for Syrian "moderates" would help "counter terrorist threats" - "terrorist" being Assad's description of his enemies. But of course, Obama must keep calling Assad a "brutal dictator". Difficult to explain all this on Fox News, of course. So just keep repeating the word "moderate". Over and over again.

16th July 2014

ISIS MARCHES FURTHER INTO SYRIA

By Patrick Cockburn

ISIS FIGHTERS have captured much of eastern Syria in the past few days while international attention has been focused on the Israeli bombardment of Gaza. Using tanks and artillery seized in Iraq, it has taken almost all of oil-rich Deir Ezzor province and is battling to crush the resistance of the Syrian Kurds.

Isis is establishing dominance over the opposition to Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, as other rebel groups flee or pledge allegiance to the caliphate declared by the Isis leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, after the capture of Mosul on 10 June. On Monday, the jihadists took over the rebel-held half of Deir Ezzor on the Euphrates river, raising their black flag over the city and executing the rebel commander from Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qa'ida affiliate that was previously in control.

The recent Isis advances in Syria, following victories in Iraq last month, are altering the balance of power in the whole region. The opposition military forces not aligned with the Syrian government or Isis are being squeezed out of existence, making obsolete the US, British, Saudi and Turkish policy of backing groups hostile to both Assad and Isis.

Isis is seeking to capture the Syrian Kurdish enclave at Kobani, or Ayn al-Arab, where some 500,000 Kurds are concentrated, many of them refugees from other parts of northern Syria. "Isis have about 5,000 fighters which have been attacking us for the past 13 days using tanks and rockets and American Humvees captured in Iraq," Idris Naasan, a political activist in Kobani, told The Independent by telephone. "The fighting is very heavy and we have lost three villages we are trying to regain."

He said the normal population of Kobani region was 200,000 but this number is swollen by refugees from the border area and from Aleppo. Causing particular concern is the fate of 400 Kurdish hostages taken by Isis, including 133 schoolchildren aged between 13 and 14. Mr Idris said negotiations with Isis to exchange them for Isis prisoners "took place three days ago but fell through because Isis tried to take more hostages".

Maria Calivis, the Unicef regional director for Middle East and Northern Africa, said in a statement at the start of the month that all of the children, with the exception of four who escaped, were still captive. "It has been over four

weeks since the children were abducted as they returned to their home town of Ayn al-Arab [Kobani], after taking their junior high school final exams in Aleppo," she said.

There is no eyewitness information about the children but a report in the al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper said some of those abducted by Isis may have been tortured. It added that they were being held in two schools and that families living nearby said they could not sleep because of the sound of children crying and screaming as they were tortured. They said they heard three shots from the direction of one of the schools, leading them to fear that children may have been killed.

The Kurdish enclave under attack at Kobani is one of several regions which are home to Syria's 2.5 million-strong Kurdish minority, most of whom live in the north and north-east of the country. The fate of Kobani has become a national cause for Kurds, particularly in Turkey just across the border. A statement from the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, whose "people's protection units" are doing most of the fighting to defend the enclave, says "all the Kurds should head towards Kobani and participate in the resistance". Mr Idris accuses the Turkish government of giving "logistical aid intelligence information to Isis". Other Kurdish sources say this is unlikely, though they concede that Turkey has helped Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra in the past.

The other main thrust of the Isis offensive in eastern Syria has been towards Deir Ezzor, where it has defeated the Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham groups. They say they are out-gunned and outnumbered by Isis, which by one estimate has 10,000 fighters in Syria. Its morale is high, it is well financed through plundering banks and through the capture of oil wells in north-east Syria. Isis has been successful in winning the allegiance of tribes, which are strong in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa provinces, by allocating to them oil production from different wells that can be sold on the black market.

Isis has been engaged in a "civil war within the civil war" since the start of the year in which it battled the rest of the Syrian armed opposition, jihadi and non-jihadi. Up to 7,000 fighters may have been killed in this fighting. Isis, which has always been well-led militarily, withdrew from Idlib province, Aleppo city and northern Aleppo province earlier in the year, a retreat misinterpreted as a sign of weakness by other rebel groups, but apparently a tactically astute manoeuvre to concentrate its forces.

Fresh from success in Iraq, Isis is now counter-attacking strongly and, having taken Deir Ezzor, may seek to move back into Aleppo city from its base at al-Bab in east Aleppo province. Meanwhile, government forces in Aleppo city have been advancing against weakening rebel resistance and may soon have isolated

the rebel-held districts. The Syrian army and Isis may then confront each other as the only important players left in the civil war.

The Syrian opposition has always claimed that Isis and Syrian government forces have had a sort of de facto ceasefire and hinted at undercover links. This was mostly propaganda, though regurgitated in Washington, London and Paris, but it is true that since Isis helped to take Minnigh air base north of Aleppo last summer, it has mainly fought other rebel groups. When President Assad and al-Baghdadi do confront each other, the West and its allies will have to decide if they will go on trying to weaken the Syrian government.

22nd August 2014

AIR STRIKES? TALK OF GOD? OBAMA IS FOLLOWING THE JIHADISTS' SCRIPT

By Robert Fisk

THE "CALIPHATE" has some pretty tough theatrical producers. They write a bleak and savage script. Our job is now to respond to each line, and they understand us well enough to know just what we'll say. So they beheaded James Foley and threatened to do the same to one of his colleagues, and what do we do? Exactly what I predicted 24 hours ago: turn Foley's murder into a further reason to go on bombing the Isis "caliphate". And what else did they provoke from us - or at least from America's vacationing President? A battle on strictly religious terms, which is exactly what they wanted.

Yes, Barack Obama - before he headed back to the golf links - informed the world that "No just God would stand for what they [Isis] did yesterday, and for what they do every single day." So there you have it: Obama turned the "caliphate's" savagery into an inter-religious battle of rival Gods, "ours" [ie the West's] against "theirs" [the Muslim God, of course]. This was the nearest Obama has yet come in rivalling George W Bush's gormless reaction to 9/11 in which he said that "we" are going to go on a "Crusade".

Now of course, Obama didn't mean the Muslim God, any more than Bush intended to send thousands of horse-mounted Christian warriors to the Biblical lands of the Middle East: indeed, Bush only sent tank-mounted and helicopter-borne warriors to those lands. No, Obama was also announcing that the "caliphate's" victims are "overwhelmingly Muslim" - ie that the "Caliphate" wasn't Muslim at all - although his enthusiasm to intervene earlier this month was not caused by his sympathy for these thousands of poor Muslims, but by the persecution of Christians and Yazidis. And of course the danger to potential American victims - a fact which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's men understood all too well.

That's why they slaughtered poor James Foley. Not because he was a journalist , but because he was an American, indeed one of the Americans Obama was promising to defend in Iraq. Whether or not Obama forgot about US hostages in Syria - the US military's attempt to rescue them at least proved they knew Foley was in Syria. But why is Isis in Syria? To overthrow the Assad regime, of course, which is what we too are trying to do, is it not?

What on earth made Obama believe he could tell Muslims about what a "just God" would or would not do? For a President who regrets the Bush war in Iraq, does he not realise that millions of Muslims in Iraq believe that "no just God" would stand for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, nor for the tens of thousands of Iraqis massacred because of the lies of Bush and Blair? I was amazed to hear Obama announce that "one thing we [sic] can all agree on" was that "a group like Isil has no place in the 21st century".

This is the same claptrap which that old scallywag Bill Clinton used when he addressed the Jordanian parliament after King Hussein's unpopular peace treaty with Israel: that those Muslim groups who opposed it were "yesterday's men". For some reason, we really think that the Muslims of the Middle East need us to tell them their history, what is good for them, what is bad for them. Muslims who agreed that Foley's murder was a revolting crime against humanity will have been insulted by being told by a Christian what a "just God" would approve or disapprove of. And those who supported such a crime will have been further convinced that America was a justified enemy of all Muslims.

As for the sinister British executioner "John", I rather think he may have lived in Newcastle-upon-Tyne or Gateshead, because - having spent time on Tyneside - I thought he seemed to have just a hint of the Geordie accent. But "John" could have been French or Russian or Spanish. It's not what went wrong in his mind, but what phenomena have afflicted so many other young men, in their thousands to do the same. How, for example, did an Australian apparently allow his young son to pose with the head of a decapitated Syrian soldier (a soldier serving, of course, in the army of the Assad regime we have all sworn to overthrow)?

And how have our security "services" responded to this? With the usual nonsense about how merely looking at such gruesome execution videotapes may be a terrorist crime. What is this tosh? Personally, I find it equally offensive to film - and show on television - the mass killing of human beings by US aircraft. But we do show them, don't we? We are repeatedly invited to observe on our television screens the targeting of supposed Isis fighters and imagine their fate in the bubble of fire that consumes their pick-up trucks. Because we can't see their faces doesn't make this any less obscene. Of course, their activities are the opposite of what James Foley stood for. But were they all actually fighters? We haven't yet heard that outrageous linguistic curse "collateral damage", but I bet we will.

So are our security bosses going to make the viewing of US military target videos a terrorist crime? I doubt it - unless, of course, the film shows us massacring lots of civilians. Then they could claim - rightly - that such viewing might encourage "terrorism". And we'd all have to give up covering the war.

23rd August 2014

WEST POISED TO JOIN FORCES WITH ASSAD

By Patrick Cockburn

ISLAMIST FORCES are fighting their way into western Syria from bases further east, bringing forward the prospect of US military intervention to stop their advance. If Isis, which styles itself Islamic State, threatens to take all or part of Aleppo, establishing complete dominance over the anti-government rebels, the US may be compelled to act publicly or secretly in concert with President Bashar al-Assad, whom it has been trying to displace.

The US has already covertly assisted the Assad government by passing on intelligence about the exact location of jihadi leaders through the BND, the German intelligence service, a source has told The Independent. This may explain why Syrian aircraft and artillery have been able on occasion to target accurately rebel commanders and headquarters.

Syrian army troops are engaged in a fierce battle to hold Tabqa airbase in Raqqa province, the fall of which would open the way to Hama, Syria's fourth-largest city. Further north, Isis has captured crucial territory that brings it close to cutting rebel supply lines between Aleppo and the Turkish border. The caliphate declared by Isis on 29 June already covers the eastern third of Syria in addition to a quarter of Iraq. It stretches from Jalawla, a town 20 miles from Iran, which the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga are trying to recapture, to towns 30 miles north of Aleppo.

The question of possible US military action in Syria, such as air strikes, jumped to the top of the political agenda on Thursday when the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, General Martin Dempsey, said: "Can they [Isis] be defeated without addressing that part of the organisation that resides in Syria? The answer is no." He stressed that he was not predicting that the US was intending to take military action in Syria, but the US is very conscious that Isis can survive indefinitely if it has a large safe haven inSyria.

Chas Freeman, the former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, told The Independent that General Dempsey was pointing out that Isis straddles the Iraq-Syrian border and there should be a consistent policy towards it on both sides. General Dempsey "did not spell out the implications of that but, to me, they point in the direction of calling it off with Assad. It might also imply the sharing of intelligence with the opponents of Isis, even those from whom we are

estranged. Odder things have happened in the Middle East."

Mr Freeman, who is retired, said he had no knowledge about whether intelligence-sharing with Mr Assad's government was being considered.

For the moment, the most pressing issue in Syria is not the elimination of Isis, but preventing its expansion after a series of victories in July and August. Firstly, it drove out Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qa'ida, from the oil-rich province of Deir Ezzor on the Euphrates. Then it overran two important Syrian army bases, one held by Division 17 in Raqqa province and a second by Regiment 121 in Hasakah province where the commander was killed.

Syria holds greater opportunities for Isis in terms of expansion than Iraq because the movement draws its support from the Sunni Arab community: 60 per cent of Syrians are Sunni Arabs, compared with 20 per cent in Iraq.

The policy of the US, Britain and their allies in the region over the last three years has been to support "moderate" Syrian rebels who are supposed to fight Isis and other jihadists as well as the Assad government in Damascus. But the Western-backed Free Syrian Army is increasingly weak and marginalised while jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic Front have been unable to halt the Isis assault.

The Islamic Front is desperately trying to hold its stronghold in the city of Marea close to Aleppo against an unexpected Isis offensive that began on 13 August and is making headway. Isis held positions in Aleppo province and further west in Idlib province before its civil war with other rebel groups which began at the start of 2014 when it withdrew, interpreted at the time as a retreat, but in reality a concentration of its forces for use in Iraq and Syria.

Though they have suffered some serious defeats at the hands of Isis, Syrian government forces regained the al-Shaer gas fields near Palmyra in July and are still holding Tabqa airbase, where they claim to have killed many Isis militants, including a well-known media activist known as Abu Moussa. As with other Isis attacks on government strongholds inSyria, this one was heralded by two suicide attacks.

Overall, the Syrian army has shown itself much more effective in combat with Isis than the Iraqi army that has yet to score a single success. A series of Iraqi army attacks against Tikrit, the most recent this week, have all failed.

Air strikes are not the only way in which the US, Britain and their allies among neighbouring states could weaken and isolate Isis, but in doing so they would necessarily undermine other rebel groups. Key to the growth of Isis and, in particular, the import of thousands of foreign fighters, has been the use of Turkey as a point of entry. Determined to get rid of President Assad, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has kept Turkey's 550-mile border with

Syria open, giving the jihadists, including Isis, a safe haven over the last three years. The Turks are now saying Isis is no longer welcome, but Ankara has not moved seriously to close the border by deploying troops in large numbers.

An unqualified volte face by the US, Britain and their allies in their relations with the Assad government is unlikely because it would mean admitting that past support for the Sunni rebellion had contributed to the growth of the caliphate. Mr Freeman says that he doubted that "the liberal interventionists and neoconservatives who had pursued regime change in Syria were capable of reversing course. To do so would require them to admit that they bore considerable responsibility for legitimising pointless violence that has resulted in the deaths of 190,000 Syrians."

He added that he did not think it would be possible to bring down Isis by a direct assault and that it would be better to bottle it up and wait for it to be destroyed by its own self-destructive instincts.

"I cannot see how it can be isolated without the co-operation of Syria as well as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arabs, Iran, Russia and Turkey." On the other hand, given the divisions in Washington and hatreds in the Middle East, such a degree of co-operation is unlikely to emerge as a declared policy.

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