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- **IRAQ: JALAL TALABANI SUFFERS FROM A STROKE.**
- **TURKEY: DEATH OF SERAFETTIN ELÇI.**
- **SWEDEN: PARLIAMENT RECOGNISES THE ANFAL GENOCIDE.**
- **IRAQI KURDISTAN: THE IRAQI-KURDISH CRISIS IS AT A DEAD END.**
- **SYRIA: THE KURDS DEMAND THAT THE PÊSH KHAPOUR BORDER CROSSING BE OPENED.**
- **IRAN: A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ASYLIM SEEKERS.**
- **CULTURE: ADEL IMAM VISITS IRBIL TO RECEIVE A TRIBUTE TO HIS WORK.**

IRAQ: JALAL TALABANI SUFFERS FROM A STROKE

While Iraq is in the middle of a crisis and its Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, is faced with both the discontent of the Sunni Arabs and the opposition of the Kurds to his conduct regarding Kirkuk and Diyala, it was announced on 18 December that the President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, who is himself Kurdish, had suffered a stroke and that the prognosis on his state of health was uncertain.

It was on leaving a heated meeting with Nuri al-Maliki that Jalal Talabani felt unwell and was rushed to Baghdad hospital. Soon after an official communiqué announced that he had suffered from a cerebral haemor-

rhage but that his condition was "stable".

Jalal Talabani is 79 years old and has suffered from poor health and overweight for several years leading to regular visits abroad for treatment. In 2008 he underwent a heart operation in the United States and in 2011 he was sent to hospital in Jordan suffering from dehydration and exhaustion. Last summer he was treated by a German team of doctors for three months and only returned to Iraq in September 2012.

Throughout the press, be it regional, national or international, the most widely contrasted prognoses were advanced, some

papers speaking of "brain death" or a coma while others were reassuring.

Cutting the rumours short, the Kurdish Member of Parliament Mahmud Othman denied any question of death. The arrival of a medical team from Germany, the same one that had treated him during the summer confirmed that the President was indeed alive, though without any more details except that his condition had improved. He was urgently transferred to a private clinic in Germany on 21 December.

The manager of the Presidential communications office, Barzan Sheikh Othman, pointed out that

the “most dangerous stage” had passed. This was confirmed by Dr. Najmaldim Karim, a Kurdish neurologist who is governor of Kirkuk and is close to Jalal Talabani.

It is generally agreed that this accident has occurred at the worse possible moment, when Iraq is in the middle of a crisis and the Prime Minister is faced with a revolt from both the Sunni Arabs and several Shiite factions as well as the trial of strength taking place with the Kurds. The Iraqi Constitution (Art 72, 3) stipulates that in the event of the President being incapacitated, he should be replaced by one of the Vice Presidents while Parliament elects a successor within 30 days.

However, one of the two Vice Presidents, the Sunni Arab Tareq al-Hashimi has been tried *in absentia* and received five death sentences for “terrorism” and has been a refugee in Turkey since April 2012. The other one, Khodaei Al-Khozaei, who is also Minister of Education, is a Shiite politician of Nuri al-Maliki’s Dawa Party, His choice would completely unbalance the official consensus that tries to arrange that each of the main components of the population (Sunni and Shiite Arabs and Kurds) be represented.

Although choosing a Kurd as President is nowhere written into the Constitution, the election of Talabani to this position since 2005 has satisfied the various Iraqi political factions. Iraqi presidential powers are very limited, but his

personality and talents as negotiator made him a public figure who could mediate and bring people together in a State so divided between ethnic and religious groupings that its very survival is often unstable.

Even if Jalal Talabani survives his stroke, he would probably not be able to play such an important political role. Moreover, succeeding him involves two roles — both as Iraqi Head of State and as leader of his party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which has been going through a serious leadership crisis for the last few years.

Interviewed by the daily *Rudaw* for its 22 December issue, Mala Bakhtiar, who manages the PUK Political Committee, gave his views of the “post-Talabani” situation, which he considered must be envisaged as from now, even though the old leader’s personality makes him “irreplaceable”. This succession cannot be effected without profound internal and structural rearrangements if the PUK is to be able to face up to the new situation.

Regarding a possible takeover by Goran, the Party born of a split within the PUK, of members who might be more inclined to change camps after the end of the Talabani era, Mala Bakhtiar answered that the changes of membership between the parties have now been balanced and that some Goran supporters (250 according to him) had already asked to rejoin the PUK. On the

other hand he rejected the idea of any fusion with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) or any likelihood of flight of PUK members to that party since the historical and political roots of the two movements were so different.

Indeed, those disappointed with the PUK have never gone to increase the score of the KDP in its historic strongholds but turned either to Goran or other opposition parties going from Islamic to extreme-Left parties.

Among the names that are going round as possible successors to Jalal Talabani, that of the former Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region and ex-Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, Barham Salih, is often mentioned, both for the Iraqi Presidency and that of the PUK, as well as that of Hoshiyar Zebari, at present Iraqi Foreign Minister, who is close to the KDP and also a former Kurdistan Prime Minister as well as that of Fuad Masum, who is also a member of the PUK for the Iraqi Presidency.

Meanwhile the party is managed by Kosrat Rasu, the PUK’s N°2. Being 60 years of age he could be seen as a successor but his status of veteran does not carry a message of renovation the party’s renovation.

Finally, should Jalal Talabani accept his enforced retirement from all political life and is again able to make public statements; he could well also designate his own successor.

TURKEY: DEATH OF SERAFETTIN ELÇI

Serafettin Elçi, one of the senior members of the Kurdish politics in Turkey, a former Minister, leader of the Party for Participative Democracy (KADEP), elected to parliament from Diyarbakir as an independent

in 2011, died of cancer on 22 December in an Ankara hospital. Born at Cizîra Botan, the capital of the Bedir Khans’ Kurdish principality. He was 74 years of age.

When his death was announced, many Kurdish political personali-

ties went to the hospital to pay him tribute — members of parliament like Leyla Zana, Aysel Tuğluk, Pervin Buldan, Hasip Kaplan and Sırrı Sakık.

Moreover his death also gave rise to many condolences from the

Turkish political caste. Thus President Abdullah Gul stated *“The loss of Serafettin Elçi, who has worked hard for a resolution of problems through dialogue and for the consolidation of an environment of peace and brotherhood, will be felt in our political world”*. The Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, visited his family to express his condolences and a ceremony in his memory took place in the Turkish National Assembly that was attended by the Speaker of the House, the President of the CHP party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the joint Presidents of the BDP party. Selahattin Demirtaş, the Deputy Prime Ministers Bülent Arınç, Ali Babacan, Beşir Atalay and Bekir Bozdağ as well as a great crowd of present and past members of Parliament.

“Our sorrow is deep” stated the Kurdish member of Parliament Ahmet Turk. *“Throughout his life Elçi always showed his awareness of the Kurdish people’s struggle for freedom. However, in politics he always gave priority to intelligence over emotions”*.

The novelist Yashar Kemal, for his part, described him as a “hero” considering that the search for democracy in Turkey had lost *“an honourable and coherent voice”*.

In the daily paper *Zaman* (pro-AKP) the editorial writer Orhan Miroğlu recalled Serafettin Elçi’s exceptionally long political life — he was a Minister in the 70s and member of Parliament for Mardin for the Justice Party (AP). However, in 1977 he resigned in protest at the setting of the Second Front nationalist government led by Suleyman Demirel. He was also Minister of Public Works in Bulent Ecevit’s “centre-left” government.

When the 12 September 1980 *coup d’état* took place he was arrested and imprisoned for 30 months. He had already caused a scandal the previous December by publicly identifying himself as a Kurd — which was a first even for a member of Parliament at the time — and for having addressed the electors of Diyarbakir, who did not understand Turkish, in Kurdish.

Once released, he resumed his activities and political career but taking pains to put across his ideas in a country that had started waging its “dirty war” against the Kurds.

In 1994, although he had been put forward as a possible leader of the Kurdish HEP party, founded in 1991, he created his own party, the KADEP, nicknamed the Kurdish Motherland Party (as opposed to the Turkish Party of that name) which appeared to be an attempt to bring together several contradictory political trends round the Kurdish question. As the daily *Sabah* remarked on 18 May 1994: *“As described by Elçi, this party will be a liberal democratic party, casting its net widely. It will seek to cooperate with business circles but without leaning to the Right. It will be close to religious electorate but will not seek to set up an Islamic State. It will promote Kurdish identity but will defend the country’s territorial integrity”*.

Serafettin Elçi did not deny that his ideas were close to those that Turgut Ozal often put forward, saying: *“What I am trying to do is similar to what Mr. Ozal wants to do. I can say that our ideas on the South East (Turkish Kurdistan) are the same. I do not wish to compare myself to anyone, but the public is free to*

make its own comparisons. We are seeking to give the State two guarantees: we believe that the political borders of the State must be preserved. We are against violence. They should not be worried about our party”.

However, as Orhan Miroglu remarked, given the political context of the 90s Serafettin Elçi could not succeed in imposing such an agenda on the Kurdish question nor succeed in convincing the Kurdish electorate.

KADEP was always close to the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party and its leader always had friendly relations with the Barzani family. The creation of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in a federal and democratic Iraq seemed to him a positive example of liberal democracy as opposed to the political trends prevailing in Turkish Kurdistan. This, however, did not prevent him from allying himself with the BDP for the June 2011 elections, in which he was elected in Diyarbakir. He hoped, thereby, to exercise a moderating influence in the pro-Kurdish party’s ranks but also to act as an intermediary between the Kurdish members of Parliament and the rest of the Parliament by using the regard that he enjoyed in the Turkish political caste although he had not sat in the Turkish Parliament for the last 20 years.

His funeral took place in his native town of Cizir. Many members of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party came to represent the KRG President, Massud Barzani.

The Paris Kurdish Institute, of which he was a regular guest at its Symposia because of his abilities, was also represented there.

SWEDEN:

PARLIAMENT RECOGNISES THE ANFAL GENOCIDE

On 5 December a majority of the members of the members voted in the Swedish Parliament to

recognise the *Anfal* campaign conducted by the Saddam Hussein regime at the end of the 1980s as an act of genocide.

This measure was welcomed by the Iraqi Kurdistan regional Government. Prime Minister Nêçirvan Barzani described it as

“humane” and “courageous” adding that Stockholm’s decision showed the Kurds and Kurdistan that they “*they were not alone. This decision assures the Kurds that the world has not forgotten their sufferings and that it will no longer let them be killed in such massive numbers. I hope that this decision by the Swedish Parliament will encourage the Iraq Criminal Court to compensate the victims of Anfal*”.

Sweden in the first country in the world to recognise *Anfal* as geno-

cide. This result was the outcome of six years and eight months of efforts by the NGO Kurdocide Watch in Sweden (CHAK) to secure this recognition by Parliament, a campaign carried out in cooperation with the Kurdish community in Sweden and the support of Swedish members of Parliament and of members of Swedish parties of Kurdish origin. In the past parliament had twice rejected the proposal. On 8 November 2012 the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee finally

met to discuss it and, after an amount of research and discussion concluded that the *Anfal* campaign was indeed, one of genocide against the Kurds.

The debate in Parliament took place on 28 November 2012. Some members of the Swedish Congress, the Presidents of eight political parties and fourteen political public figures confirmed that it was genocide. For timetable reasons the actual vote was adjourned to 5 December.

IRAQI KURDISTAN: THE IRAQI-KURDISH CRISIS IS AT A DEAD END

The Iraqi-Kurdish crisis is increasingly worrying the Americans, especially as the two protagonists support different camps in Syria and that the two conflicts could exacerbate one another. AS the Assistant Secretary of State admitted “*the region cannot stand more conflicts*”.

Thus on 7 December a crisis meeting was held in Baghdad between the US Minister of Defence, the US Assistant Secretary of State and the Iraqi Prime Minister the main theme of which was the tension with Irbil and the situation in Syria.

On 13 December the newspaper *Shafaag News*, basing itself on an anonymous source, reported that the United States and other countries were insisting that Nuri al-Maliki soften his stand and ease the tensions with the Kurds. Apparently the Iraqi Prime Minister is said to have rejected all offers of mediation, repeating that it was an “*internal*” matter.

The Kurds, on the other hand are far from being opposed to American arbitration, so long as it does not call into question those articles of the Constitution that it steadfastly determined to

defend: the Kirkuk question, Federalism and their independence in managing their resources. Yet positions are so entrenched on both sides that any diplomatic intervention has the advantage of stimulating some dialogue. As Mahmud Othman, a leader of the Kurdish Alliance in the Iraqi Parliament, said: “*resolving the crisis between the central and regional governments requires efforts from abroad, be it from the United States, Iran or another country. It is too hard to find a solution internally*”. (Iraqi National Press Agency).

Indeed, Iran, that the United States is so keen on marginalising, cannot be so easily excluded, whether from the Syrian Crisis or from Baghdad. The Kurds realise this and, despite their reconciliation with Turkey, have always managed to keep on good terms with that country, adopting an attitude of “*we are, after all, good neighbours with everyone*”. Thus, according to Mahmud Othman, if, at the end of last autumn, a Kurdish delegation met the Shiite Vice President of Iraq, Khodair Kodhae, Ammar al-Hakim, who heads the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council, and the Iranian Ambassador in Baghdad, it was

in order to set up a face to face meeting between Nuri al-Maliki and Massud Barzani, in a “*more peaceful political atmosphere*”. “*The problem can only be resolved one way – by making Prime Minister Nuei al-Maliki and the Kurdish President Massud Barzani meet at the same table*”. Since both men, though formerly allies against Saddam Hussein are now at daggers drawn, this veteran of Kurdish politics nevertheless recognises that such a meeting needs time to prepare the ground and “*friendly countries*”.

In the field, the Iraqi and Kurdish forces are still standing glaring at one another, whether at Kirkuk or in the Diyala. Jabbar Yawar, the General Secretary of the Ministry for the Peshmergas, has repeatedly expressed Kurdish determination not to give an inch to the Iraqis in the field and not to withdraw until the forces sent by Baghdad have completely withdrawn.

The Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, the Sunni Arab Osama Nujaifi, had earlier met Massud Barzani in Irbil to discuss precise means of achieving bilateral withdrawal of all troops, but in fact nothing was carried out.

On the contrary, Massud Barzani's visit to Kirkuk on 10 December and his inspection of Kurdish troops there greatly annoyed Baghdad. In his speech to the Peshmergas, the Kurdish President, wearing military uniform, spoke of the "sacred task" incumbent on them to "defend the future of the people of Kurdistan". He thus insisted on "the importance of maintaining brotherhood and peace and serving all the inhabitants of Kirkuk".

"We are against war and we do not like war, but if we are brought to making war then the whole Kurdish people is ready to fight for the Kurdish character of Kirkuk".

Naturally this visit aroused the fury of the Maliki camp, as expressed by Yassin Majid, one of the leaders of his State of Laws coalition. According to him, President Barzani's review of Kurdish troops in Kirkuk in uniform was "a declaration of war on all Iraqis — not only on Maliki but also on Talibani" — despite the fact that the Iraqi President had, from the start of the crisis, expressed his opposition to the deploying the Dijila forces and that he had been the target of a salvo of criticisms from politicians who supported the Prime Minister.

According to Yassin Madjid this "provocation" ruined "all the efforts of the Speaker of parliament, Osama Nudjaifi". He even considered this visit was "even more dangerous" than that of the Turkish Foreign Minister last summer at Kurdish invitation without seeking Baghdad's permission. Nuri Maliki's coalition described this gesture as an "escalation" and as proof that Massud Barzani was not seeking to ease the tensions. It even compared him to Saddam Hussein.

The Kurdish Alliance's Vice

President, Mohsen al-Sadoun, retorted by casting doubt on Yassin Madjid's sanity or intellectual capacities and recalled that Ahmet Davutoglu had received a visa from the Iraqi Ambassador in Ankara and so had not visited the country illegally. He also made the point that the Iraqi Constitution in no way forbade the President of Kurdistan from visiting Kirkuk or any other of the disputed regions, that Massud Barzani was, under the Kurdish Constitution, Commander in Chief of the Peshmergas and that he had reviewed the Kurdish forces deployed in Kirkuk in that capacity.

Apparently unimpressed by the accusations of provocation and incitement to conflict, Massud Barzani stressed still further Kurdish claims to Kirkuk by ordering his staff, his Ministers and all KRG organs to stop using the term "disputed regions" to describe those covered by Article 140 of the Constitution and replace it by "Kurdish regions outside the Region".

This initiative inevitably aroused fresh condemnation from Nuri Maliki, who called it unconstitutional and called on all the State's authorities to condemn it explicitly. He saw it as offensive to all those who had voted for the Constitution in 2005 — forgetting that, in voting for the Constitution they had also voted for Article 140, as the Kurds unflinchingly stress.

Despite all this, there has been no interruption in contacts between Irbil and Baghdad and statements that an agreement could be reached or was on the point of being reached keep following one another — though without any concrete effect in the field — as Mahmud Othman predicted. On

15 December, Reuters reported an agreement for bilateral but gradual withdrawal of Kurdish and Iraqi troops, said to have come from Iraqi President Talal Jalabani and not denied by the Prime Minister. Ali al-Mussawi, Nuri Maliki's principal adviser, added to this regarding the possibility of local management of the security forces in the disputed regions. However, no timetable has been set although the KRG has been cited as also being in favour of such a solution. Mahmud Othman, as usual sceptical, expressed his doubts, explaining, "The problem lies in the details. Everything depends on mutual confidence and a sincere determination to reach a solution — but unfortunately mutual confidence between the two parties is lacking".

According to Mahmud Othman, while the USA and the Western powers will do everything to avoid the conflict degenerating into an armed conflict, Turkey, on the other hand could have an interest in the disintegration of Iraq, which would weaken but also place Irbil even more at the mercy of Ankara. Thus he supports Jalal Talabani's proposal for joint withdrawal of troops, even if he is not over optimistic about the agreement being followed through. Moreover, Jalal Talabani's stroke four days later, as well as probably ending his political career, could lead to fears that the agreement might also be buried.

At the beginning of January, Kurdish military delegation led by Jabbar Yawar is due to meet senior Iraqi military leaders to discuss the crisis in the field and the possibility of mutual withdrawal from the disputed regions. However, for the moment, Mahmud Othman is right as no agreement has been reached.

SYRIA: THE KURDS DEMAND THAT THE PÊSH KHABOUR BORDER CROSSING BE OPENED

Pêsh Khabour, a Christian village in Kurdistan (in Zakho diocese) has been the centre of a confused controversy between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the PYD party, which is the Syrian branch of the PKK, over a possible bridge across the Tigris to link it with the Syrian border.

In fact, refugees continue to flood into Iraq from Syria, their number is now said to have reached 63,496 according to the UN High Commission for refugees on 5 December. Of these, 54,550 are in Iraqi Kurdistan and 8,852 in Anbar Province of Iraq and 94 in other Iraqi provinces.

Thus the Kurdistan region shelters about 80% of these refugees and the winter, that is hard and snowy this year, could bring a further influx, this time fleeing the lack of fuel rather than the fighting.

The Syrian Kurds have thus asked the Kurdistan Regional Government to open its borders so that they can obtain supplies of food, medicines and fuel. Thus the Union of Kurdish Youth has sent a written request to the KRG asking it to intervene and save the Kurds in Syria *“from tragedy, suffering, displacement, the destruction of houses and a slow death”*. In their message they attack *“the presence of armed groups claiming to be part of the Syrian revolution who have surrounded the Kurdish regions and are looting all the food that is being imported into Western Kurdistan so as to reduce the Kurdish presence there and change the course of a peaceful revolution in Western Kurdistan”*.

The Kurdish National Council

has also asked for the opening of this border point. Abdulbaqi Yousif, the representative of the Unity Party (Yakiti) has for his part and with two other Kurdish parties, approached the US Embassy in Damascus, Robert Ford, asking him to ease the opening of this border point. Abdulbaqi Yousif has also reported evidence that the armed forces of the PYD and the YPC *“are levying heavy taxes”* on imported food. According to him, the closing of the border is the KRG’s reply to these taxes *“even a German NGO that was bringing humanitarian assistance to the Kurdish towns was seized by the PYD”* he stated to the daily *Rudaw*.

It was at this point that a controversy broke out between the PYD and the KRG regarding the closing of the border between the two Kurdistans. The former state that the Kurdistan Region had closed the border and prevented the Syrian Kurds from getting supplied from Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Irbil government relied that it had not closed any border point for the simple reason that there wasn’t one with Syria but that the Presidential staff was dealing with the matter very seriously and was going to give its official reply to the possible opening of a passing point there — a decision that, legally, was solely incumbent on the Central government — with which it was on bad terms.

Despite Irbil’s denial, the PKK press agency, Firat News, broadcast a video that it claimed *“proved”* that the KRG had indeed closed the border. However the KRG replied that what had been filmed was one

between Iraq and the Kurdish region. Irritated at this, the Presidential Office finished by published a communiqué on 7 January aimed at the PYD without naming it, attacking a party that was trying to impose its authority by armed force over the Kurds in Syria and using the border for dishonest transfers.

“We say quite clearly to our brothers in Western Kurdistan that we, the Kurdistan Region will not allow our border to be used for smuggling arms and illegal drugs”.

Which indicates that while the Peshmergas have orders to allow refugees, food and medicines to cross the border they are less permissive about movement of other than humanitarian transfers for the PGY and YPG, which could explain the campaign of attacks by the PDY.

There are several crossing points on the Iraqi-Syrian border but all are controlled by Iraq with the exception of Pesh Khabour (Fish Khabour in Arabic) in Duhok Province, which is controlled by the KRG. This Christian village, built round a Mediaeval Church (destroyed by Saddam but recently rebuilt) borders Turkey and Syria. It is separated from the latter by the Tigris, which forms a natural border. There is no bridge for crossing the border, which has to be effected by boats or rafts.

Were the KRG to envisage building a bridge to ease the passing of food and humanitarian aid, it would have to be in defiance of the Iraqi Army, with which the Peshmergas have been on the point of open conflict for several months — and particularly on this part of the border.

During all this, a visit by a delegation of the National Coordination Council (NCC) to the Iraqi Prime Minister has not helped to calm things down. This committee is recognised by Russia but not by the United States and the powers that support the Syria revolution that consider it façade controlled by the Syrian Baath. Originally several Kurdish movements were members but they have all withdrawn with the exception of the PYD. Indeed, it was the PYD leader, Salih Muslim, who came in person to meet Nuri al-Maliki who is held in contempt by both the Iraqi Kurds, who accuse him of wishing to end the federal Constitution, and by the Syrian Kurds (except the PYD) for his more or less implicit support of the Syrian regime. As the Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC), through its leader Faysal Yousif, has sharply remarked *"Maliki is considered an ally of the Syrian regime. Consequently the Committee of Coordination must reveal whether Maliki has promised to support the revolution or whether they and Maliki have discussed other under the table subjects ... The Syrian people has the right to know what the Committee of Coordination has asked of Maliki"*.

Mustafa Osi, secretary of the Azadi Party and a member of the

KNC also accuses the CNC *"of not serving the Syrian revolution"* but trying, on the contrary, *"to turn the Syrian people against this revolution"*.

The KNC considers that, on the basis of the agreements of cooperation and common action that, in principle, link his party to the other Kurdish parties since the Irbil agreement, Salih Muslim, should have informed and consulted with them before this visit and demands an apology. Its annoyance is all the greater because it had, itself, rejected an invitation from the Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, because the PYD had not been invited.

"Mr. Muslim had not taken out attitude regarding this invitation into account nor does he observe the Irbil agreement. He has gone to meet Maliki without consulting the National Council. Although his membership of the CNC is some excuse, he could at least have refused to meet Maliki".

Rejecting these criticisms, Salih Muslim said he was *"free to make his own decisions and took orders from nobody"*, saying he represented *"an independent political party, with its own agenda and plans"* adding (in contradiction to this) that *"I did what was expected of me"*.

The PYD leader stated to the press that Nuri Maliki recognised the legitimacy of the Syrian revolution and that the Shiites considered the Syrian Baath was different from the Iraqi Baath, that he had fought against.

However, as the Kurdish criticisms became more persistent, he ended by reporting an invitation from Jalal Talabani that, in the circumstances was transferred to Nuri Maliki. Salih Muslim also indicated that the aim of his visit was to secure Iraqi humanitarian aid for Syria and the Kurds, which turns the spotlights onto the idea of a future bridge at Pesh Khabur: Was the sole aim of the visit to have Iraq open another corridor that would enable the PYD to avoid depending on the KRG for its supplies? For the moment this visit to Baghdad has not produced any concrete result.

The successive statements and denials of the last month show, more than anything else, that relations between the PYD, already tense enough with the Kurdish National Council are becoming more acrimonious with the Kurdistan Regional Government that, hitherto, had maintained an attitude of arbitrator in the Inter-Kurdish quarrels in Syria.

IRAN:

A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ASYLIM SEEKERS

Iran's 2009 *"Green revolution"* has had heavy consequences for civil society. This is underlined by a recent report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), entitled: *"Why they left"*, published last December. The report publishes the testimony of dozens of Human Rights defenders, journalist, bloggers, lawyers who have been threatened and targeted by the Security and Intelligence forces

because of their stands against the government.

This government pressure has consequently led to a flood of asylum seekers in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus Turkey saw the number of Iranian refugees rise by 72% between 2000 and 2011. Iraqi Kurdistan is also often chosen, especially by Iranian Kurds.

Indeed, amongst those active in civil society, Human rights

activists are the most targeted in Iran, accused of being used by foreign powers. The most oppressed ethnic minorities are the Kurds, the Azeris and the Arabs of Ahwaz. NGOs that defend their rights are also exposed to persecution, arrests and severe sentences.

HRW notes that, because of Iran's repressive policy towards its minorities and what they call *"cross border cultural relations"*

the majority of the activists belonging to ethnic minorities fleeing to Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan since 2005 are above all Kurds.

HRW also cites as an example the Human Rights Organisation of Kurdistan (HROK) founded in 2006 by Sadigh Kaboudvand. It once had as many as 200 reporters covering all the Kurdish regions of Iran who published their articles in Payam-e Mardom (The People's Message — now banned) of which Sadigh Kaboudvand was the general manager and chief editor. He was arrested by the Intelligence Service on 1 July 2007 and taken to section 209 of Evin prison (Teheran) that they control. He was kept in solitary confinement for 6 months.

In May 2008 the 15th Chamber of the Revolutionary Court sentenced Sadigh Kaboudvand to 10 years imprisonment for actions against national security by founding HROK and an additional years imprisonment for "propaganda against the system by spreading news, opposition to Islamic law by stressing sentences such as stoning and executions and for having argued in favour of prisoners".

In October 2008, the 54th Chamber of the Teheran Court of Appeal confirmed the sentence and. Since then HRW has unceasingly demanded his release and his urgent need for medical attention.

Shahram Bolouri, 27 years of age, took part in demonstrations protesting against the fraudulent Presidential elections. He explained to HRW that he had covered the acts of violence perpetrated by the police against the demonstrators and broadcast photos and videos by various media. Prior to this he had been a member of a Kurdish Association, a Teheran based NGO

had worked with several civil society organisations.

On 23 June 2003, agents of the Security and Intelligence Services searched his home in Teheran transferred to the and arrested him. He was detained for 8 months in Evin Prison, 45 days of which were in solitary, in Sections 209 and 240 of that prison that are run by the Intelligence Service before being transferred to the general section. He had been subjected to severe physical and mental torture by the guards.

"My solitary cell [in Ward 240] measured 2.5 by 1 meter. It had a toilet and no windows. Prison guards would often come in and order me to stand, sit, and perform odd tasks just because they could. One of them once said to me, "You look like an athlete. Select your sport. Stand up and sit down for me. One hundred times, and make sure you count!" He made me do this several times even though I had a busted leg. I was sweating profusely but they didn't let me shower. After two weeks the same guy opened the door to my cell and said, "Why does it smell like shit in here?" He ordered me to go take a shower and wash my clothes".

On 6 February, over 6 months after his arrest the authorities released Shahram Bolouri for an extraordinarily high bail of \$US 200,000. HRW mentions that several cases were reported of enormous sums demanded of families for bail as a form of psychological harassment of both detainees and their families. Shahram Bolouri said that the financial pressures exerted on his family were often worse for him than what he endured personally.

In October 2010 a Teheran revolutionary Court sentenced him to 4 years jail for "assembly and collusion against the State, for having taken part in demonstrations, having communication with foreign media and spreading news". After he had appealed, his

sentence was increased by 6 months in June 2011. As the pressures and harassment against his family were worsening, Shahram Bolouri decided to leave Iran. He filed a request for asylum at the UN HRC office in Iraq on 15 July 2011 and is now seeking a host country where he could have the status of a political refugee.

Media Byezyd is a student activist and blogger, expelled from Ispahan University after having taken part in the 2005 student demonstrations and having taken part in Mehdi Karroubi's campaign in 2008. On 12 June 2009, he was charged with checking the poll count together with others who had taken part in Karroubi's campaign. His team and other activists who had campaigned for Moussavi noted irregularities and reported them to the authorities. Some officials of the Ministry of the Interior answered them that they would be held responsible for any "disturbances".

They then left for Teheran to take part in the post-election demonstrations. It was on his return to Saqqez on 7 November that Media Byezyd's problems began.

"I got a call to meet someone at Payam-e Nur University in Saqqez when I returned who said he wanted to meet me. When I went there I noticed a green car with two persons who approached me. One of them said someone had complained that I was harassing them on the phone and I need to be questioned by [the police.] They put me in car, shoved my head down, and sped away. I later found out they were Ministry of Intelligence agents.

We went to the local setad-e khabari105 of the Ministry of Intelligence. I was blindfolded. The interrogator came into the room and began accusing me of having contacts with Kurdish guerrilla groups. My father was in Koya [Iraqi Kurdistan] and I had crossed the border illegally into Iraqi Kurdistan several times. He accused me of having contacts with PJAK [Kurdish Party for

Free Life of Kurdistan] and other banned Kurdish parties. When I refused to admit these contacts he slapped me and said, "This is not your aunt's house!" Then he said they had been tapping my phone for a while and played recordings of my conversations"."

Byezid said his interrogation lasted 7 or 8 hours. The Authorities beat him and harassed him several times over the 13 days during which he was in detention at the Intelligence Ministry. They finally released him but continued to summon him for interrogations till he left the country

Hezha (Ahmad) Mamandi is an activist for Kurdish rights and one of the oldest members of the Human Rights Organisation of Kurdistan (HROK). He was initially sentenced to 11 months jail for various charges of endangering National Security. Intelligence officers arrested him several times in 2005 because of his activity in HROK and with other local groups.

"I was at Mahabad's Azad University and I was collecting signatures (in 2006) when several Intelligence officers arrested me along with another colleague. Put us in a car and drove us to the local detention centre. We were interrogated for two weeks. They asked many questions about HROK and its relations with America. They beat us several times but took care not to hit us in the face. I was not able to see a lawyer. After 2 weeks I was sent, with my colleague, for trial by the Mahabad Revolutionary Court. The court session lasted 3 or 4 minutes. When we tried to speak to the judge he drove us out of the courtroom. We were transferred to the Mahabad Central Prison where, a little later, I discovered that I'd been sentenced to 20 months jail for actions against national security and having disturbed public order".

On appeal, his sentence was reduced to 10 months and he was released in 2006. He resumed his

responsibilities in the HROK but after the arrests in 2006 and 2007 of Sadigh Kaboudvand and Saman Rasoulpour, two of the organisations leaders, the group reduced its activity.

In 2010, after the execution of Farzad Jamangar and several other Kurdish activists, Mamandi and his colleagues in HROK help conduct a strike in Iran's Kurdish regions. The strike was a success and this irritated the authorities. He, along with others, was identified as ringleaders. On 22 May 2010 he fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Amir Babekri was a teacher and journalist at Piranshaht, a town with a mainly Kurdish population in Western Azerbaijan Province. Amir Babekri joined HROK in 2005 and worked on various issues affecting Kurdish rights. A Revolutionary Guards unit came to arrest him in December 2010 at the primary school where he was teaching.

"Three armed men stuck me into a Toyota and took me to the local detention centre. There they tried to implicate me with some Kurdish parties. I denied this. They threatened to send me to Urmiah if I refused to cooperate. I told them to go ahead and do it. They hit me several times the last night before sending me to Urmiah but I was not tortured.

(In the Urmiah detention centre) there were 40 of us in two rooms. The authorities accused some of us of having links with the PJAK. There were interrogations every day and we could hear screams. I was interrogated for 18 days in all but I was transferred in a car to another detention about 5-6 minutes away for interrogation. I was blindfolded. Like the others I was subjected to all kinds of ill treatment. Sometimes they threw us out into the snow. At other times they handcuffed us to a wall and forced us to stand on tiptoes. They also beat us on the head with sticks".

Amir Babekri had to answer many questions about his contacts with HROK. He was finally forced to admit he was a member of HROK but refused to give the names of people with whom he worked clandestinely. He was finally accused by the authorities of being an "enemy of God" (moharabeh — punishable by death), membership of an illegal group and of having secretly gone to Iraqi Kurdistan. It took 2 or 3 minutes to read his charge sheet to the Urmiah Court; he had no defence counsel and saw several officers of the Revolution Guards present in the courtroom.

He was tried 4 months later and his trial lasted 30 minutes, This time there was a lawyer present. The charge of moharebeh was not pressed but he was found guilty of "propaganda against the State" and of membership of HROK. His sentence was fifteen months in prison.

Because of constant pressure exerted on him and the fact that he could no longer teach at Piranshahr, Amir Babekri decided to leave Iran and to file a request for asylum at the HCR office in Iraqi Kurdistan on 15 July 2010.

An activist for Kurdish rights, Rebin Rahmani was arrested by the security forces on 19 November 2006 at Kermanshah. At the time he was working on research project on drug addiction and HIV in Kermanshah Province. After his arrest he was about 2 another months detention in the Intelligent Dept, premises. He was interrogated by both the Kermanshah agents and those of Sanandaj (Sine, in Kurdistan Province) and was subjected to both physical and psychological torture.

In January 2007, a revolutionary Court sentenced him to 5 years prison for "actions against national security" and "propaganda against the State". The trial took just 15 minutes and there were no lawyers.

On appeal the sentence was reduced to 2 years.

Rebin Rahmani, who was detained in Kermanshah's Dizel Abad Prison was then several times transferred to the Intelligence Ministry's local premises to be subjected to further interrogations, always under torture, and periods of solitary confinement. They also threatened to arrest members of his family to put pressure on him. He twice attempted to commit suicide by the authorities never succeeded in adding further charges to his case.

Released in 2006, he learned that he had been expelled from university and could no longer continue his studies. He then joined the local branch of the Human Rights Activist in Iran (HRA) but using a pseudonym, as he feared being arrested again. Before fleeing to Iraqi Kurdistan, he was able to interview several families and draw up reports for HRA, mostly on breaches of human rights committed by the Government in Iran's Kurdish regions. He was also responsible for the HRA Web site.

In March 2010 there was a large-scale dragnet against human rights activists, including the HRA, in Teheran and other major cities. Rebin Rahmani succeeded in escaping because his cover was never revealed within HRA. However, in the same month, he took part in a demonstration against the execution of several Kurdish political prisoners and the local authorities placed him under surveillance. In December 2010 the security forces searched his home soon after he had taken part in a rally before the Sanandaj prison to protest at the execution of Habibollah Latifi. He then felt he had to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan and registered a request for asylum in Irbil on 6 March 2011.

Fayegh Roorast, a Kurdish activist and law student at Urmiah University was arrested in January

2009 for having cooperated with several organisations like the HROK, HRA and the One Million Signatures campaign. Intelligence agents had started to target him when Farzad Kamangar was sentenced to death in March 2008 as Farzad Kamangar was then giving several interviews broadcast in foreign media about the arrest of Farzad Kamangar, Zainab Bayazidi and other Kurdish activists for Kurdish rights,

On 15 January 2009, Intelligence agents attacked his father's shop and arrested the latter. Soon after they came to Fayegh Roorast's home and seized some of his personal belongings without arresting him. However, 2 days later he was summoned, with his brother, his sister and his aunt to the Mahabad offices of the Intelligence Service. He was accused of working with Banned Kurdish opposition groups like the PJAK. His family was released but he remained 17 days in detention.

"At the Mahabad Intelligence Ministry I was threatened and harassed every day. My interrogator played the good cop role who urged me to cooperate and than the bad cop role when I refused to do what he wanted. He hit me and threatened to take it out on members of my family and even to rape them. After five days interrogation and beatings he told me: "From now on you will not only be interrogated. Now I am responsible for teaching you".

Fayegh Roorast was then transferred to the Urmiah Intelligence Ministry offices.

"The authorities kept me in solitary confinement for several days. There were three interrogation or torture cells in rooms at a lower level. I heard horrible noises coming from them. I was taken there 15 or 15 times. The place stank of urine and excrement, they subjected me to all kinds of torture, they suspended me by my wrists to a wall is such a

way that I was forced to stand on tiptoe, they gave me electric shocks on the toes and fingers, they beat me. They asked me why I had lists of prisoners with me and why I was collecting signatures for the One Million Signatures campaign.

Fayegh Roorast told HRW that he had refused to give any names. The authorities released him at the beginning of 2010. He left Iran in the summer of the same year.

Yaser Goli was a student activist and secretary of the Students' Democratic Union of Kurdistan. In 2006 Intelligence agents arrested him. He was given a 4 month suspended sentence. The University authorities prevented him from continuing his studies as a punishment for his political activities. In addition to his activity in the Students' Democratic Union of Kurdistan, Yaser Goli was involved with several organisations of civil society, such as the One Million Signatures campaign, Azarmehr, the Kurdish Women's Association that organises workshops and sports activities for women, and the human rights committee of the Students' Democratic Union of Kurdistan.

At the end of 2007, while he was continuing his activities and protesting against the University's decision to expel him, the security forces arrested him and transferred him to a detention centre in Sanandaj, managed by the Intelligence service. He was interrogated for 3 months, subjected to physical and psychological torture and kept in solitary confinement. In November 2008 a revolutionary Court sentenced him to 15 years imprisonment in exile (i.e. outside his own province, at Kerman, 1000 Km from Sanandaj) for being "an enemy of God". He received temporary permission to go out on bail for medical treatment for a serious heart complaint. He and his family fled to Iraqi Kurdistan in March 2010.

Amin Khawala is a journalist. He worked as correspondent for Saqez News Centre (SNC) and informed HRW of the pressures and threats with which reporters in Kurdistan Province were faced.

Ever since SNC began its activities in 2006, he was subjected to pressure from the authorities because of the sensitive subjects regarding the Kurds that the Centre treated. For example it had published lists of names dozens of smugglers shot down by the Iranian police and border guards as well as the names of government leaders involved in cases of corruption or of opposition or human rights activists arrested by the security forces. The SNC also covered, in Kurdistan, the political events that followed the fraudulent elections of 2009. The Security searched the home of editor in chief, Atta Hamedi, on 4 January 2011 and confiscated his personal belongings, while in April 2011 the Centre's Web site was filtered.

PI was summoned and warned several times by the Intelligence Ministry. They threatened me and said I had blasphemed. They also accused me of being involved in criminal and terrorist activities. I had already received a suspended sentence of 2 years from a Revolutionary Court in 2011. They threatened to reopen the case and send me to prison as well so I fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since Amin Khawala's flight on 3 March 2011, the Iranian police have harassed and persecuted his family to force him to return to Iran.

Fatemeh Goftari was a member of Azarmehr, co-founder of Mothers of Kurdistan for Peace and has been active in the One Million Signatures campaign. The Intelligence Service arrested her in 2002 in Sanandaj and accused her of propaganda against the State. A Revolutionary Court sentenced her

to 5 years jail but her sentence was finally commuted and she only did 6 months

On 14 January 2008 she was again arrested by the Sanandaj Intelligence. A Revolutionary Court sentenced her to 25 months for actions against national security. She spent part of this in solitary isolation in Khorassan Province, 1000 Km from her home. Following her release, she and her husband were constantly watched and summoned by Sanandaj Intelligence. Fatemeh Goftari finally left Iran in March 2011 after refusing a summons and escaping an attempt to arrest her during which she was struck.

The situation of these refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan is subject to the KRG's dependence on the rest of Iraq. In fact, Iraq did not sign the 1951 Convention of Refugees and thus it is the HCR that is responsible for registering and handling requests for asylum in Iraq. However, the majority of Iranians registered in Iraq as refugees did so in the Kurdish Region. In October 2012 they numbered 9636. Most of them are Kurdish and many have been there since 1980.

A HCR official in Irbil explained to the HRW investigators that the countries likely to accept these threatened Iranians, especially the European ones, show little enthusiasm for this fearing of problems of integration in the host country and the conviction that these Iranian Kurds had been in Iraqi Kurdistan for many years and were thus well integrated there and the idea is generally accepted idea that the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is a safe place and that asylum seekers had adequate access to basic needs. The Iranian Kurds that arrived in the 1980s and had not been rehoused in other countries are not naturalised Iraqi citizens.

The Iranian Kurds complains about the HCR are about this feeling of

indifference and the idea that the offices make little effort to find them a country of asylum since the KRG is a "safe" area. Many of them have secretly emigrated to Europe without waiting for the HCR to find them a country of asylum.

In the last five years only 36 Iranian Kurds have found a country of asylum whereas their numbers have continually increased. In 2007 there were 500 registered, in October 2012 the average number being registered every week was between 9 and 10 Iranian refugees.

The HCR stated to HRW that they were working satisfactorily with the KRG and had a positive opinion of the way the Kurdish region treated the Iranian asylum seekers. One official said he had not heard of any threats or expulsions in the region, another said that sometimes refugees had been threatened with expulsion to Iran is they had caused "security problems" but that the HCR had intervened in these cases and that, in the last five years, no one had been expelled to Iran for such reasons.

However the Iranian Kurds complain to HRW that they had been "warned" by Kurdish police or intelligence officers to abstain from political activities or to be less openly critical of Iran.

One Iranian asylum seeker anonymously said that he had several times been "warned" by the residents office or by the Asayish (police) to abstain from attacking the lack of human rights in Iran and that a leading official had clearly said that the KRG "would not sacrifice its relations with the Iranians" even if the safety of an Iranian refugee was involved. Other witnesses confirm this policy of threats that aims to restrict the right to move freely or their status of residents, so as to discourage the asylum seekers from pursuing their militant activities.

The procedure for obtaining the right to reside in the KRG is simple: if a refugee enters Iraqi Kurdistan he must first register with the HCR who will give him a written certificate recording his request. He then has to go to the local police to secure a 10-day residential permit. Then he has to go to the KRG Directorate of Residents for an interview. If he obtains a security clearance he will have residential permit, renewable every 6 months. If he has difficulty in securing this clearance he will receive a permit that is renewable every month.

To secure this clearance, the Iraqi Kurdish authorities demand from the refugees letters of support or recommendations from the Iranian opposition in exile in Kurdistan or from Iraqi Kurdish political parties like the KDP or PUK. Many activists dislike this kind of approach and do not want to be linked to a party. Without such "sponsorship" it seems difficult for refugees to

secure a permit as a permanent resident. He could either be considered to be a simple "migrant worker" or else enrolee in a political party. Another Iranian refugee complained that his residence permit had not been renewed after he had demonstrated several times against Iran and against the KRG authorities that had threatened him with expulsion.

Finally the refugees report that pressures are exercised on their families in Iran once the authorities there discover that they are in Iraqi Kurdistan. Some have even received threats by telephone and much fear that the Iranian secret services could take it out on them directly on Iraqi territory, but the HCR is unable to see whether these fears are well founded.

The HRW has asked the KRG to ease these restrictions regarding activists that engage in non-violent political activity. It also asks for an end to the requirement of "guarantees" and "protection" from Iranian

parties in exile or from Iraqi Kurdish political parties as a condition for securing or renewing residential permits. HRW asks that restrictions of movement and residence be on an individual basis and only on grounds of "public health" or "national security".

In its recommendations to other countries likely to host asylum seekers, namely the European Union, Canada, Australia and the USA, it gave them to understand that some refugees from Iran were not able to "integrate locally in Northern Iraq" and that they should reconsider settling them.

Commenting on the refugees in Turkey, HRW pointed out that that country had refused to let Dr Ahmed Shaheen, UN reporter on human rights in Iran, to enter the country to meet asylum seekers and called on Ankara to lift this ban and to register and welcome Iranian refugees in a more satisfactory manner.

CULTURE:

ADEL IMAM VISITS IRBIL TO RECEIVE A TRIBUTE TO HIS WORK

The famous Egyptian actor, Adel Imam visited Irbil on 4 December as the guest of the Satellite Television channel al-Aadel and a Kurdish businessman, as a tribute to his role in the series "Nagy Attallah's team" as well as for his career as a whole.

Accompanied by his son Rami, the superstar of Arab films urged the Kurds to spread their culture

worldwide so as to support their cause.

Speaking at a press conference the Egyptian actor stated "he knew all about the problems faced by the Kurds and to be aware of the rights which they demanded and their wish for", stressing that the Kurds should express themselves more through art and culture at an international level: "This would greatly support the Kurdish question".

Adel Imam said he was pleased with

his visit to the Kurdistan region, expressing the affection that links him to the Kurds. He said that, in the course of his travels: "When people in Turkey, Iran or Iraq came to embrace me I always ended up by discovering that they were Kurds. My relations with the Kurdish people are unending, whether by email, speech or phone calls they express admiration for my art. I am sure that you love Adel Imam and Adel Imam loves you too" he ended, addressing his fans in Kurdish.

Armed standoff returns Iraq to crisis mode



AZAD LASHKARI/REUTERS

Kurdish Peshmerga forces gathering outside Kirkuk. Baghdad sent reinforcements to the area after a clash with Kurds last month.

BAGHDAD

Attempt to arrest Kurd exposes longstanding ethnic rift with Arabs

BY TIM ARANGO
AND DURAIAD ADNAN

It was just the sort of episode that experts have long worried could provoke a serious conflict: When Iraqi federal police agents sought to arrest a Kurdish man last month in the city of Tuz Khurmato in the Kurdish north of Iraq, a gunfight ensued with security men loyal to the Kurdish regional government.

When the bullets stopped flying, a civilian bystander was dead and at least eight people were wounded.

In response, the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, rushed troop reinforcements to the area, and Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraq's semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region, dispatched his own soldiers, known as

the Peshmerga, and the forces remain there in a standoff.

Almost a year after the departure of the American military closed a painful chapter in the histories of both the United States and Iraq, Iraq finds itself in a familiar position: full-blown crisis mode, this time with two standing armies, one loyal to the central government in Baghdad and the other commanded by the Kurdish regional government in the north, staring at each other through gun sights, as officials in Baghdad, including U.S. diplomats and a U.S. general, try to mediate.

Iraq is closing the year as it began, with a major confrontation that has exposed sectarian and ethnic rifts that hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars and thousands of lives have not reconciled. At the start of the year, it was the sectarian divide between Shiites and Sunnis that was on vivid display when the government of Mr. Maliki, a Shiite, issued an arrest warrant on terrorism charges against the Sunni vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi.

"The year started with the warrant

"It will be an ethnic conflict that is not in the interest of both parties. War is not a game or a picnic."

against Hashimi and is ending with tanks on the edge of the Kurdish mountains," said Sarmed al-Tai, a columnist for the newspaper Mada, which ran a story on Sunday on the anniversary of the U.S. military's departure that described the exit as "leaving a large vacuum and a significant deterioration of the national partnership."

As American troops left at the end of 2011, Mr. Maliki sent tanks to surround Mr. Hashimi's home in the Green Zone of Baghdad. An arrest warrant led to Mr. Hashimi's self-imposed exile, first in the Kurdish north and then Turkey; a trial in absentia followed, then the handing down of not one but two death sentences. Mr. Hashimi now lives in a suburban high-rise apartment in Istanbul, where he is protected by Turkish guards and remains defiant.

"Legally, I am still a vice president."

he said in a recent interview, adding, "I do have a lot of time to look after the future of my country."

The latest crisis is an ethnic one, between Kurds and Arabs, and the consequences are potentially more serious because the Kurds, in contrast to the Sunni Arabs, enjoy a measure of autonomy in the north, control their own security forces and have longstanding ambitions for independence.

Tuz Khurmato, the city where the clash occurred, is of mixed ethnicity, where Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds compete for power. It lies in a region around the city of Kirkuk, an area of vast potential oil wealth that is at the center of a power struggle between Kurds and Arabs.

As part of his brutal rule, Saddam Hussein moved tens of thousands of Arabs into the area to dilute what was historically a Kurdish stronghold. After his fall, thousands of displaced Kurds demanded the right to return to the homes they had been driven from, creating tensions that have yet to subside.

The latest crisis began after Mr. Maliki sought to consolidate his control over security in Kirkuk, where Kurdish and Iraqi forces have shared responsibility for security, and it reached a critical stage after the gunfight.

"This is a red line for the Kurds," said Joost R. Hiltermann, an Iraq expert at the International Crisis Group in Washington. "Maliki is essentially taking control of the police. And the Kurds will never give up the city."

Efforts at mediation, backed by the Americans, have so far failed to reach resolution. On Monday, Mr. Maliki and Mr. Barzani sent more troops to the area, with each side accusing the other of doing so first. Mr. Maliki warned the Kurds of the "seriousness of their behavior" and warned of its "consequences." A spokesman for the Peshmerga said, "Anything is possible."

Some Arabs in the area are yearning for a fight. "We are in favor of a military conflict with the Kurds, because without a conflict we will remain frustrated, depressed and with no power at all," said Sheik Abdul Rasheed, the head of an Arab political council in Kirkuk.

The Kurds have cast the conflict in the historical context of their struggle against Saddam Hussein, but this time against Mr. Maliki, whose accrual of power over the last year has raised alarms in Baghdad and Washington. Mr. Barzani, in a statement, said, "The Kurdistan region is ready to defend its soil and all its citizens."

Mr. Maliki, in a news conference over the weekend, said: "It is not a struggle against a dictator. It will be an ethnic conflict that is not in the interest of both parties." He added, "War is not a game or a picnic."

Analysts say the tensions are also rooted in the political rivalry between Mr. Maliki and Mr. Barzani, who this year tried to assemble a parliamentary coalition to oust Mr. Maliki from office. Mr. Barzani has also engineered oil deals with international companies, like

Exxon, in violation of Baghdad's laws.

Of Mr. Maliki's efforts to control security in Kirkuk, Mr. Hiltermann said, "Obviously, he's doing it to poke Barzani in the eye."

Now some Kurdish officials, recalling the role the U.S. military played in helping secure autonomy for the Kurdish region after the Gulf War in 1991 by instituting a no-flight zone, are calling for the unlikely return to Iraq of U.S. troops.

For average Iraqis, who have a lifetime of experiences of war and brinkmanship backed by threats of violence, there is a sense of the solemnly familiar, even as they worry that the latest flare-up in tensions between Arabs and Kurds might lead to direct conflict.

"My grandfather had a date palm tree, and when I was 4 years old, I opened my eyes and saw a tank near the date palm tree," said Mr. Tai, the columnist for Al Mada, who grew up in the southern city of Basra and fled to Iran after Mr. Hussein turned his tanks and helicopter gunships on his own people at the end of the Gulf War. "Now, I see tanks outside my newspaper."

Duraid Adnan reported from Baghdad and Kirkuk.

Observateur

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SYRIE

Les missiles de la rébellion

C'est un tournant dans le conflit syrien : pour la première fois depuis le début de l'insurrection, en mars 2011, les rebelles ont utilisé des missiles sol-air pour abattre un hélicoptère et un avion les 27 et 28 novembre, entre Alep et Idlib, dans le nord du pays. Les images ont été diffusées sur les télévisions du monde entier.

Un hélicoptère de l'armée syrienne vole au-dessus de Daret Ezza, dans la province d'Alep, quand il est soudain abattu par un missile. « Il a été touché ! Allah Akbar ! », s'exclament des rebelles. Quelques heures plus tard, c'est au tour d'un chasseur bombardier d'être abattu au-dessus du même village. Selon un porte-parole de son commandement, l'Armée syrienne



Un avion syrien abattu par les rebelles à Daret Ezza

libre de l'intérieur a utilisé des missiles russes qui appartenaient au régime syrien et dont les rebelles se sont emparés. Une version vivement contestée par le chef de la diplomatie russe, Sergueï Lavrov, qui avait prévenu que les rebelles syriens avaient

obtenu 50 missiles antiaériens Stinger (de fabrication américaine) pour abattre les avions du régime. Et par le... « Washington Post ». Le quotidien américain, qui cite des responsables du renseignement occidentaux et proche-orientaux, affirme que certains des missiles sol-air aux mains des rebelles ont été récemment livrés par le Qatar. Jusqu'ici, les Etats-Unis avaient empêché le Qatar et l'Arabie saoudite de fournir des armes lourdes à l'opposition de peur qu'elles ne tombent entre les mains de groupes djihadistes liés à Al-Qaïda, présents en Syrie. Côté français, on affirme respecter l'embargo européen et ne pas livrer d'armes aux rebelles syriens. Pourtant, au lendemain de la reconnaissance par la France de la coalition élargie de l'opposition, Laurent Fabius avait été le premier ministre occidental à évoquer la possibilité d'une levée de l'embargo sur « les armes défensives » en direction de l'Armée libre. Elle pourrait avoir officieusement commencé, prélude à l'instauration d'une « zone libérée » au nord de la Syrie. **SARA DANIEL**

L'armée turque tue 13 militants du PKK près de la Syrie

L'armée turque appuyée par des hélicoptères a bombardé des positions des rebelles kurdes du PKK près de la frontière syrienne, tuant treize combattants et en capturant cinq autres, rapportent les services

du gouverneur de la région d'Osmaniye.

L'offensive a été lancée lundi dans la partie occidentale de la Turquie, loin de l'habituelle zone de combat entre les troupes turques et les

insurgés kurdes le long des frontières avec l'Irak et l'Iran.

L'intervention a été décidée sur la base d'informations des services de renseignement signalant la présence de membres du Parti des travailleurs du

Kurdistan dans la région. L'opération se poursuivait mercredi, a précisé le gouvernement provincial.

Ankara estime que le regain de violences commises par le PKK depuis cet été est lié à la situation en Syrie et accuse le président Bachar al Assad de soutenir et d'armer les insurgés. □

L'avion du ministre turc de l'Énergie non grata en Irak

Alors que les tensions entre Bagdad et Ankara sont vives depuis plusieurs mois, l'Irak a interdit, mardi, l'atterrissage de l'avion transportant le ministre turc de l'Énergie Taner Yildiz (photo) à Erbil, capitale du Kurdistan irakien.

Par FRANCE 24

Victime des tensions exacerbées entre Bagdad et Ankara, l'avion transportant le ministre turc de l'Énergie, Taner Yildiz, n'a pas eu le droit d'atterrir dans la ville d'Erbil, capitale du Kurdistan, région autonome du nord de l'Irak. L'appareil a dû atterrir à Kayseri, dans le sud-est de la capitale turque.

Taner Yildiz devait assister à une conférence internationale sur le gaz et le pétrole et y rencontrer des responsables kurdes pour parachever la conclusion d'un accord énergétique avec les autorités du Kurdistan.

"Nous n'avons interdit à aucun avion d'entrer dans notre espace aérien (...) mais nous avons des législations spéciales pour le vol de certains avions", a déclaré aux agences de presse Nasser Bandar, le chef de l'Autorité de l'aviation civile irakienne. "Les Emirats arabes unis, la Jordanie et la Turquie ont transmis une demande d'obtention d'autorisation pour des vols privés et nous avons refusé ces trois requêtes car elles allaient à l'encontre des lois et réglementations irakiennes", a poursuivi M. Bandar, précisant que le contrôle de tout l'espace aérien de l'Irak relève du gouvernement central à Bagdad, même pour la région autonome du Kurdistan.



L'AFFAIRE TAREK HACHÉMI

Mais, si le gouvernement irakien a invoqué des "raisons techniques" pour justifier sa décision, cet incident intervient alors que les relations entre Bagdad et Ankara sont particulièrement tendues depuis plusieurs mois.

Ankara refuse en effet d'extrader Tarek Hachémi, vice-président sunnite d'Irak condamné à mort dans son pays et réfugié en Turquie depuis décembre 2011. Son arrestation a été ordonnée par le Premier ministre irakien, le chiite Nouri al Maliki, qui l'accuse d'avoir dirigé des "escadrons de la mort".

En représailles, début novembre, le gouvernement irakien a exclu la compagnie pétrolière turque TPAO d'un important contrat d'exploration dans le sud de l'Irak. En octobre, le gouvernement irakien a réclamé au Parlement l'abrogation d'accords autorisant les bases militaires étrangères sur son sol, une décision visant les bases militaires turques situées à

Dohouk, une des trois provinces de la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien. Ces accords, signés par Saddam Hussein en 1995, permettent à l'armée turque d'avoir une présence dans les régions septentrionales de l'Irak afin de traquer le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK).

LE SPECTRE D'UN CONFLIT ETHNIQUE

De son côté, alors que de nombreux griefs opposent Bagdad et Erbil, Ankara s'est rapproché de l'administration autonome kurde du Nord irakien. Au cœur des tensions entre le gouvernement central et la région autonome : l'exploitation des hydrocarbures. Le gouvernement irakien reproche au Kurdistan de signer des contrats avec des compagnies pétrolières étrangères en se passant de son aval.

Des négociations entamées pour tenter d'apaiser les relations entre Erbil et Bagdad ont d'ailleurs échoué cette semaine, faisant craindre au Premier ministre irakien Nouri al-Maliki un "conflit ethnique". "Si un conflit éclate, ce serait malheureux et douloureux, et ce sera un conflit ethnique", qui n'est "pas dans l'intérêt des Kurdes, ni des Arabes, ni des Turkmènes", a déclaré M. Maliki lors d'une conférence de presse à Bagdad. ○

Iraq failing to cut flow of arms to Syria from Iran, U.S. fears

WASHINGTON

BY MICHAEL R. GORDON,
ERIC SCHMITT AND TIM ARANGO

The U.S. effort to stem the flow of Iranian arms to Syria has faltered because of Iraq's reluctance to inspect aircraft carrying the weapons through its airspace, American officials say.

The shipments have persisted at a critical time for President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, who has come under increasing military pressure from rebel fighters. The air corridor over Iraq has emerged as a main supply route for weapons including rockets, antitank missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

Iran has an enormous stake in Syria, which is its closest ally in the Arab world. It has also provided a channel for Iran's support to the Lebanese Islamist movement Hezbollah.

To the disappointment of the administration of President Barack Obama, U.S. efforts to persuade Iraq to randomly inspect the flights have been largely unsuccessful.

Adding to U.S. concerns, Western intelligence officials say that there are new signs of activity at sites in Syria that are being used to store chemical weapons. The officials are uncertain whether Syrian forces are preparing to use the weapons in a last-ditch effort to save the government, or if they are simply sending a warning to the West about the implications of providing more help to the Syrian rebels.

"It's in some ways similar to what they've done before," said a senior U.S. official who was not authorized to discuss intelligence matters and who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "But they're doing some things that suggest they intend to use the weapons. It's not just moving stuff around. These are different kind of activities."

The official said, however, that the Syrians had not carried out the most blatant steps toward using the chemical weapons, like preparing them to be fired by artillery batteries or loaded in bombs to be dropped from warplanes.

Regarding the arms shipments, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton had secured a commitment from Iraq's foreign minister in September that Iraq would inspect flights to Syria from Iran. But the Iraqis have inspected only two, most recently on Oct. 27. No weapons were found, but one of the two planes that landed in Iraq for inspection was on its way back to Iran after delivering its cargo in Syria.

Adding to the United States' frustrations, Iran appears to have been tipped off by Iraqi officials as to when inspections would be conducted, American officials say, citing classified reports by U.S. intelligence analysts.

Iran's continued efforts to aid the Syrian government were described in interviews with a dozen U.S. administration, military and congressional officials, most of whom requested anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss intelligence matters.

"The abuse of Iraqi airspace by Iran continues to be a concern," a U.S. official said. "We urge Iraq to be diligent and consistent in fulfilling its international obligations and commitments, either by continuing to require flights over Iraqi territory en route to Syria from Iran to land for inspection, or by denying overflight requests for Iranian aircraft going to Syria."

Iraqi officials say they oppose the ferrying of arms through Iraqi airspace. They also cite claims by Iran that it is merely delivering humanitarian aid, and they call the U.S. charges unfounded.

"We wouldn't be able to convince them, even if we searched all the airplanes, because they have prejudged the situation," Ali al-Moussawi, the spokesman for Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki of Iraq, said of the U.S. concerns. "Our policy is that we will not allow the transfer of arms to Syria."

Mr. Moussawi acknowledged that one of the planes was not inspected until it

"The abuse of Iraqi airspace by Iran continues to be a concern."

was returning from Damascus, but he said it was a simple error. "Mistakes sometimes occur," he said.

But one former Iraqi official, who asked not to be identified because he feared retaliation by the Iraqi government, said that some officials in Baghdad had been doing the bare minimum to placate the United States and were in fact sympathetic to the Iranian efforts in Syria.

The Iranian flights present challenges for the Obama administration, which has been reluctant to provide arms to the Syrian rebels or to establish a no-flight zone over Syria for fear of becoming entangled in the conflict.

Iranian support for Syria is vital to the Assad government, U.S. officials say. In addition to flying arms and ammunition to Syria, Iran's paramilitary Quds Force has been sending trainers and advisers,

sometimes disguised as religious pilgrims, tourists and businessmen, the officials say.

Iranian flights of weapons to Syria drew the concern of American officials soon after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in December. Iraq does not have an air force and is unable to enforce control of its own airspace, making it easier for Iran to ferry arms to Syria.

Under U.S. pressure, Iraqi officials persuaded the Iranians to hold off on the flights as Iraq prepared to host a summit meeting of Arab leaders in March. Soon after the meeting, Mr. Obama, in an April 3 call to Mr. Maliki, underscored that the flights should not continue.

But after a bombing in Damascus in July that killed ranking members of Mr. Assad's government, the Iranian flights resumed. Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. raised U.S. concerns over the flights in an Aug. 17 phone call with Mr. Maliki. So did Denis McDonough, Mr. Obama's deputy national security adviser, who met with Mr. Maliki in Baghdad in October.

When Mr. McDonough raised concerns over the inspection of the plane that was on its way back to Iran, Mr. Maliki responded that he was not aware that the inspection had been carried out that way, according to one account of the meeting by an American official.

A spokeswoman for the National Security Council in Washington declined to comment.

Tim Arango reported from Baghdad.
David E. Sanger contributed reporting.

La Syrie continue de diviser M. Poutine et M. Erdogan

A Istanbul, le président russe a critiqué le projet de déploiement de missiles Patriot en Turquie

Istanbul

Correspondance

Moins de deux mois après l'incident provoqué par l'interception, par la Turquie, d'un avion russe à destination de Damas, la courte visite à Istanbul du président russe, Vladimir Poutine, lundi 3 décembre, n'a pas vraiment permis d'aplanir les différends mais au moins de les exprimer.

Les deux pays s'opposent diamétralement sur la crise syrienne. « *La position de la Russie et celle la Turquie se rejoignent quant au but à atteindre en Syrie, a déclaré M. Poutine au cours d'une conférence de presse avec le premier ministre turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, dans une aile de l'ancien palais ottoman de Dolmabahçe. Mais il n'y a pour le moment aucune approche commune sur les moyens d'y parvenir.* »

Ankara, qui réclame depuis des mois le départ de Bachar Al-Assad et soutient les rebelles de l'Armée syrienne libre, voit dans Moscou « *le dernier appui du régime syrien* », selon un diplomate turc. « *La Russie n'est pas l'avocate de Damas* », a toutefois voulu préciser M. Poutine. En octobre, les chasseurs de l'armée turque avaient forcé un avion de ligne de la compagnie nationale syrienne à atterrir. Celui-ci transportait dans ses soutes des pièces d'un système de radar fourni par la Russie. Cet épisode avait suscité la colère de Moscou.

Depuis, le survol du territoire turc a été interdit aux appareils militaires et civils à destination de la Syrie.

La visite de Vladimir Poutine intervient cette fois à la veille d'une réunion de l'OTAN, à Bruxelles, où l'Alliance pourrait donner son aval au déploiement de missiles sol-air Patriot sur le sol turc, pour protéger la frontière turco-syrienne. Deux à quatre batteries ainsi qu'environ 170 hommes pourraient être installés à Diyarbakir, Urfa ou Malatya, dans le sud-est de la Turquie.

Armes chimiques

Les Etats-Unis, l'Allemagne et les Pays-Bas seraient prêts à contribuer à ces renforts. Ankara a fait cette demande auprès de l'OTAN pour se prémunir d'une attaque de la part de Damas. Le gouvernement de M. Erdogan s'inquiète

notamment du stock d'armes chimiques dont dispose son voisin et craint une attaque aveugle, en cas de chute de Bachar Al-Assad.

Lundi, l'armée turque a envoyé ses jets patrouiller le long de la frontière à la suite d'un énième incident. L'aviation du régime baasiste a lourdement bombardé Ras-Al-Aïn, terrain d'affrontements, depuis un mois entre groupes rebelles islamistes et combattants kurdes, à la frontière turque. Au moins douze personnes auraient péri dans ces bombardements. Des obus sont également tombés côté turc, à Ceylanpinar, une ville touchée à plusieurs reprises ces dernières semaines. Le 3 octobre, cinq civils turcs y avaient été tués. En représailles, la Turquie avait répliqué par des tirs d'artillerie contre les positions syriennes. Mais Mos-

cou a vivement critiqué le déploiement de missiles Patriot. « *Mettre en place des capacités additionnelles sur la frontière ne calmera pas la situation mais au contraire risque de l'exacerber* », a dénoncé, lundi, le président russe.

Pragmatiques, la Turquie et la Russie ont toutefois pris garde à ne pas compromettre des échanges, principalement économiques, « *en progrès significatifs depuis dix ans* » comme l'a souligné le ministre turc des affaires étrangères, Ahmet Davutoglu, en marge du Conseil de coopération Turquie Russie, qui s'est tenu lundi à Istanbul.

La balance commerciale, qui a atteint près de 26 milliards d'euros cette année, pourrait dépasser les 75 milliards, selon M. Davutoglu. Elle penche nettement en faveur de Moscou. La Russie a été choisie pour construire la première centrale nucléaire turque, près de Mersin, sur la côte méditerranéenne. Elle fournit surtout près des deux tiers des importations de gaz naturel de la Turquie, le deuxième client de Gazprom après l'Allemagne, et s'est dite prête à augmenter les livraisons, cet hiver, pour subvenir aux besoins d'Ankara.

Une dizaine d'accords ont été signés entre les deux délégations en marge de la visite de M. Poutine, dont un renforcement de la coopération en mer Noire, utilisée par la Russie pour ses pipelines. ■

GUILLAUME PERRIER

Le PAM manque de moyens pour aider les Syriens

Le Programme alimentaire mondial (PAM) a indiqué, mardi 4 décembre, qu'il a dû réduire les rations distribuées à des centaines de milliers de Syriens en raison de problèmes de financement. Selon cet organisme de l'ONU, il lui manque 20 millions de dollars (15 millions d'euros) pour maintenir ses activités en décembre, alors que le nombre des bénéficiaires syriens est passé au cours des derniers mois de 850 000 à 1,5 million.

Le PAM a aussi davantage de difficultés à livrer son aide aux populations en raison des combats. La décision des Nations unies de suspendre provisoirement les missions de terrain, en dehors de Damas, pour toutes les agences de l'ONU devrait limiter sa capacité à contrôler les distributions de vivres. Le PAM dit également avoir constaté une augmentation des attaques contre ses camions dans différentes parties du pays. – (AFP.)

Le Point 1 décembre 2012

Irak : échec des négociations avec les Kurdes

Le Premier ministre irakien Nouri al-Maliki a mis en garde samedi contre le danger d'un "conflit ethnique" en Irak, après l'échec cette semaine des négociations destinées à apaiser les tensions entre les autorités de Bagdad et celles du Kurdistan autonome. "Si un conflit éclate, ce serait malheureux et douloureux, et ce sera un conflit ethnique", qui n'est "pas dans l'intérêt des Kurdes, ni des Arabes, ni des Turkmènes", a déclaré Nouri al-Maliki lors d'une conférence de presse à Bagdad.

Des discussions pour apaiser les tensions autour de zones revendiquées par le Kurdistan et le gouvernement central ont tourné court face au refus de Bagdad de renoncer au quartier général de l'armée

installé en septembre à Kirkouk, une ville disputée, a annoncé vendredi le gouvernement de la région autonome du Kurdistan. L'armée américaine a longtemps coordonné les opérations entre troupes kurdes et irakiennes dans les zones disputées du nord du pays, mais son départ l'année dernière a privé les parties en présence d'un intermédiaire.

Le retour des Américains n'est pas souhaité

Nouri al-Maliki a écarté tout retour des soldats américains dans ces zones, assurant qu'il était "de la responsabilité du gouvernement irakien et de la région (du Kurdistan) de régler leurs problèmes sans l'assistance d'un tiers". Le 16 novem-

bre, des accrochages ont eu lieu entre les forces kurdes et l'armée irakienne dans la ville de Touz Khourmatou. Et la semaine dernière, des responsables de Bagdad et d'Erbil se sont mutuellement accusés d'avoir renforcé leur dispositif militaire dans cette zone.

Nouri al-Maliki a justifié samedi les mouvements de troupes dans le nord du pays, répétant que l'armée irakienne avait le droit "d'être n'importe où en Irak". Pour nombre de diplomates et de dirigeants, ces tensions, alimentées en outre par des différends liés à l'exploitation pétrolière dans la région autonome, représentent à long terme la plus forte menace pour la stabilité du pays. □

La périphérie de Damas est gagnée par les combats entre armée et rebelles

Jaramana, quartier à majorité druze, prend ses distances vis-à-vis du régime de Bachar Al-Assad

Beyrouth
Correspondance

Artillerie lourde, bombardements et tirs de mortier ont endeuillé, samedi 1^{er} et dimanche 2 décembre, les localités situées de part et d'autre de la route de l'aéroport, au sud-est de Damas. Les organisations de défense des droits de l'homme ont dénombré plus de cent trente victimes. Des affrontements ont également été signalés au sud, autour de la base aérienne militaire, accentuant encore l'encerclement de la capitale par les rebelles. Les communications, interrompues deux jours plus tôt, faisant craindre une contre-offensive majeure du régime, ont été rétablies samedi.

Dans la périphérie orientale de Damas, où se concentrent la plupart des combats, la ville de Jaramana semble épargnée. Elle a cependant été confrontée à une autre forme de violence : un double attentat à la voiture piégée, le 28 novembre, qui a fait plus de soixante morts. Le cœur de Jaramana ne bat ni pour le régime ni pour la rébellion. Enclavée entre les zones de combat, cette agglomération de 100 000 âmes est constituée d'une mosaïque de presque toutes les communautés que compte la Syrie, avec une majorité de Druzes et de chrétiens. Elle a également été le refuge de plusieurs dizaines de milliers d'Irakiens, qui avaient fui la guerre civile dans leur pays, au point que Jaramana avait, un temps, gagné le surnom de « Fallouja », le fief de l'insurrection antiaméricaine en Irak.

Face à un tragique sentiment de déjà-vu, les Irakiens ont fini par repartir, laissant place aux déplacés des localités syriennes voisines ou plus lointaines, comme Homs, Idlib et Alep.

Si Jaramana n'a pas connu de manifestations de masse comparables à celles qui se sont déroulées ailleurs dans la banlieue de Damas, elle a longtemps servi de base de repli pour les opposants. C'est dans ses appartements, sou-



Plus de soixante personnes ont été tuées par le double attentat qui a frappé Jaramana. AGENCE OFFICIELLE SANA/REUTERS

vent occupés par des étudiants, des artistes et de jeunes fonctionnaires, que s'écrivaient les slogans de la révolution.

Selon Salah, un militant originaire du camp de réfugiés palestinien de Yarmouk, ces mêmes réseaux se sont organisés pour venir en aide aux populations déplacées, harcelées par les milices locales prorégime, car suspectes de sympathie avec les insurgés. La neutralité longtemps affichée par les chefs des minorités religieuses avait assuré à Jaramana un calme relatif, permettant aux militants de stocker vivres et médicaments, avant de les redistribuer, à l'insu des autorités, aux populations nécessiteuses.

Salah était l'un des responsables du transport et de la distribution de ces denrées. Arrivé depuis peu à Beyrouth, il explique que « si toutes les entrées de Jaramana sont étroitement surveillées par les différents services de sécurité, il est en revanche facile d'en faire sortir n'importe quoi ».

La rigueur des contrôles de sécu-

rité à l'entrée de la ville laisse certains résidents perplexes quant à la responsabilité des attentats du 28 novembre, que le régime a attribués à la rébellion. Mounir, un habitant de Jaramana joint par Skype, se demande « comment deux voitures bourrées d'explosifs ont pu franchir les barrages sans être inquiétées »

Groupes affiliés à Al-Qaida

Les charges ont été déclenchées simultanément pour faire un maximum de victimes à une heure d'affluence, selon un mode opératoire rappelant les attentats en Irak. La frontière poreuse entre la Syrie et l'Irak ainsi que la présence de groupes affiliés à Al-Qaida confortent la thèse des autorités.

Mais, affirme Salah, le régime dispose, lui aussi, de cette « expertise ». « Par trois fois, rappelle-t-il, le président a annoncé la libération de détenus politiques. Au lieu de quoi, il a libéré des criminels qui sont allés gonfler les rangs des milices du régime ainsi que des islamistes proches d'Al-Qaida, lesquels sont soit mani-

pulés par le régime, soit relâchés pour accentuer le chaos. »

La meurtrière attaque de Jaramana survient peu après la publication, le 3 novembre, d'un communiqué émanant du « comité spirituel de la communauté druze » de Jaramana dont *Le Monde* a eu copie : le texte avertit que « tout milicien ou soldat druze tué aux côtés des forces de sécurité du régime à l'extérieur de Jaramana ne pourra être enterré dans le cimetière de la ville (...). Si l'enterrement a lieu, aucun cheikh ne priera sur sa dépouille. »

Par ce communiqué, le comité confirme l'enracinement de Jaramana dans son environnement et son attachement à « la coexistence pacifique avec les autres communautés religieuses ».

Moins radical que les appels à l'insurrection lancés, depuis le Liban, par le chef druze Walid Joumblatt, ce texte constitue cependant un réel acte de défiance envers l'autorité d'un régime qui se targue d'être le « protecteur » des minorités de Syrie. ■

KHALED SID MOHAND

Iraqi rivals see potential political gains

By Suadad al-Salhy,
Isabel Coles / Reuters

TUZ KHURMATO, Iraq: A hundred miles from Baghdad, tanks are facing off across a front line defined not by an international border but by ethnic enmity, fueled by past bloodshed and future oil wealth, that risks tearing Iraq apart.

The sun-blazoned flag of Kurdistan flies from the turrets of Soviet-built armored vehicles, seized a decade ago from Saddam Hussein's army, their barrels now aimed at the unseen forces of Iraq's national government on the far side of Tuz Khurmato, a town beyond the formal boundary of the Kurds' autonomous region.

For three weeks, Kurdish Peshmerga and soldiers of Baghdad's Arab army, have been reinforcing positions in the "disputed territories," a long, ill-defined swathe of northern Iraq, rich in oil and communal complexity, where the federal government and Kurdish leaders based in Irbil vie for control.

For all the flag-waving and warnings of war from Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani, few believe either will risk an all-out conflict whose outcome would be uncertain and would disrupt both a flourishing economy in Kurdistan and oil exports that bring Baghdad vital revenues.

Rather, both are gaining from this, the second such flare-up in the year since U.S. troops quit Iraq, to consolidate their respective support among Arabs and Kurds for upcoming elections.

Maliki spoke this week of "unpredictable risks" as Kurdish troops brought up more tanks and artillery close to the oil field city of Kirkuk: "If it erupts ... it will be a painful, shameful ethnic conflict," he said, warning of "dangerous dimensions."

Kurds accuse the Iraqi pre-

mier of "opening a Pandora's box."

U.S. forces, whose no-fly zone first gave the Kurds de facto autonomy from Saddam in 1991, helped keep a peace between them and the Arabs after occupying Iraq in 2003; now, Washington's diplomats have had to work behind the scenes to calm tempers, most recently following a shootout on Nov. 16 between Iraqi and Kurdish forces in Tuz Khurmato in which a bystander was killed.

Politicians, diplomats and analysts detect an unwillingness on either side to go beyond verbal skirmishing or the sort of occasional, tit-for-tat halts in transfer payments or oil pipelines that have long marked their fractious relationship.

"Both Baghdad and Irbil seem not to be willing to push this," said Gareth Stansfield, a former U.N. adviser on the dispute who teaches Middle East politics at Exeter University.

At the same time, neither side is in a hurry to pull back.

"There is definitely a sense this might not cause outright war, but flashpoints all over in all sorts of places," one diplomat said. "This is probably going to be quite prolonged, because there isn't much appetite to settle it."

Ten years after the U.S. invasion toppled Saddam in the name of democracy, the standoff demonstrates Iraq's failure to forge consensus among Maliki's Shiite Muslim majority, Sunni Arabs who were dominant under Saddam, and the Kurds, some 15 percent of the population, concentrated in the northern mountains.

Most violence has been seen in a sectarian war among Arabs; Maliki has had support from the Kurds, who have not pressed for full statehood, aware of their landlocked isolation and the hostility of neighbors wary of their own Kurdish minorities.

Yet Iraqi Kurdish expansion beyond a regional frontier noted in the 2005 constitution - and new Kurdish contracts to sell oil



For all the flag-waving and warnings of war from Maliki and Barzani, few believe either will risk an all-out conflict. (REUTERS/Azad Lashkari/Files)

to foreign firms without reference to Baghdad - may push Iraq's divided Arabs to close ranks; united Arab hostility may in turn also help stifle friction among competing Kurdish movements.

"The sectarian card is not working anymore and the nationalist card is the joker now," said a Shiite member of the Iraqi parliament who has himself previously allied with Sunnis, in describing a coming realignment of forces among the Arabs.

One Sunni tribal leader in Salahaddin province, which includes Tuz Khurmato but also Tikrit, Saddam's hometown, said former army officers he knew had not only removed portraits of the executed dictator from their walls recently but even put up pictures of Maliki. That would once have been unimaginable among Sunni Arabs who have long seen the premier as a pawn of Shiite Iran. It says much about new perceptions of a Kurdish threat.

For his part, Maliki, despite pursuing Iraq's fugitive Sunni vice president over sectarian attacks, is courting Sunni allies after seeing some Kurdish lawmakers who helped keep him in power after the 2010 election support a parliamentary motion to unseat him. Provincial elections in the new year may offer clues to potential partners before the March 2014 parliamentary ballot.

"Maliki is waiting for a strong Sunni ally, to get a parliamentary majority and then to form the majority government next time," one ally of the prime minister said privately.

For the Kurds, Maliki's move to set up a new command struc-

ture for those national security forces based on their doorstep - known as the Tigris Operations Command - violates the constitution and reveals a drive by Baghdad to thwart their hopes of annexing Kirkuk and other areas where, since 2003, they have been expanding their own military and political presence.

Accusing the head of the new command center of a role in Saddam's genocidal assaults on the Kurds in the 1980s - a charge he denies - Kurdish leaders have lined up together against Maliki after falling out among themselves earlier this year over tactics in the parliament and over the civil war in Syria.

Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who is Iraq's president in the power-sharing national administration, have buried differences to demand Maliki disband the new command whose troops are now confronting the Peshmerga at Tuz Khurmato.

"Maliki is opening a Pandora's box," said one senior Kurdish politician, who spoke anonymously due to the sensitivity of the current situation. "Kirkuk for us is everything, not a game for political gains or any other kind. It is about justice to our cause and undoing what Saddam and other Iraqi regimes did."

In a joint statement on Nov. 22, the Kurdish parties invoked memories of the poison gas massacre of Kurds at Halabja in 1988 to warn that Baghdad might repeat such "chauvinist attacks."

"Whenever an external threat exists against

► Kurdish issues, we are unified,” said Omar Badi of the Islamic Union of Kurdistan, which sits in the regional assembly in opposition to the governing coalition of KDP and PUK. “Whoever confronts the threat from outside will win the votes of the Kurdish people.”

A Shiite politician in Baghdad said one significant change had been in the role of Talabani, who had used his position as head of state to mediate between Maliki and Barzani -

against whom Talabani fought a civil war in Kurdistan in the 1990s.

“Talabani has lost his strategic Shiite alliances and his position as a friend and father of all factions,” the Shiite political figure said, speaking privately. “He can no longer play the role of intermediary between the rivals.”

For now, that phony war continues, around Tuz Khurmato, to the southeast of it in Diyala province, in the north-

west around the big city of Mosul and, most intensely, around Kirkuk.

For years, it has been a conflict fought in near silence, with intimidation and only sporadic violence used to drive out rival groups and alter the ethnic mix of local communities that are supposed, one day, to vote in a referendum on whether parts of the disputed territories should join the Kurdistan region.

Kurds are keen to reverse

Saddam’s policy of resettling the area with Arabs, including many Shiites from the south. Arabs accuse Kurds of rewriting history. Other substantial groups, notably Turkish-speaking Turkmen, are also pressing claims.

Stalemate over holding the plebiscite that the constitution stated should have been held by 2007, has left Baghdad and Irbil increasingly arguing along the barrels of their tanks. □

Rudaw

6 / December / 2012

Kurdish MPs Warn Of War With Baghdad, As Peshmerga Forces Await Orders

By HEVIDAR AHMED
rudaw.net

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – With Erbil-Baghdad tensions high over troop deployments in disputed territories, Kurdish MPs in the Iraqi parliament warned of war, and a senior commander of Kurdish Peshmerga forces said he has 30,000 armed men deployed and ready for orders.

The tense stand-off of the past two months was triggered after Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki moved his controversial Dijla forces into disputed territories that are also claimed by the autonomous Kurds, who dispatched their own Peshmerga fighters into the areas.

“The current situation will end in a conflict,” Hakim Sheikh Latif, a Kurdish MP in the Iraqi Parliament, told Rudaw.

Latif, from the Change Movement, said he has written to Kurdish politicians, warning them of the upcoming dangers and informing them about his predictions of war.

In an interview with Rudaw four months ago, Latif predicted that, “Within a year the Iraqi government will wage a war against the Kurds.”

Observers say the tensions are the worst since the Kurds gained autonomy, following Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s fall in the 2003 US-led invasion.

Latif urged Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani to seek outside help to defuse the crisis, warning that if the United States and neighboring Iran did not pressure the Iraqi government, “The tensions will transform into an armed confrontation.”

“Now, the Kurds are on the verge of an imposed war. Maliki has mobilized forces and wants a war. Therefore, President Massoud Barzani must knock on the doors of the US, Iran and other regional powers,” Latif said.

“I have said this before, and I am repeating it now: Nuri al-Maliki intends to esta-



A breakout of war is possible. We live in Iraq and have had bitter experiences with this country.”

blish his army units in Qushtapa, Faida, and Bani Maqan, the former Iraqi regime’s frontlines with the Kurdistan Region,” Latif added.

Earlier this month, Maliki told reporters that if another war erupted in Iraq, it would be between the Arabs and Kurds.

Meanwhile, a senior Peshmarga commander on the frontlines of the stand-off, told Rudaw that his forces stand ready for orders.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said that, “More than 30,000 Peshmerga troops are deployed in the area. The Iraqi army’s weapons capability does not equal those of the Peshmerga forces.”

He said it was better for the Peshmerga forces to strike now, because Baghdad’s forces were still uncoordinated in the disputed areas, but that Maliki was trying to recruit former officers of Saddam’s Baathist regime.

“Maliki is recruiting the former Baathist army officers. He is trying to rebuild the army with the Iraqi officers who have experience in fighting Iran, Kuwait, and the US army. Some of them are quite experienced,” he said.

“For the Kurds, now is the best time to start the war. If the war is started now, Peshmerga forces will clear all the disputed areas within three days, and then we can

draw a red line.”

Moayad Teyib, spokesman of the Kurdish coalition in Iraq’s parliament, criticized Maliki, saying he “has closed all doors to negotiations.”

He said that Maliki’s recent statements had convinced Kurdish leaders that, “Negotiations with Maliki are no longer possible.”

Teyib also warned that the present tensions could escalate into a war.

“A breakout of war is possible. We live in Iraq and have had bitter experiences with this country. When the political process reaches a stalemate, they transform to armed conflict,” he said.

Iraqi analyst and politician Hassan Allawi, an Arab and independent member of the Iraqi parliament, said recently that a conflict between the Arabs and Kurds would likely be on a small scale.

“There might be a war between the Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi army. But the fight will be on a small scale -- here and there,” he said.

Allawi said that Maliki dispatched his Dijla forces into the disputed territories as “a reaction, a revenge to the current year’s April attempts to remove him from office, which were initiated in Erbil,” and headed by Barzani. ■

Kurdish initiative still on table, says Deputy PM

Göksel Bozkurt
ANKARA - Hürriyet Daily News

Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay says the government will continue to take the necessary steps to end the Kurdish issue. 'We will continue taking the required steps for the benefit of our country and nation in order to stop the blood and to stop this vicious problem,' he says

Describing the issue of terrorism as one "beyond politics," Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay yesterday reasserted the government's determination to continue the "National Unity and Brotherhood Project," first launched in 2009.

Atalay fell short of explicitly stating whether a new Oslo process – similar to the secret talks held between the government and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) between 2009 and 2011 in the Norwegian capital – was on the horizon and whether convicted PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is serving a life sentence on İmralı Island, could be included in the new process as one of the instruments.



Atalay explains the arrangements under the National Unity and Brotherhood Project, such as legal arrangement for defense in mother tongue in courts. DAILY NEWS photo Selahattin SÖNMEZ

"As the prime minister has also emphasized, we will continue taking the required steps for the benefit of our country and nation without hesitation. Whoever needs to be met with in order to stop the blood and to stop this vicious problem; whatever step needs to be taken; whichever tolls and mechanisms should go into force; we are not and will not show any hesitation in making the required decisions in the appropriate time and

grounds," Atalay said in a speech delivered at the Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE).

He added that the government was aiming for stronger cooperation on the issue with opposition parties as well as civil society.

NATIONAL UNITY, BROTHERHOOD PROJECT

A legal arrangement that will pave the way for conducting defense in one's mother-tongue in courts, facilitating public services in mother-tongues and plans for establishing a civilian body that will assess complaints regarding security forces are under way as part of the "National Unity and Brotherhood Project," Atalay explained, defining the project's target as being to increase democratic standards while minimizing terror.

"On terror and related issues, as issues beyond politics, we will continue to decisively, actively and determinedly work with all political parties, civil society organizations and our nation," Atalay said.

"We are reviewing all instruments regarding the terror issue. We are and will put into force all instruments both together and separately. In this regard, we are both eyeing international conjuncture and also following the situation in related states," Atalay said, emphasizing that combating terrorism was the most important item on the government's agenda. ○

OPINION/ MURAT YETKİN

Does Turkey have a Kurdish policy? And an energy one?

Right after landing in Kayseri airport on his way to Arbil – due to the objection of Baghdad - Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız told reporters that Turkey would not be affected by the Iraqi government's obstruction and would keep going on its own way.

Yıldız was pointing to a Turkish policy about Iraq's rich oil and gas fields; in particular, those that lay in the northern part of Iraq bordering Turkey, which is under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG forces and the central Iraqi army were about to clash as recently as last week, mainly over oil and gas rights, which could be averted with the intervention of the United States. Tony Hayward, the former head of British Petroleum and now of Ankara-based Genel Enerji, which has a lot of investments in the region, keeps saying that the fields in the KRG area are the last untapped resources on earth and they would find a way

out to markets whatever the political obstructions are. Estimates claim that there are 45 billion barrels of oil and 3.5 trillion cubic meters of gas waiting to be surfaced in the region. That is why many major energy companies of the world - from Exxon and Chevron of the U.S. to Total of France and Gazprom of Russia - have already invested in the region, risking their rights in the south of Iraq after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's ultimatum. The scene is an oil rush, perhaps the last one in the Middle East.

Turkey doesn't want to stay out of this oil rush next to its borders. That is why Yıldız was on his way to attend an "Oil and Gas Conference" in Arbil, where the office of Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG, is located. One has to recall that up until a few years ago, the same Tayyip Erdoğan government in Turkey was protesting its Western allies for having relations with Barzani and thus encouraging Kurdish independence there. What's more, the military headquarters of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been fighting a war against Turkey for independence for the last 30 years, is still based in the Kandil Mountains within the borders of the KRG.

While following this pragmatic foreign and energy policy outside Turkey, inside it Erdoğan is trying to lift the parliamentary immunities of the Kurdish problem-focused Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) deputies, while also supporting the re-establishment of talks with the imprisoned-for-life leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. These come at the same time as fierce clashes continue between Turkish security forces and the PKK militants.

It is not realistic and sustainable for the Turkish government to follow two Kurdish policies inside and outside Turkey, as this has started to affect almost every walk of politics now - from energy, to diplomacy, to security. ○

REUTERS

Turkish forces kill 13 Kurdish militants near Syria border

December 05, 2012 - by Ece Toksabay - (Reuters)

TUNCELI, Turkey — Turkish troops and attack helicopters pounded Kurdish militants near the border with Syria, killing 13 militants and capturing five others, the regional governor's office said on Wednesday.

The operation was launched at the western end of Turkey's frontier with Syria, far from the main arena of conflict between Turkish government forces and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants further east along the borders with Iraq and Iran.

Ankara has linked a surge in militant violence since the summer with

the chaos in neighbouring Syria and has accused Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of resuming support for the PKK and arming the militants.

The latest Turkish military operation, which began on Monday, was based on intelligence received from a drone indicating PKK militants were in the area.

Troops captured five PKK militants, the Osmaniye provincial governor's office said, and the operation was continuing.

Clashes between the army and militants generally surge during the summer when snow melts in the mountainous region, and PKK fighters spend the harsh winter in camps along Turkey's southeast border.

Over 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict between Turkey and the PKK. The militants began fighting in 1984 with the aim of carving out a separate state in mainly Kurdish southeast Turkey. They now seek autonomy in the region.

The PKK is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and European Union. ●

thestar
online

December 5, 2012

Iraq govt stops Turkish minister landing in Kurdistan

By Orhan Coskun and Jonathon Burch

ANKARA (Reuters) - A plane carrying Turkey's energy minister to an energy conference in Iraqi Kurdistan was denied permission to land on Tuesday by the central government in Baghdad, underlining its strained relations with Ankara and Iraq's Kurdistan region.

The minister's private plane, which was en route from Istanbul to the northern Iraqi city of Erbil, was forced to land in the Turkish city of Kayseri, southeast of the capital Ankara.

Iraq's civilian aviation authority said it had refused the plane permission because it had not complied with regulations.

"We haven't forbidden any plane to enter our airspace ... but we have special regulations and laws which organise the flight of certain planes," said Nasser Bandar, manager of the aviation authority.

"The UAE, Jordan and Turkey forwarded their demand to get permission for private flights, and we refused the three requests as they were not going along with Iraqi laws and regulations," he said.

The fact that Turkey's energy minister was en route to participate in a conference on energy in the north would likely have aggravated the government in Baghdad.

Baghdad, which has been locked in its own long-running feud over oil and land rights with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the north, has been riled by Ankara's recent moves aimed at for-



Turkey's Energy Minister Taner Yildiz attends a news conference with his Russian counterpart Alexander Novak in Istanbul December 2, 2012. REUTERS/Murad Sezer

giving closer ties with the Iraqi Kurds.

Ankara and Baghdad have also accused each other of inciting sectarian tension and have summoned each others' ambassadors in tit-for-tat manoeuvres.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

Turkey, which shares a border with Iraqi Kurdistan, has increasingly courted Iraqi Kurds as its relations with Baghdad have soured and while Ankara is a major investment and trading partner for the whole country, most business is with the north.

Kurdistan has also been taking steps towards easing its reliance on Baghdad in the sale of its oil and gas, further irritating the Iraqi government which says it has the sole right to export oil and gas produced throughout Iraq.

An oil pipeline pumping about 60,000 bpd already feeds directly from Kurdistan's Tawke oilfield into the main pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, and more are due to follow. Turkey also began importing crude oil by truck from Kurdistan this year in exchange for diesel.

KRG spokesman Safeen Dizayee said he believed the air regulations had only been introduced the previous day and hoped there had been no separate motive behind the move.

"It is new to us, we were not aware of it. We sincerely hope the reason behind this is actually this technical issue and nothing more," Dizayee said.

Speaking to Turkish media after landing in Kayseri, Yildiz said he was in talks with Iraq over the incident and that he believed the breakdown in communication would be repaired.

"I believe this interruption in communication will be resolved. I believe our colleagues in the central Iraqi government will treat this subject with sensitivity," Turkish media reported Yildiz as saying.

"All our projects, wherever in Iraq they may be, are about normalising the whole of Iraq. There will be an investigation. We are meeting with the (Turkish) foreign ministry. I am talking to Iraq. We will see what comes out of this," he said.

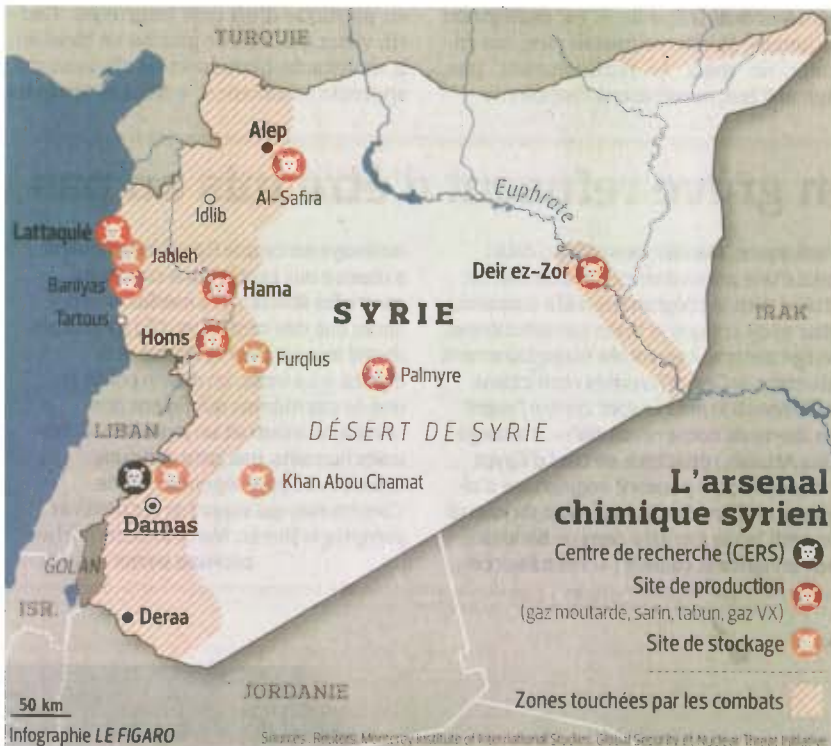
Relations with Baghdad have also been strained by Turkish air strikes on northern Iraq on bases of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Turkish Kurd militant group. Baghdad asked Turkey to stop attacking the PKK on its soil after Ankara stepped up operations following a rise in militant attacks inside Turkey.

The PKK, considered a terrorist group by Ankara, the United States and the European Union, has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984 for greater self rule in Turkey's southeast.

□ □ □

Bachar el-Assad : la fuite en avant

Les pays occidentaux multiplient les avertissements à Damas contre l'utilisation d'armes chimiques.



L'Otan et les États-Unis redoutent un geste de folie d'un régime aux abois qui serait tenté d'utiliser son arsenal chimique, considéré comme l'un des plus importants du Moyen-Orient, accumulé avec l'aide de la Russie et de l'Iran. Les Occidentaux ont averti avec force la Syrie que le recours à ses armes non conventionnelles serait « inacceptable » et entraînerait « une réaction internationale immédiate ».

Ces craintes ont brusquement refait surface alors que la contre-offensive du régime est montée d'un cran contre les forces rebelles autour de Damas. Les insurgés disposent désormais de missiles sol-air capables d'abattre des avions.

Dans ce contexte de tension accrue, les djihadistes sont aussi un sujet d'inquiétude pour les Occidentaux, qui hésitent à apporter leur soutien à la rébellion par peur de voir la Syrie basculer dans l'islam radical ou les armes fournies tomber entre les mains de groupes terroristes.

Assad veut un « glacis » autour de Damas

GEORGES MALBRUNOT

MOYEN-ORIENT L'armée a intensifié mardi ses bombardements dans les faubourgs sud de Damas, tandis que huit élèves et un professeur étaient tués dans la chute d'un mortier tiré par les rebelles sur une école du camp al-Wafidine, à 20 km au nord-est de la capitale syrienne, où la situation sécuritaire s'est récemment dégradée. La veille, plus de 60 personnes avaient péri dans des bombardements.

Face aux insurgés, qui tiennent plusieurs secteurs proches de Damas, le pouvoir a décidé d'accroître encore sa puissance de feu, cherchant à inverser une dynamique favorable dernièrement

aux rebelles. « Bachar el-Assad veut reprendre l'initiative sur l'Armée syrienne libre, en attaquant par des moyens aériens plus importants et de l'artillerie plus lourde », analyse un diplomate européen, qui a quitté mardi Damas. Selon lui, « le régime veut établir un glacis de sécurité autour de la capitale pour ne pas voir se reproduire les tirs de mortiers, qui sont tombés récemment près du palais présidentiel. Le centre de Damas ne doit plus être touché », ajoute-t-il.

8 000 soldats formés en Iran

D'où les bombardements massifs et répétés depuis cinq jours sur un périmètre d'une dizaine de kilomètres autour de Damas, les plus violents depuis ceux de juillet, qui avaient permis à l'armée de

repousser les insurgés hors de la périphérie de la capitale. L'objectif étant de vider la zone de sa population, pour ne se retrouver que face aux rebelles. Mais ceux-ci, venus en renfort de province,

Face aux insurgés le pouvoir a décidé d'accroître encore sa puissance de feu

sont nombreux. Pour le seul quartier de Darraya, pilonné depuis plusieurs jours, ils sont estimés à près de 4 000, alors qu'il ne resterait que 10 % des habitants de ce faubourg du sud-ouest de Damas autour duquel l'unité 105 de la garde

républicaine et deux autres brigades blindées de la IV^e division ont été masquées sous les ordres du redouté général druze Issam Zahrane, le « tombeur » de Baba Amr en février dernier à Homs.

Lundi, les insurgés ont encore revendiqué la chute d'un avion de combat (MIG) entre Doumeir et Rahiybeh, au nord-ouest de Damas. La semaine dernière, un avion de combat et un hélicoptère avaient déjà été abattus pour la première fois par des missiles sol-air, dans le nord de la Syrie. Ces pertes devraient contraindre l'ar-

mée à utiliser d'autres appareils, moins vulnérables aux tirs de missiles (des MIG 29 ou 31, ainsi que des Sukhoi 29). « Le régime s'affaiblit progressivement, estime le diplomate européen, mais il ne va pas s'effondrer demain. »

Ces derniers mois, 8 000 membres des unités d'élite de la garde républicaine et de la IV^e division sont allés se former auprès des gardiens de la révolution en Iran, selon une source occidentale. Trois cent cinquante autres officiers ont suivi une instruction en

Russie, l'autre allié de Damas.

Même si le *New York Times* affirmait dans son édition de lundi que Moscou afficherait désormais « une nouvelle approche » vis-à-vis de son partenaire syrien, d'autres sources font état d'une livraison prochaine à Damas de batteries de missiles balistiques Iskander, destinées à contrer les fusées Patriot que l'Otan s'appête à déployer en Turquie, face au territoire syrien. ■

LE FIGARO

mercredi 5 décembre 2012

Les djihadistes en embuscade derrière les rebelles syriens



ADRIEN JAULMES
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O n croise parfois dans Alep des combattants rebelles à l'allure singulière. Le keffieh noué en queue sur la nuque, les pantalons larges portés au-dessus des mollets, la barbe en éventail et la lèvre supérieure rasée, on les distingue facilement des autres révolutionnaires, qui font plus dans le cheveu hérissé au gel et les jeans griffés. Ils se tiennent à l'écart des autres combattants et évitent les étrangers. Ils ont visiblement de l'argent. Leur armement est neuf et généralement en meilleur état que celui des autres insurgés. Ils sont aussi plus disciplinés que nombre de rebelles. Mais surtout, ces djihadistes ou salafistes ne se battent pas seulement pour renverser le régime de Bachar el-Assad : la Syrie n'est pour eux que le champ de bataille d'un combat plus vaste, où réaliser leurs rêves fumeux de rétablir le Califat et d'instaurer un État islamiste sur tout le Moyen-Orient.

« Les groupes locaux de la révolution se sont formés pour se protéger, mais ils restent limités dans leurs idées, explique Mahmoud Mangani, un islamiste radical syrien engagé dans les combats à Alep, sa ville natale. Alors que nous, nous faisons la guerre au régime, mais sommes en même temps engagés dans un projet plus vaste de transformation de notre société. »
« Je suis un islamiste, j'ai un projet islamique, dit ce membre d'un petit groupe radical appelé al-Taliah al-Mouqatila, « l'Avant-Garde ». Nous avons retenu la leçon des fautes commises par les talibans en Afghanistan ou al-Qaïda en Irak. Et nous essayons de bâtir quelque chose de nouveau en Syrie, si Dieu le veut. »

Le parcours de Mahmoud Mangani suit l'histoire de l'islam radical depuis le début des années 1980. Fils d'un militant islamiste d'Alep assassiné par le régime d'Hafez el-Assad pendant le soulèvement des années 1976-1982, il grandit en exil en Allemagne et dans le golfe Persique. « J'ai été élevé dans le souvenir de mon père et de ses principes : refuser l'humiliation et garder l'esprit de résistance. » Il se rapproche du Hamas palestinien dans les années 1990, puis d'al-Qaïda, avant de rompre avec l'organisa-

Les combattants islamistes, parfois étrangers, qu'on trouve parmi les insurgés syriens prospèrent sur la crainte qu'ils inspirent chez les Occidentaux et l'aide que leur apportent certains pays arabes. Peuvent-ils confisquer le soulèvement populaire ?

tion de Ben Laden après l'invasion américaine en Irak en 2003, révolté, dit-il, par les exactions d'Abou Moussab al-Zarqawi qui tue plus de musulmans que d'infidèles. « Ils étaient devenus inhumains, tuaient des innocents. Je me situe plus sur la ligne d'Abdallah Azzam », ajoute-t-il, en référence au mentor palestinien de Ben Laden, assassiné au Pakistan dans les années 1980.

Les dates et les lieux s'embrouillent un peu ensuite, mais Mangani résume l'expérience des islamistes en Syrie : tantôt instruments, tantôt victimes. Il séjourne pendant plusieurs années dans les redoutables prisons syriennes, où il laisse plusieurs phalanges de la main gauche. Il milite dans les rangs de Fatah al-Islam, groupe islamiste palestinien instrumentalisé par le régime syrien pour diviser l'OLP, puis déstabiliser le Liban et envoyer des djihadistes contre les Américains en Irak - groupe qui s'est aujourd'hui retourné contre le régime de Damas, comme la créature de Frankenstein. Libéré au début du soulèvement dans une des mesures de conciliation tardives du régime, Mangani a aussitôt embrassé une révolution qui lui permet de concilier son messianisme religieux avec une cause nationale.

« Aujourd'hui nous avons enfin une cause pour laquelle combattre. Et la victoire ne viendra pas de l'extérieur, comme semblent le croire beaucoup de chefs rebelles, mais de nous-mêmes : ce qui nous permettra de construire en Syrie un État islamique, développé. »

La présence de ces islamistes dans les rangs de la révolution syrienne nourrit évidemment toutes les craintes et tous les fantasmes. Le régime de Bachar el-Assad dénonce depuis le début le soulèvement comme un complot djihadiste lié à al-Qaïda, ce qui lui permet de terroriser les minorités, chrétiens et alaouites, de faire chanter les Occidentaux et de justifier toutes les méthodes de répression, en qualifiant très tôt de « terroristes » des manifestants devenus depuis des insurgés. Les djihadistes sont aussi le principal sujet d'inquiétude des Occidentaux, qui hésitent à apporter leur soutien à la rébellion par peur de voir la Syrie basculer dans l'islam radical, ou les armes fournies tomber entre les mains de groupes terroristes.

Engagés dans la brèche

Dans les deux cas, ces calculs ont eu ironiquement comme résultat de favoriser le phénomène contre lequel on prétendait lutter. La brutalité de la répression du régime syrien a nourri le radicalisme religieux des insurgés et favorisé l'approche manichéenne des djihadistes. L'inaction des Occidentaux a laissé les mains libres au Qatar ou à l'Arabie saoudite pour favoriser ses clients islamistes, un peu comme Saoudiens et Pakistanais l'avaient fait à l'époque de la guerre contre les Soviétiques en Afghanistan.

À Alep, l'attitude des autres groupes à l'égard de ces djihadistes qui ont pris le train de la révolution en marche va de l'indifférence à l'agacement. « Les Occidentaux sont obsédés par les djihadistes, explique Abdallah Yaçine, un combattant rebelle d'Alep devenu coordinateur des médias pour le compte de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL). Pourtant ils ne représentent pas beaucoup de combattants, quelques centaines, quelques milliers au maximum à Alep. Certains ont de l'expérience, ils se sont battus en Irak ou ailleurs, mais en aucun cas ils ne représentent la majorité de la révolution. Ce sont pourtant eux qui reçoivent le plus d'aide de l'extérieur. On voudrait leur donner le pouvoir qu'on ne ferait pas autrement. »

Commencée dans des manifestations inspirées du printemps arabe, continuée comme une jacquerie paysanne, la révolution syrienne est devenue une guerre civile où l'opposition au régime est composée dans son immense majorité de musulmans sunnites, plutôt paysans et conservateurs. Il n'en fallait pas plus pour donner une forte dimension sectaire à cette révolution politique. Les djihadistes internationaux se sont engagés dans la brèche. Un peu comme les bolcheviques au début de la Révolution russe, les djihadistes sont moins nombreux que les autres courants révolutionnaires. Mais ils bénéficient d'une meilleure organisation que les autres, qui combattent sous une multitude de chefs locaux et se chamaillent fréquemment pour d'obscures rivalités. Leur idéologie a la puissance des théories autoexplicatives, leurs financements extérieurs leur donnent aussi un solide avantage matériel : il n'en faut pas plus pour que les volontaires affluent.

Vu de l'extérieur, la confusion est totale entre toutes les composantes de la révolution syrienne. La lutte armée n'a rien clarifié. Tous les révolutionnaires crient *Allah est grand*, s'affublent de titres ronflants tirés du Coran et utilisent l'iconographie djihadiste. Leurs drapeaux portent la Chahada, la profession de foi musulmane, ils arborent des keffieh et prient tant et mieux. Mais les objectifs des révolutionnaires restent nationaux et politiques, à la différence des rêves globalisants des djihadistes.

À Alep, la plupart des combattants de l'ASL appartiennent à une alliance locale appelée Liwa al-Tawhid. Créée à l'été 2012 en vue de l'offensive

surprise sur la ville, cette union d'environ 170 groupes totalisant 10 000 combattants a un discours ouvertement religieux. Son nom de Tawhid signifie d'ailleurs à la fois Union et l'unicité d'Allah. Mais le programme politique de Liwa al-Tawhid se résume à un point : renverser le régime Assad. Les tiraillements internes surviennent assez vite. Lorsque, à la fin novembre, des groupes de combattants d'Alep rejettent dans une vidéo la Coalition nationale syrienne récemment formée au Qatar et appellent à la création d'un État islamiste en Syrie, Liwa al-Tawhid réagit aussitôt par un démenti.

Attentats suicides et voitures piégées

Les principaux chefs de Liwa al-Tawhid, dont Abdelkader el-Saleh, le grand organisateur de l'opération contre Alep, apparaissent à leur tour sur une vidéo où ils affirment leur soutien à la Coalition nationale syrienne et se prononcent en faveur d'un « État civil en Syrie où l'islam constitue la principale source juridique » et respectant « toutes les minorités syriennes ». « Nous travaillons en bonne entente avec Liwa el-Tawhid, dit Mahmoud Mangani, mais leurs idées sont un peu limitées. Nous sommes aussi en contact avec Jabhat al-Nosra : ce sont des gens sincères, mais qui doivent s'ouvrir un peu. »

Jabhat al-Nosra est le plus grand groupe islamiste en Syrie. Son nom est une abréviation de « Front de l'aide au peuple des moudjahidins du Levant sur les champs de bataille du djihad », un peu dur à prononcer d'une seule traite. Il apparaît début 2012 dans une vidéo annonçant sa création en vue de mener le djihad dans le « pays de Cham », le Levant, le terme utilisé par les islamistes pour désigner la Syrie. Secret, élitiste, Jabhat al-Nosra est présent dans différents secteurs de la Syrie et déploie plusieurs centaines de combattants à Alep. Rarement engagé dans les combats de rue, le mouvement a mené des assassinats de personnalités du régime, des attentats suicides et à la voiture piégée qui témoignent d'un niveau technique et d'organisation supérieur à celui de beaucoup de groupes rebelles.

D'autres formations plus petites, comme Suqour al-Islam, les Faucons du Levant, implantés dans le Djebel Zawiya, près de la frontière turque, ou Ahrar al-Cham, les Brigades de Libération du Levant, complètent cette nébuleuse de djihadistes. Les liens de ces organisations avec les réseaux d'al-Qaïda sont plus ou moins diffus, et difficile à établir. Une chose est sûre : la faune des djihadistes étrangers est sur un terrain familier dans un pays où le régime et ses services secrets ont longtemps cultivé et instrumentalisé les islamistes pour déstabiliser les pays voisins, avant de les voir se retourner contre lui.

« Si les Occidentaux ne choisissent pas d'aider les groupes qui représentent le peuple syrien et laissent le Qatar avancer ses pions, ils vont se retrouver avec les islamistes et nous aussi, conclut Abdallah Yaçine. Il n'est pas trop tard, mais il faut faire vite si on veut empêcher ça. » ■

The New York Times DECEMBER 6, 2012

Wider Chaos Feared as Syrian Rebels Clash With Kurds

By TIM ARANGO

CEYLANPINAR, Turkey — In plain view of the patrons at an outdoor cafe here in this border town, the convoy of gun trucks waving the flag of the Syrian rebels whizzed through the Syrian village of Ras al-Ain. They had not come to fight their primary enemy, the soldiers of Bashar al-Assad's government. They had rushed in to battle the ethnic Kurds.

The confrontation spoke not only to the violence that has enveloped Syria, but also to what awaits if the government falls. The fear — already materializing in these hills — is that Syria's ethnic groups will take up arms against one another in a bloody, post-Assad contest for power.

The Kurdish militias in northern Syria had hoped to stay out of the civil war raging in Syria. They were focused on preparing to secure an autonomous enclave for themselves within Syria should the rebels succeed in toppling the government. But slowly, inexorably, they have been dragged into the fighting and now have one goal in mind, their autonomy, which also means the Balkanization of the state.

"We want to have a Kurdish nation," said Divly Fadal Ali, 18, who fled the fighting and was recently staying in a local community center here for Kurdish refugees. "We want our own schools, our own hospitals. We want the government to admit our existence. We want recognition of our Kurdish identity."

These skirmishes between Kurds and Arabs take on a darker meaning for Syria as the rebels appear each day to gain momentum and the government appears less and less able to restore control. The rebels have taken over military bases, laid siege to Damascus and forced the airport to close.

But the rebels are largely Sunni Arabs, and the most effective among them are extremists aligned with Al Qaeda, a prospect that worries not only the West, but the Christians, Shiites, Druze — and Kurds — of Syria.

The fighting in Ras al-Ain, which came after a fierce battle between rebel and government forces last month, demonstrated the complexity of a bloody civil war that has already claimed more than 40,000 lives. Like the sectarian battles in Iraq after the American invasion, the recent violence between Arabs and Kurds in Syria indicates the further unra-



Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Syrian civilians fled from Ras al-Ain after two jets bombed the village, sending people into Ceylanpinar in neighboring Turkey. Ras al-Ain has also seen fighting between Syrian rebels and Kurds, rousing fears that Syria's ethnic groups will take up arms against one another in a bloody, post-Assad contest for power.

veling of a society whose mix of sects, identities and traditions were held together by the yoke of a dictator.

Analysts fear this combustible environment could presage a bloody ethnic and sectarian conflict that will resonate far beyond Syria's borders, especially if it involves the Kurds. There is concern that Iraq's Kurds, who are already training Syrian Kurds to fight, may jump into the Syria fight to protect their ethnic brethren. That could also pull in Turkey, which fears that an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria would become a haven for Kurdish militants to carry out cross-border attacks in the Kurdish areas in southeastern Turkey.

"The fear that an Arab-Kurdish confrontation has been ignited might lead the Kurds to ask for additional security forces to protect their lands," said Maria Fantappie, an Iraq analyst at the International Crisis Group, who is helping to prepare a report on the Syrian Kurds.

She said that the Syrian Kurdish fighters being trained in northern Iraq were on standby and could be sent to Syria, which would escalate the situation.

Before the uprising in Syria, the Kurds in Ras al-Ain lived peacefully with their Arab neighbors, they say. But the war has shredded those bonds just as surely as the revolutions in the region have prompted the Kurds to dream of an independent nation uniting the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran, and put their own stamp on the great contest for power under way

in the Middle East.

"Our time has come after so much suffering and persecution," said Barham Salih, the former prime minister of Iraq's regional Kurdish government. "The 20th century was cruel to the Kurds. Our rights, identity and culture were brutally suppressed."

Amid the fog of war here, there are recriminations. The rebels say the Kurds are cooperating with the government, a common perception among Arabs in Syria. This is partly because the government has withdrawn from Kurdish areas to concentrate on fighting rebel forces, and partly because the Assad government granted new rights like citizenship to the Kurds after the uprising began and issued them official identification cards, which they had long been denied.

At the same time, a powerful Syrian Kurdish militia, the Democratic Union Party, or P.Y.D., is an offshoot of the Kurdish militant group in Turkey known as the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or P.K.K., which has fought an insurgency within Turkey for nearly 30 years. As Turkey has supported the rebels within Syria, the perception has arisen that Mr. Assad's government and the P.Y.D., which is viewed suspiciously by other Kurdish factions, have coordinated to face a common enemy in Turkey.

The Kurds say the rebel fighters that came to Ras al-Ain, some of whom they say belonged to an extremist Islamist group, burned and looted their

village, inciting a sense among Kurds that if they did not fight now they could be left out of the spoils of power and autonomy in a post-Assad Syria.

A rebel fighter inside the village, who gave his name as Abu Mohammed, said that some Kurdish militants were fighting on the side of the government, but that rebels had no plans to penetrate deeper into Kurdish territory. "The regime is hoping and working hard to spark an Arab-Kurdish conflict," he said, a black radio in his hand and a sniper rifle slung from his shoulder. "We should save our efforts to fight the Assad forces, not our Kurdish brothers."

A Kurdish fighter worried that the fighting was just the beginning of a long struggle that would outlast the Assad government. "I am sure that Arabs and Kurds will fight each other for years and

years after the Assad regime is finished," said the fighter, Abu Zaradashit.

Lying in a hospital bed here, a rebel fighter named Haqer Hamed said he was shot in the leg after being ambushed by a group of Kurdish fighters. "The Kurds want their own small nation," he said. "Arabs don't mind if they have their own nation, but since they are working hand-in-hand with the regime, there will be fighting."

Ceylanpinar, a town of wheat and pistachio farmers and cattle breeders, like its sister village across the border, has a sizable Kurdish population, and the clashes have also heightened tensions here because local Kurds regard the Turkish government's support of the Syrian rebels as a threat. "Of course we are concerned," said Ismail Arslan, the mayor. Mr. Arslan, a Kurd, said, "There is clear support by

the Turkish government for the Arabs, the Free Syrian Army."

As the mayor spoke recently, a rumor was spreading through town that fighting would resume across the border in a couple of hours. The mayor's assistant received a call from a source who told him that a cease-fire for funerals would soon expire, and that the fighting would start again at precisely 3:30 p.m.

Sure enough, before a clutch of curious townspeople who had gathered at the cafe to watch, the gun trucks appeared at the appointed hour and the fight resumed. Under dimming skies, the playful shrieks of schoolchildren on one side of the border competed to be heard above the din of explosions and gunfire on the other.

Iraq's Senior Shia Clerics Prohibit Arab-Kurdish War



A group of Shia clerics meeting with Ayatollah Hussein Shahroudi in the holy city of Najaf. Photo: shahroudi.com

rudaw.net

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – As many Iraqis worry about a possible war between Iraqi troops and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in the disputed northern territories, the country's senior Shia clerics have issued religious prohibitions against such a conflict.

The latest reaction came on Wednesday from the Najaf Hawza, the prominent Shia religious institution, which issued a fatwa saying that, "Fighting the Kurds is haram (religiously prohibited)."

"Those Iraqi soldiers who die in battle against the Kurds are not considered martyrs," the Hawza said in a statement.

Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ignited tensions by sending in his controversial Dijla forces into the northern disputed territories that are also claimed by the Kurds. The autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government dispatched thou-

sands of its own Peshmerga forces into the territories, setting off a tense stand-off that has endured for weeks.

The Najaf statement accused Maliki of driving Iraq toward war for personal gain. "This war will not serve the Iraqis," it said.

Maliki, himself a Shia leader from the Dawa Party, has received a lot of criticism from the country's Shia clerics, among them Muqtada al-Sadr, the founder of the Mahdi Army.

The clerics said on Wednesday that the prime minister has not consulted the prominent Shia leaders about his recent actions, and that only a small circle of people around him are aware of his decisions.

The Najaf Hawza's statement mentions a letter received from the father of a soldier who has been sent to the disputed territories.

"In the letter, the father asked us whether his son would be considered a martyr

if he died in battle against the Kurds," the statement said. It added that the response of senior clerics was that he would not be considered a martyr.

In another part of the statement, the Shia religious institution said that Maliki has failed in his post as prime minister and should step down.

"Maliki has not yet been able to improve the security situation in Iraq," it said. "As prime minister and commander-in-chief, he failed to carry out this task and therefore must step down."

In restructuring the army and forming the Dijla Operations Command, the prime minister has reinstated a number of high-ranking officers from the former Iraqi army, causing a stir among both Kurdish and Shia officials.

"We will never forget Maliki's initiative to create a committee in order to return Saddam's followers to power," said the Najaf statement.

Also last week, Hussein al-Sadr, a senior Shia cleric, sent a letter to Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani, saying that several Shia clerics, including himself, had issued a fatwa that prohibited fighting the Kurds.

Meanwhile, the office of Ali Sistani, Iraq's grand Ayatollah, called on Maliki, "To be patient and stay away from a war that could only harm the Iraqis."

President Massoud Barzani applauded Sistani for his statement, saying, "History has repeated itself," a reference to existing bonds between Iraq's Kurdish and Shia populations.

Meanwhile, in response to a comment by Maliki that Arabs and Kurds were on the brink of war, President Barzani said on Wednesday: "We don't want war, but we are ready to protect our nation and our region." ■

The Syrian Kurdish Issue in Turkish-Iranian-Iraqi Relations

Turkey, Iran and Iraq are deeply worried about the aftermath of Syria's crisis. The irony is that Syria and Turkey had been teetering on the brink of war because of the Kurdish question and had agreed to cooperate against Kurdish ambitions. Ankara now perceives the development of the Syrian Kurdish issue as a serious national security threat, stresses Idrees Mohammed.

Middle East Online

Kurds in Syria will attract special attention from the triangle states of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Syria is the epicenter of powerful countries' interests and the Syrian Kurdish issue is multi-dimensional. The triangle states all include significant populations of Kurds and have shared and conflicting interests in relation to the Kurdish question and beyond. Ironically the Syrian Kurdish issue could contribute both to the improvement, and to the deterioration, of their interstate relationships. Grasping this complexity provides Syrian Kurds with further power to play politics; on the other hand, the same complexity could have negative ramifications with regard to the future of the Syrian Kurdish issue.

Turkey, Iran and Iraq are deeply worried about the aftermath of Syria's crisis. The irony is that Syria and Turkey had been teetering on the brink of war because of the Kurdish question and had agreed to cooperate against Kurdish ambitions. Ankara now perceives the development of the Syrian Kurdish issue as a serious national security threat. The improvement of the status of Kurds and the consolidation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), seen as being affiliated to the PKK, will make Turkish Kurds envious and increasingly motivate them to demand further rights.

Iran laments over Syria's crisis. Together with the Syrian regime, Iran was influential in regional and international politics. They had also cooperated on the Kurdish question, coordinating moves against Kurdish aspirations in Iraq and, reportedly, worked side by side on the Turkish Kurdish problem. The downfall of Syria's regime and the development of Syria's Kurdish issue could be a threat to the Iranian regime given its own Kurdish problem.

With respect to Iraq, Syria's crisis can be seen through three different lenses. While the Shiites feel the results of Syria's crisis will hurt their power, the Sunnis believe that time is on their side as it would bring strong Sunni leadership in Syria, while for the Kurds, Syria's crisis is a window of opportunity.

Iraqi Kurdistan benefits greatly from Syria's crisis although this crisis could somewhat, and temporarily, affect its relations with various actors. Nevertheless, Syrian Kurdish leverage contributes significantly to the development Iraqi Kurdish internal and external agendas. The landlocked Kurdish region has an extreme need for a route to the sea and that could be offered by Syrian Kurds. The political position of Iraqi Kurds vis-à-vis Baghdad would be strengthened. Moreover, and given the interstate characteristics of the Kurdish question, Iraqi Kurdish influence over Syrian Kurds will strengthen the leverage and bargaining power of Iraqi Kurdistan towards Turkey, Iran and even a future Syria.

The Syrian Kurds may be magnets for Iran and Turkey and a source of rivalry between them. Iranian involvement with Syrian Kurds is necessary and may, together with others, have three main purposes. Iran suffers from its own Kurdish problem and increasingly feels pressured by regional and international developments. Accordingly, it needs to keep a close eye on Syrian Kurdish measures. Should it not do that, the Kurds would move in their own preferred direction. Secondly, Iran needs to ease its problems caused by Syria's crisis. Explicit Iranian support for the Syrian regime has drawn Syrian opposition furious and

remote towards Tehran. Thirdly, Iranian regional rivals, including Turkey, have significant influence over Syria's crisis, which strengthens their regional position. The Arabs and Turkey would find it hard to digest a Kurdish federal region in Syria. Whereas Iran would feel that Syrian Kurds could be beneficial in affecting regional politics. Conversely, the Syria opposition has continually refused to accede to domestic Kurdish demands. Seeing themselves in a delicate position and afraid of losing considerable empowerment, the Kurds may consider making strategic alliances with Syrian Alawites and Iran, which would favor Iran.

There are attractive opportunities for Turkey to involve itself with the Syrian Kurds. First and foremost, Turkey continues to suffer from its endemic Kurdish problem, and the Turkish security mindset reflects a deep-seated fear of the state's territorial dismantlement. The defense of Iraq's territorial integrity and now the struggle for that of Syria has become Turkey's perennial end game. In addition, Turkey cannot achieve its ambitious dreams unless it resolves its own Kurdish problem. And these points are directly related to the Syrian Kurds. Secondly, Turkey and Iran are regional rivals for influence. Turkey tried to contain Iranian influence in Syria. Now that influence is waning Turkey does not want Iran to take any opportunity to practice influence through the Syrian Kurds. Thirdly, Turkey looks at Iraq and imagines the future of Syria. Security and political stability would remain fragile. Syrian Arabs would be greatly influenced by the Gulf powerhouses and only limited attention would be paid to Turkish interests. With Turkey increasing needing energy and trying to be a hub, it surely eyes on Syrian oil concentrated at Kurdish regions. On the other hand, the Kurds may favor alliances with Turkey. Iraqi Kurds were appreciative of Turkish help and considered it as a protector against the Arabs. Syrian Kurds may face difficult challenges like those faced by their Iraqi brethren.

Such a context certainly attracts both Iraqi and Turkish Kurds into the game. For a start, Kurds in Iraq and Turkey have a considerable influence on the future of Syrian Kurds. Turkey has developed good-natured relations with Iraqi Kurdistan and together they coordinate actions on the Syrian Kurdish issue. Bearing in mind the Syrian Kurdish issue, it has also stepped forward to reach its own Kurds, including the imprisoned PKK leader.

While relations between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan have been affected by Syria's crisis, Iran has recently appeared to seek a better understanding with Iraqi Kurds with regard to the Syrian Kurds. As for the Turkish Kurds, the Turkish government has publicly accused Iran of supporting the PKK.

It is a complex situation. Ankara and Tehran will continue to oppose to Kurdish statehood and Baghdad and Damascus will do the same. The Kurds will continue to seek greater rights and power. However, this does not mean that these states will not seek greater involvement with Kurds, but it will be exclusive insofar as specific Kurdish ambitions and Ankara's and Teheran's interests are viewed. This also does not imply that the Kurds should not seek or accept cooperation and involvement with them, but that it should be exclusive insofar as specific Kurdish interests are regarded. □

Idrees Mohammed holds an MA in International Relations from Warsaw University. His thesis was on Turkey's policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan. He now largely monitors and writes on Turkish foreign policy and Kurdish issues.

OPINION/ GÜVEN SAK

Why Turkey wants Kurdish oil

There are two types of countries in the world – those in which you get to your email as soon as you turn on your smart phone at the airport and those in which you do not. Erbil's sleek International Airport in northern Iraq puts its country in the first type. It is part of our civilization. The airport was modernized in 2010, by a Turkish construction company of course. That didn't mean, however, that Turkey's energy minister was welcome. Baghdad did not allow his private jet to land, preventing the minister from participating at an oil and gas conference in the city.

The last time I was there about a year ago, I was struck by a new Family Mall close by. Everything in the place – brands, signs, goods – were Turkish. Even at the food court, the restaurant has a menu in Turkish and all the waiters were from Turkey. By Turkey, I am referring to Şırnak province on the border. So all Turkish SMEs have been rather active in northern Iraq since the first government of Nechirvan Barzani. Nowadays, the area of the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG) has a new meaning for Turkey. Among the plethora of commercial possibilities, however, it is the Kurdish oil that interests us the most these days.

Turkey is heavily dependent on imported oil and natural gas. The country is not a producer of carbon-based fossil fuels. Turkey's energy bill is around 60 billion Turkish Liras, about half of all imports, and is likely to increase further. That is not good for a country with high current account deficits. But the energy bill is not the reason for imbalance. South Korea is also a net importer of energy but suffers from no related structural problem in its current account balance. In this cooling down period of 2012, Turkey's growth rate has declined about 70 percent, from 9 percent to 3 percent, while the decline in the current account deficit is only a meager 30 percent from 10 percent to 7.5 percent of GDP.

Look at Turkey's other energy partners: Iran and Russia. Hardly ideal. Turkey has been paying Iran with gold to circumvent sanctions, but new U.S. legis-

lation will soon make that impossible. That only means that we can expect price hikes on the Russian energy bill. Bad for the already-high current account deficit figure, especially in a period of slow growth. That bodes ill for the sustainability of the current account deficit in 2013.

Diversification is always good, but this regional turbulence makes Turkey even more interested in Kurdish oil and natural gas. It is definitely a nascent supply route to Turkey. Turkey is also important for the KRG to market its own natural resources, now that Syria's alternative supply route is closed for the coming five years at least. So a win-win situation? Not so, thinks Baghdad's federal government, putting a ban on the private jet of the Turkish energy minister.

The trouble with Turkey is its schizophrenic attitudes toward the Kurds. If the Kurds in the south are considered indispensable allies, then so should be the ones in the north. Erbil was part of Mosul province in the past, with all its ethnic divergence.

Vilayet-i Musul was also part of the National Treaty (Misak-ı Milli) of Turkey's 1920 Liberation War, a fact neither Ankara nor Baghdad seems to have forgotten. ○



Iraq gets tough with Turkey over Kurds

BAGHDAD, December 5, 2012 (UPI)

The Iraqi government has stopped an airliner carrying Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz landing in Iraqi Kurdistan amid Baghdad's deepening rift with Ankara over its support Iraq's independence-minded Kurds.

The Kurds, who have a semiautonomous enclave in northern Iraq, are locked in a tense confrontation with Iraqi troops in the region because of long-simmering disputes over land and oil.

Ankara's backing for the Kurdistan Regional Government, whose territory contains an estimated 45 billion barrels of oil and 211 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, threatens a showdown with the Turks that could inflame tensions with Syria and Iran in a region already torn by war.

The decision Tuesday by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to refuse Yildiz's aircraft permission to land at Erbil, the Kurdish capital, imposed greater strains on Baghdad's relations with the Turks at a critical juncture.

Yildiz was heading to Erbil to attend the closing session of a Kurdistan oil and gas conference intended to accelerate the enclave's drive to establish its own energy industry operating independently of the cen-

tral government, a move Baghdad clearly found offensive.

The Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil has signed exploration deals with oil majors like Exxon Mobil and Chevron of the United States, Total of France, and Gazprom of Russia, along with some 40 smaller foreign companies.

Baghdad refuses to recognize the contracts, branding them illegal. The KRG's deals with Exxon and the other majors are likely to end their investment in Iraq's mega oil fields in the south.

Other majors, particularly Chinese companies, are eager to take their place in boosting Iraq's oil production but the defections were a bitter humiliation for Baghdad and could set back its ambitious oil strategy.

This dispute with Baghdad, over oil rights and revenue-sharing, is only one component of the multilayered rift between Erbil and Baghdad, but the banning of Yildiz's aircraft reflects the growing tensions between the KRG and the federal government as well between Iraq and Turkey.

Baghdad was incensed in August after Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu made an unannounced visit to the flashpoint city of Kirkuk, which the Kurds claim is part of their territory along with its oilfields, without informing Baghdad.

Kirkuk "is a red line for the Kurds," observed Joost Hilteermann of the International Crisis group. "The Kurds will never give up the city."

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants to make his country into the energy hub between east and west, which is why it's dealing directly with the KRG.

It's offered to build oil and gas pipelines from landlocked Kurdistan to its Mediterranean export terminals, allowing the Kurds to bypass Baghdad's pipeline network.



→ In recent weeks, Maliki and Erdogan have engaged in a war of words, accusing each other of pushing their countries toward conflict.

Erdogan has also given sanctuary to Iraq's fugitive vice president, Tariq al-Hashemi, a minority Sunni who has been sentenced to death in absentia by a Baghdad court on charges of murder and treason against Maliki's Shiite-controlled government.

He denies the charges and says he was framed by Maliki, who's widely seen to be accumulating dictatorial powers following the U.S. military withdrawal in December 2011.

Baghdad's refusal to relinquish Kirkuk, traditionally a Kurdish city that Saddam Hussein sought to Arabize by forcibly driving out Kurdish inhabitants, has long been a powder keg waiting to explode.

Amid the growing tension between Baghdad and Erbil, there are concerns it could explode and touch off a shooting war between Iraq's Shiite majority and the Sunni Kurds, amid the wider sectarian strains.

The trigger could come from a standoff between battle-seasoned Kurdish fighters known as peshmerga -- "those who face death" -- and Maliki's mainly Shiite forces in disputed territory in northern Iraq.

Kurdish leaders want to expand their semiautonomous enclave across territory stretching from Iraq's eastern border to with Iran to the western frontier with Syria, a predominantly Kurdish region that also contains most of Syria's oil reserves.

This has raised suspicions the Iraqi Kurds may be seeking to establish a wider Kurdish state embracing Syria's Kurds, and energy resources, should war-torn Syria fragment.

Maliki warned Saturday of "ethnic conflict" after efforts to ease tension stalled. Baghdad refused to dismantle the newly established Tigris Operations Command that covers disputed territory in Kirkuk, Salaheddin and Diyala provinces in the north. □

TheNational DECEMBER 7, 2012

Genel in Kurdish oil link to Turkey

thenational.ae / Florian Neuhofer

ERBIL // Genel Energy, the biggest oil producer in Kurdistan, plans to fund a pipeline from the autonomous region in Iraq to Turkey.

Tony Hayward, the company's chief executive, expects work on a 1 million barrel per day (bpd) pipeline from Kurdish oilfields to the Turkish border to begin in the first half of next year, even as relations between Ankara and Baghdad have soured.

"We are intent on investing and funding that development," he said at an energy conference held in Erbil this week.

Genel will complete a pipeline connecting its Taq Taq oilfield to another field this month. The new pipeline would connect that field to the border.

The company is also drawing up plans to export gas to Turkey.

"We are developing plans to install a gas transport infrastructure, said Mr Hayward, who formerly headed BP.

"The additional infrastructure required to connect Kurdish gas to the Turkish gas network is modest and technologically straightforward."

Genel's plans will be met with displeasure by Iraq's central government, which has for some time been feuding with both Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) over their cooperation in the energy sector.

Baghdad's displeasure became apparent on Tuesday, when its air traffic controllers refused to allow the Turkish energy minister Taner Yildiz the right to land at the airport in Erbil, where he was due to attend a conference.

An article by Iraq Oil Report published that day suggested that Turkey and the KRG were close to signing a large energy contract that would result in a Turkish government-backed oil company developing Kurdish oilfields and building pipelines.



Turkey is keen to establish closer ties with Kurdistan in an effort to ensure its energy supplies. Above, the Kar refinery in Erbil. Sebastian Meyer / Corbis

"We are having serious discussions with the company," the KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani was quoted as saying.

"We hope they participate in the region."

So far, KRG oil exports flow through Iraq's export infrastructure.

But if Kurdish ambitions to increase production capacity from the current 250,000 bpd to 1 million bpd by 2015 are realised, the existing pipelines will be insufficient.

Turkey is keen to establish close ties with the hydrocarbon-rich KRG in an effort to ensure energy supplies for fast-growing domestic demand.

The two governments in May signed an energy and security agreement.

"We believe that will pave the way for oil and gas exports from northern Iraq to Turkey," said Mr Hayward.

Baghdad is unhappy at what it sees as an infringement on its sovereignty. Relations with Ankara were already strained after Turkey's foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu made an unscheduled visit to

Kirkuk, a city at the centre of dispute between the central government and Erbil, in August.

The Iraqi government also considers the contracts signed by the KRG and international oil companies to be illegal and is refusing to pay for oil produced in the autonomous region at full price.

Genel, which aims to produce 140,000 bpd in the KRG by 2014, also wants to profit from the rising Turkish demand for natural gas.

"Rapid growth in overall [Turkish] gas consumption is expected to continue," said Mr Hayward, who said that gas was the "next phase in the development of the Kurdistan region of Iraq hydrocarbons".

Genel hopes to produce 4 billion cubic metres a year from Kurdish gasfields by 2015.

Mr Hayward said he believed Kurdistan would supply about 20 per cent of Turkish gas demand by the end of the decade. ●



Le président du Kurdistan irakien inspecte les troupes à Kirkouk

KIRKOUK (Irak), 10 décembre 2012 (AFP)

LE PRÉSIDENT de la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien, Massoud Barzani, a passé en revue lundi les forces de sécurité kurdes, les peshmergas, dans la province contestée de Kirkouk, dans le nord de l'Irak, a indiqué un général kurde.

Cette visite pourrait augmenter encore les tensions avec Bagdad. La dégradation des relations entre le Kurdistan et les autorités centrales a poussé les deux parties à déployer des renforts de troupes dans le nord de l'Irak.

"Le président de la région du Kurdistan irakien (M. Barzani, NDLR) a inspecté des unités de peshmergas situées dans la périphérie de (la ville de) Kirkouk", chef-lieu de la province éponyme, a indiqué à l'AFP un commandant de brigade peshmerga, le général de division, Chirko Rauf.

Selon M. Rauf, M. Barzani a souligné devant les troupes peshmergas "l'importance de maintenir la fraternité et la paix et de servir tous les (habitants) de Kirkouk".

Cette province fait partie des territoires du nord de l'Irak que les dirigeants kurdes souhaitent intégrer à leur région autonome, ce à quoi les autorités centrales irakiennes s'opposent.



La dispute sur les territoires contestés dans le nord de l'Irak est l'un des dossiers les plus susceptibles de menacer à terme la stabilité et l'unité de l'Irak, à en croire analystes et diplomates. ◻

Bagdad et Erbil divergent également sur la répartition des revenus du pétrole et le partage du pouvoir.



6 décembre 2012

SYRIE • L'échec moral de la révolution

L'armée rebelle a recours à la torture et aux exécutions sommaires. Des pratiques de mauvais augure pour l'avenir du pays.

Al-Mustaqbal | Omar Abdallah |

La révolution syrienne va entrer dans sa deuxième année et, malgré la mort et la destruction que l'armée de Bachar El-Assad a semées à travers tout le pays, elle réussit à poursuivre son combat pour la chute du régime. Il n'empêche qu'elle a échoué sur plusieurs fronts, le plus important étant celui de la morale. Elle n'a pas su rejeter les us et coutumes instaurés par un demi-siècle de règne du Baas. D'aucuns diront que dans la phase actuelle il faut se contenter d'affronter le régime et repousser à une phase ultérieure la reconstruction du pays, des villes et des hommes. Or cette vision des choses est trop étroite. Car la révolution est un changement radical [pas seulement du régime au sens étroit du terme], mais de tout ce qui le sous-tend, à savoir un ensemble de conceptions politiques, sociales, économiques et morales. Aussi la révolution doit-elle se dresser contre le système dans son intégralité, y compris dans sa dimension morale.

L'expression la plus évidente de cet échec réside dans un certain nombre d'actes de l'Armée libre syrienne [l'armée des rebelles]. Ce que le général Daoud a fait à Idlib [dans le nord de la Syrie] –

l'exécution des hommes du barrage de Hamichou – a été tout simplement la répétition conforme de ce que les forces d'Assad avaient fait à Baniyas [dans le nord de la Syrie] au début de la révolution. Il ne s'agit pas de discuter pour savoir si ces hommes devaient être exécutés, mais de la manière de procéder [exécutions sommaires] et de traiter les soldats prisonniers. De même, à Alep, des soldats rebelles ont ouvert le feu sur des manifestants kurdes qui leur refusaient l'entrée dans leur quartier.

Ces pratiques, qui se sont répandues et sont de plus en plus visibles, sont de mauvais augure pour l'avenir de la Syrie. Le plus grave est qu'on y réagisse en disant qu'on n'a pas le droit de demander des comptes aux soldats qui se sacrifient pour le peuple. Ce faisant, nous produisons sans nous en rendre compte un nouveau tyran dont il sera d'autant plus difficile de venir à bout qu'il est armé. Nous ne voulons pas diffamer l'Armée libre, qui reste, malgré toutes ses erreurs, le bouclier de la révolution. Mais, nous devons être attentifs à ces comportements afin de ne pas nous retrouver plus tard à dire que "c'était mieux sous Assad".

L'autre aspect de la problématique morale réside dans la corruption et



▲ Dessin de Tiounine paru dans Kommersant, Moscou.

l'arrivisme qui se sont répandus comme une traînée de poudre. On entend souvent parler d'Untel qui a reçu telle somme en provenance de tel pays mais sans que les gens en voient la couleur, l'argent restant bloqué sur un compte en banque. De même, il y a l'opportunisme politique et la tentation d'engranger des bénéfices sur le dos des Syriens, de trahir les martyrs et de poursuivre des intérêts personnels ou communautaires au détriment de la patrie. Tout cela mine la confiance que les Syriens peuvent avoir en leurs hommes politiques. ♦

Iran : des opposants en exil tentent de s'organiser

Les effets des sanctions internationales et des « printemps arabes » ravivent l'espoir d'un affaiblissement du régime

Prague
Envoyé spécial

Au sous-sol d'un anonyme hôtel international de Prague, un simple sigle est affiché sur la porte : UDI, pour Unity for Democracy in Iran. Entre deux séminaires d'entreprises percent les échos lancinants du persan. Les 17 et 18 novembre s'est tenue, dans la capitale tchèque, la troisième conférence de cette nouvelle organisation encore peu connue sur la scène de l'opposition iranienne en exil.

Fondée officiellement en février 2012 à Stockholm, l'Union pour la démocratie en Iran s'est déjà réunie en juillet à Bruxelles. Difficile de définir ce qu'est l'UDI. Pas un parti ni une coalition : elle n'est pas assez organisée et hiérarchisée. Pas non plus un think tank ou un forum, mais plutôt une plateforme de réflexion et d'action. C'est un « parapluie », disent ses organisateurs, un lieu de rencontre destiné à dégager des consensus au sein d'une opposition qui a toujours été handicapée par ses divisions et des ambitions concurrentes.

Mais, en cette fin d'année, l'humeur est à l'optimisme parmi les participants à la réunion. « Les sanctions occidentales [en représailles au programme nucléaire controversé] commencent à faire

Le Guide suprême « a été délégitimé et le mouvement pour la démocratie se propage sous la peau de la société »

Mohsen Sazgara

l'un des fondateurs de l'Union pour la démocratie en Iran

mal au régime. La population souffre et l'on sait que les Iraniens rejettent le régime depuis les manifestations de 2009. Avec ce qui se passe

en Syrie et dans le monde arabe, tout est possible aujourd'hui en Iran », résume Mohsen Sazgara, 58 ans, l'une des têtes pensantes de l'UDI, en exil depuis 2004.

M. Sazgara connaît bien le régime, il en a été un farouche supporter – il a fondé les Gardiens de la révolution (pasdarans) – avant de prendre ses distances et de partir aux Etats-Unis, où il travaille pour la Fondation George W. Bush. « Nous devons utiliser la prochaine présidentielle [prévue en juin 2013] pour gagner les classes populaires à la cause de la démocratie. »

Pour Mohsen Sazgara, l'une des principales faiblesses du « mouvement vert », qui avait suivi la réélection contestée de Mahmoud Ahmadi-néjad en juin 2009, était de n'avoir pas su rallier les classes populaires et de n'être pas sorti des grandes villes. Malgré la chape de plomb et les dizaines de milliers d'emprisonnements, M. Sazgara est convaincu qu'« Ali Khamenei [le Guide suprême] a été délégitimé et [que] le mouvement pour la démocratie se propage sous la peau de la société ».

Tout en redoutant une guerre aux effets désastreux, les participants à la conférence de l'UDI – 120 personnes venues de toute l'Europe, des Etats-Unis et de Turquie – parlent ouvertement d'un possible effondrement du régime, sous la pression conjuguée de l'Occident et du mécontentement social intérieur. Ils veulent en voir les signes avant-coureurs dans la multiplication des grèves et des dissensions au sommet de l'Etat, où chacun se rejette la faute du fiasco économique et de l'isolement diplomatique.

« Il est de notre responsabilité de nous tenir prêts », explique Djavad Khadem, un autre organisateur, proche de l'ancien premier ministre assassiné, Chapour Bakhtiar. Nous devons réfléchir à ce que sera la transition afin que le pays ne sombre pas dans le chaos. Nous

essayons de dégager des points de consensus. »

L'UDI n'a ni charte ni instances. C'est un rassemblement informel, dont les participants, militants politiques ou intellectuels sans étiquette, sont invités à titre personnel. De fait, presque toutes les sensibilités politiques sont représentées, à l'exception des royalistes purs et durs, des Moudjahidine du peuple et de la branche radicale du Parti communiste.

Un tel éventail, qui s'étend des nationalistes aux Kurdes, des libéraux aux réformateurs, des capitalistes aux socialistes, est sans précédent dans les annales de l'opposition iranienne en exil, qui continue de se déchirer sur trois points essentiels : le niveau de centralisme de l'Etat, le degré de libéralisme ou de dirigisme dans l'économie et la place du religieux dans la politique.

« Si on ne se met pas d'accord sur les règles d'un dialogue, ces désaccords risquent de nous tuer, met en garde Shariar Ahy, l'un des fondateurs de l'UDI. En 2005, les Irakiens ont eu des élections totalement libres, cela ne les a pas empêchés de se massacrer ensuite. »

« Il y a ici des gens qui ne se parlaient pas il y a dix ans », souligne la journaliste Sharan Tabari. Ainsi, Nasser Iranpour, un intellectuel kurde vivant en Allemagne, a exposé son projet d'Etat fédéral. A la sortie, un conférencier l'aborde : « Pour moi, le fédéralisme a toujours été synonyme de séparatisme. Aujourd'hui, je viens de comprendre que non. » « Seul le fédéralisme sauvera l'Iran », renchérit Iranpour.

La question des minorités – Turcomans, Azéris, Arabes, Baloutches et Kurdes – est l'une des plus épineuses. Sans compter les cultes non reconnus par l'islam comme les bahais ou les yarsanis, qui s'estiment eux-mêmes opprimés par les nationalistes kurdes.

L'on a donc beaucoup discuté, au sein de studieux petits groupes de travail, de réformes constitutionnelles, de décentralisation et

de fédéralisme, de politique économique et de statut de la femme, ou encore de la place de la culture et de la religion.

Mais l'UDI ne veut pas seulement réfléchir à l'avenir, elle travaille à changer le présent en réfléchissant, par exemple, à la création

d'une chaîne d'information par satellite sur le modèle d'Al-Jazira ou encore aux moyens de contourner la « grande muraille » que le régime tente de mettre en place pour isoler Internet. Des formations à l'action non violente sont envisagées.

Ces groupes de travail donnent parfois lieu à d'intéressants affrontements générationnels. « Quand j'entends des intellectuels remettre en question l'économie de marché,

j'ai l'impression d'être face à des fossiles », s'esclaffe Ahmad Eshghyar, un jeune militant de 29 ans qui a participé à la campagne de Mir Hossain Moussavi, candidat malheureux à la dernière présidentielle.

L'arrivée en exil de milliers de ces jeunes issus du « mouvement vert » a donné un second souffle à la diaspora politique tout en la bousculant. L'amalgame prendra-t-il ? L'UDI s'est fixé pour objectif de publier une charte et de se mettre en mouvement en février 2013, avant la présidentielle. Il faudra évidemment des moyens. Pour l'instant, la seule aide étrangère revendiquée par l'UDI provient du centre Olaf-Palme, en Suède.

Quand on fait remarquer aux organisateurs que l'opposition en exil n'a jamais eu beaucoup d'influence sur le cours de choses en Iran, M. Ahy répond du tac au tac : « Khomeiny venait bien de l'étranger quand il a pris le pouvoir ! »

Signe que le régime de Téhéran commence à prendre l'UDI au sérieux, il a accusé ses participants, au lendemain de la réunion de Prague, d'être « des agents à la solde du Mossad et de la CIA ». ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

Syrie : l'OTAN divisée sur la menace chimique

Au sein de l'Alliance, certains s'inquiètent d'une intervention sur la base de renseignements aléatoires

Le spectre de la manipulation du renseignement par l'administration Bush pour justifier la guerre d'Irak en 2003 revient hanter la relation transatlantique. Un vif malaise est apparu depuis environ une semaine au sein de l'Alliance atlantique, où les analyses divergent sur le danger d'un recours aux armes chimiques en Syrie.

Début décembre, l'administration Obama a commencé à diffuser dans les médias américains des renseignements faisant état de signes d'une militarisation d'une partie de l'arsenal chimique syrien, laissant entendre qu'un acte apocalyptique du pouvoir syrien n'était pas à exclure au moment de sa chute, jugée proche. Selon ces informations, des précurseurs chimiques – des éléments qui composent le gaz sarin – auraient commencé à être mélangés sur quelques sites syriens. Mais ces allégations suscitent chez plusieurs alliés des demandes de clarification, si ce n'est de la méfiance.

La France, l'Allemagne, les Pays-Bas et la Pologne font partie des pays européens qui se demandent si l'administration Obama ne cherche pas à entraîner des alliés dans une intervention militaire en Syrie au prétexte d'une sécurisation de l'arsenal chimique, alors que la réalité d'un danger imminent d'emploi de ces engins ne leur paraît pas irréfutablement démontrée.

« Nous avons déjà fait une guerre sur la base de renseignements fallacieux, nous n'allons pas en refaire une deuxième ! » déclare au Monde, sous le couvert de l'anonymat, un haut responsable d'un pays ayant pris part à la coalition en Irak. « Nous devons voir les preuves », insiste-t-il. « On a tous à l'esprit cette scène où Colin Powell [alors secrétaire d'Etat de George Bush] brandissait à l'ONU des images de camions et une fiole » pour tenter de légitimer la guerre d'Irak, commente une source diplomatique d'un des pays sceptiques.

La grande différence avec le cas irakien est que personne ne met en doute l'existence d'un stock d'armes de destruction massive en Syrie : « 1 000 tonnes » de substances meurtrières réparties sur

« 31 sites », a décrit le ministre français des affaires étrangères, Laurent Fabius, dimanche 9 décembre. C'est sur la réalité et la signification des informations avancées par Washington que porte le contentieux.

Les désaccords transatlantiques opposent deux « camps » dans un découpage qui, sans être identique, rappelle les fissures au sein de l'Alliance à propos de l'Irak et de la Libye. D'un côté : les Etats-Unis, le Royaume-Uni, la Turquie et le secrétaire général de l'OTAN, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, perçus comme interventionnistes. De l'autre : l'Allemagne, les Pays-Bas, la Pologne et, dans une moindre mesure, la France, inquiets d'un scénario « à l'irakienne » où des forces armées seraient engagées sur la base de renseignements aléatoires.

C'est dans le huis clos d'un dîner des ministres des affaires étrangères de l'OTAN, le 4 décembre à Bruxelles, que ces tiraillements ont pris une tournure virulente. La veille, le président Obama avait déclaré que « l'emploi d'armes chimiques » serait « totalement inacceptable » et aurait des « conséquences ». Les ministres écoutent – certains sont stupéfaits – un propos liminaire du secrétaire général de l'OTAN, qui propose que l'Alliance se lance dans un travail de « planification » pour une éventuelle opération visant à mettre les armes chimiques syriennes en sécurité. Il est appuyé par Hillary Clinton, la secrétaire d'Etat américaine, qui souligne la gravité de l'enjeu chimique. Et par le Britannique, William Hague, qui dit « why not » (pour-

quoi pas). Le ministre turc, Ahmet Davutoglu, semble renchérir, fournissant des détails sur l'état de « préparation » de l'arsenal syrien.

Mais le ministre allemand, Guido Westerwelle, et son homologue néerlandais, Frans Timmermans, sont « furieux », selon des témoins. Ils semblent croire à un complot. Ils font valoir qu'au moment où ils doivent passer devant leurs Parlements respectifs pour faire valider le déploiement de missiles Patriot en Turquie, la mise à l'étude par l'OTAN d'une intervention en Syrie est inenvisageable. Les Patriot apparaîtraient comme l'avant-garde d'une action militaire extérieure, alors que l'OTAN a pris soin de les présenter comme purement défensifs.

M. Fabius adopte une position prudente. Il est du côté des sceptiques, mais sans emphase. En septembre, il avait déclaré qu'en cas d'utilisation d'armes chimiques, la réponse serait « massive et foudroyante ». Depuis l'été, les Etats-Unis, la France et le Royaume-Uni ont fixé comme seule « ligne rouge » non pas le nombre de civils tués en Syrie (plus de 40 000), mais le recours aux engins chimiques. Une intervention serait alors auto-

matique, ont-ils prévenu.

Mais quel serait exactement le facteur déclencheur ? La notion d'« emploi » peut-elle recouvrir l'étape de la militarisation des

Côté français, on souligne que les informations mises en avant par les Américains sont non corroborées

armes, les préparatifs à leur usage, ce qui rendrait l'intervention préventive ? Comment s'accorder sur la fiabilité du renseignement disponible ? Quel rôle pour l'OTAN ? Avec quel mandat ? Ces questionnements sont très présents à Paris.

Le fait est que les responsables français ne disposent pas des mêmes renseignements que ceux diffusés par Washington. M. Fabius y fait allusion devant la presse. Les informations sur un « mouvement » de précurseurs chimiques « n'ont pas été vérifiées... pas été confirmées », dit-il, le 4 décembre.

On souligne, côté français, que la « source » des informations mises en avant par les Américains est « unique » et qu'il y a donc « un problème d'établissement des faits ». La diplomatie française se méfie, en outre, d'un nouvel engagement de l'OTAN en terre arabe. « Ce n'est pas la bonne enceinte », explique une source proche du dossier.

A la fin du dîner, M. Rasmussen balaie les objections, et déclare : « J'ai entendu ce que vous dites, mais ne soyez pas étonnés si vous voyez de la planification sur la table. » M^{me} Clinton ne le contredit pas. Mais elle aurait été contrariée par cette approche à la hussarde, contre-productive pour unifier les alliés. A défaut de s'accorder, les membres de l'OTAN ont, pour la première fois, lancé une réflexion sur une action militaire en Syrie. ■

NATALIE NOUGAYRÈRE

L'Etat juif craint plus que tout le détournement d'engins chimiques au profit de groupes extrémistes

La base Cheikh Souleimane aux mains des djihadistes

Un groupe djihadiste, composé en partie de combattants étrangers, arabes ou originaires du Caucase, a conquis dimanche 9 décembre la base militaire Cheikh Souleimane, située à 12 km au nord d'Alep. Ils ont pris de vitesse les unités de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), qui participaient également au siège. Cette base militaire, où était stationné le bataillon 111 de l'armée,

s'étend sur plusieurs kilomètres carrés. Elle était la dernière garnison d'importance à proximité d'Alep encore sous le contrôle du régime syrien. Cet assaut intervient deux jours après la création d'un nouveau commandement chapeautant la plupart des groupes insurgés, à l'exception des djihadistes, dont le Jabhat Al-Nosra, force montante de la rébellion. – (AFP.)

Pinar Selek dans les mâchoires du système judiciaire turc

Acquittée deux fois, cette sociologue réfugiée à Strasbourg est à nouveau poursuivie pour un attentat... qui n'a pas eu lieu.

LAURE MARCHAND
ISTANBUL

TURQUIE Le cas Pinar Selek sera peut-être un jour enseigné aux étudiants en droit comme un exemple des égarements de la justice turque. Cette sociologue réfugiée à Strasbourg est harcelée judiciairement depuis quatorze ans. Son procès pour terrorisme reprend mercredi devant la cour pénale n° 12 d'Istanbul alors qu'elle a déjà été acquittée deux fois. Une affaire ubuesque, dans laquelle elle est toujours menacée d'une condamnation à perpétuité pour terrorisme.

Tout commence en juillet 1998 par une explosion au bazar égyptien d'Istanbul, près de la Corne d'or, qui fait sept morts. Deux jours plus tard, Pinar Selek est placée en garde à vue et torturée. La police veut connaître les noms des militants de la guérilla kurde du PKK qu'elle a interrogés dans le cadre de ses recherches. Le 12 août, Abdülmecit Öztürk, un Kurde soupçonné de faire partie du PKK, est arrêté. Au cours de son interrogatoire, il dit avoir fabriqué avec Pinar Selek une bombe qui a été posée dans le petit restaurant du marché où l'explosion s'est produite. Très vite, l'homme se rétractera, dira avoir donné son nom sous la torture et sera finalement innocenté. Sur les causes du drame, les rapports d'expertises concluent à... une fuite de gaz.

Un militantisme mal vu

L'attentat étant en fait un accident, les



charges contre Pinar Selek, accusée d'avoir « posé une bombe » qui n'a jamais existé, devraient en toute logique être abandonnées. Mais le procureur s'acharne. À deux reprises, en 2008 et 2011, un acquittement est pourtant prononcé. Le 22 novembre dernier, à la faveur d'une absence du juge qui suit l'affaire, la 12^e cour, qui avait reconnu par deux fois sa non-culpabilité, se dédit et annule sa décision - une impossibilité en droit.

Pinar Selek se dit à bout de forces et de patience : « Quatorze ans et demi à lutter, c'est presque une vie, dit-elle. C'est comme un supplice chinois, tant que le procès n'est pas terminé, je ne peux pas guérir des séquelles laissées par la torture, elles sont à chaque fois ravivées. » Aujourd'hui âgée

de 41 ans, elle poursuit une thèse sur les mouvements sociaux en Turquie à l'université de Strasbourg. Lorsqu'elle vivait à Istanbul, la jeune femme engagée à gauche a été de tous les combats pour défendre les minorités opprimées par l'État. En s'acharnant sur elle, la justice lui fait payer ce militantisme, mal vu en Turquie.

Pour le politologue Samim Akgönül, professeur à l'université de Strasbourg, le cauchemar que subit Pinar Selek est révélateur de la nature de la justice en Turquie : « Depuis le début de la République, la justice ne s'est jamais privée de violer la loi, en 1930 comme en 2012. Elle ne protège pas les citoyens, elle protège l'État, qui est sacré, contre les individus, qui sont perçus comme une menace pour la pérennité de l'État. » Ce fonctionnement explique pourquoi la Turquie est le pays le plus condamné par la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme.

Pinar Selek bénéficie d'un puissant comité de soutien en France. Catherine Trautmann, parlementaire européenne, a envoyé une lettre au premier ministre Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Le président de son université, Alain Beretz, a pris publiquement position en sa faveur. « Pinar Selek est un symbole, poursuit Samim Akgönül. Combien sont-ils à pourrir dans les geôles turques pour des histoires similaires ? » ■

AFP

Un jésuite chassé de Syrie rejoint une communauté monastique au Kurdistan irakien

CITE DU VATICAN, 10 décembre 2012 (AFP)

LE PÈRE JÉSUITE Paolo Dall'Oglio, fondateur d'une communauté monastique en Syrie qu'il avait été contraint de quitter en juin, a rejoint une autre communauté créée à Souleimaniyeh au Kurdistan irakien, a-t-il indiqué lundi à l'agence vaticane Fides.

« Avec les frères du monastère, je prierai pour la paix en Syrie, dans l'attente et dans l'espérance de pouvoir y retourner », a déclaré le fondateur de la communauté de Mar Moussa, à 90 km au nord de Damas, qui a été un lieu original de rencontres et de prière entre christianisme et islam.

Le père Dall'Oglio, à l'origine il y a une trentaine d'années de cette initiative attirant jeunes chrétiens et musulmans, a pris des positions très fermes contre la répression armée du régime de Bachar al-Assad, et avait été contraint par les autorités ecclésiastiques de son diocèse à partir.

Paolo Dall'Oglio, qui est aussi un connaisseur de l'islam, a été accueilli dans la petite communauté monastique de Deir Maryam el Adhra, fondée il y a seulement quelques mois dans le quartier de Sabunkaran à Souleimaniyeh, après

que l'évêque chaldéen de Kirkouk, Mgr Louis Sako, eut donné son agrément à sa venue.

Le père jésuite avait dû quitter la Syrie la mort dans l'âme. En septembre, il avait été accusé par le régime de Bachar al-Assad d'être complice de l'opposition armée, et même d'Al-Qaïda.

Critique envers des évêques syriens jugés trop pro-Assad, ce jésuite italien énergique, à la parole forte, a depuis lors rencontré différents responsables arabes et occidentaux, pour faire prévaloir l'idée du soutien à l'opposition démocratique. Seule manière selon lui d'éviter une dérive islamiste.

La ville de Souleimaniyeh au nord de l'Irak est peuplée de kurdes musulmans, mais héberge aussi une communauté chrétienne originaire à la fois des montagnes du nord de l'Irak et des villes plus au sud comme Bagdad, que ces chrétiens ont dû fuir ces dernières années en raison des menaces islamistes.

La nouvelle petite communauté, dont la vocation et l'identité sont en cours de définition, est dans la lignée de celle fondée à Mar Moussa. L'Eglise chaldéenne, a relevé Fides, "n'est pas une Eglise d'Etat, elle est l'héritière d'une très riche expérience historique d'interaction avec l'islam et d'ouverture vers l'est, de l'Iran à la Chine". ○

La tragédie syrienne et la politique du pire

La solution militaire avance en Syrie, lentement, inexorablement, et au prix de centaines de victimes supplémentaires chaque semaine, depuis bientôt deux ans.

Le régime avait imposé le choix des armes en faisant mitrailler les cortèges pacifiques qui marquèrent les premiers mois du soulèvement syrien. Cette option tactique, si l'on ose qualifier ainsi un choix tragique, se retourne aujourd'hui contre lui.

Il y a encore dix mois, ses troupes étaient capables de chasser les combattants rebelles

de son cousin Rami Makhlouf révélèrent les véritables ressorts d'un clan prédateur.

Les redoutables capacités militaires dont dispose encore le régime lui permettent de retarder une chute pourtant inéluctable. Elles suscitent désormais les plus vives inquiétudes des Occidentaux. Contrairement à la Libye, la Syrie est effectivement dotée d'armes non conventionnelles.

Leur usage par un pouvoir aux abois ou leur pillage par les combattants djihadistes, que le pourrissement syrien a attirés – comme auparavant en Afghanistan ou en Irak –, ne sont pas à exclure. Avec les conséquences que l'on imagine. C'est cette menace, encore très imprécise, qui pousse ces pays à prononcer le mot jusque-là interdit d'intervention, et à en débattre au sein de l'OTAN.

Comme si les quarante mille morts syriens, majoritairement civils, et les massacres, inédits dans l'histoire du pays, n'avaient pas été jugés assez effroyables à ceux qui pouvaient tout autant déplorer que se retrancher derrière le blocage à l'ONU, sous l'effet des veto chinois et russe, ou l'inorganisation d'une opposition disparate, pour ne rien fai-

re. C'est peu dire que personne ne s'est vraiment précipité pour reconnaître après la France, il y a quelques semaines, les nouveaux responsables de cette opposition comme seuls représentants légitimes du peuple syrien.

La très complexe équation syrienne, les multiples fractures communautaires de ce pays et les implications régionales d'un changement de régime, après près d'un demi-siècle de baasisme progressivement privatisé par une dynastie, constituent évidemment un défi majeur.

Mais l'immobilisme et l'attentisme des Grands ont laissé le champ libre à des pays du Golfe motivés par des considérations géopolitiques (affaiblir Téhéran, dont Damas est le principal allié arabe) plus que par une soudaine passion révolutionnaire. La vision que le Qatar ou l'Arabie saoudite peuvent avoir de la Syrie après les Assad n'est peut-être pas identique à celle des Syriens, les premiers concernés. Les Grands n'auront qu'à s'en prendre à eux-mêmes : intervenant à la dernière heure, ils ne seront pas les mieux placés pour tenter de faire prévaloir leurs vues. ■

ÉDITORIAL

de chaque partie des villes ou des campagnes, où elles établissaient durablement leur contrôle. Ce n'est plus le cas aujourd'hui. Déjà évincé des régions frontalières au nord et à l'est, et enlisé à Alep, Bachar Al-Assad est désormais contesté à Damas, comme l'attestent les combats autour de l'aéroport. Là où son frère Bassel se tua accidentellement en 1994. Là où les fastueuses boutiques de duty

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Letter from Syria



Thomas L. Friedman

DARKUSH, SYRIA The scene is almost biblical. You step down through tall reeds, cross the Orontes River from Turkey in a small rowboat and are received by a local contingent of the Free Syrian Army, outside the Syrian town of Darkush. One of them shows you the picture on his cellphone of a Syrian girl who was just taken across the river to Turkey with what turned out to be fatal wounds from a Syrian Army helicopter attack on her village. The helicopters, the rebel soldiers say, dropped barrels with nails and explosives on her house. Meanwhile, over here in the mud are three fresh graves with bodies that just floated down the river. Some days it's just an arm or leg that washes up. Although this is "liberated" territory, in the background you can hear the low drumbeat of shells slamming into some town over the hills. I ask the rebel local commander, Muatasim Bila Abul Fida,

how he thinks all of this will play out. His answer strikes me as very honest. "Without the help of Iran and Hezbollah, he would be gone by now," he says of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. But even after he goes, there will be a great sorting out. "It will take five or six years," he adds, because the Islamist parties "want Shariah, and we want democracy."

In my visit along the Turkey-Syria border, I am struck at how so many different people want so many different things for Syria. It is unnerving. A Christian businessman from Aleppo tells me that if a real election were held in Syria today, the besieged President Assad would still win "with 75 percent

of the vote," because most Syrians crave the order that he provided and are exhausted by war. But a few hours earlier at an impressively run Syrian refugee camp set up by Turkey outside the Turkish border town of Antakya, I interviewed young Syrian Sunni Muslim men who had fled from the Assad family's largely Alawite stronghold of Latakia, just down the coast. They spoke about the deep unfairness of the Syrian system and how Alawites were getting an unfair share of the pie.

"When we first protested to demand reforms, the regime did not do anything," said Yahya Afacesa, "and then we started to shout and demand freedom, and the regime attacked us. So there was no

way to fight the regime peacefully."

He and his colleagues insisted, though, that the problem in Syria was the Assad family, not the Alawite sect, a Shiite offshoot from which the Assads hail and which dominates the regime. These are secular young men, and they still took pride in Syria's multisectarian identity and harmony, which, it should be remembered, has deep historical roots in this region. Indeed, before visiting them, I met with the Chamber of Commerce of Antakya. The chamber's president proudly displays outside his office a poster of more than 20 different churches, mosques and even a synagogue still operating in his town, which is just a few miles from the Syrian border. I repeat: There are cultural roots for pluralism in this region that a new Syrian government could still fall back on — but there's also the opposite.

A case in point: In Antakya I met two Turkish logistics experts. They spoke about the "Arab foreign legion" of Islamist fighters from as far away as Chechnya and Libya who have come through their town and crossed the Orontes to join the battle in Syria. They scoffed at the idea that Syria will emerge as a democracy from a war in which its main arms suppliers are the Islamic-oriented monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The main Saudi and Qatari desire is that Syria shift from being an Iranian-Shiite-dominated coun-

try to a Sunni-dominated one. Democracy per se is not their priority.

One of the two Turkish experts has another business in Qatar. To get permission to work and operate in Qatar, he explained, he needs a local Qatari to sponsor his work permit. "If you have a work permit and you want to leave the country, you need your sponsor to give you written permission," he noted. "If your sponsor dies, his son inherits that right." His Qatari sponsor's son is very young. Yet, "if he says I cannot leave, I cannot leave. I do business [in Qatar] but I have no rights at all. ... We joke that we are 'modern slaves' there. And this country is trying to bring democracy to Syria?"

These stories illuminate for me the enormous number of crosscurrents and mixed motives driving this revolution. Without a strong, galvanizing Syrian leader with a compelling unifying vision, backed by the international community, getting rid of Assad will not bring order to Syria. And disorder in Syria will not have the same consequences as disorder in other countries in the region.

Syria is the keystone of the Middle East. If and how it cracks apart could recast this entire region. The borders of Syria have been fixed ever since the British and French colonial powers carved up the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. If Assad is toppled and you have state col-

lapse here, Syria's civil war could go regional and challenge all the old borders — as the Shiites of Lebanon seek to link up more with the Alawite/Shiites of Syria, the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey try to link up with each other and create an independent Kurdistan, and the Sunnis of Iraq, Jordan and Syria draw closer to oppose the Shiites of Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

We could be entering a new age of Middle East border-drawing — the do-it-yourself version — where the borders of the Middle East get redrawn, not by colonial outsiders from the top down but by the Middle Easterners themselves, from the bottom up.

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune DECEMBER 12, 2012

Syria rebels placed on U.S. terror list

WASHINGTON

BY MICHAEL R. GORDON
AND ANNE BARNARD

The United States has formally designated Al Nusra Front, the militant Syrian rebel group, as a foreign terrorist organization.

The move, which was expected, is aimed at building Western support for the rebellion against the government of President Bashar al-Assad by quelling fears that money and arms meant for the rebels would flow to a jihadi group.

The State Department delayed the publication of the decision, originally made last month, in order to synchronize it with the expected announcement this week in Morocco that the United States will formally recognize the Syrian opposition coalition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people, as Britain, France, Turkey and some other countries have done.

The designation of the Nusra Front was first disclosed on Monday in the Federal Register, just before an important diplomatic meeting Wednesday in Morocco on the political transition if Mr. Assad is driven from power.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, the State Department expanded on the decision. The Nusra Front, it asserted, is under the control of Abu Du'a, the emir of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. The Qaeda leader, the State Department statement added, also issues instructions to the Nusra's emir, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, and has "tasked him to begin operations in Syria." According to the State Department, the front has claimed almost 600 attacks — including more than 40 suicide attacks — in Syria since November 2011.

In practical terms, the designation makes it illegal for Americans to have fi-

nancial dealings with the group. It is intended to prompt similar sanctions by other nations, and to address concerns about a group that could further destabilize Syria and harm Western interests.

France, Britain, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council have formally recognized the Syrian opposition. E.U. foreign ministers met Monday with the head of the Syrian opposition coalition, Ahmed Mouaz al-Khatib, in Brussels. William Hague, the British foreign secretary, said that he hoped the European Union would soon grant it full recognition.

The Nusra Front comprises only a small minority of the Syrian rebels, but it includes some of the rebellion's most battle-hardened and effective fighters.

"Extremist groups like Jabhet al-Nusra are a problem, an obstacle to finding the political solution that Syria's going to need," the U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, said last week.

But a growing number of anti-government groups — including fighters in the loose-knit Free Syrian Army that the United States is trying to bolster — have signed petitions or posted statements online in recent days expressing support for the Nusra Front. In keeping with a tradition throughout the uprising of choosing themes for Friday protests, the biggest day for demonstrations be-

cause it coincides with Friday Prayer, many called for this Friday's title to be "No to American intervention — we are all Jabhet al-Nusra."

Many Syrian fighters consider the Nusra Front a key ally because of its fighters' bravery and reliable supply of money and arms.

It has never come under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, shunning the Western aid and input that other groups have sought, but it coordinates closely with many who do.

Adding to the complication is that some groups in the Free Syrian Army have similar ideologies, follow the strict Salafist interpretation of Islam and count among them fighters who joined the insurgency in Iraq — though they are not known to share the Nusra Front's direct organizational connections to Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

The Nusra Front celebrated another apparent battlefield achievement on Monday, declaring it had captured part of a large base outside the commercial hub of Aleppo.

Activist groups and video posted online said that it had fought alongside other Islamic battalions including the Mujahedeen Shura Council and the Muhajireen Group.

The decision to designate the group, the register noted, was made by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Nov. 20, in consultation with Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. and Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner.

In a related move, the Treasury Department announced that it had also taken similar action against two pro-Assad militias: the Jaysh al-Sha'bi and the Shabiha.

"Jaysh al-Sha'bi was created, and continues to be maintained, with support from Iran and Hizballah and is modeled after the Iranian Basij militia, which has proven itself effective at using violence and intimidation to suppress political dissent within Iran," the Treasury said in a statement.

In Syria on Tuesday, rebels clashed with government forces near Damascus airport in a continuing battle for the capital's outskirts, Reuters reported.

The center of Damascus, shielded for months from the violence which has killed 40,000 people since March 2011, was echoing to the sound of shelling from late Monday, residents said.

The United Nations, meanwhile, said that the conflict had now driven half a million people into neighboring countries. The latest figures for the number of Syrians registering as refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq had passed 509,000, said Melissa Fleming, spokeswoman for the Geneva-based U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

An ocean of reserves waiting to be tapped

By **Guy Chazan**,
the Financial Times

Richard Lowe faces a dilemma most oilmen can only dream about: what on earth is he to do with 14 billion barrels of crude?

Mr Lowe's company, a small London-listed explorer called Gulf Keystone, found the oil in question in Shaikan, in Iraqi Kurdistan, in 2009. It was one of the world's largest onshore discoveries in more than 20 years.

Stretching for miles under a ridge of brown, rugged hills near the Turkish border, Shaikan is huge. Yet its sheer size is problematic. "The big question is – where do you start?" says Mr Lowe, Gulf Keystone's drilling manager. "The field is almost too big."

Oil finds such as Shaikan have made Kurdistan, an autonomous region in the north of Iraq, one of the biggest draws in the global oil industry. It has attracted \$10bn in investment from foreign oil companies – a vast amount for a country of only 4.9m people.

"It is almost the only place in the Middle East where the private sector can explore virgin territory," says Tony Hayward, the former chief executive of BP who runs the Kurdistan-focused oil explorer Genel Energy.

Initially, the region was the playground of wildcatters – small buccaneers with a big appetite for risk. But now the big boys are moving in. Over the past year, ExxonMobil, Chevron and Total have been grabbing some of the 45bn barrels of oil thought to lie underneath Kurdistan.

Ashti Hawrami, Kurdistan's minister of natural resources, forecasts a wave of consolidation as the majors swoop in. The number of operators in the region will, he says, soon shrink from 50 to 20 or less. "We're moving from the small and the beautiful to the large and the magnificent," he told the Financial Times.

The big oil companies are coming despite a somewhat precarious legal environment. For years, Kurdistan has been embroiled in a bitter dispute with Iraq's central government over who owns the region's oil. Baghdad says the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, lacks the authority to sign contracts with western energy groups and has declared them illegal.

In April 2012, the KRG suspended crude shipments from the region in protest at Baghdad's delays in disbursing \$1.5bn owed to operators in Kurdistan.

Since then circumstances have improved. In August, the KRG restarted exports as a goodwill gesture and, a month later, the central government agreed to pay foreign companies what they were owed for their oil. The Kurdish authorities reciprocated by agreeing to increase exports.

The deal enabled Gulf Keystone to resume production at Shaikan after a near five-month hiatus. "It's a huge relief that we're able to start again," says Mr Lowe. Some 30 tankers a day are loading up at Shaikan and taking its crude to local refineries.

The September agreement was extraordinary in that it seemed to acknowledge the legitimacy of KRG contracts. Mr Hawrami says Baghdad realised that the most important priority was to make sure oil flows were resumed in full – regardless of which companies were producing it under what contracts. The view was "now Kurdistan must export the oil and we need the revenue," he says. "Any stranded oil is not to the benefit of Iraq." He called the deal "a win-win".

It is not hard to tell that Kurdistan is sitting on a bountiful resource. On the northern side of Gulf Keystone's Shaikan field, Mr Lowe points visitors to crude oil oozing out of the limestone rock and dribbling down in dense black seeps.

Iraqi geologists knew about the



area's potential. "These fields should have been discovered 30 or 40 years ago," says Mr Lowe. Leaving them untapped was, he says, part of a policy of neglect designed to keep the Kurdish population down. Instead, Iraq focused on the huge fields around Basra and Kirkuk.

That has redounded to the Kurds' advantage. "If these oil reserves had been developed 30 years ago, all the benefit would have gone to Saddam Hussein and his family," says an Erbil-based diplomat. "It's the only time the Kurds have been thankful to Saddam for something."

It was only after 2006, when Mr Hawrami was appointed minister, that Kurdistan's oil industry really took off. He has been credited with creating Kurdistan's oil sector – with its complex contractual and regulatory framework – from scratch.

"It's an amazing achievement in difficult circumstances," says one diplomat.

Unlike the oilfields of southern Iraq, which had export pipelines linked to the Gulf, Kurdistan's were stranded, with no outlet to wider markets. The area was largely unexplored and there was confusion over whether they had the right to sign their own contracts.

But according to Mr Hawrami's view of Iraq's 2005 constitution, under which the country's oil and gas was "owned by the people of Iraq in all the regions and governates", they did. He

started allocating blocks of exploration acreage in production-sharing agreements – contracts that offer oil companies the potential for handsome profits.

Initially, small companies took the bait but their success encouraged larger competitors. Mr Lowe says seven out of 10 exploration wells drilled in Kurdistan are commercially successful – a "strike rate" with few parallels.

As the oil companies' presence expanded, Kurdistan changed – fast. In the early days, Erbil was a provincial backwater and, as in all of Iraq, power came on for only a couple of hours a day. The city had one decent hotel, the Sheraton, built in the late 1970s. It felt like a "Wild West frontier town", recalls one oil engineer who lived there then.

Now it is booming. Planes full of businessmen fly into Erbil's new international airport from Dubai, Vienna and Istanbul. Five-star hotels tower over a cityscape dotted with cranes and vast construction sites.

The pace of development will increase. In 2008, there were only three drilling rigs in Kurdistan. This year there are 24 and next year there will be 40. Production, at about 200,000 barrels a day, will reach 250,000 b/d next year. By 2015, Kurdistan hopes to be exporting 1m b/d.

To achieve that will need a major reconfiguration of the region's export infrastructure. The current Baghdad-controlled pipeline is plagued by bottlenecks. Many believe that Kurdistan will build its own pipeline into Turkey, giving it full control over exports. If that happens, the KRG will receive oil revenues directly from Turkey, rather than via Baghdad.

This will give the KRG the economic independence many Kurds have long craved and build on the close relationship evolving between Kurdistan and its neighbour, Turkey.

"Kurdistan is going to emerge as a major contributor to global oil supplies by the end of this decade – possibly sooner," says Mr Hayward. ■

Kurdistan leader vows to defend claims over disputed city

KIRKUK, Iraq (Reuters) - Iraqi Kurdistan's president vowed to protect Kurdish interests during a visit to the city of Kirkuk on Monday, in a show of defiance of Iraq's central government over disputed territory and oil.

Tensions are running high between autonomous Kurdistan and Baghdad after both sent troops to reinforce areas along their disputed internal border, bringing them close to confrontation in their long-running feud.

Dressed in military uniform and flanked by troops, Kurdistan's President Masoud Barzani visited Kurdish-controlled areas of Kirkuk, a city long seen as a flashpoint for Arab-Kurdish tensions after the U.S. military withdrawal a year ago.

"Kurds, throughout history, did not choose war as a means, but this does not mean they will sit handcuffed in the face of oppression," he said on the outskirts of Kirkuk.

"We are against the war and we do not like



Kurdish Regional Government President Masoud Barzani speaks during an interview with Reuters in Arbil, Reuters/Azad Lashkari

war, but if things come to war, then all Kurdish people are ready to fight in order to preserve the Kurdish identity of Kirkuk."

Barzani's sensitive visit and tough rhetoric come as U.S. officials try to negotiate an end to the military standoff that began last

month when Baghdad and Kurdistan both sent troops to reinforce positions around cities on their internal border.

Although outside the three northern Iraqi provinces run by Kurdistan, Kirkuk has historically been claimed by the Kurdish region. A census to determine whether the city has a Kurdish or Arab majority has long been delayed.

Kirkuk sits on some of the world's largest oil reserves and fields around the city produce about a fifth of Iraq's total crude exports of 2.6 million barrels per day.

American troops acted as a buffer between the two regions until their departure. Since then, the federal government and Kurdistan have increasingly sparred over control of land and oil.

Kurdistan relies on the central government for its share of the national budget. But tensions have grown since the Kurdish region signed deals with major oil firms like Exxon and Chevron to develop its oilfields, a move Baghdad sees as an unconstitutional challenge to the central government

REUTERS

Kurdish mayor among dozens detained in Turkey on militant links

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey — December 8, 2012 — (Reuters)

TURKISH POLICE ARRESTED DOZENS of Kurdish activists and politicians on Saturday, including a provincial mayor, in their latest push against alleged supporters of armed militants.

Selim Sadak, mayor of Siirt, was among about 60 people detained in simultaneous operations in three southeastern cities, police said. Many are local officials from the legal, pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and civic groups.

Turkey has jailed thousands of Kurdish politicians, academics, lawyers, journalists and others since 2009 on charges they support the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has fought the state for autonomy in a conflict that has claimed more than 40,000 lives since 1984.

Turkey, the United States and the European Union list the PKK as a terrorist organization.

The BDP said in a statement police operations were continuing.

The latest raids coincide with efforts in the capital Ankara to lift the parliamentary immunity of 10 lawmakers, nine of them from the BDP. This would pave the way to prosecute them, in a move that would weaken Kurdish representation in parliament and may fuel tension in the southeast.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan last week said he favored stripping the Kurdish MPs of their immunity after they were filmed in August embracing armed PKK rebels who had stopped their convoy in the southeast.



Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) Parliamentarian Gultan Kisanak (C), accompanied by her party's co-chairman Selahattin Demirtas (L) and Siirt Mayor Selim Sadak, speaks to the media in Diyarbakir, southeastern Turkey, April 19, 2011. REUTERS/Stringer

Kurdish members of parliament are often under investigation, accused of links to the militants, but are protected from prosecution while they are in office. The BDP denies any outright ties to the PKK.

Erdogan has pledged greater Kurdish political and cultural freedoms since his party came to power in 2002 while applying increasing military pressure on the militants and, occasionally, the BDP, which he calls the PKK's "political extension."

Excluding the latest detentions, some 190 elected BDP officials are already in jail, including 37 mayors. Six BDP lawmakers are also behind bars after they were barred from taking up parliamentary seats they won in 2011.

(Reporting by Seyhmus Cakan and Ayla Jean Yackley)

New Arab-Kurdish front could strengthen Assad



By Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Clashes between Kurdish militias and armed Syrian opposition groups in Aleppo starting at the end of October in Ras al-Ayn near the Turkish border have raised the specter of a possible Arab-Kurdish civil war in Syria. An Arab-Kurdish civil war would weaken the efforts of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and non-FSA affiliated groups to take over strategic areas in northern Syria such as oil-rich Hasakah province and Aleppo.

Any fighting between the Syrian armed opposition and Kurdish militias trying to establish their authority in Kurdish-dominated

areas could strengthen the resolve of the government led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, the fighting could indicate that Turkey is facilitating the entry of Syrian armed rebels into Syria to prevent the influence of Kurdish groups affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Even as Syrian insurgents fighting in the streets of Damascus call for President Bashar al-Assad to flee the country while he still can, there is the possibility that a new front may open in the struggle for Syria as Kurdish nationalists increasingly come into conflict with Islamist militias fighting the Assad regime.

Serious clashes erupted on November 19 between Islamist groups and fighters of the Syrian Kurdish Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD - Democratic Union Party) in the border town of Ras al-Ayn (Kurdish: Serekaniye), killing at least 18 combatants. This is the second time serious fighting has erupted between Islamist groups fighting Assad and combatants of the PYD, which is affiliated to the larger Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK - Kurdistan Workers Party) but publicly denies such ties for fear they could lead to placement of the PYD on international terrorist lists.

While Turkey is worried about the increasing influence of the PYD, the PKK is concerned by Turkish support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and claims that Turkey is hatching plans to destroy PYD

influence in Syria.

The Syrian Kurds are a non-Arab minority that comprise up to 10% of the population and are spread over three Kurdish-dominated enclaves in the provinces of Aleppo and Hasakah. [1] These areas are close to the Turkish border, and since 2011 the PYD has managed to extend its control over large parts of these enclaves through its Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG - People's Defense Units) to the despair of Turkey.

The recent clashes came after Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, failed in his efforts to prevent PYD influence from spreading in Syria. Barzani supported an agreement in July between Syria's Kurdish National Council (KNC) - a weak coalition of more than 11 political parties and youth groups supported by Barzani - and the PYD in order to prevent a Kurdish civil war.

For Barzani, Kurdish infighting, or Kurdish fights with the Syrian armed opposition could destabilize security in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and he has warned against this publicly. These tensions indicate that a new battlefield near the Turkish border could be opened between anti-Assad Islamist fighters and combatants associated with the PKK, slowing down rebel progress against Damascus and Aleppo.

PYD-FSA war in Aleppo

The FSA and Arab Islamist groups are perceived to be close to the interests of the Turkish state by the PYD, while the FSA and other armed groups have accused the PYD of working with the Assad government. The PYD claims to be neutral and has made unofficial deals with both Syrian rebels and the government to take control of more Kurdish areas. As a result, there have been minor clashes with both security forces of the regime and Syrian rebels.

Major clashes erupted for the first time on October 26 in the Kurdish al-Ashrafiya neighborhood of Aleppo, where dozens were killed and hundreds kidnapped by both sides. Clashes also occurred in Aleppo and near the Syrian towns of Efrin and Azzaz, between the PYD and the 1,200 strong non-FSA affiliated Northern Storm Brigade, which controls the vital

crossing from Aleppo province into Turkey. The PKK based in the Qandil Mountains near the Iraqi-Turkish border also threatened to support its PYD affiliate.

Despite media reports that the clashes could lead to sectarian conflict between Kurds and Arabs, the PYD blamed other rival Kurdish groups of being involved in the incident with the support of Turkey. The YPG stated that, of the 19 FSA combatants killed in the clashes, seven were Kurds affiliated to Mustafa Cummaa's Freedom Party, which has been the most critical of the PKK. Deputy FSA commander Malik al-Kurdi claimed the conflict was caused by Kurdish groups pushing the FSA to fight with the PYD.

The increasing success of the FSA and other armed Islamist groups has led to the movement's spread to Kurdish-dominated areas in northern Syria. Thus clashes broke out after Syrian Islamist groups entered PYD-controlled districts, breaking the alleged cold truce between the two groups that said the FSA or other armed Islamist groups would not enter PYD-controlled areas. The PYD was not willing to help the FSA to fight Assad, but was also disinclined to fight the FSA unless the Syrian insurgents entered PYD-controlled areas.

Both the FSA and the YPG realized that fighting between them could benefit the Assad regime (Today's Zaman, October 31). "We and the Free Syrian Army are one side, we are not on opposite sides," PYD-official Sinem Muhammad told Jamestown [2].

The two sides therefore engaged in negotiations over the control of checkpoints and the handover of detainees. On November 1, the FSA announced that it had reached an agreement with the PYD stating that both sides aimed to topple the Assad-regime and would hand over detainees. The PYD's foreign representative Alan Semo told Jamestown that the initial agreement was only meant to stop further fighting while other demands were still negotiated. [3]

One of the primary demands impeding the progress of negotiations was the fate of YPG Commander Nujin Deriki (aka Shaha Ali Abdo), who was captured on October 26. On November 2, the →

⇒ YPG claimed that she had been tortured to death, which led to demonstrations and further tensions. The FSA subsequently announced she was still alive and was supposed to be released.

It seemed that the Syrian regime tried to prevent the FSA and PYD from reaching agreement by shelling the Kurdish districts of Aleppo on November 4, killing three people. On November 10, the FSA released the YPG commander, leading to diminished tensions between the groups in Aleppo.

The new conflict in Hasakah

Just as tensions between the PYD and the FSA were dying down, the Islamist Ghuraba'a al-Sham (Strangers of Greater Syria) Brigade and al-Nusra Front entered the Kurdish city of Ras al-Ayn on November 9 from the Turkish town of Ceylanpinar and the nearby village of Tel Halaf. The area is populated by Kurds and Arabs, leading to fears among Syrian Kurds that the war would spread to Hasaka province.

Initially, those fears proved unfounded as this did not lead to fighting between the Islamists and the Kurdish YPG units, with the YPG retreating to Kurdish districts of the town and the FSA controlling Arab parts of Ras al-Ayn. However, it did lead to accusations from PYD-affiliated media, such as the Kurdish news agency Firat News, that Turkey was behind the entry of armed groups into Ras al-Ayn, trying to involve Kurds in the civil war. A PYD-affiliated group claimed in a statement that they would not allow armed groups into Kurdish districts.

On November 11, the Ras al-Ayn area was bombed by fighter jets, artillery and helicopters, leading to the death of dozens of civilians and insurgents. The bombing lasted for three days, with most inhabitants fleeing the city for Turkey or the Kurdish-controlled town of Derbisiye.

After the Islamists moved into Ras al-Ayn, the YPG forced remaining Syrian government security elements from Derik (al-Malikiyah), Amude, Derbisiye and Tel Amir, fearing the arrival of Syrian insurgents and the spread of fighting. The YPG indicated it did not want to give "the regime [or] the FSA any excuse to come here. We don't need anyone to protect us".

Turkey amassed its troops near the border and condemned the Syrian military operations that led to the death of civilians in Ras al-Ayn. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated that the Syrian air bombardment of Turkish border towns was a clear threat to Turkey,

adding that Turkey would shoot down Syrian fighter jets if they cross the border.

The PYD's foreign representative, Alan Semo, told Jamestown that the PYD is worried that under the Adana Agreement, Turkey could characterize the ensuing refugee crisis as a threat to the "security and stability of Turkey," leading to a legal path for Turkish intervention in Syria. "You might see the FSA on Turkish tanks coming into Kurdistan. This scenario can happen," he said. [4]

Turkey worried about PKK

Reports emerged on November 14 that Turkish tanks were amassing on the border of Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) alongside FSA units. Others have suggested that Western diplomats fear Turkey is supporting the FSA to prevent an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. In reality, Turkey is not against Kurdish autonomy in Syria (or in Iraq) since it has good relations with the Syrian Kurdish nationalist parties of the Kurdish National Congress, but it does oppose the increasing influence of the PYD and the PKK in Syria.

The United States fully supports the Turkish position of opposing any PKK presence in Syria. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed her support at a joint news conference in Istanbul with her Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu, saying, "We share Turkey's determination that Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists whether now or after the departure of the Assad regime."

The clashes that erupted between the armed Islamist groups and the PYD on November 19 further raised PYD suspicions of Turkish involvement. The fact that wounded Islamist fighters were transported to Turkish hospitals showed a certain degree of Turkish support. A temporary truce was made on November 19 to hand over wounded and dead bodies. But on November 20, fighting resumed again between the Islamist groups receiving reinforcements from the Turkish border and the PYD receiving reinforcements from other Kurdish cities in Syria. The fighting stopped after a ceasefire agreement between the two sides on November 23.

Kurdish political parties have argued that the armed Syrian opposition should fight Assad in Damascus or Aleppo, not in Kurdish areas. It is likely that in the current situation more clashes could erupt due to the fact that armed Syrian Islamist groups expressed their intention to expand their operations outside of Ras al-Ayn to other Kurdish-dominated cities such as Amude, Qamishli and Derik.

However, according to Abdul Basit Sieda, former head of the Syrian National Council (SNC), it is unlikely that Turkey would use this expansion of the conflict to establish a humanitarian corridor in northern Syria without support from the West: "If Turkey wants to move, they need the international community to accept it." [5]

Turkey could, however, facilitate the supply of reinforcements and weapons for the FSA to attack the PYD. Moreover, it could try to use Western support to decrease PKK influence in Syria and try to pressure the United States or European Union to put the PYD on the terrorist list.

The problem for Turkey is that fighting between the PYD and Syrian rebels could increase PYD support in Kurdish communities and make it more difficult for other Kurdish groups not to support the group against the Arabs, especially as some of those fighting against the PYD are allegedly former Arab settlers who were brought to the area by the Syrian government as part of its "Arab belt" policies.

Conclusion

The PYD already has a traditional support base around the Kurdish areas of Aleppo and is increasing its support. Therefore, Turkish attempts to physically eradicate the PYD could prove to be troublesome and lead to an Arab-Kurdish civil war. It seems that Turkey is focused on preventing the PKK from controlling autonomous Kurdish areas instead of supporting the insurgency in Syria to overthrow the Assad government. Continued fighting between Kurds and Arabs in the Hasakah province could weaken Syrian rebel advances against Assad and strengthen the current weak position of the Assad government.

Notes:

1. Jordi Tejel, "Syria's Kurds: Troubled Past, Uncertain Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, October 16, 2012.
2. Author's interview with Sinem Mohammed, head of the PYD-affiliated People's Council of West-Kurdistan (PCWK).
3. Author's interview with PYD foreign representative Alan Semo, November 11-15, 2012.
4. Foreign Minister Davutoglu There is not even a minute to lose, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
5. Author's interview with Abdul Basit Sieda, November 19, 2012.

(This article first appeared in The Jamestown Foundation. Used with permission.)

Les Etats-Unis adoubent la Coalition nationale syrienne

La décision de Washington, à la veille de la réunion des Amis de la Syrie au Maroc, est accompagnée d'une mise à l'index des djihadistes d'Al-Nosra

Pour la Coalition nationale syrienne (CNS), le principal rassemblement d'opposants au régime de Bachar Al-Assad, la réunion du groupe des Amis de la Syrie, qui devait s'ouvrir, mercredi 12 décembre, à Marrakech, dans le sud marocain, se présente sous les meilleurs auspices. Mardi, les Etats-Unis ont emboîté le pas à la France, au Royaume-Uni, à la Turquie et aux monarchies du golfe

Arabo-persique, en reconnaissant ce nouveau regroupement, formé au mois de novembre à Doha, au Qatar, comme le représentant légitime du peuple syrien.

D'autres reconnaissances similaires pourraient intervenir durant la réunion de Marrakech, où étaient attendus des représentants, au niveau ministériel, d'une centaine de pays arabes et occidentaux ainsi que de nombreuses orga-

nisations internationales. Chef de la diplomatie américaine, Hillary Clinton, qui est souffrante, devait être représentée par le numéro deux du département d'Etat, William Burns. Washington s'était jusqu'à présent montré réticent à l'idée d'adouer officiellement les opposants anti-Assad, en raison des divergences qui règnent souvent entre eux, du poids des islamistes en leur sein et de leur manque de relais sur le terrain.

« Nous avons décidé que la coalition de l'opposition syrienne était désormais suffisamment organisée et représentative de la population syrienne pour que nous la considérions comme la représentante légitime du peuple syrien opposé au régime d'Assad », a expliqué, mardi, le président américain Barack Obama. Une décision aussitôt critiquée par la Russie, qui a déploré que les Etats-Unis aient « décidé de tout miser sur une victoire par les armes de cette coalition ».

Malgré son pas en avant, l'administration américaine campe sur son refus de fournir des armes aux insurgés. Elle s'en tient à une assistance humanitaire de 200 millions de dollars (154 millions d'euros) et à l'acheminement d'une aide « non létale » aux rebelles. Washington redoute, en cas de livraisons d'armes, que celles-ci ne parviennent dans de « mauvaises mains », à savoir les groupes djihadistes, de plus en plus actifs sur le terrain et qui ne font pas mystère de leur volonté de remplacer la dictature Assad par un régime fondamentaliste, gouverné par la charia.

C'est dans cette logique d'endiguement que le département d'Etat a annoncé, mardi, l'inscription sur sa liste noire des organisations terroristes du Jabhat Al-Nosra, le groupe armé le plus puissant au sein de la mouvance djihadiste à l'œuvre en Syrie. Souvent formé de volontaires étrangers, venus principalement du monde arabe et du Caucase, cette milice s'apparente à la branche syrienne d'Al-Qaïda, l'internationale djihadiste, dont elle utilise l'imagerie, la rhétorique et les méthodes d'action.

« La vision violente et sectaire

d'Al-Nosra est en contradiction avec les aspirations du peuple syrien », a déclaré la porte-parole du département d'Etat, Victoria Nuland, ajoutant que « les extrémismes et les idéologies terroristes n'ont pas leur place dans la Syrie de l'après-Assad ». Inconnu avant le début de la révolte syrienne, Al-Nosra a connu une ascension fulgurante, en multipliant notamment les attentats-suicides contre des sites de l'armée syrienne dans lesquels de nombreux civils ont trouvé la mort.

S'il a pu être perçu, à ses débuts, comme une création du régime, destinée à discréditer l'insurrection, Al-Nosra est désormais reconnu comme l'un de ses principaux adversaires. Présents sur la plupart des fronts, ses hommes sont appréciés pour leur bravoure, leur discipline et leur expertise militaire, acquise souvent sur d'anciennes terres de djihad, comme l'Irak ou l'Afghanistan. Ils se sont distingués en début de semaine en participant, aux côtés d'autres djihadistes, à la prise de la base de Cheikh-Souleimane, au nord-ouest d'Alep, la dernière garnison sous contrôle gouvernemental dans les environs de cette métropole.

Lors de cet assaut, les radicaux ont pris de vitesse les rebelles de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), le label dont se revendiquent la plupart des groupes armés non djihadistes, mettant en lumière la rivalité encore sourde qui oppose ces deux branches de l'insurrection. Souvent associés sur le terrain, pour des raisons d'efficacité, leurs hommes pourraient se retrouver face à face au lendemain de la chute du régime Assad.

Sur les forums de débat djihadistes en ligne, la mise à l'index du Jabhat Al-Nosra est applaudie par de nombreux internautes, persuadés que son statut d'ennemi des Etats-Unis ne fera que renforcer son aura. Au sein des partis d'opposition en revanche, la décision est accueillie fraîchement. « Je pense qu'il est prématuré de catégoriser ainsi les gens (...) étant donné le chaos et le climat très confus dans le pays », a estimé Farouk Tayfour, haut responsable des Frères musulmans. Outre Jabhat Al-Nosra, les Etats-Unis ont ajouté sur leur liste noire deux milices affiliées au régime, les « cha-biha » et le « Djaïch Al-Chabi ». ■

BENJAMIN BARTHE



Des combattants de l'Armée syrienne libre près de la base militaire d'Azaz, le 10 décembre. MANU BRABO/AP

Une centaine de blessés et de tués dans un village alaouite

Une attaque contre Aqrab, un village alaouite (la confession du président Assad), dans la province d'Hama, a fait de nombreuses victimes, mardi 11 décembre, sans qu'il soit possible, faute d'informations suffisantes, de connaître l'origine de ces violences. Selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH), qui appelle l'ONU à mettre en place une commission d'enquête indépendante, entre 125 et 150 habitants ont été blessés ou

tués dans des tirs et des explosions. Un habitant d'une localité voisine a mis en cause des insurgés, venus de la ville de Houla, à huit kilomètres d'Aqrab, site d'un massacre, en mai dernier, attribué aux chabihis, les milices pro-Assad. Contestant la thèse de la vengeance, des militants de la révolution ont mis en ligne des vidéos où des blessés d'Aqrab accusent au contraire des miliciens du régime. — (Reuters, AFP.)

La Syrie et la question kurde en Turquie

Hugh Pope

International Crisis Group

Le regain de violence entre l'armée turque et les insurgés du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) est l'une des conséquences régionales de la guerre qui fait rage en Syrie. Les affrontements se sont multipliés cette année dans le sud-est de la Turquie, et un groupe affilié au PKK est à présent en position de force dans les régions kurdes du nord de la Syrie, le long de la frontière turque. De plus, Ankara accuse Damas d'avoir repris son soutien au PKK, un mouvement interdit et considéré comme responsable d'actes terroristes.

Le facteur syrien n'est toutefois qu'un symptôme d'un problème interne turc plus profond. Le déploiement d'un bouclier de missiles le long de la frontière syrienne, envisagé en novembre par Ankara, ne sera pas d'un grand secours face au PKK. La véritable épreuve consistera pour la Turquie à tirer parti des troubles actuels pour opérer un revirement de stratégie vis-à-vis des Kurdes, et rompre avec les échecs de ces dix-huit derniers mois.

Un changement d'approche devient urgent. Les pertes liées à cette insurrection s'élèvent, selon le bilan informel de l'International Crisis Group, à au moins 870 soldats, policiers, membres du PKK et civils tués depuis juin 2011, un triste rappel du nombre élevé de victimes dans les années 1990.

GRÈVE DE LA FAIM DANS LES PRISONS

En septembre-novembre, dans une soixantaine de prisons en Turquie, plus de 700 prisonniers pro-PKK ont entamé une grève de la faim. La police détient plusieurs milliers de militants kurdes pour terrorisme, alors que la plupart d'entre eux n'ont pas commis de violences. Le mois dernier, la fermeture des commerces, écoles et services municipaux dans la capitale kurde de Diyarbakir, en solidarité avec les détenus

et grévistes de la faim, a été très largement suivie.

Le Premier ministre turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan a multiplié les discours inflexibles, associés à une stratégie strictement militaire sur le terrain et un refus de reconnaître la grève de la faim. Cette position n'est plus tenable. Il doit renouer avec la politique poursuivie jusqu'en 2009, une « ouverture démocratique » qui a bénéficié aux Kurdes bien plus que toute autre mesure depuis presque un siècle, associée à une tentative sincère de dialogue avec le PKK en faveur d'un accord de paix.

En juin de l'année dernière, les dividendes de cette politique avaient aidé le Parti pour la justice et le développement (AKP), dont est issu le gouvernement, à remporter plus du tiers des suffrages dans douze provinces du Sud-Est, en majorité kurdophones.

Pour résoudre ce conflit, le Premier ministre turc a besoin de nouvelles mesures. Il lui faut d'abord distinguer le combat militaire du problème kurde sous-jacent. Pour régler ce dernier, des réformes sont nécessaires, telles que le droit à l'éducation en kurde, la décentralisation, un système permettant au parti nationaliste kurde de participer normalement aux élections, et la suppression de toute discrimination constitutionnelle ou législative.

PAS D'OPPOSITION MAJEURE DES TURCS

Le prétexte trop souvent employé pour justifier l'immobilisme, à savoir le rejet supposé de la majorité des Turcs à l'égard de l'égalité pour les Kurdes, est sans fondement. L'opinion turque n'a jamais manifesté d'opposition majeure à l'« ouverture démocratique », aux pourparlers avec le PKK ou à la chaîne de télévision entièrement kurde, autant d'évolutions qui auraient été impensables il y a cinq ans.

Les signes timides d'une évolution positive apparaissent déjà. Des cours optionnels de kurde ont débuté dans les

écoles en septembre. Le vice-Premier ministre Bulent Arinc a promis que les Kurdes seraient autorisés à utiliser leur propre langue devant la justice, et que le chef emprisonné du PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, pourrait reprendre contact avec ses avocats (et ainsi, avec le monde extérieur), après plus d'un an d'isolation.

L'AKP a présenté en novembre de nouvelles propositions pour une nouvelle constitution, qui comprendraient un abaissement, voire une suppression du seuil de 10% de suffrages nécessaires à un parti pour accéder au Parlement, qui oblige les candidats du principal parti kurde à se présenter en tant qu'indépendants aux élections. Enfin, le comité pour la réforme constitutionnelle pourrait agir pour supprimer toute discrimination ethnique subsistant.

Cependant, pour garantir son succès, le Premier ministre Erdogan doit montrer une véritable volonté politique et présenter ces mesures comme une stratégie cohérente, visant à résoudre un conflit qui a coûté plus de 30 000 vies et 300 milliards de dollars depuis 1984.

CONSTRUIRE UN ORDRE PLUS JUSTE

Faire preuve d'équité envers Öcalan ou au sujet de l'utilisation du kurde dans la justice et l'éducation mettrait un terme à la grève de la faim. Une marge de manœuvre s'est récemment dégagée : l'AKP a renoncé à avancer les élections locales prévues en mars 2014, disposant ainsi de plus d'une année sans enjeu électoral pour mettre en œuvre cette stratégie.

Assurément, les événements en Syrie ont renforcé les appréhensions d'Ankara à l'égard d'une montée en puissance des Kurdes au Proche-Orient, et Damas pourrait bien avoir renoué avec ses tentatives passées d'affaiblir son voisin en rendant son problème kurde plus difficile à résoudre.

Toutefois, il est clair que la Turquie ne dispose d'aucun véritable levier pour agir face à l'aggravation du conflit syrien. Si Ankara se sent vulnérable sur la question kurde, la meilleure défense du Premier ministre Erdogan est de construire un ordre plus juste dans son propre pays. ●



Irak: deux morts dans l'explosion d'une voiture piégée devant un parti kurde

BAQOUBA (Irak), 16 décembre 2012 (AFP)

L'EXPLOSION d'une voiture piégée devant les bureaux d'un parti kurde à Jalawla, dans le nord de l'Irak, a tué dimanche deux personnes souhaitant s'engager dans les forces de sécurité kurdes et en a blessé deux autres, selon des sources médicale et de sécurité.

L'explosion s'est produite devant le quartier général local de l'Union patriotique du Kurdistan (UPK) du président irakien Jalal Talabani, où un certain nombre de personnes voulant rejoindre les peshmergas étaient rassemblés, a indiqué un officier de police.

Cet officier a fait état de deux morts et de deux blessés parmi ces recrues, un bilan confirmé par une source médicale à l'hôpital de Jalawla.

Jalawla, peuplée de Kurdes chiites et d'Arabes sunnites, est située dans la province de Diyala, à 130 km au nord-est de Bagdad.

Cette zone fait partie des territoires du nord de l'Irak que les dirigeants du Kurdistan irakien souhaitent intégrer à leur région autonome, ce à quoi les autorités centrales irakiennes s'opposent.

La querelle autour des territoires contestés est l'un des dossiers les plus susceptibles de menacer à terme la stabilité et l'unité de l'Irak, selon des analystes et diplomates.

Bagdad et Erbil divergent également sur la répartition des revenus du pétrole et le partage du pouvoir. ○



15 décembre 2012

Derniers jours du régime Assad : va-t-on droit vers une partition de la Syrie ?

Alors que les Etats-Unis viennent tout juste de reconnaître la Coalition de l'opposition à Bachar al-Assad, la solution au conflit serait-elle la partition ?



Ardavan Amir-Aslani

Alors que les attentats contre la population civile ne cessent de faire des ravages, avec le dernier en date ce jeudi à Damas ayant fait une vingtaine de morts, majoritairement des femmes et des enfants, les Etats-Unis, après beaucoup d'atermoiements et d'hésitations, viennent de reconnaître la Coalition de l'opposition, sacrée à Doha, comme seule représentante légitime du peuple syrien. Parallèlement à cette reconnaissance, Washington vient de qualifier de "mouvement terroriste" les forces du Jabhat al-Nusra, principale force organisée des rebelles sur le terrain affilié à Al-Qaïda en Mésopotamie.

Cette ambivalence de la politique américaine face au conflit syrien traduit l'embarras de l'administration Obama. En effet, si Washington a contribué à créer et à former la coalition de Doha, destinée à voler l'exclusivité de la représentativité à l'Armée syrienne libre qui est composée exclusivement d'islamistes sunnites, le département d'Etat est forcé de reconnaître le décalage qui existe entre cette Coalition des exilés de l'étranger, ayant à sa tête Al-Khatib, un Imam modéré, si une telle chose existait, et la sociologie des rebelles qui se battent sur le terrain.

La question est d'importance car les Etats-Unis n'ont nulle envie d'apporter leur concours à une force composée de fanatiques sectaires qu'ils qualifient eux-mêmes de terroristes. Or, les rebelles n'accordent pas de légitimité à la Coalition de Doha qu'ils qualifient de complot ourlé par l'étranger. Ils semblent ne vouloir qu'un Califat sunnite, qu'ils ont d'ailleurs proclamé à Alep, qui, au fur et à mesure que les combats perdurent, se radicalise davantage. A un moment où le vice-ministre des Affaires étrangères russe, Mikhail Bogdanov, vient d'évoquer pour la première fois la perspective de la victoire des insurgés, l'enjeu

humanitaire prend tout son sens. Qu'advient-il des Alaouites, Chrétiens, Druzes, Kurdes et autres Chiites syriens après une telle victoire des rebelles sunnites ? Quelle mesure concrète est-ce que la communauté internationale, les Etats-Unis en premier, se propose-t-elle de prendre afin d'éviter un nettoyage ethnique en règle ?

S'il semble que les forces spéciales américaines sont en train d'entraîner des miliciens syriens dans la perspective d'une débâcle du régime de Bachar al-Assad, et ce, en vue d'assurer la protection des sites contenant d'armes chimiques, rien ne semble être prévu pour assurer la protection des minorités ethniques. A moins que le monde se prépare à l'idée de voir des barbus crier "Allah Akbar" et décapitant les minorités, des mesures doivent être prises.

L'autre option qui pourrait se dessiner est celle de la division du pays en trois parties, respectivement, Alaouites, Kurdes et Sunnites. En pareil cas, la partie sunnite n'aurait accès ni à la mer ni aux rares ressources pétrolières du pays car le bord de mer est principalement alaouite avec, les gisements miniers d'hydrocarbures, la ville de Lattaquié qui est le berceau historique de la famille Assad et la base militaire russe de Tartous. En effet, il faut bien appréhender la sociologie communautaire du pays qui ne ressemble en rien à la Tunisie ou à l'Egypte avec leurs populations relativement homogènes. La nature sectaire et communautaire du conflit syrien fait que la chute d'Assad ne signifiera en rien la fin de la guerre civile qui se poursuivra, chaque communauté se battant pour assurer sa survie.

La partition après tout, ne serait peut-être pas une si mauvaise chose, ce d'autant que la partie qui serait réservée aux Alaouites serait celle qui sera frontalière d'Israël, la frontière la plus sûre de l'Etat Hébreux pendant les 42 ans de règne des Assad. Autrement, Israël risquerait d'avoir un deuxième Hamas mais cette fois de 20 millions d'habitants à sa frontière. ♦

Turkey weighs pivotal oil deal with Iraqi Kurdistan

BY BEN VAN HEUVELEN,

ANKARA, Turkey — American diplomats are struggling to prevent a seismic shift in Turkey's policy toward Iraq, a change that U.S. officials fear could split the foundations of that fractious state.

The most volatile fault line in Iraq divides the semiautonomous Kurdistan region in the north from the Arab-majority central government in Baghdad. As the two sides fight for power over territory and oil rights, Turkey is increasingly siding with the Kurds.

Kurdish and Turkish leaders have had a budding courtship for five years. But now Turkey is negotiating a massive deal in which a new Turkish company, backed by the government, is proposing to drill for oil and gas in Iraq's Kurdish region and build pipelines to transport those resources to international markets. The negotiations were confirmed by four senior Turkish officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of political sensitivities.

"Turkey hasn't needed to ask what we think of this, because we tell them at every turn," said a senior U.S. official involved in Middle East policymaking, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk with the media. The official said that any bilateral energy deals with the Kurdistan region would "threaten the unity of Iraq and push [Prime Minister Nouri] al-Maliki closer to Iran."

Iraqi Kurdistan has already staked out significant autonomy, providing its own public services, controlling airports and borders, and commanding police and army forces. The energy deal with Turkey would all but sever Kurdistan's economic dependence on Baghdad, which is perhaps the primary tie that still binds the two sides.

"We are having serious discussions with the [Turkish] company," said Nechirvan Barzani, prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government. "We hope they participate in the region."

The Turkish government has not made a final decision. Energy Minister Taner Yildiz is leading a review of the deal, according to senior Turkish officials, and expects to issue a formal recommendation to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan by the end of the year.

Turkey's moves come at an especially volatile time for the region. Along Turkey's southern border, Syria's Kurdish minority has gained control of a large expanse of territory in the midst of a civil war. That insta-



MARWAN IBRAHIM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES - Massud Barzani (center), the president of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region sits amid security forces during a visit to Kirkuk on Dec. 10, 2012. Ties between Baghdad and Kurdistan are marred by dispute over territory, as well as disputes over oil and power-sharing.

bility has worried Turkish leaders, who have used their sway over the Iraqi Kurdish leadership — both Prime Minister Barzani and his uncle, Massoud Barzani, Kurdistan's powerful president — to help ensure that they exert a benign influence in Syria.

Iraq is also in crisis. On Nov. 16, a minor confrontation between Kurdish security forces and Iraqi soldiers combusted into a deadly firefight. Since then, both sides have deployed thousands of troops, as well as tanks and artillery, to each side of their contested border, where they remain within firing range.

STRATEGIC SHIFT

Erdogan has left little doubt where his sympathies lie, accusing Maliki of "leading Iraq toward a civil war."

Yet Turkey's embrace of the Iraqi Kurds is not just a function of personal enmity. Rather, it represents a deliberate strategic shift that has upended the conventional wisdom that once governed Turkish policy toward Iraq.

After the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, Turkey advocated against giving autonomy to Iraqi Kurds, fearing that such a precedent might strengthen Turkey's Kurdish minority in its quest for greater rights and self-governance. Turkey also was wary that any Iraqi Kurdish territory would become a haven for the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, known by the acronym PKK, which the United States has designated a terrorist organization.

In 2007, Erdogan began to soften that

stance. He took primary responsibility for his Iraq policy away from the military and gave it to a diplomat named Murat Ozcelik. "My instructions from the prime minister were to build ties with the Kurds," Ozcelik said.

U.S. diplomats encouraged the rapprochement. By pursuing economic cooperation, Turkey could form a bulwark of mutual interest with mainstream Iraqi Kurds who might otherwise be inclined to sympathize with the PKK's nationalism.

Turkey also recognized the strategic value of Iraqi Kurdistan's abundant oil and gas resources, which had barely been explored under previous regimes. Turkey's economy was growing rapidly, at an average annual rate of about 5 percent. To sustain that growth — and the enormous popularity it brought Erdogan — Turkey would need new energy supplies.

Moreover, Turkey's ambitious leaders aspired to elevate their country to the highest echelons of international diplomacy. To do that, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has argued, Turkey should leverage its geographical position at the crossroads of East and West into geopolitical power. One way to accomplish this, he suggests, is to make Turkey a transit hub for energy.

"The Foreign Ministry's analysis was that relations with Baghdad are important, but relations with the Kurds are strategic," said Serhat Erkmen, the Middle East political adviser at ORSAM, a research institute connected to the Foreign Ministry. That idea now frames Turkey's Iraq policy, ⇨

⇒ according to several officials charged with implementing it.

Ozcelik said he initially envisioned that a strong relationship with the Kurds could help Turkey referee the persistent disputes between Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, and Baghdad.

But political progress has been elusive. Instead, Baghdad and Irbil have fought their battles largely through their oil policymaking. Iraqi Kurdish leaders enlisted international companies to develop oil and gas resources, including in territory whose official status is contested. Baghdad responded by banning any company that contracted with the Kurdish regional government from southern Iraq's much larger oil fields — a policy that secured the loyalty of the world's biggest energy companies, including Turkey's state oil company, Turkish Petroleum, or TPAO.

That stalemate was broken in October 2011, when Exxon Mobil, which was already developing an enormous oil field under a contract with Baghdad, decided to defy the ban and sign contracts with the Kurdish government, including three swaths of disputed land. By doing so, it implicitly endorsed Irbil's expansive claims of contracting and territorial authority.

Exxon Mobil's move was pivotal, said a senior Turkish official involved in foreign and energy policymaking. "Here is Exxon coming in, and what is Turkey supposed to

do? Keep waiting? There will be nothing left for us!" the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of political sensitivities

This calculus led Turkey to accelerate its courtship with Irbil, according to several officials in the Turkish foreign and energy ministries. At the beginning of this year, Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish leaders began to discuss the details of a strategic energy partnership — culminating in the exploration and pipeline deal under consideration.

KEEPING IRAQ UNITED

Obama administration officials as high-ranking as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton have advocated against such moves, according to the Turkish officials involved in the deal, warning that bilateral pipelines would open a route for the Kurds to circumvent Baghdad's authority over oil exports. That, in turn, would bring the Kurds a big step closer to independence.

The State Department and the White House declined to confirm these accounts or to comment on their efforts to discourage Turkish investment in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdish leaders have denied that they are seeking independence, but they confirm that they are using energy deals to achieve their political goals of greater autonomy.

Turkish leaders also insist that they have no interest in an independent Kurdistan. Erdogan's foreign policy strategists say that Turkey will always have power over the

pipelines and, with that leverage, can help keep Iraq united.

"They need us in terms of their outreach to the world, especially in light of their problems with the central administration," a senior Foreign Ministry official said. "And Turkey still supports the unity of Iraq."

While Erdogan has recently been happy to showcase his rapport with Iraqi Kurdish leaders, his relationship with Maliki has never been worse. Erdogan has given harbor in Istanbul to Iraq's fugitive vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi, who was sentenced to death over allegations of running a sectarian death squad; Erdogan also has backed Maliki's political opponents, including their unsuccessful effort in the summer to remove the prime minister through a no-confidence vote.

The Obama administration has argued that Turkey's diplomatic clout and investment dollars make it an important counterweight in Iraq against Iran. If Turkey were to write off southern Iraq as a lost cause, U.S. diplomats worry, Iran would fill the breach by increasing its political and economic presence there, gaining even more influence over Maliki.

But those arguments have not resonated in Ankara, where many senior officials think a major energy partnership with Iraq's Kurdish region is imminent. "U.S. support would be appreciated," said one official involved in the deal, "but it's not a condition."

□□□

Kurds ready to fight over Kirkuk



Pres. Barzani visits with Kurdish Peshmerga troops in Kirkuk.

By: Kevin Brent , Iraq / Kirkuk

urdish Regional Government (KRG) Pres. Massoud Barzani vowed yesterday to protect Kurdish interests in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. Tensions have been high between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad for several weeks following an incident near Tikrit, Iraq that left 12 Iraqi government soldiers dead and initiated a standoff between both sides' military forces

which continue to be built up along the internal border.

Barzani made the remarks in the Kurdish controlled area of Kirkuk dressed in a military uniform and flanked by troops of the Kurdish 'Peshmerga', the military arm of the regional government. U.S. officials have been trying to negotiate an end to the standoff since both sides began the troop buildup. Prior to their withdrawal, American troops acted as a buffer between the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi government troops.

Kirkuk officially is outside the three provinces administered by the KRG. However, Kurds have long lay claim to Kirkuk which among other territories in northern Iraq endured forced relocation projects to remove Kurds and re-settle Iraqi Arabs under the former regime of Saddam Hussein.

Kirkuk also sits on some of the largest oil reserves in the world which account for a fifth of Iraq's total crude oil exports. The KRG had previously been reliant solely on its share of the national budget, however has grown bolder in challenging the government in Baghdad in the wake of independently made oil deals with Exxon and Chevron; deals which the Iraqi government feels are unconstitutional and a challenge to its authority.

The government of Turkey also stands to benefit from Kurdish oil production and has been fostering more solid relations with the KRG as if it were a separate nation from Iraq, opening a Turkish School and a separate consulate in Irbil and often conducting diplomacy and economic negotiations with the Kurds without so much as the courtesy of informing the Iraqi government.

Baghdad has retaliated diplomatically with threats to enforce restrictions on the movements of Turkish officials within Iraq along with refusing to register Turkish firms over Ankara's refusal to extradite Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi who fled to Turkey following a conviction by an Iraqi court of running death squads and subsequent sentencing to death by hanging. Hashemi insists the charges were

➔ politically motivated and false. One week ago, the plane carrying Turkey's energy minister was refused Iraqi permission to land in Irbil, capital of the KRG.

Though Turkey has made multiple military incursions into northern Iraq's Kurdish region over the last two decades against the PKK, Turkey and the KRG enjoy an exceptionally good relationship. The prime link between the two being that both are predominantly Sunni Muslim while the government of Iraq is dominated by the Shiite majority of southern Iraq and are more aligned with Shiite Iran than is generally acknowledged.

For Turkey close relations with the KRG offer the long term possi-

bility of blunting the cross border operations of the insurgent Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) by permanently eliminating their sanctuaries just across the border in Kurdish controlled Iraq with KRG assistance. There is also for Prime Minister Erdogan the opportunity to further diminish the influence of both Tehran on the Sunni Arab world as he seeks to fill the vacuum of leadership among Sunnis in the Middle East.

For the KRG there are far better economic prospects in an alignment with Ankara than with Baghdad or Tehran. Particularly with Turkey's ability to act as a trans-shipment country for Kurdish oil and gas to Europe. Those prospects would gleam even brighter with Kurdish control of the oil fields around Kirkuk. ●

The Washington Post DECEMBER 18, 2012

In Iraq, Exxon oil deal fomented talk of civil war



Marwan Ibrahim/AFP/Getty Images - The damage from a car-bomb attack in the Iraqi city of Kirkuk on Nov. 27. The attack came a day after officials from the government and the Iraqi region of Kurdistan reached an agreement aimed at easing tensions in disputed areas of north Iraq.

BY BEN VAN HEUVELEN

The Washington Post

BAGHDAD — With their opposing armies massed on either side of the contested border dividing southern and northern Iraq, leaders in Baghdad and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region are warning that they are close to civil war — one that could be triggered by Exxon Mobil.

Although leaders on both sides are negotiating a walk back from the brink, they also say their armies could easily be provoked into battle. One of the most sensitive tripwires is Exxon, which is preparing to drill for oil in the disputed territories at the heart of the military standoff. Iraq's two most explosive political conflicts — over land and oil — are primed to combust.

"The prime minister has been clear: If Exxon lays a finger on this territory, they will face the Iraqi army," said Sami al-Askari, a member of parliament and confidant of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "We don't want war, but we will go to war, for oil and for Iraqi sovereignty."

Iraq's major ethnic groups have laid

competing claims to a belt of land between the Kurdistan region and southern Iraq. An unofficial "line of control" bisects the disputed areas, demarcating the southern border of Kurdistan-governed territory.

The crisis began after a Nov. 16 battle in the town of Tuz Khurmatu, whose ethnic tensions are typical of the disputed areas. A shootout erupted when federal forces tried to arrest a Kurdish fuel seller, who asked Kurdish soldiers, known as the pesh merga, to protect him.

Maliki and the Kurdistan region's president, Massoud Barzani, quickly ordered thousands of reinforcements to move toward the line of control. "We do not want war," Barzani said in a speech to troops on the front lines, "but if war comes, then all Kurdish people are ready to fight."

Iraqi Kurds are scarred by memories of Saddam Hussein's campaigns of ethnic cleansing. After the fall of his regime, they staked out substantial autonomy in northern Iraq, and now the Kurdistan region has many features of an independent state.

Many of the region's southern Iraqi neighbors, however, complain that the Kurds are grasping for territory that is not



rightfully theirs. Authorities in Baghdad say they had to deploy thousands of Iraqi troops to prevent further Kurdish encroachment.

"This recent crisis has given gains to the Kurds," said a high-ranking military officer in Baghdad, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of political sensitivities.

Military leaders in Baghdad and the Kurdistan region say fighting could begin with a single misfire. In some areas near the city of Kirkuk — the epicenter of the territorial disputes — the Iraqi army and the pesh merga are well within firing range of each other's weapons.

The military officer said the Iraqi army would open fire under three scenarios: if the pesh merga forces fire first or advance beyond their current positions, or if oil companies begin working in disputed areas.

"If they do this, it's a declaration of war," the officer said.

Exxon is not the only company with oil deals in Iraq's disputed areas, but its contracts are the most controversial because of the company's iconic stature and the location of its exploration blocks, on the southernmost edges of Iraqi Kurdistan's expansive interpretation of its territory. Before Exxon signed the contracts in October 2011, Baghdad warned the company that it considered such deals illegal.

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U.S. orders missiles and their crews to Turkey

INCIRLIK AIR BASE, TURKEY

Patriot batteries are part of NATO effort to guard against fallout from Syria

BY THOM SHANKER, ERIC SCHMITT AND MICHAEL R. GORDON

Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta signed a deployment order on Friday to send 400 American military personnel and two Patriot air defense batteries to Turkey, in the most direct U.S. military action so far to help contain the Syrian conflict and minimize the risk it will spill across the border with Turkey.

The American batteries will be part of a broader push to strengthen Turkey's defenses that will include the deployment of four other Patriot batteries, two from Germany and two from the Netherlands. Each battery contains multiple rounds of guided missiles that can intercept and destroy other missiles and hostile aircraft flying at high speeds.

Mr. Panetta's deployment order is the result of NATO discussions last week. Turkey, a member of the military alliance, is housing more than 100,000 Syrian refugees and providing aid to the Syrian rebels trying to oust President Bashar al-Assad.

Tensions between Turkey and Syria have escalated in recent months as Syrian forces have bombed rebel positions along the border and occasionally lobbed artillery rounds into Turkish territory. The Turks have also grown increasingly alarmed that Mr. Assad's forces could fire missiles into Turkey.

News of the Patriot deployment order came as antigovernment activists inside Syria reported fresh mayhem, including an unconfirmed rebel claim to have downed a government warplane attacking insurgent positions near the international airport in Damascus, the capital.

The Local Coordination Committees, a network of opposition activists, said the plane was brought down in the Eastern Ghouta area, but gave no details of the weaponry used. There was no im-

mediate sign of the amateur video footage or photographs that activists often post to substantiate their claims of military success.

Last month, the Brown Moses blog, considered an authoritative source on arms used in the conflict, reported new images showing insurgents armed with SA-16 and SA-24 shoulder-fired heat-seeking anti-aircraft missiles, apparently captured from the Syrian military. Both systems are newer generations of weapons than rebels have been seen carrying before and pose a new threat to Syrian military aircraft.

In Moscow, meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Ministry sought to distance itself from comments a day earlier by its Middle East envoy that the Syrian rebels may defeat Mr. Assad, a long-standing Kremlin ally and arms client. A ministry spokesman, Aleksandr K. Lukashevich, said Russia remained committed to a political solution in Syria.

"We have never changed our position and will not change it," Mr. Lukashevich said. He rejected a comment made by a State Department spokesman on Thursday that Moscow had "woken up" and changed its position as dynamics shifted on the battlefield, saying "we have never been asleep."

Mr. Lukashevich said that Russia was not carrying out any discussions with the United States about Mr. Assad's future, shooting down widespread speculation that Russia could help arrange the president's safe passage out of Syria. He said he had restated Russia's insistence on a negotiated solution "hundreds of times" in recent months.

All six Patriot units deployed in Turkey will be under NATO's command and are scheduled to be operational by the end of January, according to officials in Washington.

George Little, the Pentagon spokesman, said Mr. Panetta signed the order as he flew from Afghanistan to this air base in southern Turkey, close to the Syria border.

"The United States has been supporting Turkey in its efforts to defend itself," Mr. Little said.

The order "will deploy some 400 U.S. personnel to Turkey to support two Patriot missile batteries," Mr. Little added, and the personnel and Patriot batteries will arrive in Turkey "in coming weeks." He did not specify their deployment locations.

After landing at Incirlik on Friday, Mr. Panetta told a gathering of American Air Force personnel of his decision to deploy the Patriots.

He said the United States was working with Turkey, Jordan and Israel to monitor Syria's stockpiles of chemical

weapons, and warned of "serious consequences" if Syria used them, but he did not offer any specifics.

"We have drawn up plans for presenting to the president," Mr. Panetta said. "We have to be ready."

Turkey's worries about vulnerability to Syrian missiles, including Scuds that might be tipped with chemical weapons, were heightened recently by reports of increased activity at some of Syria's chemical sites, though Mr. Panetta said this week that intelligence about chemical weapons activity in Syria had "leveled off."

The recent Scud missile attacks by Mr. Assad's forces against rebels in northern Syria have only added to Turkey's concerns. The Scud missiles were armed with conventional warheads, but the attacks showed that the Assad government is prepared to use missiles as it struggles to slow rebel gains.

Syria denied Thursday that it had fired Scuds this week. But NATO's secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said that the intelligence gathered by the alliance indicated that they were Scud-type missiles. "In general, I think the regime in Damascus is approaching collapse," he said. "I think now it's only a question of time."

NATO foreign ministers last week endorsed the decision to send Patriot batteries to Turkey. The details of how many each nation would send were not worked out until this week, officials said.

Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon from Washington. Reporting was contributed by Anne Barnard, Hania Mourtada and Hwaida Saad from Beirut, Alan Cowell from London, Ellen Barry from Moscow and Rick Gladstone from New York.



17 décembre 2012

Une série d'attentats en Irak fait près de 50 morts

Les attaques ont surtout eu lieu au Kurdistan et dans les environs de Bagdad.

Une vague d'attentats visant à la fois les forces de l'ordre et des civils ont fait au moins 48 morts et plus de 100 blessés lundi en Irak, à la veille du premier anniversaire du départ des soldats américains, ont annoncé des sources policières et médicales. Dimanche, une première série d'attaques avait fait 19 morts et des dizaines de blessés, essentiellement dans le nord du pays.

L'Irak reste plongé dans la crise depuis le départ des derniers soldats américains le 18 décembre 2011, après presque neuf ans d'une guerre qui a fait des dizaines de milliers de morts irakiens ainsi que des milliers de morts américains, et coûté des centaines de milliards de dollars. Même si les violences n'atteignent plus les niveaux effroyables des années 2006 et 2007, les groupes d'insurgés continuent de représenter une véritable menace et les attentats restent quasi-quotidiens, avec des bilans mensuels qui dépassent systématiquement la centaine de morts.

La plus meurtrière de ces attaques s'est produite dans un quartier du nord de Bagdad où une voiture piégée a explosé dans une concession automobile, faisant onze morts et 40 blessés, selon des sources médicales et de sécurité.

Près de Mossoul (Nord), une voiture piégée a tué sept personnes à Khaznah, village de la communauté shabak, une secte

ésotérique issue du chiisme qui compte environ 30 000 membres et qui a été persécutée sous Saddam Hussein avant de devenir une cible d'Al-Qaeda. A Mossoul même, des hommes armés ont tué un soldat à un point de contrôle.

Dans la ville de Touz Khourmatou (Nord), deux attentats à la voiture piégée contre une mosquée chiite ont fait cinq morts. Et des hommes armés ont tué un milicien à Kirkouk. Trois autres bombes ont fait un mort sur une route près de Baqouba, où une bombe magnétique et une fusillade ont tué deux autres personnes. Dans la même province, deux Kurdes ont été tués par une bombe magnétique à Baladruz.

Khaznah et Touz Khourmatou font partie des zones que se disputent le gouvernement central et le Kurdistan autonome, et le représentant de l'ONU en Irak, Martin Knobler, a souligné que «ces attentats dans les régions contestées aggravent encore les tensions dans ces zones».

NIVEAU DE VIOLENCES STABLE

Dans le centre de la capitale, une voiture piégée a fait au moins un mort. Les restes du véhicule étaient éparpillés sur les lieux de l'explosion, qui a soufflé les vitres du voisinage, selon un journaliste de l'AFP. «La situation sécuritaire est en train d'empirer», a dénoncé Duniyah, 23 ans, employée dans un hôtel proche.



A Kirkouk le 17 décembre, après l'explosion d'une bombe. (Photo stringer. Reuters)

Sur une autoroute à l'ouest de Tikrit (160 km au nord de Bagdad) des hommes armés ont tué un policier à un poste de contrôle. Poursuivis, les agresseurs ont abandonné leur véhicule piégé et tué cinq autres policiers en le faisant exploser. Toujours au nord de Bagdad, une bombe a explosé au passage d'une patrouille militaire dans le village d'Al-Buslaibi, tuant trois soldats. Et une voiture piégée a tué un Irakien et blessé au moins dix pèlerins chiites iraniens près de Doujaïl.

Selon les statistiques officielles, les forces de sécurité irakiennes ont réussi à empêcher une explosion des violences depuis le départ des soldats américains, puisqu'il y a eu moins de tués lors des onze premiers mois de l'année que sur la même période en 2011.

«L'état de la sécurité n'a pas fondamentalement changé, en dépit du retrait américain. Et c'est déjà remarquable», soulignait récemment Joost Hiltermann, directeur adjoint du service Moyen-Orient de l'International Crisis Group. «Le retrait des forces américaines a entraîné une réduction de la formation, de la collecte de renseignement et de la capacité d'envoyer rapidement des renforts bien équipés sur les points chauds», a expliqué John Drake, expert au sein du groupe AKE.

«Cependant, il n'y a pas eu de baisse des opérations de contre-insurrection et des arrestations», même si «l'armée irakienne a encore beaucoup de chemin à faire et qu'elle reste confrontée à une pénurie de moyens», a-t-il ajouté.(AFP) □



18 décembre 2012

IRAK • Des attentats qui visent les Turkmènes

Al-Mada

Une série d'attentats a fait près de 50 morts en Irak le lundi 17 décembre parmi les forces de sécurité et les civils. Le journal attire particulièrement

l'attention sur la région de Kirkouk, riche en pétrole et disputée entre Arabes, Kurdes et Turkmènes. "Des explosions détruisent des dizaines de maisons appartenant à des membres des minorités turkmène et shabak à Touz Khormato",

près de Kirkouk, rapporte-t-il. Il cite le gouverneur de la province selon lequel des affrontements au mortier et à la mitrailleuse "visent les Turkmènes afin de les pousser à partir". ♦

Le président irakien Talabani hospitalisé après une attaque cérébrale

Mohamad Ali HARISSI (A F)

Le président irakien Jalal Talabani, un ancien rebelle Kurde qui a œuvré à réduire les profondes divisions entre les communautés du pays, a été hospitalisé d'urgence après une attaque cérébrale mais son état a été qualifié de "stable" mardi par son bureau.

Elu premier président kurde d'Irak en 2005 après le renversement du président Saddam Hussein, M. Talabani, 79 ans, se trouve dans l'unité des soins intensifs à la Cité médicale de Bagdad, a déclaré son chef de cabinet Nasser al-Ani à la télévision officielle al-Iraqiya.

"Son état est stable et susceptible de s'améliorer. Mais il va devoir rester pendant une longue période aux soins intensifs pour que l'on soit rassuré sur son état", a-t-il ajouté.

Sur une possibilité de voyage à l'étranger pour se faire soigner, il a précisé que cette décision revenait aux médecins traitants.

Dans une déclaration à l'AFP, le responsable des relations avec les médias au bureau de M. Talabani, Barzan cheikh Othmane, a lui aussi déclaré que "l'état du président est stable et s'améliore".

Selon al-Iraqiya, M. Talabani a été victime d'une attaque cérébrale. Le Premier ministre Nouri al-Maliki s'est rendu à l'hôpital pour s'enquérir de son état de santé.

"Ses fonctions vitales sont normales et son état est stable", a indiqué un communiqué de la présidence sur son site internet



en parlant d'"un durcissement des artères". Dans un précédent texte, elle avait indiqué qu'il avait été hospitalisé "d'urgence" lundi soir à la suite d'un état d'"épuisement".

M. Talabani a dû faire face à plusieurs problèmes de santé ces dernières années. Il a été opéré du cœur avec succès aux Etats-Unis en août 2008, et un an plus tôt il avait dû être évacué en Jordanie voisine pour y être soigné en raison d'un état de déshydratation et d'épuisement.

Il a également été soigné en Europe pour différents problèmes de santé.

Ces derniers temps, la fatigue et la maladie marquaient ses traits. Il ne se déplaçait plus qu'à l'aide d'une canne.

En vertu de la Constitution irakienne, "le vice-président de la République remplace le président en cas de vacance du poste sous n'importe quelle raison, et le Parlement devra élire un nouveau président, dans une période n'excédant pas les 30 jours à partir de la date à laquelle le poste est devenu vacant".

Un seul des deux vice-présidents,

Khoudair al-Khouzāi, est toujours en place, le second Tarek al-Hachémi, est en fuite, ayant été condamné à mort par contumace cinq fois, notamment pour meurtres.

Ennemi juré de l'ancien président Saddam Hussein qui a opprimé les Kurdes pendant des décennies, Jalal Talabani avait été désigné président de la République en avril 2005 puis élu en 2006 et réélu en 2010, après avoir consacré une grande partie de sa vie à lutter clandestinement contre le pouvoir.

Il avait alors troqué son treillis de guérillero pour le costume trois-pièces de président d'un Irak débarrassé de Saddam Hussein, son ennemi juré, après l'invasion américaine de 2003.

"Oncle Jalal", comme l'appelaient ses sympathisants, s'est construit une solide réputation d'homme de paix pour avoir tenté de réduire, si ce n'est combler, les profondes divisions entre les différentes communautés du pays.

Durant l'année écoulée, il avait ainsi appelé à la tenue d'une "conférence nationale" destinée à résoudre la crise politique apparue entre chiites et sunnites, et la crise de confiance entre M. Maliki et ses détracteurs qui l'accusent d'être un "dictateur".

Jalal Talabani a dominé avec son ancien rival Massoud Barzani la vie politique kurde irakienne. Mais après la chute de Saddam Hussein, tous deux avaient enterré la hache de guerre. ●



Un an après le retrait américain, l'Irak vogue de crise en crise

BAGDAD, 16 décembre 2012 (AFP)

DEPUIS le retrait des troupes américaines il y a un an, l'Irak est empêtré dans une crise aux multiples facettes qui n'en finit plus: son Premier ministre a échappé à un vote de défiance, un vice-président a été condamné à mort et les tensions entre Arabes et Kurdes sont vives.

Cette grave crise a débuté au lendemain du départ des derniers soldats américains, le 18 décembre 2011, qui a mis fin à une guerre de près de neuf ans au cours de laquelle des dizaines de milliers d'Irakiens et plus de 4.400 soldats américains ont péri.

Lors d'une récente visite à Bagdad, le secrétaire général des Nations unies Ban Ki-moon a d'ailleurs mis en garde les dirigeants irakiens contre l'impact négatif

de leurs divisions sur la sécurité et la gouvernance du pays.

Depuis qu'elles ne sont plus épaulées par les Américains, les forces de sécurité irakiennes sont seules aux commandes et doivent gérer des infrastructures déficientes et des attentats quasi-quotidiens.

Au plan politique, l'année s'est ouverte sur un grave conflit entre le Premier ministre chiite Nouri al-Maliki et ses alliés au sein du gouvernement, certains allant jusqu'à l'accuser d'être un "dictateur".

La formation laïque Iraqiya, les Kurdes et le chef religieux radical chiite Moqtada Sadr, dont la formation fait partie du gouvernement ont rejoint en début d'année les rangs de ses détracteurs. Mais un vote de défiance n'a finalement pas été organisé, faute de soutien au Parlement.

La rivalité politique s'est aussi subitement déplacée sur le terrain pénal, ➤

➤ lorsque le vice-président sunnite Tarek al-Hachémi a été accusé d'avoir fomenté des assassinats. M. Hachémi, membre d'Iraqiya, n'a eu de cesse de réfuter ces accusations depuis son exil turc, assurant qu'elles étaient à caractère politique. Il a depuis été condamné à mort par contumace par la justice de son pays.

TENSIONS AVEC LE KURDISTAN

Mais la plus grosse menace à l'unité de l'Irak est aujourd'hui l'âpre conflit qui oppose la région autonome du Kurdistan (nord) au gouvernement central.

La dispute a d'abord porté sur l'exploitation des hydrocarbures du Kurdistan. Bagdad est en effet furieux de voir Erbil signer des contrats avec des compagnies pétrolières étrangères en se passant de son accord.

Le conflit est allé crescendo jusqu'à connaître ces dernières semaines une suite militaire. Les deux entités revendiquent toutes deux une bande de territoire qui comprend notamment la ville de Kirkouk.

Les Kurdes enragent depuis que Bagdad y a installé l'un de ses quartiers généraux en septembre. Des troupes supplémentaires des deux camps ont été envoyées dans la région sans qu'une réelle confrontation n'ait toutefois lieu.

Pour les Irakiens, les violences, sans atteindre les niveaux du conflit de 2006-08, restent la plaie majeure à laquelle ils doivent faire face.

"Je crains que la polarisation politique accrue alimente les violences confessionnelles et annihile les gains précieux engrangés dans la lutte contre le terrorisme ces dernières années", a souligné Ban Ki-moon lors d'une rencontre avec des dirigeants politiques irakiens.

Sur les onze premiers mois de l'année, les violences ont fait moins de morts que sur la même période l'an passé, selon des chiffres du gouvernement irakien. Mais "l'état de la sécurité n'a pas fondamentalement changé, en dépit du retrait américain. Et c'est déjà remarquable", souligne Joost Hiltermann, sous-directeur du service Moyen-Orient de l'International Crisis Group.

L'EXPRESS 20 décembre 2012

Allemagne: le président irakien Talabani hospitalisé à Berlin

Le président irakien Jalal Talabani, 79 ans, hospitalisé en urgence à Bagdad pour une attaque cérébrale selon la télévision officielle, a été transféré jeudi en Allemagne pour y recevoir des soins. Jalal Talabani a quitté la Cité médicale de Bagdad, où il avait été admis lundi accompagné de son équipe médicale.

Des responsables irakiens avaient affirmé la veille que l'amélioration de l'état de santé du président avait permis son transfert à l'étranger. Barzan Cheikh Othman, le responsable en charge de la presse au bureau du président, a affirmé que la décision de le transférer en avion vers l'Allemagne avait été prise par une équipe de médecins venus d'Irak, d'Allemagne et de Grande-Bretagne pour soigner le président. A Berlin, le ministère des Affaires étrangères n'a pas souhaité commenter ces informations.

La chaîne Iraqiya a indiqué lundi, le jour de l'hospitalisation de Jalal Talabani, qu'il avait été victime d'une attaque cérébrale et la présidence a parlé d'un "durcissement des artères". Les médecins n'ont pas donné de précisions sur ses problèmes médicaux, mais plusieurs responsables ont fait état d'une amélioration de son état de santé.

Plusieurs problèmes de santé ces dernières années

Jalal Talabani a dû faire face à plusieurs problèmes de santé ces dernières années. Il a été opéré du cœur avec succès aux Etats-Unis en août 2008, et soi-



gné plusieurs fois à l'étranger.

Jalal Talabani a été désigné président de la République en avril 2005, deux ans après le renversement de Saddam Hussein et après avoir consacré une grande partie de sa vie à lutter clandestinement contre le pouvoir central de Bagdad. Premier chef d'état kurde d'Irak, il a été élu en 2006 et réélu en 2010 pour un mandat de quatre ans.

La présidence est en théorie une fonction essentiellement honorifique en Irak, mais Jalal Talabani, un ancien seigneur de la guerre kurde, s'est construit ces dernières années une solide réputation d'homme de paix pour avoir tenté de réduire les profonds clivages qui persistent entre les communautés du pays. "Jalal Talabani est un lien crucial entre le Kurdistan irakien et Bagdad", a souligné Maria Fantappie, analyste pour l'International Crisis group, un rôle d'autant plus important que les tensions se sont aggravées entre la région autonome du

Kurdistan et le pouvoir central à Bagdad.

Le vice-président peut assurer la vacance

En vertu de la Constitution irakienne, "le vice-président de la République remplace le président en cas de vacance du poste pour n'importe quelle raison, et le Parlement devra élire un nouveau président, dans une période n'excédant pas les 30 jours à partir de la date à laquelle le poste est devenu vacant".

Un seul des deux vice-présidents, M. Khoudaïr al-Khouzaï, est susceptible de remplacer Jalal Talabani en cas de besoin. Le second, Tarek al-Hachémi, est en fuite, et a été condamné à mort par contumace cinq fois, notamment pour meurtres. (AFP) □

CONFESSIONS OF A SNIPER

A rebel gunman in Syria talks about his disillusionment with the cause—and one soul-shattering decision

BY RANIA ABOUZEID/ALEPPO

To the other men in his Free Syrian Army unit, he's simply known as **the Sniper**, a 21-year-old army-trained sharpshooter who defected on Feb. 21 and joined their ranks. Few of his colleagues know his first name, let alone his surname—and that's the way he wants to keep it.

He hails from a Sunni military family in a town on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus. His uncle is a general in President Bashar Assad's army. Several of his other relatives are also high-ranking military officers. Apart from his parents and siblings, however, his kinfolk all think he's dead—and that's the way he wants to keep it.

A trim young man with closely cropped black hair and beard, he looks intense but calm as he sits in complete silence for hours, finger on the trigger, peering through the telescopic sight of his Dragunov sniper rifle. He's careful not to let its barrel protrude through the double-fist-size peephole he has punched through an apartment wall, lest it give away his location to the regime's sharpshooters, some of whom are only about 165 ft (50 m) away.

He may look calm, but he's deeply troubled. After some nine months of fighting with several Free Syrian Army units, first on the outskirts of Aleppo and then in the city itself after the rebel push into it in late July, he has grown disillusioned with the fight and angry with its conduct. "I did this when it was clean," he says. "Now it's dirty. Many aren't fighting just to get rid of Bashar, they're fighting to gain a reputation, to build up their name. I want it to go back to the way it was, when we were fighting for God and the people, not for some commander's reputation."

He refused an order in November to fight a proregime, ethnic Kurdish militia in a Kurdish neighborhood of Aleppo that the rebels had entered. "Why should I fight the Kurds?" he says. "It's a distraction. This isn't our fight."

Syrians in the opposition, whether armed or not, have often said there may be a revolution after the revolution to unseat Assad. The fault lines differ depending on whom you talk to. Some envision a fight between Islamist and secular rebels; others between defectors and armed civilians; some say it will be ethnic, between Kurds and Arabs; others simply

territorial, between rebel commanders in a particular area, irrespective of ideology. Others say it won't happen at all. But the Sniper, like many fighting men, thinks that it will and that it will be ugly: "We will not become Somalia after Bashar falls," he says. "We will have many Somalias in every province."

It didn't start this way—neither for this young rebel nor the revolution. "I think I'm unrecognizable now," the Sniper says. "I never really thought I'd kill someone." But he has killed—34 people who did not see his bullet coming, including, he suspects but cannot quite admit,



his childhood friend Mohammad, a man who was "dearer to me than a brother."

The Syrian revolution is also unrecognizable from 20 months ago, when Syrians first took to the streets in peaceful protests demanding freedom and dignity from a totalitarian leader who allowed little of either. The uprising soon morphed into an armed revolt as soldiers defected and men took up arms against the loyalist troops who were shooting into the crowds and going house to house looking for dissenters. As the conflict became deeper and bloodier, and the international community looked on impotently, armed rebels scrounging for help were increasingly compelled to compete for

resources. Various backers—Syrian and foreign, private and state-sponsored—entered the fray, picking their men on the ground and funneling weapons and money to them. The help wasn't always free; it often required pledges of allegiance, which many rebels have said they made with little intention of keeping. The money and weapons haven't really bought the rebels' love or obedience, just their temporary gratitude.

Over the past few weeks, the rebels have made sizable inroads in many parts of the country, but in Aleppo, Syria's largest city and its once pulsating commercial hub, the intense firefights and dramatic capture of neighborhoods that marked their initial frenetic push into the city have largely stalled. Although the government's warplanes and heavy weapons continue to pummel various neighborhoods, and the rebels continue to try to pound their way forward, the fight has ground to a stalemate in many areas that fell out of government control early on. In these districts, territory gained is measured in street corners and meters rather than neighborhoods. And the snipers reign. A few good sharpshooters can effectively freeze a front line by making any movement by their rivals too costly.

So rebel snipers, especially professionally trained ones, are in great demand. The Sniper says he has "been offered so much money, it is as if I am working for the mafia."

"Some [rebel commanders] offered me money. Others would say, 'Just tell me what you want.' One told me, 'I'll bring your parents, take them to safety. Just come and work with me,'" he says. "It does not honor me to work with people like this who think they can buy and sell me."

Instead he has found a home with Liwa Suqoor al-Sha'aba, an Islamist unit of the Free Syrian Army headquartered in Azaz, a town north of Aleppo in the vast band of countryside in rebel hands around the city. For the past few months, he has been stationed in the

northeastern neighborhood of Bustan al-Basha, a devastated wasteland emptied of all but three of its thousands of residents. “We cannot charge on [government] positions—if we do, they will eliminate us—nor can they advance on us,” he says. “It’s not that I’m tired, but I want something new. New territory. I’m sick of it here. I’m disgusted by it.” But he respects his adversaries, who he says have pinned the rebels down for months.

He is always on the lookout for new sniper positions. “Are you ready?” he asks before running alongside me as we dash past regime snipers to minimize my chances of being hit. We walked through the deserted neighborhood, up darkened stairwells and through a maze of holes punched through apartment walls to avoid exposure on the streets. The Sniper kicked in locked apartment doors, moving through family rooms and kitchens with rotting vegetables as he searched for higher, better ground. He paused in one living room to feed fish in a tank. A few days later, he replaced the damaged locks of the apartments he had entered. In one apartment, on the fifth floor, a blackened male corpse lay in a bedroom. The rubble strewn around the room from the gaping hole in the ceiling made it clear what had killed the man. The stench was tear-inducing. Fat maggots crawled on the bloated corpse. Several rebels removed the body, wrapping it in a blue blanket. The next day, the small group, along with the Sniper, returned, methodically removed the china from a dining-room cabinet and placed it in a dusty lounge area before punching a small hole through the dining-room wall. The room looked out onto a government position in the shrubbery below and would serve as a new rebel outpost.

Still, on some days, the Sniper says, he doesn’t even fire a shot. He just watches and waits in nearly dark apartments with no power, alone with his thoughts. His victims, when he speaks of them, were all *shabiha*, progovernment paramilitary thugs—an easy term to wield when he wants to dehumanize his enemies. But he knows it’s not quite accurate. He knows his childhood friend Mohammad was not a *shabih*. He says he doesn’t know if his bullet—or one of his colleagues—killed him.

“We were in school together. We grew up together. His mother was like my mother, that’s how close we were,” he

says. The Sniper is pensive, takes several deep breaths and fidgets with his ro-mm handgun as he speaks of his friend, repeatedly flicking off the gun’s safety. The young men joined the army together and stayed in contact even after the Sniper defected. He was the only person outside of the Sniper’s immediate family who knew that he was still alive. “I would tell him to defect. He’d say, ‘Not yet, it’s still early.’ I’d say defect. I told him I’d come and get him, that I would go anywhere to see him, to help him defect, even to the gates of his brigade. Whatever he wanted, wherever he was, I would get him. He kept saying, ‘It’s still early, it’s early.’ He was scared that his family would go through the same thing my family went through.” The Sniper says his family members were interrogated, harassed, ostracized in their community. The only thing that saved them from greater harm, he suspects, was the clout of the loyalist military men in his family and the fact that they thought he was dead, not a defector.

Mohammad was eventually sent to Azaz, stationed at what was called the Shatt Checkpoint. Both the Sniper and his commander repeatedly urged Mohammad to defect, warning him that they planned to attack the checkpoint. He didn’t listen. “We were three snipers. We killed a colonel, a soldier and my friend. I don’t know which one I killed. I didn’t see their faces. They were soldiers in front of us, and we were ordered to kill them.” That was three months ago.

“He’s gone anyway. What good is thinking about it? I did—for a long time afterward. I thought, ‘Why? He was my friend. Why did I shoot at him? I shouldn’t have.’ But I have left those thoughts behind me. I have to move forward.”

Like many men on the front line, the

‘I’m only comfortable on the front line. My rifle has become not just like a part of my body. It is my life, my destiny.’

—THE SNIPER

Sniper has found solace in religion. But his is a politicized form of Islam. He speaks admiringly of the extremist group Jabhat al-Nusra, which has been responsible for some of the most spectacular suicide bombings against regime targets. “They are clean and doing good work,” he says. He wants to join them if he can “cleanse” his body and mind, he says, pointing to a red pack of Gauloises cigarettes. A day later, he quits smoking.

He was not always like this. An avid boxer before he was the Sniper, the young man lived in Hamburg for five years, returning to his homeland in 2010. He attended the Goethe-Institut in Damascus and says his Arabic was so poor, he could barely read. It has since improved to the degree that he now reads the Koran aloud to his fellow rebels. He has long since shelved his dream of returning to Germany and training as a boxer. In fact, he doesn’t want to survive the Syrian uprising and is seeking “martyrdom.” “I’m only comfortable on the front line,” he says. “My rifle has become not just like a part of my body. It is my life, my destiny.” He remembers his religious awakening, during the first assault he participated in. It was a hit on a checkpoint on the road to the town of al-Bab on Aleppo’s outskirts. “We ambushed them. There was an Islamist with me. My heart was filled with faith. He told me the only thing between me and paradise was this road, was dying on this road. I was sorry that I lived.”

A few days later, we return to the issue of victims, of whether or not they were all *shabiha*, and his friend Mohammad. At the end of the day, I tell him, he is a Syrian killing other Syrians. “I used to think about the people I’d killed. I’d think about their parents,” he says. “Yes, we are all Syrian, but we didn’t create these differences, they did. It is because I am Syrian, because these people, these civilians who are dying are Syrian, that I am doing this, that I am standing with and for my people. Those who are not standing with their people are not Syrian, they are traitors, and traitors must die.”

And Mohammad? Was he a traitor? No, he says, he wasn’t, but “I’ve accepted it now, and nothing matters to me anymore.”

“Whoever is going to be in my sights will die. That’s it,” the Sniper says. “My heart has hardened. I returned to religion, but after I killed, my heart hardened. A sniper sees who he kills,” he says, pausing. “It’s hard. A sniper sees his victim.” ■

Baghdad-Erbil Tensions Intensify Over New Kurdish Reference to Disputed Lands

16/12/2012 05:43:00 RUDAW

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – A decision by the president of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region to henceforth refer to disputed northern regions as "Kurdish territories" has intensified tensions with Baghdad over the areas, which are at the center of worries over an Arab-Kurd conflict.

"In order to preserve the Kurdish identity and culture of these areas a presidential decision will from now on consider those areas as Kurdish territories outside the Kurdistan Region," according to a statement from President Massoud Barzani.

"The president's office advises all government departments in the Kurdistan Region to use the new term," it added.

At a time when the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) accuses Baghdad of breaching the Constitution by dispatching its Dijla forces into the disputed territories to unilaterally control security, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki countered that Barzani's move was a violation of the charter.

Barzani's decision "has no legal value" and is a "violation of Iraq's Constitution," said a statement from Maliki's office that was received by Rudaw.

Maliki urged all parties in Baghdad,



Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani. Photo: Rudaw.

particularly Iraq's ethnically Kurdish President Jalal Talabani and the non-Kurdish speaker of Parliament, to condemn "this dangerous series of actions."

"Any act outside the law will face a tough legal response," Maliki warned. "In the end, we have no other option but to stick to the Constitution to solve all political disputes," his statement added.

A serious row has been brewing between the KRG and Baghdad since weeks ago Maliki stationed his newly-formed and controversial Dijla forces in the energy-rich disputed territories, which are also claimed by the Kurds. The KRG deployed thou-

sands of its own Peshmarga fighters in the areas, and last week Barzani told the troops to hope for peace but be ready for war.

On Friday, Barzani's office said that the name change over the disputed regions was in response to pronouncements by a number of senior Iraqi officials, "Who refuse to admit that those territories are in dispute, as mentioned in the Iraqi Constitution."

"These officials use terms that have no historic or geographical backing," Barzani's statement said.

The disputed territories lie in the northern provinces of Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala. During Saddam Hussein's regime, thousands of the original inhabitants -- mainly Kurds -- were displaced and replaced by Arab families brought in from the south.

Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution is set to solve the issue by compensating and returning Arab families to the south, and facilitating the return of displaced Kurds to their former lands.

Kurdish authorities have long accused Baghdad of insincerity regarding Article 140. Barzani's statement said that, "Iraqi officials refusing to use the term disputed territories means that they do not intend to implement Article 140."

Kurdish troops fire on Iraqi army helicopter in dispute

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Troops from Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan opened fire on an Iraqi army helicopter on Tuesday, underscoring tensions between Baghdad's Arab-led central government and the Kurdish region, officials said.

Iraq's government and self-ruled Kurdistan last month both sent troops from their respective armies to reinforce positions around towns in disputed areas where they both claim control as part of a broader feud over oil and territory.

Kurdistan Peshmarga officials said on Tuesday they fired on an Iraqi military helicopter near Sikanyan town just north of the ethnically

mixed city of Kirkuk, to keep the aircraft from taking surveillance pictures of their military positions.

"We opened fire at an Iraqi military helicopter flying over our forces," said Anwar Othman, deputy minister for Kurdish military affairs. "This is a clear message that next time our response will be tougher."

A local mayor in the area confirmed the incident. But there was no immediate response from the Iraqi central government.

The growing rift between Baghdad and Kurdistan is the most challenging test to Iraq's federal unity since the last American troops left a year ago, removing a buffer of U.S. military presence from an area long seen as a flashpoint for conflict.

News of the clash came just hours after authorities announced Iraq's President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, had been hospitalized following a stroke that had left him in critical but stable condition.

A veteran Kurdish politician, Talabani has been a key mediator between Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government who are growing further apart over how to control oil

wealth and the disputed territories between their two regions.

Iraqi armed forces and Kurdish Peshmarga have faced off before only to back off before any major confrontation and U.S. officials have been in talks with both regions to try to ease tensions between them.

The ethnically mixed, disputed areas are a swathe of land separating Iraq from the territory administered by ethnic Kurds in the north, and they include the sensitive city of Kirkuk, which sits atop some of the world's largest oil reserves.

Bombings and attacks across those areas killed more than 30 people on Sunday and Monday in what authorities said was an attempt by insurgents to stoke Arab-Kurdish tensions.

Violence in Iraq has eased since the height of sectarian attacks in 2006-2007. But Sunni Islamists still carry out bombings nearly a decade after the American-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein.

(Reporting by Baghdad newsroom, Azad Lazkari in Arbil; Mohammed Ahmed in Kirkuk; writing by Patrick Markey)

Kurdish officials say Iraqi President Talabani to be treated in Germany after stroke

Sinan Salaheddin / Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi President Jalal Talabani will be flown to Germany for further treatment after suffering a stroke earlier this week, two Kurdish officials close to him said Wednesday.

Medical experts from Germany and other countries began arriving earlier in the day to assess the 79-year-old president's condition.

Iraqi doctors at the Baghdad intensive care unit where he is being treated say he is in stable condition and getting better, but they have released few details about his illness.

Talabani, a member of Iraq's Kurdish minority, was taken to the hospital late Monday and doctors worked to stabilize him into the following day. His illness raises new concerns about Iraq's stability, which is being tested anew by a recent spike in tensions between the central government and the Kurds.

Firyad Rawndouzi, a senior member of Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party, said the German team recommended he be moved, possibly as early as Thursday. The head of the president's media office, Barazan Sheikh Othman, also said doctors were preparing to transfer him.

"Most probably the president will be taken tomorrow, or at maximum the day after tomorrow, to Germany to complete



his treatment," Othman said. "The president's medical situation has improved and he has passed the dangerous stage."

Questions remain about the graveness of Talabani's illness.

One government official and a medic with knowledge of the situation earlier said he was in a coma, while another official said he is in a partially comatose state, suggesting he may be responding to some stimuli. All insisted on anonymity because they are not authorized to discuss the president's condition with reporters.

Talabani's doctors have not formally said that the 79-year-old statesman suffered a stroke, though several government officials have publicly confirmed that is the case.

Talabani is overweight and has undergone several medical procedures in recent

years, including heart surgery in 2008 and knee replacement surgery this year.

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad expressed hopes for a speedy recovery. Word of Talabani's illness trickled out on Tuesday, which also marked the anniversary of the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops from Iraq.

Talabani's official powers are limited, but he is seen as a rare unifying figure able to rise above the ethnic and sectarian rifts that still divide the country.

Iraq's parliament has the authority to choose a new president should Talabani's office become vacant. The Kurds would likely insist on retaining the presidency to maintain the government's power-sharing balance.

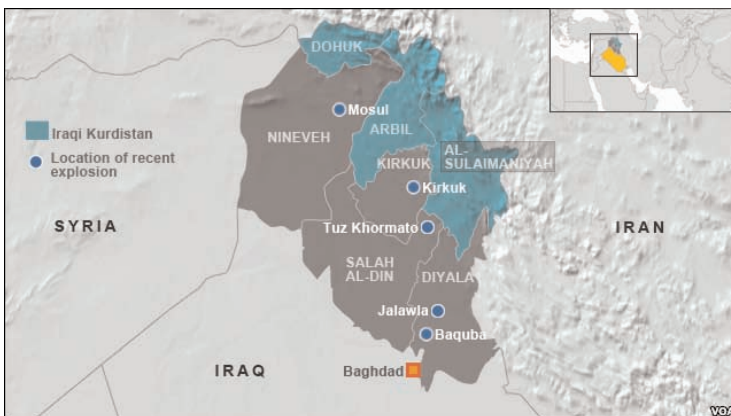
Before he fell ill, Talabani was actively involved in trying to mediate in a crisis between Baghdad and the Kurds, who have their own fighters and considerable autonomy in their enclave in northern Iraq.

The two sides last month moved additional troops into disputed areas along the Kurds' self-rule region, prompting fears that fighting could break out.

Last week Talabani brokered a deal that calls on both sides to eventually withdraw troops from the contested areas, though there was no timetable for how soon the drawdown might take place.

VOICE of AMERICA
December 17, 2012

Iraq Attacks Kill 26, Many in Kurdish-Claimed Areas



Michael Lipin

Iraqi authorities say bombings and shootings across the country have killed at least 26 people, about half of them in northern regions whose territory is disputed between autonomous Iraqi Kurds and Baghdad's central government.

In one of Monday's deadliest attacks, a car bomb killed seven people in a village near the northern city of Mosul in Iraq's Nineveh province. The village is inhabited by the Shabak ethnic minority.

Another two car bombs exploded in a

☞ Shi'ite district of the town of Tuz Khormato in Salah al-Din province, killing five people. Several bombs also went off around the town of Baquba in Diyala province, killing one person.

Disputed regions

Nineveh, Salah al-Din and Diyala provinces all border Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, which wants to incorporate Kurdish-populated parts of those provinces into its territory, over Baghdad's strong objections.

There were no immediate claims of responsibility for the attacks, which marked the second consecutive day of violence in internally-disputed regions claimed by Iraqi Kurdistan.

Kirkuk provincial governor Najmaldin Karim told VOA that authorities believe al-Qaida terrorists carried out the latest attacks to try to enflame sectarian tensions and political differences between Iraqi Kurdistan and the federal government.

"There have been terrorist activities in these areas many time before," Karim said. "The pattern [of the latest attacks] is similar to what [al-Qaida] has done in the past, and the targeted areas are places in which they are active."

On Sunday, bombs targeting Iraqi Shi'ites killed at least six people in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, home to a mix of ethnic Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen. A car bomb also struck a Patriotic Union of Kurdistan office in the Diyala town of Jalawla, killing two recruits seeking to join a Kurdish peshmerga security force.

Some of the Kirkuk blasts happened near Shi'ite mosques. Speaking by phone from Kirkuk, Karim said militants often switch their targets between Shi'ite and Kurdish areas. "It just depends on where they get the opportunity and where they can create more mistrust between the communities," he said.

Iraqi challenges

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in December 2011 has made it tougher for their Iraqi government allies to secure the country. "A vacuum was left," Karim said. "Some of the listening and surveillance capabilities [of the U.S. forces] no longer exist. We are trying to train our police so that they can manage to combat those terrorist groups."

Karim also called for better coordination between Baghdad and provincial governments in training Iraqi security forces.

At least 13 people were killed in Monday's other attacks in Iraq. Two car bombs went off in different parts of the Iraqi capital, killing six people at a car dealership and one person in downtown Baghdad.

□□□

FROM JOSEPH FARAH'S G2 BULLETIN

Iraqi Kurds would welcome U.S. troops in the north

Barzani plan echoes strategy sought by Biden



F. Michael Maloof, staff writer for WND and G2Bulletin, is a former senior security policy analyst in the office of the secretary of defense.

www.wnd.com

BEIRUT - Nechirvan Barzani, prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, would like to see U.S. troops in northern Iraq where the Kurds are predominant, according to a report from Joseph Farah's G2 Bulletin.

That echoed a suggestion U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden recently made that was rejected by Iraq's Shi'ite prime minister, Nouri al-Makiki. Biden even was barred from visiting the country to deliver that message.

WND/G2Bulletin recently reported that Biden wanted to visit northern Iraq to suggest U.S. troop presence to prevent a potential civil war in that region.

However, al-Maliki nixed that suggestion, saying that the central government was fully capable of handling the problem and that Biden would encourage separation of the country into three distinct areas to give the Shi'ites, Sunnis and the Kurds their respective regions of influence.

Biden has been a long-time proponent of dividing Iraq into three semi-autonomous regions, and it may be a proposal that current Iraqi leaders never have forgotten.

As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden proposed to do just that. It was agreed to in a Sept. 25, 2007, non-binding resolution by a full Senate vote of 75 to 23. The resolution envisioned a federal government system in Iraq consisting of separate regions for Iraq's Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish populations.

Indeed, Biden had made his Iraqi plan the centerpiece of his unsuccessful 2008 bid for the presidency.

At the time, the vote was considered a consensus that the problems in Iraq could not be solved militarily, but might be helped by Biden's idea of resolving sectarian and ethnic disputes through division.

Sources in Iran, which is allied with the Shi'ite al-Maliki, said the region has been the subject of such sectarian and ethnic tensions and that the Iraqi prime minister was doing "whatever he can to fend off attempts to weaken the country's unity."

For his part, al-Maliki is attempting to keep the country together despite conflicting sectarian interests.

The northern region for years has been the subject of not only wanting to separate from the rest of Iraq but wants its own autonomous region to join with Kurds in neighboring countries where large minorities of Kurds reside.

They are Turkey, and the northern portions of Syria, Iraq and Iran.

In addition to all this, however, there is a further split within the Kurdish community between the Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP, led by Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, which is headed by Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani.

Their differences, sources say, could lead to civil war, not only within the Kurdish community but also from a more sectarian perspective of Sunni against Shi'ite.

Sources say that Iran has been pressing to keep out U.S. presence in Iraq and, so far, al-Maliki has gone along with its request.

Keep in touch with the most important breaking news stories about critical developments around the globe with Joseph Farah's G2 Bulletin, the premium, online intelligence news source edited and published by the founder of WND. ■

Le déploiement de missiles Patriot en Turquie, près de la Syrie, ravive les tensions entre Téhéran et Ankara

Le président iranien, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, annule une visite en Turquie

Istanbul

Correspondance

Les derviches tourneurs auraient dû permettre d'apaiser les tensions entre la Turquie et l'Iran. Les désaccords se sont multipliés, ces derniers mois, entre les deux voisins, divisés par la crise syrienne et par la récente décision de déployer des missiles Patriot sur le territoire turc.

Le président iranien, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, et le premier ministre turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, auraient dû se retrouver, lundi 17 décembre, à Konya, pour le Seb-i Arus, la grande cérémonie soufie qui, chaque année, célèbre la mort du poète persan Jalaluddin Roumi, fondateur de l'ordre mystique des derviches et mort en 1273 dans cette ville de l'ouest de l'actuelle Turquie. Ankara avait vu les choses en grand en y conviant plusieurs chefs d'Etat d'Asie centrale et des Balkans.

Mais une annulation de dernière minute est venue bouleverser les plans initiaux. Le chef de la section des affaires internationales de la présidence, Mohammad Reza Forghani, a en effet prétexté que Mahmoud Ahmadinejad avait un « problème d'agenda inat-

tendu », à la veille de sa visite en Turquie.

La véritable raison de ce brusque changement de programme pourrait plutôt être à chercher du côté des déclarations du chef de l'état-major iranien, le général Hassan Firouzabadi, qui, samedi, a violemment critiqué la Turquie et ses alliés occidentaux : « Chacun de ces missiles Patriot est un point noir sur la carte du monde dont le but est de déclencher une guerre mondiale », a rapporté la chaîne iranienne Press TV.

« Malheureusement, les pays occidentaux approuvent un à un le déploiement des missiles Patriot à la frontière entre la Turquie et la Syrie en préparant une guerre mondiale, ce qui est extrêmement dangereux pour l'avenir de l'humanité », a déclaré le chef de l'armée iranienne, qualifiant la future installation de « ligne de défense pour l'Etat sioniste », sous-entendu Israël.

Dimanche, c'est le ministre des affaires étrangères du régime iranien, Ali Akbar Salehi, qui a renchéri en qualifiant de « provocation » le déploiement des batteries de missiles sol-air, mettant en garde contre d'éventuels résultats « imprévus ». L'Iran, qui s'était déjà

vivement élevé, en novembre 2011, contre l'installation en Turquie d'une partie du dispositif de bouclier antimissiles de l'OTAN, perçoit de plus en plus le voisin turc comme une menace potentielle. Le président russe, Vladimir Poutine, autre allié de

incidents qui ont fait cinq morts – la Turquie a réclamé à ses alliés de l'OTAN l'installation de batteries de Patriot, capables d'abattre des avions ou des missiles. Ankara redoute un « geste de désespoir du régime baasiste » et l'utilisation de missiles armés de substances chimiques. Des Scud non chimiques ont été récemment tirés sur la ville syrienne d'Azaz, à quelques kilomètres de la frontière turque.

Réunis à Bruxelles début décembre, les membres de l'Alliance atlantique ont approuvé la mise en place du dispositif, qui ne devrait pas être opérationnel avant la mi-janvier. Quatre batteries de Patriot devraient être disposées à l'intérieur des terres, dans les villes de Malatya et d'Urfa, ainsi que sur la base américaine d'Incirlik, près d'Adana.

Au cours d'une visite surprise sur cette plateforme militaire, vendredi 14 décembre, le secrétaire d'Etat américain à la défense, Leon Panetta, a confirmé le déploiement de deux batteries de missiles et de 400 hommes, suivant une décision similaire de la part de l'Allemagne et des Pays-Bas. Les premiers soldats allemands sont arrivés lundi en Turquie. ■

GUILLAUME PERRIER

L'Iran s'était déjà élevé, en 2011, contre l'installation en Turquie d'une partie du dispositif de boucliers antimissiles de l'OTAN

Damas, avait lui aussi critiqué l'installation de Patriot au cours d'une visite à Istanbul début décembre.

Le secrétaire général de l'OTAN, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, s'est empressé de démentir les allégations iraniennes. « Nous avons dit clairement, dès le début, que le déploiement des Patriot est une mesure purement défensive », a-t-il précisé lundi. Dès novembre, après une série de tirs de mortier syriens sur des villes situées de l'autre côté de sa frontière – des

KURDISH GLOBE BE

20 December 2012

The Kurdish Globe

By Salih Waladbagi -- Erbil

Sulaimaniyah, the second geographically biggest province, is the most crowded

According to statistics from all three Kurdistan provinces administrations', Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Duhok, Kurdistan population has so far reached around 5 million and 300 thousand persons.

"Actually, the number is taken from food ration coupons which are registered in Iraqi and Kurdistan's ministry of trade," an official said.

Of which, around 2 million and 56 thousand and 186 per-

sons are from the second geographically biggest province Sulaimaniyah, according to Mahmud Othman Director of the city's statistic unit.

In regard to the Kurdish capital, Erbil's population, Mudhafar Tahir, Director of Data Analysis and Statistic department, said that the city's population has up to now reached around 1 million, 927 thousand and 118 people.

"Indeed, population of the third province Duhok is around 1 million and 316 thousand people," said Tahir.

Population and national budget

Increasing Kurdistan's population has not so far benefited to

increase Kurdistan's share from the national budget, Kurdistan's Ministry of Finance and Economy along with Kurdish officials in Baghdad say.

According to them, the budget has to be fairly distributed over Iraqis and Kurdish people, adding that it should be distributed in accordance with population.

Kurdistan's share has been 17 percent until Saddam's ousting in 2003 while population of the three provinces was about 4 million, 320 thousand and 604 people.

The budget that comes to Kurdistan is still calculated in keeping with the statistics of 2003 and no change has been

done so far, officials say.

Rashid Tahir, Kurdistan Ministry of Finance and Economy's undersecretary, said that consistent with the budget draft of 2013, which has been sent to Iraq Parliament, the country's population has been presupposed around 34 million, 410 thousand and 560 people.

"In the budget draft, Kurdistan population has been calculated as about 4 million and 320 thousand people."

The region's population, Tahir says, is considered around 12 percent of all Iraq's population, while according to previous consensus by Iraqi parties the region's share should be 17 percent. □

Al Qaïda monte en puissance dans la guerre civile en Syrie

Khaled Yacoub Oweis | Reuters

AMMAN - En perte d'influence en Irak, Al Qaïda tente une percée en Syrie, ce qui constitue un dilemme pour les forces d'opposition qui cherchent à renverser le président Bachar al Assad et explique la réticence de l'Occident à soutenir militairement l'insurrection.

Al Qaïda est présent en Syrie par le biais du Front al Nusra (Djabhat al Nusra), considéré par les Etats-Unis comme une organisation terroriste. Ses membres, estimés à quelques milliers, sont particulièrement puissants dans les régions d'Alep et Idlib, dans le nord du pays, où ils ont mené des opérations conjointes avec des groupes islamistes comme Ahrar al Cham et Lioua al Taouhid.

Ses effectifs sont, semble-t-il, en croissance. La brigade des Moudjahidine de la région de Tadamun, près de Damas, qui n'a pas réussi à s'entendre avec des groupes constitués de militaires déserteurs, a proclamé son allégeance à Al Nusra.

Profitant des dissensions entre activistes et de la montée du sentiment religieux depuis le début de la révolte en mars 2011, le Front en profite pour recruter des sunnites qui estiment que le pouvoir est confisqué au profit de la minorité alaouite du président Assad, une branche de l'islam chiite.

Al Nusra a revendiqué la responsabilité d'une série d'attentats spectaculaires à Damas et à Alep.

Selon le groupe Site Intelligence, le Front al Nusra a revendiqué la responsabilité de 45 attentats en une seule journée le mois dernier dans les régions de Damas, Deraa, Hama et Homs et notamment d'un attentat suicide qui a fait 60 morts.

"Dans 18 communiqués mis en ligne sur des forums djihadistes (...) dont la plupart étaient accompagnés de photographies des attentats, le Front al Nusra a revendiqué embuscades, assassinats, attentats à la bombe et raids contre les forces de sécurité syriennes et les 'chabbiha', des milices pro-Assad", affirme Site, qui répertorie les mouvements djihadiste.

Des membres du groupe interrogés



par Reuters expliquent qu'Al Nusra veut restaurer le "califat", comme au temps des premiers compagnons du prophète Mahomet.

Cette perspective alarme les chrétiens, les alaouites et les chiites ainsi que les musulmans sunnites qui craignent que le Front ne veuille mettre en place un régime de type taliban.

"NOUS VOULONS NOUS VENGER"

La crainte d'une répression fondée sur des croyances religieuses a déjà incité les Kurdes à se barricader dans leur quartier d'Alep. Elle explique aussi les heurts entre Kurdes et membres du Front à Ras al Aïn, localité frontalière avec la Turquie, en novembre.

Les idées d'Al Nusra sont aussi en contradiction avec la nouvelle Coalition nationale syrienne (CNS, opposition) qui a été reconnue la semaine dernière par de nombreux pays comme l'alternative au président Assad et qui a promis d'établir la démocratie.

Omar, 25 ans, diplômé de l'université et ancien appelé de l'armée, explique qu'il a déserté pour rejoindre le Front al Nusra après la répression dont il a été victime en tant que sunnite de la part d'officiers alaouites qui monopolisent les postes de commandement dans l'armée régulière.

Avant l'insurrection, Omar raconte qu'il a sympathisé avec le Hizb ut Tahrir, formation musulmane internationale, qui souhaite rétablir le "califat" aboli en 1924 par le fondateur et président de la République turque, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

"Notre but est la destitution d'Assad, la défense de notre peuple contre la répression militaire et la mise en place du califat. Beaucoup dans l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) ont les mêmes idées que nous et veulent un Etat musulman", affirme Omar.

"Nous et d'autres islamistes avons acquis une réputation de succès au combat. Beaucoup de gens veulent rejoindre Nusra, mais nous n'avons pas assez d'armes pour tous", ajoute-t-il.

Certains expriment leur désaccord avec le Front.

"Al Nusra pense qu'en criant 'Dieu est le plus grand', il peut justifier tout ce qu'il fait. Nous ne nous sommes pas soulevés pour passer de l'humiliation d'être sous Assad à l'humiliation d'être sous Al Qaïda", déclare une femme qui a enseigné à Mogambo, un quartier du centre d'Alep.

Selon des membres de l'opposition, de nombreux Syriens qui avaient facilité le transfert de djihadistes de Syrie vers Al Qaïda en Irak du temps de la guerre avec les Etats-Unis se battent désormais pour Al Nusra, tandis que des djihadistes en Irak s'occupent maintenant d'organiser le transfert de personnel et de techniques de fabrication de bombes vers la Syrie.

"Nous voulons nous venger", dit Ibrahim, un autre jeune membre de Nusra, de la province d'Idlib. Il raconte avoir été détenu dans la prison de Sednaya, au nord de Damas, où 170 prisonniers musulmans ont été tués après une mutinerie en 2007.

Ibrahim minimise la mort de civils imputée au Front.

"Une bombe explose devant un bâtiment civil avec quatre voitures pleines =>

⇒ de 'chabbiha' en civil qui le gardaient. Les 'chabbiha' meurent et les médias d'Etat disent que c'étaient des civils. Seuls leurs vêtements étaient civils", affirme Ibrahim.

AL QAÏDA TOUT PRÈS D'ISRAËL

Malgré des vidéos diffusées sur internet montrant des rebelles apparemment liés à Nusra abattant -et parfois décapitant- des militaires de l'armée syrienne faits prisonniers, le Front semble bénéficier d'un large soutien.

Farouk Tayfour, vice-président des Frères musulmans, qui a lutté dans les années 1980 contre Hafez al Assad, le père de Bachar, estime qu'il est trop tôt pour classer les combattants de l'opposition en catégories. Certains, dit-il, ont rejoint Nusra pour se défendre sans souscrire forcément à son idéologie.

On ne sait pas qui est à la tête d'Al Nusra. Certains évoquent le nom d'Abou Mohamed al Golani. Sa nationalité reste un mystère. Un membre de l'opposition islamiste, qui s'est rendu

dans le nord et le centre de la Syrie il y a quelques jours pour y rencontrer des commandants du Front, estime que le groupe fonctionne sans doute comme une coalition.

"Ce n'est pas un groupe monolithique. Le caractère de Nusra à Damas est plus tolérant qu'à Idlib. Ils ont une véritable base populaire à Idlib, où la plupart des membres de Nusra sont syriens, contrairement à ce qui se passe à Alep et Damas."

Pour lui, le Front ne semble pas vouloir imposer un contrôle de style taliban. "De nombreux rebelles que j'ai rencontrés disent avoir rejoint Al Nusra parce qu'il possède des armes (...) et disent qu'ils rentreront chez eux après la révolte".

Pour une figure de l'opposition liée aux groupes djihadistes, la question de la nature d'Al Nusra se posera après la guerre face à un pouvoir non islamiste.

"La grande question est comment contenir Nusra dans une Syrie de l'après-Assad. Al Nusra est le genre de groupe qui pourrait déclarer hérétique le

religieux le plus pieux et le tuer en plein milieu de la mosquée simplement parce qu'il n'est pas d'accord avec lui", affirme-t-il sous condition d'anonymat.

Une autre figure de l'opposition qui a requis l'anonymat raconte que les services secrets de différents pays tentent de réduire l'influence d'Al Nusra à Damas et dans la région du Hauran, proche d'Israël et de la frontière jordanienne.

"Les services de renseignements occidentaux sont en train de réaliser que Nusra est la menace la plus grave pour la Syrie de l'après-Assad et consacrent des ressources supplémentaires au traitement de cette menace", dit-il.

"Pour la première fois, Al Qaïda se trouve tout près d'Israël", dit-il. "Beaucoup réalisent que la meilleure chose à faire pour l'instant est de les contenir dans le nord de la Syrie -même si la région risque de devenir une sorte d'émirat islamiste- tout en essayant de bâtir une autorité dans et autour de Damas." ●

Le Monde 20 décembre 2012

Le conflit syrien est "ouvertement intercommunautaire" selon l'ONU

Le Monde.fr avec AFP et Reuters

Le conflit syrien est désormais "ouvertement intercommunautaire", ont indiqué jeudi 20 décembre les enquêteurs de l'ONU dans leur dernier rapport sur la Syrie, estimant que des "communautés entières" sont menacées.

Le risque de conflit intercommunautaire, impliquant une "confrontation entre groupes ethniques et religieux", "a toujours été présent", écrivent ainsi les quatre enquêteurs, parmi lesquels figure l'ancienne procureur général du TPIY Carla Del Ponte. Mais, poursuivent-ils, après près de vingt et un mois d'affrontements, "le conflit est devenu ouvertement intercommunautaire", citant les tensions entre les chiïtes et les sunnites.

"Les autres minorités,

comme les Arméniens, les chrétiens, les Druzes, les Palestiniens, les Kurdes et les Turkmènes, ont été emportées par le conflit. Cependant les divisions intercommunautaires sont les plus marquées entre la communauté alaouite (...) et la communauté sunnite", expliquent les experts de l'ONU. La situation est telle que "des communautés entières risquent de devoir fuir le pays ou d'être tués dans le pays", s'alarment-ils.

"NÉCESSITÉ D'UN RÈGLEMENT NÉGOCIÉ"

"Alors que les communautés croient - non sans raison - qu'elles font face à une menace existentielle, la nécessité d'un règlement négocié est plus urgent que jamais", affirment-ils.

La commission a été créée en

août 2011 par le Conseil des droits de l'homme de l'ONU, mais elle n'a jamais reçu le feu vert de Damas pour se rendre sur place. Seul le président de la commission, le Brésilien Paulo Pinheiro a pu s'y rendre à titre personnel. Dans son rapport, la commission dénonce "l'escalade de la violence armée dans tout le pays".

Elle souligne aussi l'apparition de nouveaux groupes armés d'opposition qui "sont moins susceptibles de se joindre à l'Armée syrienne libre", expliquant que "beaucoup sont indépendants des groupes existants ou sont affiliés à d'autres groupes extrémistes ou islamistes comme Jabhat Al-Nusra".

La commission a déjà recueilli plus d'un millier de témoignages dans les pays voisins de la Syrie, rassemblant ainsi des preuves sur des crimes

de guerre et des crimes contre l'humanité commis par les forces gouvernementales et les milices pro-régime.

Elle a également relevé des crimes de guerre commis par l'opposition armée, mais à une échelle plus limitée. La commission a établi deux listes de noms de responsables ou d'unités impliqués dans ces crimes et des éléments de preuve, remis au Haut-Commissariat de l'ONU aux droits de l'homme. Ces documents confidentiels pourraient servir en cas de saisine de la Cour pénale internationale par le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU. ■

Syria issues warning to Palestinians as many flee

BEIRUT

Refugee population told not to aid rebels in sign of Damascus's sensitivity

BY HANIA MOURTADA
AND RICK GLADSTONE

Syria warned its Palestinian refugee population on Monday not to aid the insurgency that is fighting President Bashar al-Assad as hundreds of Palestinians fled the Yarmouk neighborhood of Damascus and headed for relative safety in Lebanon, a day after Syrian forces attacked that neighborhood for the first time in the civil war.

The Syrian warning, reported by the official news agency, SANA, appeared to reflect the sensitivity Mr. Assad attaches to the loyalty of the country's Palestinians, an important element of what remains of his political legitimacy. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live in Syria, displaced by the Arab-Israeli struggle. Historically, they have considered Mr. Assad a benefactor and ally. Yarmouk was originally a refugee camp, and has developed into a mixed Damascus neighborhood where many Palestinians live, but increasing numbers of them have been siding with the insurgents.

The warning aimed at these Palestinians came in a news dispatch about what SANA said was a telephone conversation between the country's foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem, and the U.N. secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, about the general situation in Syria and specifically the Yarmouk neighborhood. Mr. Moallem was quoted as telling Mr. Ban that mayhem had been convulsing Yarmouk for days, caused by infiltrations from terrorist groups, the government's blanket description for insurgents.

"The minister also stressed that Palestinians should not shelter or help terrorist groups who are outsiders to the camp, and should work on kicking them

They have considered Mr. Assad a benefactor and ally.

U.N. seeks \$1.5 billion for refugees from Syria

GENEVA

BY NICK CUMMING-BRUCE
AND RICK GLADSTONE

The United Nations on Wednesday appealed for \$1.5 billion in new aid to handle the steadily worsening humanitarian crisis created by spiraling violence in Syria, and predicted that the number of refugees fleeing the conflict would double to more than one million in the next six months.

The increased refugee estimate represents at least the fourth time that the United Nations has revised its projections upward on refugees in the nearly two-year-old uprising against the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. It has turned into a civil war that has left at least 40,000 people dead and has threatened to destabilize the Middle East.

Meeting representatives of donor governments in Geneva, U.N. agencies said they were seeking \$1 billion to assist Syrian refugees in five neighboring countries and a further \$519 million to provide emergency aid to four million people inside Syria over the same period. There are 20.8 million people living in Syria, according to the World Bank.

"This massive humanitarian crisis requires urgent support from governments, businesses and private individuals," Panos Mourtzis, the U.N. regional coordinator for Syrian refugees, said in

a statement. "Unless these funds come quickly, we will not be able to fully respond to the lifesaving needs of civilians who flee Syria every hour of the day — many in a truly desperate condition."

More than 525,000 Syrians have now registered as refugees, the U.N. refugee agency reported, about double the number it had recorded in early September. These refugees include about 160,000 in Lebanon, 150,000 in Jordan, 140,000 in Turkey and more than 65,000 in Iraq. The agency also included Egypt for the first time as a sanctuary for fleeing Syrians, reporting that more than 10,000 had registered there.

The refugee agency now expects the number to double again within the next six months, Mr. Mourtzis said.

Citing daily shelling and bombings in the suburbs of the Syrian capital, Radhouane Nouicer, the coordinator of U.N. humanitarian aid based in Damascus, said in Geneva that "there are nearly no more safe areas where people can flee."

Among the immediate concerns is the fate of around half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria, a legacy of the Arab-Israeli conflict, mostly living in Damascus. An aerial assault on Yarmouk, a vast Palestinian neighborhood in the south of the capital on Sunday, had prompted many to flee.

In Syria on Wednesday, the state-run news agency, SANA, reported that military forces had attacked insurgent positions in and around Damascus, Idlib, Hama and Dara'a, and had seized weapons and "eliminated a number of terrorists," the government's generic term for Mr. Assad's armed opponents.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a group based in Britain with a network of contacts in Syria, said much of the fighting was in districts adjoining the Yarmouk neighborhood, which insurgents have sought to occupy as part of their stated intention to seize control of the central part of the capital.

out," Mr. Moallem was quoted as saying.

The SANA account said Syrian ground forces had refrained from entering Yarmouk, but said nothing about the airstrikes that hit Yarmouk on Sunday, which were reported by witnesses, rebels and Palestinian defectors to the rebel side.

By some accounts, as many as 20 people were killed, and families could be seen hastily fleeing the area with packed bags.

In Lebanon, the minister of social affairs, Wael Abu Faour, said Monday that at least 22 busloads of people had entered the country from Syria in the last day, and that a "majority were Pal-

estinians fleeing Yarmouk."

More refugees were arriving on Monday at the border-crossing town of Masnaa, where entry lanes were clogged with Palestinians.

Hussam Salah, a 27-year-old Palestinian who grew up in Syria and who now lives in Lebanon and works for Al Mayadeen, a pro-Syrian television channel, said a large number of Palestinians fleeing Syria, some of them apparently wounded, had arrived at Bourj el-Barajneh, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut's southern suburbs, and had sought medical treatment from a hospital there.

Syrian city pays the price

ALEPPO, SYRIA

Battle for Aleppo leaves residents threatened by cold and disease

BY C.J. CHIVERS

Inside the classrooms where they once studied, the boys darted like a pack. Their banging and clanking could be heard for a city block.

The playground outside had been hit by a Syrian Air Force strike, which fractured walls. Now the children were smashing the furniture, prying off wooden desktops and bench seats, rushing away with what they could.

The Isam al-Nadri School for Boys was being dismantled for the firewood it contained. One sixth-grader, Ahmed, clutching the kindling he had made by ransacking a room, offered an irreducible argument for looting his own school. "I want heat," he said.

Winter is descending on Aleppo, Syria's largest city and the bloodied stage for an urban battle, now running into its sixth month, between rebels and the military of President Bashar al-Assad.

Diseases are spreading. Parks and courtyards are being defoliated for firewood, turning streets once lined with trees into avenues bordered by stumps. Months' worth of trash is piled high, often beside bread lines where hundreds of people wait for a meager stack of loaves.

One of the Middle East's beautiful and historic cities is being forced by scarcity and violence into a bitter new shape. Overlaying it all is a mix of fatigue and distrust, the sentiments of a population divided in multiple ways.

Aleppo's citizens scavenge and seethe. And along with the sectarian passions of civil war, some residents express yearnings for starkly opposite visions of the future: either for a return of the relative stability of the Assad government or for the promises of Islamic rule.

Others see a grim hope, calling the unraveling of their society a period that one day will be remembered as this ancient city's ultimate test.

"We left high salaries, we left our jobs, we left our rank in society," said Dr. Ammar Diar Bakerly, who directs medical care in the city's rebel-held east. "We left everything to get our dignity. This is the price we have to pay, and it is a cheap price to get our freedom from the tyrant."

Not everyone shares these revolutionary views.

"We come every morning to the clinic asking for medicine, but they don't offer



SENSE OF DESPERATION Residents of Aleppo waiting for scarce bread. Fuel and medicines are also in short supply as fighting between rebels and government forces there enters its sixth month.

any," said Johair Iman Mustafa, a house painter and taxi driver with no work, who spotted a visitor and approached in a rage. "We go to the bakery for hours but there is no bread and they kick us."

"Before the revolution," said Mr. Mustafa, a Sunni who had been no supporter of Mr. Assad's Alawite-led government, "it was much better."

For most of Syria's 21-month uprising, Aleppo, a commercial and government center built around its historic Old City, was spared the battles engulfing the country.

That changed in July when the Free Syrian Army, or F.S.A., as many rebels call themselves, entered Aleppo and opened urban fronts.

The army rushed in much-needed units from elsewhere, turning to heavier weapons in a bid to retain control of a city that if it lost would change its self-assured narrative of the war. The war's largest battle yet was joined.

Five months on, the government's gambit has failed. Even with air support and artillery batteries firing relentlessly, Mr. Assad's military has yielded ground. In more than half the city, rebels move about openly.

From the outset, Aleppo's population, its loyalties split, was stuck between forces. Disorganized rebel groups had started a battle they had little prospect to win swiftly. The army fought back in part with a collective-punishment model. Foreign fighters began to trickle in, stalking the front and talking of jihad.

And the city's population showed signs of ambivalence. Sentiments mixed and roiled along urban demographic and social lines — between Arabs and Kurds,

"It is not good enough to die from shelling or disease? The international community laughs at our suffering."

loyalists and revolutionaries, secular citizens and Islamists, young and old — all aggravated by the sense that many of the rebels were from rural areas, and did not share Aleppo's cosmopolitan fabric.

The battle's effects followed a predictable course, with little differentiation among its victims' backgrounds. Aleppo's residents face a collapsed economy, broken infrastructure, no services and no clear sense of when the fighting will end.

Prices soared. Necessities today cost 3 to 12 times what they did in July.

A tank of cooking gas, worth \$5 before the war, now costs about \$60. A liter of diesel, 50 cents not long ago, sells today for \$3. Residents often pay for 10 sheathes of bread what they used to pay for 30, 40 or 50. Sometimes though there is no bread at all.

No one expects relief. If anything, people predict that prices will climb even more, further pressured by the decline of the Syrian pound. Devaluation adds strains to families that have no income; the fighting and destruction have put much of Aleppo's population out of work.

Then events made life harder still.

In late November, Aleppo's flour supply was abruptly cut when rebels captured much of the city's grain storage. What might have been a victory instead became a source of popular rage.

Bakeries shut down while the Free Syrian Army struggled to organize flour delivery and sales, leading to public demonstrations. Then, when the rebels did begin distribution, they increased the price of flour — by as much as 20 percent, residents said.

By mid-December only some bakeries were working again. This created a cruel food lottery for residents, who gambled each day on which bakery to line up outside of, wondering if their chosen bakery would receive flour and bake bread.

One bakery owner, Mohammad Badour, 60, reopened his shop last week. “Today the F.S.A. brought flour for the first time,” he said.

Outside, a crowd shouted and shoved. A line of perhaps 200 people snaked around the corner. Inside, several men worked nonstop, keeping the automated bread machine running.

Mr. Badour was sweaty and tired. He understood the desperation at the window, the eyes looking in, alternately angry and plaintive. “We are hungry,” he said.

Later that day, at another bakery in a rebel-held zone, people waited for hours but no flour ever arrived. The crowd turned into a protest that marched down an alley behind a black flag bearing Koranic script, calling for Islamic rule.

“The Free Syrian Army are thieves!” the people chanted — not the sentiment the rebels hoped for when they vowed to liberate the city. One man looked at two foreign journalists and menacingly ran his hand across his throat.

The shortages extend past food to hospital beds. In all the rebel-held territory, medical service is scarce, a shortage that deepened in November when the Syrian Air Force destroyed Dar al-Shifa Hospital, the largest in rebel-held ground.

With the hospital closed, Dr. Bakerly said, “there are 20 hospital beds for all of east Aleppo,” which is an area with more than a million residents.

Doctors now work from a partly hidden network of clinics and small hospitals, from which they treat about 40 people each day for wounds from the shelling.

The number of patients has declined since the hospital was destroyed, doctors said; many people arrange to move the wounded north, to makeshift trauma centers in the countryside and then across the border to Turkey.

But there are other conditions to treat, including a growing menace: disease.

Dr. Bakerly noted that people had crowded into neighborhoods away from the fronts. Dense living conditions, combined with the shortage of potable water and a long absence of trash collection, have created conditions ideal for the spread of infectious diseases.

He and other doctors noted a surge in leishmaniasis, a potentially fatal infection passed to humans by sandfly bites.

Before the fighting came to Aleppo, several doctors said, the government misted the streets and the areas where sandflies bred with insecticide. That has



TERRITORIAL BATTLE A road in Aleppo was barricaded by overturned buses this month. In parts of the city, once busy streets are empty as fighting stretches into winter.

not happened for months. Leishmaniasis cases have spiked.

“We are seeing very high numbers of this; it is spreading in the streets,” said another doctor, Mohammad al-Haj, who splits times between the city’s clinics.

Dr. Haj ticked off the season’s dreary list: more leishmaniasis, more respiratory and stomach infections, dysentery spreading like he had never seen. He added: “We could treat these cases, but there is no laboratory, no medical equipment and almost no medicine. We divide the medicine. The medicine we would normally give to one person we now give to many.”

Shells landed nearby, close enough to make the distinctive thump and crunch of high-explosive ordnance creeping close. A crowd of women with children all but pushed at his door.

Dr. Haj was gentle and polite, but spoke with bitterness at how he hears the West assess Syria’s war.

“They say that chemical weapons are the red line,” he said, referring to President Barack Obama’s warning to Syria’s government that a chemical strike might provoke a U.S. military response. “But we are dying from other ways. It is not good enough to die from shelling or disease? The international community laughs at our suffering.”

Many of the problems plaguing Aleppo can be seen in the experience of Ahmed and Hayat Saleh, a couple with seven children.

The Salehs live for now in an unfinished apartment in a large building that had yet to open when the war broke out. A group of fighters from Al Tawhid brigade, the main F.S.A. contingent in the city, had moved in first, after overrunning a nearby army checkpoint. They offered the family shelter.

The building has no electricity or heat; the rooms turn pitch-black during December’s nearly 14-hour nights. And the apartment needed basic upgrades.

“There was no door when we came

here,” Mr. Saleh said. “We brought the door.”

There are no windows, either. Mr. Saleh covered the open holes with blankets and sheets.

Despite this, as he paced the small space on a recent night, he offered a strange form of real-estate pride. The building is three rooms’ thick, he said, and his apartment is not on the top floor.

That matters. At night, the family huddles together on thin mattresses on the center room’s floor, knowing that their location in the building’s interior improves prospects for survival if an artillery shell hits either side of the building or the roof.

But many of the Salehs’ troubles cannot be solved by shelter. One of their sons has a heart condition and needs the attention of a cardiologist. The specialist lives on the other side of the front lines, in a neighborhood occupied by the army. When Mr. Saleh tried to take his son there, the soldiers stopped him.

“At the checkpoint they said, ‘You gave food to the F.S.A.’” he said. “I said, ‘How can I give food to the F.S.A. when I don’t have food myself?’”

The soldiers blocked the way, even though, he said, the truth was the other way around.

“Now when the F.S.A. downstairs gets food, they give us some,” he said.

Inside the chilly room, two small candles burned, casting the concrete walls in a faint orange glow. Outside, a cold rain fell. In the distance, artillery boomed.

Mr. Saleh rattled off what he and his family faced: No heat, no electricity, no money, no medicine, no doctor and no home, except this unlit, borrowed room.

The children sat silently, under shared blankets, bundled in thick clothes. Their father’s soft voice filled the space.

“We don’t know how we will survive the winter,” Mr. Saleh said. “We wait for the mercy of God.”

Putin makes his case for staying out of Syria fight

MOSCOW

Citing chaos in Libya, he asks, 'What will happen next' if Assad is toppled?

BY DAVID M. HERSZENHORN AND NICK CUMMING-BRUCE

President Vladimir V. Putin on Thursday strongly defended Russia's implacable opposition to military intervention in Syria and sharply chastised the United States for its role in toppling Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, describing the outcome as having created chaos in the region.

Mr. Putin's remarks came as American officials in Washington said forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, had resumed firing Scud ballistic missiles against rebel forces in what they have characterized as an increasingly desperate effort to crush the nearly two-year-old uprising. At the same time, U.N. officials warned in a report that the conflict, which has already cost some 40,000 lives, was turning increasingly sectarian in nature.

Mr. Putin, responding to a question at his annual year-end news conference, rejected an assertion that Russia was making a mistake, risking isolation and a loss influence in the Middle East, by opposing intervention in Syria. He pointed to Libya as his evidence that intervention by the NATO alliance of Western nations had caused more harm than good.

"No matter how they explained their position, the state is falling apart," he said. "Interethnic, interclan and intertribal conflicts continue."

"Moreover, it went as far as the murder of the United States ambassador," he added, referring to the death of J. Christopher Stevens in Benghazi. "I was asked here about mistakes: Isn't it a mistake? And you want us to constantly repeat these mistakes in other countries?"

Mr. Putin insisted that Russia was not acting in defense of Mr. Assad, but rather to preserve stability.

"We are not concerned with the fate of Assad's regime," he said. "Of course, changes are being demanded, but it's something else that concerns — what will happen next?"

Mr. Putin expressed worry that the Assad government and the Syrian opposition could merely switch places, with the rebels in power but with the fighting

unabated. Later, elaborating on Russia's position, he said: "We stand for finding a variation of a solution to the problem which would save the region and this country first from collapse and never-ending civil war."

He continued, "Our position is not for the retention of Assad and his regime in power at any cost but that the people in the beginning would come to an agreement on how they would live in the future, how their safety and participation in ruling the state would be provided for, and then start changing the current state of affairs in accordance with these agreements, and not vice versa."

Russia, a longtime ally of Syria, has used its veto as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council both to block more aggressive intervention sought by Western powers and to defend the sovereignty of the Assad government.

But in recent days, the Kremlin has sounded increasingly pessimistic about Mr. Assad's ability to retain power, and Russian officials acknowledged that they had been developing contingency plans to evacuate Russians from Syria.

The American officials in Washington said that they had no indication that the Scud missiles used by Mr. Assad's forces were armed with chemical weapons and that they had no information on possible casualties. But they again condemned the use of the missiles as an escalation of the conflict.

"We've been clear that we have seen the regime in Syria use Scud missiles against its own people, and that continues," a State Department official said.

As they monitor the fighting, American and Western officials have also focused closely on any sign that Russia might alter its position on Syria, in the hopes that it might hasten the dislodging of Mr. Assad. But it is far from certain that the Kremlin could persuade him to relinquish power.

Russia has been a major Syria arms supplier and trade partner with the Assad government and maintains a small naval refueling installation in the Syrian port of Tartus. But Mr. Putin on Thursday sought to portray the relationship as transactional.

"Some special economic relations?" Mr. Putin asked rhetorically. "No. And Assad did not come to Moscow a lot during the period of his presidency. More often, he was in Paris and other European capitals than here."

His remarks coincided with a new report from U.N. human rights investigators that said the Syrian crisis had evolved from a battle to oust Mr. Assad into more of a sectarian conflict, pitting entire communities against each other and pulling in fighters from the Middle East and North Africa.

The interim report, issued in Geneva by a panel of the U.N. Human Rights Council, said the conflict "has become overtly sectarian in nature."

The panel, led by Paulo Pinheiro, a human rights investigator from Brazil, said attacks and reprisals had led communi-



KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/GETTY IMAGES-APP

ties to arm themselves and to be armed by different parties to the conflict.

"Entire communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or killed inside the country," the panel wrote in the report, which covered actions over the past two months. "Feeling threatened and under attack, ethnic and religious minority groups have increasingly aligned themselves with parties to the conflict, deepening sectarian divides."

The sharpest split is between the ruling minority Alawite sect, a Shiite Muslim offshoot from which Mr. Assad's most senior political and military associates are drawn, and the country's Sunni Muslim majority, mostly aligned with the opposition, the panel noted. But it said the conflict had drawn in other minorities, including Armenians, Christians, Druze, Palestinians, Kurds and Turks.

Most foreign fighters joining the conflict are Sunni Muslims from neighboring Middle Eastern and North African countries, many of them linked to extremist groups, the panel said, and often operating independently of the Free Syrian Army but coordinating attacks with its forces.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite group, confirmed that its members were fighting for the Assad government, the panel said, adding that it was investigating reports that Iraqi Shiites had also entered Syria. Iran has also confirmed that members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps are providing the Assad government with "intellectual and advisory support."

Making their fourth submission to the Human Rights Council, the panel of four investigators said government forces and supporting militias had attacked Sunni civilians, and opposition forces had attacked Alawite and other pro-government communities.

It said Kurdish groups had clashed with government and anti-government forces, Turkmen militias were fighting with anti-government forces, and Palestinians, increasingly split in their view of the government, were being armed by both pro- and anti-government forces. "As the conflict drags on," the panel concluded, "the parties have become ever more violent and unpredictable, which has led to their conduct increasingly being in breach of international law."

Nick Cumming-Bruce reported from Geneva. Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Washington, and Rick Gladstone from New York.

IRAQ, KURDS, TURKS AND OIL

A tortuous triangle

The governments of Turkey, Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan play a dangerous game

ERBIL

SNAKING their way from Kirkuk, a city 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Baghdad, through Kurdistan and across Turkey's eastern region of Anatolia to the Mediterranean are pipes that once carried 1.6m barrels a day (b/d) of Iraqi oil to the global market and yielded fat transit fees to Turkey along the way. The infrastructure underpinned the two countries' mutual dependence. But nowadays the balance of power has shifted. A third party, the Iraqi Kurds, has changed it. It is unclear who will emerge on top. But Iraq's central government in Baghdad is on the defensive.

Wars, saboteurs and, since the 1990s, economic sanctions have left the Iraqi sections of the pipeline system in a mess. Barely a fraction of its capacity is used. One of the two parallel lines stands empty and the source that once fed them, the giant Kirkuk oilfield, is dilapidated. The oil ministry in Baghdad has vague ideas about revamping the pipeline, perhaps to carry crude extracted near Basra, in the far south, though this would need an expensive new pipeline to link both ends of the country.

But Turkey is hatching a different plan for its section of the Kirkuk-to-Ceyhan pipeline. Its souring relations with the government in Baghdad have spurred it to cultivate new ties with the Iraqi Kurds' regional government in Erbil, which oversees the oil and gas that Turkey's growing economy craves. A wide-ranging energy deal is in the works that will see state-backed Turkish firms and Western oil majors plough money into Kurdish infrastructure and oilfields, connecting them to Turkey and the world beyond. The deal could eventually allow for up to 2m b/d of Kurdish oil exports to go through Turkey.

Last year, trade between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan amounted to \$8 billion. Turkish money has paid for pristine airports in Erbil and Dohuk, an Iraqi Kurdish city further north, and for other large projects. Not long ago, Turkish politicians, wary of their own large and restless Kurdish minority still fighting for autonomy (or



more) in eastern Turkey, barely acknowledged Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region.

Now Turkey's government is using its commercial clout to press the Iraqi Kurds' president, Masoud Barzani, to help restrain militant Kurds within Turkey. A stroke recently suffered by Jalal Talabani, a Kurd who is president of federal Iraq and who has often mediated between his kinsmen and the rulers in Baghdad, may make it even harder to keep the calm.

Oil and gas are at the core of this warm new relationship between Turkey and Iraq's Kurds. "Turkey has made a strategic shift in its relations with us," says an official in a ministry in Erbil. "Whatever the scenario, our market is in Turkey."

Nuri al-Maliki's government in Baghdad, dominated by Shia Muslims, has unwisely pushed Turkey into this oily Kurdish embrace. Mr Maliki's close ties to Iran and support for President Bashar Assad in Syria have angered Turkey's government and convinced it not to rely on Iraq. The refuge offered by Turkey to Tariq al-Hashemi, Iraq's vice-president, who was sentenced to death in absentia by a court in Baghdad in September, has also upset Mr Maliki, who has duly insulted Turkey's leaders. In November his government expelled Turkey's state oil company from a block in Iraq, plainly out of political spite. In December he ordered his air-traf-

fic controllers to deny landing rights to Turkey's energy minister, Taner Yildiz, who was en route to Erbil for an investor conference.

Iraq's central government seems bent on wrecking the Kurds' thriving oil industry, saying that their regional government has no legal authority to export oil independently or sign contracts with developers. The government in Baghdad has delayed payments to Iraqi Kurdistan's oil producers, who say they are owed about \$1.5 billion. Some explorers fret that they will never recoup their cash. Pars Kutay, an executive at Genel Energy, a Turkish oil producer in Kurdistan, says that depending for payment on Iraq's central authorities is like "pumping oil into a black hole". Kurdish oil exports are now said to have collapsed to around 30,000 b/d.

This helps no one. Oil explorers in Kurdistan, now including big spenders like ExxonMobil and Chevron, are said to have so far invested about \$10 billion. Future exports of 2m b/d, as envisaged by the regional government in Erbil, would yield far greater sums. Under Iraq's revenue-sharing scheme more than four-fifths of the money from such sales would go to Baghdad, 17% to the Kurds. If the region's oil were allowed to flow, Kurdistan, now a drain on Iraq's budget, would soon be a net contributor, says Ashti Hawrami, the Kurds' oil minister. "It is a win-win."

But the centralising Mr Maliki is deeply loth to give the Kurds their head. Their oil policy, he says, threatens to tear Iraq's fragile federation apart by fostering similar aspirations in its oil-producing provinces in the south. Western governments, fearing that Iraq's disintegration would strengthen Iran, are siding with Mr Maliki. The Americans are pressing Turkey to tone down its support for Iraq's Kurds.

In recent weeks Mr Maliki has mobilised Iraq's army along the fault-line that divides the Kurdish region from the rest of Iraq. Bombs have killed at least ten people in the past fortnight in Kirkuk. Kurdish leaders say that they are ready to fight and have sent thousands of their fighters, known as peshmerga, to face down the Iraqi army. From a ridge north-west of Kirkuk, they peer through binoculars at Iraqi troops massing a few hundred yards below on the plain. "If one peshmerga is killed," says a Kurdish officer, "it is war."

Syrie : les djihadistes montent en puissance

Jabhat al-Nosra et d'autres groupes extrémistes risquent d'imposer leur agenda à la chute du régime.

GEORGES MALBRUNOT

MOYEN-ORIENT « Dangereux terroristes » pour les États-Unis, « valeureux combattants » anti Bachar el-Assad pour de nombreux opposants : le groupe djihadiste Jabhat al-Nosra (Front de la victoire), que Washington vient d'inscrire sur la liste des organisations terroristes, divise les parrains de la rébellion armée.

Une chose est sûre : ses 5000 à 8000 hommes dispersés sur le territoire syrien infligent les plus lourdes pertes aux forces du régime. Dernière victoire en date : la prise de la base militaire de cheikh Souleimane à l'ouest d'Alep, le 10 décembre. En une seule journée de novembre, le réseau américain Site de surveillance des djihadistes recensa 45 attaques revendiquées par Jabhat al-Nosra à Damas, Deraa (sud), Hama (centre) et dans la province de Homs. Dans leurs fiefs d'Alep et d'Idleb, au nord près de la frontière turque, « ses hommes sont populaires », affirme un journaliste syrien de retour de ces régions. « Nous voulons une armée qui a peur de Dieu, nous voulons Jabhat al-Nosra », scandent de nombreux manifestants.

Sa popularité provient d'une grande discipline dans ses rangs. « Les gens voient la différence avec la plupart des autres chefs de brigades qui se conduisent en despotes, alors que Jabhat al-Nosra est une organisation solide et quasi stalinienne, où nul ne peut agir sans les ordres d'un chef », poursuit le journaliste. Une organisation qui cultive le goût du secret et fuit la presse étrangère. Contrairement aux autres volontaires ayant pris les armes pour chasser le régime baassiste, les djihadistes bénéficient de l'expérience des combats menés sur d'autres fronts de la « guerre sainte », en Irak en particulier.

Al-Nosra est une émanation directe d'al-Qaida en Irak (AQI), selon la CIA. AQI a joué un rôle important dans sa création à la fin de l'année 2011, lui fournissant argent et combattants, notamment des experts en explosifs, indispensables aux attentats que le « Front » commet depuis janvier. L'un de ses deux chefs est d'ailleurs Irakien (Al-Jbouri), l'autre Syrien, Abou Hanas al-Assahaba. Au nord, les étrangers (Saoudiens, Irakiens, Koweïtiens...) représenteraient plus de la moitié des effectifs d'Al-Nosra. Au sud de Homs, la proportion serait



Rebelles à la base militaire de cheikh Souleimane à l'ouest d'Alep. HERVÉ BAR/AFP

encore plus élevée.

Al-Qaida aux portes d'Israël

Deux autres groupes, pas encore dans le collimateur de Washington, accueillent des étrangers : Ghouraba al-Sham (des Turcs et des moudjahidins venus d'Asie centrale) et Ahrar al-Sham, des salafistes syriens, épaulés par des Irakiens et des Libanais, dont des réfugiés palestiniens. « Si les autres opposants ne luttent pas contre les djihadistes, ces derniers risquent d'imposer leurs vues à la libération, privant les nationalistes de la victoire », avertit Robert Ford, ancien ambassadeur américain à Damas.

« Nous les connaissons, certains d'entre eux ont tué des Américains à Hilla ou à Diyala en Irak », assure M. Syrie au département d'État. Pas question de les combattre, répondent les dirigeants de la Coalition nationale d'opposition, reconnue par la communauté internationale. Si des Syriens les ont rejoint, ajoutent-ils, c'est davantage par dépit face à l'immobilisme des Occidentaux que par adhésion à leurs idéaux de créer un Califat en Syrie ou d'allumer une guerre confessionnelle chiite-sunnite. Ils ont pourtant brûlé une mosquée chiite la semaine dernière dans le nord. « Ils quitteront la Syrie à la chute du pouvoir », promet Riad Seif de la Coalition.

« Pure illusion ! », répond un cadre des services de renseignements français. « Ben Laden et Zawahiri ont toujours révé

d'implanter al-Qaida à Damas et aux portes d'Israël. Maintenant que leurs fidèles y sont, ils ne vont certainement pas en partir ». Paris, qui compte adopter une loi criminalisant les séjours de Français sur ces terres de djihad, est gêné. « Si la Coalition, qui est un peu notre bébé, condamne al-Nosra, elle va perdre une part du soutien populaire. Si elle ne fait rien, on va être accusé de laxisme contre le terrorisme », résume un diplomate.

Au jour le jour, de nombreux rebelles proches des Frères musulmans - la colonne vertébrale de la Coalition - coopèrent avec les djihadistes. Comme en Irak après la chute de Saddam Hussein. Sous l'influence d'AQI, « vont-ils se structurer comme à Bagdad, s'interroge un expert onusien, c'est-à-dire créer un Conseil des moudjahidins et au-dessous deux organisations, une pour les étrangers en charge du financement, une autre avec les Syriens pour la désignation des cibles à frapper ? »

Ironie de l'histoire : les opposants ont longtemps juré qu'Al-Nosra était une création du régime. En libérant une quarantaine de djihadistes de ses geôles - dont Abou Moussab al-Souri, militaire aguerri auprès de Ben Laden en Afghanistan - Assad a clairement favorisé l'essor de ses ennemis. ■

La crise humanitaire en Syrie touche la totalité du pays, frappé par les pénuries

Un raid aérien, à Halfaya, a tué 60 personnes dans une file d'attente devant une boulangerie

Beyrouth

Correspondance

Le bilan du raid aérien qui a frappé, dimanche 23 décembre, Halfaya, au nord-ouest de Hama, en Syrie, s'élève à 60 morts et des centaines de blessés, selon des sources de l'opposition syrienne. D'après les activistes, un avion de chasse de l'armée syrienne a bombardé une boulangerie devant laquelle s'était formée une file d'attente de plusieurs centaines de personnes.

Halfaya, déclarée « zone libre » par les rebelles cinq jours plus tôt, était assiégée par les troupes gouvernementales, empêchant tout ravitaillement. Damas a démenti être à l'origine du massacre et l'a imputé à des « terroristes », qui l'auraient perpétré pour accuser le régime Assad, « au moment où l'émissaire international Lakhdar Brahimi arrivait en Syrie ».

Inflation générale

Les files d'attente qui s'allongent devant les boulangeries témoignent d'une crise humanitaire qui affecte désormais l'ensemble de la Syrie. Les pénuries de produits de premières nécessités génèrent une inflation, qui frappe toutes les denrées alimentaires, les médicaments, ainsi que l'essence, dont le prix a augmenté de 500%. Mais selon Yasmina, responsable d'une association damascène de secours aux déplacés, contactée depuis Beyrouth et qui préfère taire son nom, « les ONG chargées de l'action humanitaire en Syrie refusent de tirer la sonnette d'alarme pour ne pas compromettre leur relation avec le régime et perdre leur accréditation ».

Le conflit qui déchire la Syrie depuis près de vingt mois a provoqué le déplacement de 2,5 millions de personnes à l'intérieur du pays, en plus de l'exode à l'étranger d'un demi-million de Syriens, selon les Nations unies. Si les déplacés forment la catégorie la plus vulnérable de la société syrienne, les exilés ont, par leur nombre, contribué à fragiliser les populations qui les ont accueillis.



Capture d'une vidéo de la chaîne Shaam News Network montrant les victimes d'un raid aérien, devant une boulangerie d'Halfaya, près de Hama, le 23 décembre. SHAAM NEWS NETWORK/HOEP/AP

Selon Yasmina, les ONG et les agences onusiennes sont loin d'être à la hauteur de la gravité de la situation. Un constat confirmé par Abou Leïla, cadre d'une agence des Nations unies : « Même là où l'on parvient à acheminer des

Lakhdar Brahimi à Damas, combats à Hama

L'émissaire international Lakhdar Brahimi a appelé, lundi 24 décembre, à « un accord pour mettre fin à la guerre civile », après avoir rencontré Bachar Al-Assad à Damas. M. Brahimi, qui avait consulté des responsables russes et américains, a fait part de son inquiétude. Par ailleurs, les combats se sont étendus à la province de Hama, dans le centre du pays. Des insurgés ont attaqué le village alaouite de Maan et menacé deux localités chrétiennes, des communautés considérées comme acquises au régime. Enfin, la rébellion a accusé l'armée syrienne d'avoir usé contre elle des gaz toxiques à Homs. — (AFP, Reuters)

vivres, l'aide ne couvre jamais plus du quart des besoins de la population. »

Elysa Byrs, porte-parole du Programme alimentaire mondial (PAM) à Genève, a révélé, le 18 décembre, que « l'aide ne parvient à atteindre qu'un tiers (...) des personnes nécessiteuses », en raison de l'extension des combats. Dix camions du PAM ont été attaqués en Syrie. Les organisations humanitaires sont également affectées par la pénurie de carburant, qui entraîne régulièrement la suspension des opérations de distribution.

Selon les professionnels de l'humanitaire, corroborés par de nombreux réfugiés syriens au Liban, la Syrie n'a pas connu, jusqu'à présent, de famine ou de mort par hypothermie, malgré les températures glaciales de décembre. Cela essentiellement grâce à la solidarité de la population.

Partout, des réseaux informels de solidarité se sont constitués grâce aux activistes, qui acheminent l'aide, parfois au péril de leur vie, là où les ONG ne vont pas. Le régime a criminalisé ces activités et asso-

cié « toute personne aidant des personnes indirectement liées aux terroristes à un terroriste », selon un décret promulgué à la fin de l'été 2012. L'objectif de ce texte vise autant à punir les populations déplacées provenant de foyers d'insurrection que de prévenir le ravitaillement des insurgés. Yasmina précise que des arrestations avaient déjà eu lieu bien avant la promulgation de ce décret.

Il subsiste quelques exceptions. La jeune femme raconte comment elle a réussi à convaincre le maire de sa ville d'ouvrir une école pour y loger les 66 familles de déplacés campant dans les rues. Aussitôt, 70 personnes se portèrent volontaires pour aider à leur installation. « L'école, raconte-t-elle, a reçu un flot ininterrompu d'habitants venus apporter vêtements, argent, denrées alimentaires, lunettes de vues, ustensiles de cuisine... » Malheureusement, constate Abou Leïla, « les gens qui ont quelque chose à partager se font de plus en plus rares et les riches donateurs qui finançaient les organisations caritatives ont quitté le pays ». ■

KHALED SID MOHAND

A Kurdish state is being established, and Baghdad may accept it

By David Hirst

I was surprised last week to read an article in the Baghdad newspaper Al-Sabah, by its editor Abd al-Jabbar Shabbout, suggesting it was time to settle the “age-old problem” between Iraq’s Arabs and Kurds by establishing a “Kurdish state.” For never before had I heard so heretical a view so publicly expressed in any Arab quarter. And this was no ordinary quarter either. Sabah is the mouthpiece of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Shabbout went on to suggest a negotiated “ending of the Arab-Kurdish partnership in a peaceful way.” He called his proposal Plan-B – Plan-A being what was already in train: namely, a continuous “dialogue” between Iraq’s central government and the Kurdish regional government, conducted within the framework of the “new Iraq” – constitutionally defined as “federal, democratic and parliamentary” – that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein.

But Plan-A, Shabbout observed, was going nowhere. Differences – over power and authority, oil and natural resources, territory and borders – were so profound that dialogue had repeatedly failed. And this month it almost came to war. For a while the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga faced each other across the frontiers between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq in an atmosphere so tense, noted Shabbout, that hostilities could have broken out at any moment.

And it wasn’t only Shabbout, but Maliki himself, who warned that if war did break out it wouldn’t be just a war between Kurdish rebels and Baghdad, as it used to be under Saddam. It would be an

“ethnic war between Arabs and Kurds.”

Be it Plan-A or Plan-B, war or diplomacy, the latest, dangerous standoff has made one thing clear: the “Kurdish question” has now reached another critical stage in its long history, and it is intimately bound up with the regionwide cataclysm that is known as the Arab Spring.

It was ever thus for the Kurds, their destiny as a people always shaped less by their own struggles than by the vagaries of regional and international politics, and particularly by the great Middle Eastern upheavals regional and international politics periodically produce. These began, in modern times, with World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement Britain and France promised Kurds a state of their own, but then reneged on that promise. Kurds became minorities, more or less severely repressed, in the four countries – Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria – among which their vast domains were divided. They repeatedly rebelled against this new order, especially in Iraq. But their landlocked location and their broader geopolitical environment were always against them. Their rebellions were invariably crushed – the last one, under Saddam Hussein, through genocide and the use of chemical weapons.

But they never ceased to dream of independent statehood. And the first of two great breakthroughs toward this grew out of the megalomaniac folly of Saddam himself, with his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. One of the entirely unforeseeable consequences of this was the establishment of an internationally protected “safe haven” in northern Iraq that

enabled Kurds to take their first state-building steps, in the shape of a regional assembly and a degree of self-government.

The second breakthrough grew out of that whole new constitutional order which the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 ushered in. Under it, the Kurds consolidated their already existing autonomy with broad new legislative powers, control over their own armed forces, and some authority over that mainstay of the Iraqi economy, namely oil.

From the outset, the Kurds had made it clear that they would only remain committed to the “new Iraq” if it treated them as equal partners, and not, as before, a subordinate minority.

It wasn’t long before this ethno-sectarian, power-sharing democracy began to malfunction, and to generate those disputes no amount of dialogue could resolve. And as these disputes deepened, they only intensified the Kurds’ yearning for independence – and their practical preparations for it. Openly or surreptitiously, they began accumulating constitutional, political, territorial, economic and security “facts on the ground,” designed to ensure that, if and when they proclaimed their new-born state, this entity would have the means and ability to stand on its own feet, to thrive and to defend itself.

So are the Iraqi Kurds now on the brink of their third, perhaps final, breakthrough, the great losers of Sykes-Picot about to become, 90 years on, the great winners of the Arab Spring? They themselves certainly hope so. “Not only is Iraqi Kurdistan undergoing an unprecedented building boom,” reports Joost Hiltermann in the American

magazine Foreign Affairs, “its people are now articulating a once-unthinkable notion: that the day they will break free from the rest of Iraq is nigh.” And Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani often openly alludes to this possibility. “We have had enough,” he says, of the “the dictatorship in power in Baghdad” and of the Kurds’ participation in it.

It seems, however, that he awaits one last thing before taking the plunge, another of those game-changing events – such as the breakup of Syria – that can transform the whole geopolitical environment in the Kurds’ favor. But the quarter in which Kurds are actively looking to bring this change about is in Turkey. That they should even think of this is, historically speaking, extraordinary, considering that, of all the Kurds’ neighbors, Turkey probably has most to lose from independence-seeking Kurdish nationalism, and has brutally repressed it in the past. Considering, too, that ever afraid that Kurdish gains elsewhere may be a progenitor of Kurdish aspirations in Turkey, Ankara has long set great store on Iraq remaining united, with its Kurds an integral part of it.

But since 2008, in a complete reversal of earlier policy – which had once been to boycott Kurdistan altogether – the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been pursuing “full economic integration” with Iraqi Kurdistan. Meanwhile, its relations with the Iraqi government have been relentlessly deteriorating, with the two now on opposite sides of the great Middle Eastern power struggle that pits Bashar Assad’s Syria, Shiite Iran, Maliki’s Iraq, and Hezbollah against the Syrian revolutionaries, most of the Sunni Arab states and Turkey itself. ➤

➤ Under pressures from this struggle, Turkey's extraordinary courtship of Iraq's Kurds has continued to bloom, and to move from the merely economic to the political and strategic as well. In fact it has moved so far – the Kurds believe – that Turkey might soon break with Maliki's essentially Shiite regime altogether, and deal separately with those two other main components of a crumbling Iraqi state, the Arab Sunnis

and, more importantly, the Kurds.

The allurements that an independent Kurdistan could offer in return would include its role as a potential source of much-needed, abundant and reliable oil supplies, as a stable, accommodating ally and buffer between it and a hostile Iraq and Iran, and even – in a policy option as extraordinary as Turkey's own – as a collaborator in containing fellow Kurds, such as the Kurdistan

Workers Party, or PKK. Having established a strong presence in "liberated" Syrian Kurdistan, the PKK is now seeking to turn this territory into a platform for reviving the insurgency in Turkey itself.

It is even said that Erdogan has gone so far as to promise Barzani that Turkey would protect his would-be state-in-the-making in the event of an Iraqi military onslaught. However, presumably that would never come to pass if, adopting Plan-

B, the Maliki regime really is contemplating the seismic step of letting the Kurds go of their own free will.

David Hirst is a former Middle East correspondent for The Guardian and author of "Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East." He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.

(The Daily Star :: Lebanon News :: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb>)

San Francisco Chronicle December 25, 2012

Official: Iraq's northern Kurdish suspends crude oil exports due to payment row with Baghdad

By SINAN SALAHEDDIN,
Associated Press

BAGHDAD- An Iraqi Kurdish official said on Tuesday that the country's self-ruled northern Kurdish region has suspended oil exports over a payment row with Baghdad, a development that could add to already souring relations between the Kurds and the Arab-led central government.

Since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, the Kurds have unilaterally struck more than 50 deals with foreign oil companies, even though Baghdad says they have no right to do so. In 2011, the two sides reached a tentative deal by which the Kurds send the oil to Baghdad, which sells it, and pays 50 percent of the revenues to the developers to reimburse the development costs.

In April, the Kurds halted exports of around 100,000 barrels a day, saying that Baghdad had made only two payments under the agreement and had failed to pay \$1.5 billion they say they were owed.

Four months later, the Kurds agreed to restart exports as a goodwill gesture. That allowed the two sides to reach a new agreement under which Baghdad would pay 1 trillion Iraqi dinars (about \$848 million) to the companies in September.

However, Ali Hussein Balo, the advisor of the Kurdish Ministry of Natural Resources, said Baghdad sent only 650 billion Iraqi dinars (about \$550 million) and withheld the rest. That prompted the Kurds' latest move.

"The region has found itself forced to halt the oil exports as Baghdad didn't fulfill a commitment it made in the September agreement in regard to payment," Balo told



The Associated Press over the phone from the self-ruled region's capital, Irbil.

He said the Kurdish region of Iraq was exporting around 180,000 barrels a day before recently starting to decrease the shipments. He didn't say when exactly exports were halted but said it was in the past few days.

Faisal Abdullah, the spokesman for Iraq's deputy prime minister for energy affairs, confirmed that the full amount wasn't paid. He said the payments were suspended because the Kurds were pumping less than the 200,000 barrels a day they had pledged. He wouldn't give more details.

The latest move could dash Iraq's hopes to pump 3.7 million barrels a day and to export 2.9 million barrels a day next year. Daily production last month averaged around 3.2 million barrels and daily exports averaged 2.62 million.

Iraq sits atop the world's fourth largest

proven reserves of conventional crude, about 143.1 billion barrels, and oil revenues make up 95 percent of its budget.

In addition to the dispute over development oil resources, the Kurds and the central government in Baghdad have been in a long-running dispute over lands claimed by the Kurds and power-sharing. Along with Sunni Arabs, the Kurds accuse the country's Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of consolidating power in his hands and marginalizing political opponents. Separately, Iraq and neighboring Jordan have agreed to speed efforts to build a pipeline to export Iraqi oil through the Jordanian Red Sea port of Aqaba, according to Jordan's Petra news agency.

The deal calls for an oil pipeline that would have a capacity to export one million barrels a day, according to the news agency and al-Maliki's office. The two sides signed an economic cooperation agreement that includes the pipeline project during a brief visit by al-Maliki to Jordan on Monday.

They also agreed to boost the capacity of a natural gas pipeline to supply Jordan with additional Iraqi gas. In addition, Iraq said it could raise the amount of crude oil it exports for Jordanian domestic use, and will double to 60,000 tons the amount of heavy fuel it exports to Jordan monthly, according to Petra.

Violent demonstrations broke out in Jordan last month after the government removed subsidies to offset \$5 billion in losses from a rising fuel bill. Heating and cooking gas prices have jumped sharply since. To help, al-Maliki's Shiite-led government last month announced a one-time gift of 100,000 barrels of oil to Sunni Muslim Jordan. □

Devil's brew of choices for Assad

BEIRUT

**Fight, flee or relocate?
His life and legacy, and
Syria's fate, are at risk**

BY ANNE BARNARD
AND HWAIDA SAAD

President Bashar al-Assad of Syria sits in his mountaintop palace as the tide of war licks at the cliffs below.

Explosions bloom over the Damascus suburbs. His country is plunging deeper into chaos. The United Nations' top envoy for the Syrian crisis, Lakhdar Brahimi, met with Mr. Assad in the palace on Monday in an urgent effort to resolve the nearly two-year-old conflict.

How Mr. Assad might respond to Mr. Brahimi's entreaty depends on his psychology, shaped by a strong sense of mission inherited from his iron-fisted father and predecessor, Hafez al-Assad; his closest advisers, whom supporters describe as a hard-line politburo of his father's security men; and Mr. Assad's assessment, known only to himself, about what awaits him if he stays — victory, or death at the hands of his people.

From his hilltop, Mr. Assad can gaze toward several possible futures.

East of the palace lies the airport and a possible dash to exile, a route that some say Mr. Assad's mother and wife may have taken. But the way is blocked, not just by bands of rebels, but by a belief that supporters say Mr. Assad shares with his advisers that fleeing would betray both his country and his father's legacy.

He can stay in Damascus and cling to — even die for — his father's aspirations, to impose a secular Syrian order and act as a pan-Arab leader on a regional and global stage.

Or he can head north to the coastal mountain heartland of his minority Alawite sect, ceding the rest of the country to the uprising led by the Sunni Muslim majority. That would mean a dramatic comedown: reverting to the smaller stature of his grandfather, a tribal leader of a marginalized minority concerned mainly with its own survival.

Mr. Brahimi was closemouthed about the details of his meeting, but has warned in recent weeks that without a political solution, Syria faces the collapse of the state and years of civil war that could dwarf the destruction caused by the conflict that has taken more than 40,000 lives.

A Damascus-based diplomat said

Monday that Mr. Assad, despite official denials, was "totally aware" that he would have to leave and was "looking for a way out," though the timetable was unclear. "More importantly," said the diplomat, who is currently outside Syria but whose responsibilities include the country, "powerful people in the upper circle of the ruling elite in Damascus are feeling that an exit must be found."

Yet others close to Mr. Assad and his circle say any retreat would clash with his deep-seated sense of himself, and with the wishes of increasingly empowered security officials, whom one friend of the president's has come to see as "hotheads."

Mr. Assad believes he is "defending his country, his people, and his regime and himself" against Islamic extremism and Western interference, said Joseph Abu Fadel, a Lebanese political analyst who supports Mr. Assad and met with government officials last week in Damascus.

Analysts in Russia, one of Syria's staunchest allies, say that as rebels try to encircle Damascus and cut off escape routes through Hama Province to the coast, the mood in the palace is one of panic, evinced by erratic use of weapons: Scud missiles better used against an army than an insurgency, naval mines dropped from the air instead of laid at sea.

But even if Mr. Assad wanted to flee, it is unclear whether the top generals would let him out alive, Russian analysts say, as they believe that if they lay down arms, they — and their disproportionately Alawite families — will die in vengeance killings, and need him to rally the troops.

"If he can fly out of Damascus," said Semyon A. Bagdasarov, a Middle East expert in Moscow — at this, he laughed dryly — "there is also the understanding of responsibility before the people. A person who has betrayed several million of those closest to him."

Many Syrians still share Mr. Assad's belief that he is protecting the Syrian state, which helps explain how he has held on this long. At a lavish lunch hosted by a Lebanese politician outside Beirut in September, prominent Syrian backers of Mr. Assad — Alawites, Sunnis and Christians — spoke of the president as the bulwark of a multicultural, modern Syria.

But one friend of Mr. Assad's, stepping out of earshot of the others to speak frankly, said the president's advisers were "hotheads" who were telling him, "You are weak, you must be strong," adding, "They are advising him to strike more, with the planes, any way

that you can think of.

"They speak of the rebels like dogs, terrorists, Islamists, Wahhabis," the friend said, using a term for adherents to a puritanical form of Islam. "This is why he will keep going to the end."

The friend added that even though Mr. Assad sometimes spoke of dialogue, he mainly wanted to be a hero fending off a foreign attack. "He is thinking of victory — only victory."

Such a crisis is the last thing that was expected for the young Bashar al-Assad. He was the stinky, shy second brother with the receding chin, dragged from a quiet life as a London ophthalmologist after the death in 1994 of his swaggering older brother, Basil al-Assad, who crashed his sports car while speeding toward the airport.

Mr. Assad's father, Hafez, held power from 1970 to 2000, raising a second-tier clan from the oppressed Alawite minority to power and wealth. But critics say the Assads used four decades in power not to promote meaningful ethnic and religious integration, but to cement Alawite rule with a secular face.

After the uprising began as a peaceful protest movement in March 2011, Mr. Assad rejected calls for deep reform — from his people, from Turkish officials who had spent years cultivating him, even from militant groups he had long sponsored, Hamas and Hezbollah, which, according to Hamas, offered to arrange talks with the rebels. Instead, Mr. Assad took his father's path. To put down an Islamist revolt in the 1980s, Hafez al-Assad bulldozed entire neighborhoods and killed at least 10,000 people. The son now presides over a crackdown-turned-civil-war that has killed four times that number, and counting.

In a government that has become even more secretive, it is impossible to know exactly how Mr. Assad makes his decisions. Some people say that he wanted to change but that his father's generals and intelligence officials, along with his mother, convinced him that change would bring about their downfall.

"There are two Bashar al-Assads," said Jürgen Todenhöfer, a German journalist who interviewed him in July. One is a quiet man "who doesn't like his job"

**Either the Syrian president
"is a professional liar or he
can't deliver on what
he promises."**

and wants a way out, he said; the other wants to show his family and the world, "I'm not a softy." Others say that Mr. Assad's impulses toward change were always meant only to bring access to the luxuries and approval of the West.

The Assads were raised by their father and their uncles — aggressive men — to believe "they were demigods and Syria was their playground," said Rana Kabbani, the daughter of a prominent diplomat who knew them growing up.

Turkish officials say that in frequent talks during the revolt's first months,

Mr. Assad listened calmly to their criticisms, took personal responsibility for the government's actions and promised to seek resolution. "Either he is a professional liar or he can't deliver on what he promises," said a senior Turkish official, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Now, Mr. Assad, 47, faces a set of unpalatable choices. Fleeing to become an Alawite militia leader is most likely hard to imagine for the president, who grew up in Damascus, reached out to and married into the Sunni elite, and was even mocked in his ancestral village for his Damascus accent, said Joshua Landis, a professor at the University of Oklahoma who studies Syria and the Alawites.

Mr. Assad was long believed to take advice from his mother; his brother Maher, who heads the army's feared Fourth Division; his brother-in-law Asef Shawkat; and his cousins, the Makhloufs.

But his mother is believed to have fled Syria in recent weeks. Mr. Shawkat, the deputy defense minister, was killed in a bombing in July. The Makhloufs are believed to be spiriting money out of the country. Maher has been reported to have lost a leg in the bombing, but still to be commanding troops.

Turkish, Russian, Syrian and Lebanese analysts agree: Mr. Assad's main advisers are now his father's hardliners and the leaders of the shabiha mi-

litias, which have carried out attacks on government opponents.

If there ever existed moderates in the government who might cajole Mr. Assad to hand power to a successor who could preserve the Syrian state, that option now appears increasingly remote.

Kareem Fahim and David D. Kirkpatrick contributed reporting from Beirut, Ellen Barry from Moscow, Sebnem Arsu from Istanbul, Rick Gladstone from New York, and an employee of The New York Times from Tartus, Syria.

IRAK



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Ces Kurdes irakiens qui rêvent d'Istanbul

Alors que les relations entre les Kurdes de Turquie et le gouvernement d'Ankara sont au plus bas, ceux d'Irak sont devenus les fidèles alliés de la Turquie.

—Zaman Istanbul

Le "Family Mall" est le plus grand centre commercial d'Erbil. Il symbolise parfaitement l'augmentation du pouvoir d'achat des Kurdes d'Irak. En effet, le revenu par tête d'habitant, qui, au Kurdistan d'Irak, était il y a dix ans de 300 dollars, a, selon les statistiques officielles locales, dépassé les 4 500 dollars et j'ai même rencontré des gens qui évoquaient le chiffre de 6 500 dollars. La plupart des magasins de ce centre commercial appartiennent à des personnes venues de Turquie, illustrant ainsi le rôle croissant des entreprises turques qui débarquent dans la région et participent au développement du Kurdistan. Le rapprochement s'effectue aussi dans les esprits entre la Turquie et le Kurdistan irakien.

On se trouve dans une situation paradoxale. En effet, alors que les relations entre Ankara et le Kurdistan de Turquie ne cessent de se détériorer, les liens avec les Kurdes d'Irak se renforcent. Il n'est un secret pour personne qu'Ankara ne s'est pas bien comporté vis-à-vis de ses propres Kurdes. Le soulèvement mené par le PKK [le mouvement armé kurde] continue. Pourquoi, dans ces conditions, les Kurdes d'Irak, du moins la plupart d'entre

eux, se sentent-ils de plus en plus proches de la Turquie ?

La meilleure réponse à cette question m'a été faite par un professeur en psychologie de l'université de Souleymanieh [grande ville du Kurdistan irakien]. "C'est en réalité un phénomène nouveau. Une tendance qui s'est développée après l'arrivée d'Erdogan au pouvoir en Turquie. Je vous donne un exemple qui me concerne personnellement. Avant 2002, chaque fois que je me rendais en Turquie, je subissais les vexations systématiques des policiers turcs dès que ceux-ci voyaient l'inscription Kurdistan sur mon passeport. Mais, maintenant, la situation a complètement changé. Je suis désormais respecté et j'en suis heureux. Istanbul est notre porte d'ouverture vers l'Ouest..." De même qu'Erbil et Souleymanieh incarnent pour les Arabes irakiens l'endroit où ils peuvent souffler et fuir la chaleur étouffante des régions plus méridionales de l'Irak – ce qui explique notamment que les hôtels y poussent comme des champignons –, Istanbul est devenue pour de nombreux Kurdes irakiens un lieu où ils se sentent à l'aise et où ils peuvent nouer toutes sortes de contacts. N'oublions pas qu'Istanbul est la plus grande ville kurde du monde – plus grande encore de ce point de vue qu'Erbil,

Souleymanieh ou Diyarbakir [grande ville à majorité kurde du sud-est de la Turquie].

Maliki sur le départ. Aujourd'hui, la moitié de la population du Kurdistan d'Irak, autonome depuis 1991, a moins de vingt ans et ne se sent donc plus très irakienne. Cette situation est un legs de la dictature de Saddam Hussein, qui a opprimé les Kurdes et dilapidé les richesses du pays. Au fur et à mesure que le Premier ministre chiite irakien, Nouri Al-Maliki, manifeste son envie de reprendre le contrôle de la région kurde, c'est à dire au fur et à mesure qu'il se "saddamise" comme on le dit de plus en plus, les rapports entre Erbil et Bagdad se distendent. La mise sur pied par Maliki d'une brigade militaire baptisée "Commandement de l'opération du Tigre" [et créée dans le contexte de la rivalité entre Kurdes et Arabes par rapport à la ville de Kirkouk] est la dernière illustration de la tension de plus en plus palpable dans les relations entre Kurdes et Arabes irakiens. C'est paradoxal, il y a encore quelques années, la Turquie se tenait aux côtés du gouvernement central irakien, gardant ses distances vis-à-vis d'Erbil, pour marquer son attachement au maintien de l'intégrité territoriale de l'Irak (et, par conséquent, de la Turquie). La situation s'est aujourd'hui totalement inversée pour des raisons économiques, politiques et culturelles de plus en plus évidentes. Comme me l'a dit un observateur avisé de la région, "la Turquie ne peut plus privilégier Bagdad au détriment du Kurdistan irakien. En effet, tant [le président syrien] Assad que Maliki sont sur le départ."

—Sahin Alpay

Vivre et mourir, au rythme des combats, dans les rues d'Alep



Six mois après l'entrée de l'Armée syrienne libre dans la deuxième ville du pays, les combats se poursuivent

Reportage

Alep (Syrie)

Envoyée spéciale

Un type nettoie sa kalachnikov et un autre, à côté de lui, épluche l'ail pour la soupe. Il a posé à ses pieds son revolver et son tricot entamé, avec les aiguilles plantées dedans : c'est une écharpe rayée aux couleurs de la rébellion. Un petit feu éclaire les parois de la casemate, qui était, il y a quelques mois encore, une boutique de « souvenirs orientaux et folkloriques » dans la vieille ville d'Alep. La ligne de front zigzague quelques centaines de mètres plus haut à travers les ruelles du souk.

Un avion passe. Le type à la kalachnikov s'étonne. Ça bombardait moins depuis quelques jours. Pourquoi ? Chacun a ses explications, multiples et volatiles. De gros combats mobiliseraient ailleurs les forces du régime, à Damas et Hama. Peut-être que les défenses anti-aériennes, dont l'armée rebelle a enfin pu s'équiper, découragent aussi les décollages.

L'autre homme, qui a repris son tricot, annonce que deux roquettes viennent de tuer 18 personnes du côté de l'aéroport. Le régime tombera, ça fait peu de doutes ici. Mais on a tantôt l'impression que les combats vont durer encore une éternité et tantôt qu'il n'y en a plus que pour une minute. Cela fait six mois

que l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) est entrée dans Alep, dont elle contrôle un peu plus de la moitié. Ces jours-ci, on y vit et on y meurt à l'heure des incertitudes, des alliances qui se nouent et se dénouent ou des convictions qui basculent.

« Dans ce souk, on vendait toutes les richesses possibles, des tapis, des diamants, des antiquités », se ren-

Chaque quartier s'est organisé en « conseil civil », par voisinage, cousinage, réseautage, basé sur des relations de proximité

gorge un électricien. « Vous êtes au cœur de la belle Alep, capitale économique de Syrie. » Il est assis sur son canapé dans une pénombre glaciale, coiffé d'un sac en plastique noué sur la tête. Il fait des mines pour s'excuser : « Je crains l'humidité. » Comme dans toute la ville, le courant a sauté depuis deux mois, plus de chauffage, un peu d'eau mais pas souvent. On entend un obus de mortier tomber juste derrière. L'électricien n'ose plus circuler dans son propre appartement depuis que les deux pièces du fond ont été dévastées par les combats.

Par la fenêtre, un graffiti annonce, sur le mur d'en face : « Bachar est mon Dieu ». L'homme tempère : ce n'est pas qu'on aimait vraiment Bachar dans le quartier, mais on n'aimait surtout pas les ennuis. Lui-même avait été arrêté par les forces

de sécurité du régime, il y a huit ans, en allant acheter des sous-vêtements. On l'avait battu quelques jours, puis libéré contre des « aveux » dans lesquels il reconnaissait être un terroriste, et un billet de 50 dollars glissé sous la table. L'aventure l'avait plutôt conforté dans l'idée qu'au pays des Assad, il fallait être bien sot pour se mêler d'autre chose que de ses affaires.

Le 20 juillet 2012, tout le quartier, ou presque, a regardé les rebelles entrer en ville avec une sorte de stupéfaction. Qui étaient ces gens des campagnes, qui prétendaient venir les libérer avec leurs claquettes et leurs kalachnikovs d'occasion, eux les habitants d'Alep si fiers de leur teint blanc ? L'électricien avait fui, comme tout le monde, persuadé que c'était l'affaire d'une semaine. Au bout de deux mois, l'exil en Egypte avait dévoré ses économies. Et le voila de retour dans son petit bout de souk désert, où n'habitent plus que sept familles sous le contrôle de l'ASL.

De l'autre côté de la ligne de front, les tireurs embusqués du régime leur envoient des messages : « si vous traversez, on vous tue ». L'électricien a essayé une fois de passer officiellement un checkpoint. « On m'a regardé comme un animal parce que je vis de ce côté-ci : je n'étais plus un des leurs. » Alors, il s'est résolu à frayer avec les rebelles. « Ici, on a une katiba [unité combattante] correcte, c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne vole pas. » Au-dessus du canapé, l'horloge fait soudain sursauter, sonnante avec un bruit de

coucou suisse au milieu des tirs en rafales. Il est 15 heures. On se croirait en pleine nuit.

Dans la partie de la ville tenue par les rebelles, les ordures s'amasent un peu partout en tas impressionnants, où fourragent des gamins et des moutons à longs poils. Un groupe indistinct s'est endormi, hommes, femmes, enfants roulés ensemble dans une couverture, comme une portée de chats dans le hall d'un immeuble démolé. L'état de guerre a mélangé les cartes, les gens, les genres.

Plus personne ne semble exercer son véritable métier. Sur une caisse renversée, un tailleur vend des bougies. Un informaticien en uniforme de l'armée rebelle contrôle les voitures. Dans un jardin public, un mécanicien grimpe dans les arbres pour en faire du bois de chauffage. Un conducteur de bus public, dont plus aucun ne fonctionne, vend hors de prix de l'essence turque de contrebande.

Chaque quartier a commencé à s'organiser en « conseil civil », par voisinage, cousinage, réseautage, basés sur des relations de proximité où chacun doit avant tout connaître l'autre et en répondre, comme si quarante ans de dictature avaient pétri de défiance une société entière. Cela engendre des réalités différentes, parfois contradictoires, comme autant de petites républiques indépendantes qui cohabitent, sans lien entre elles, ni même de volonté d'en tisser.

A Salaheddine, par exemple, c'est Abou Nazer, un gros garçon

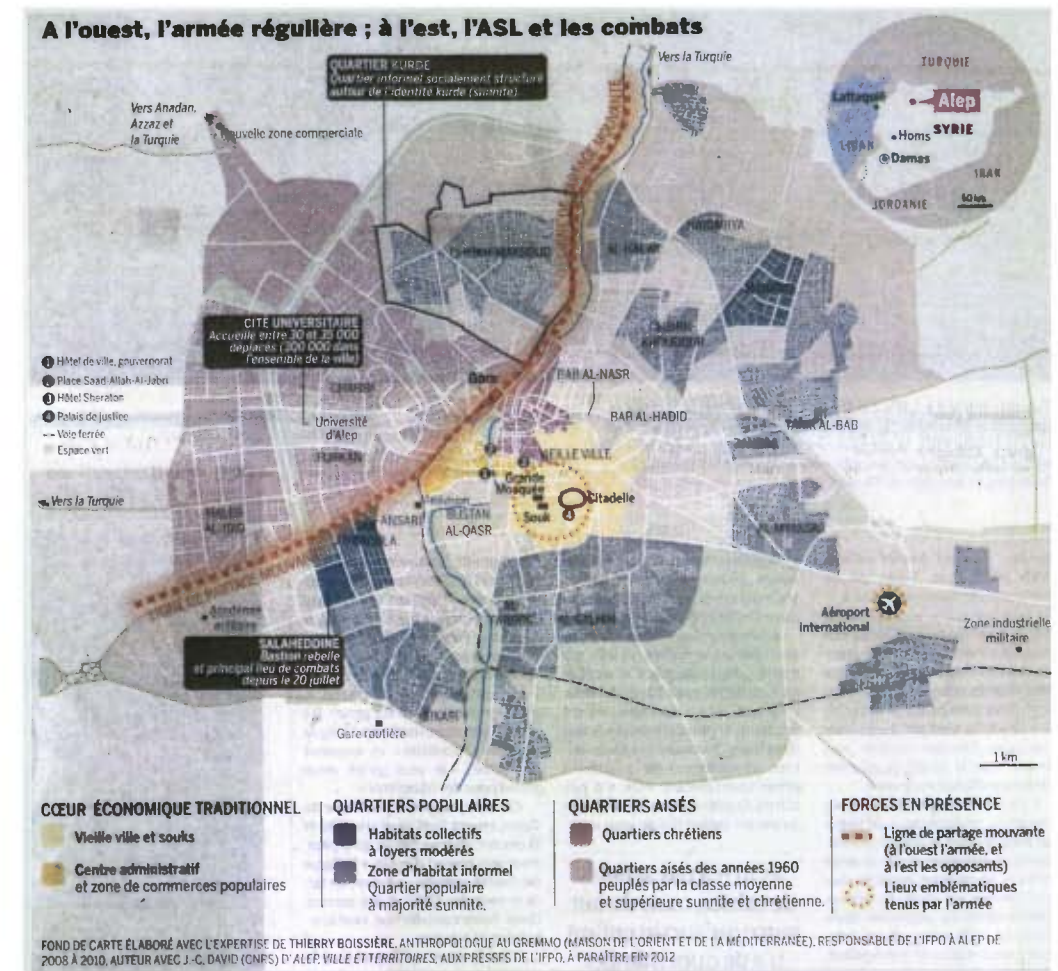
timide de 38 ans, qui a été choisi pour diriger le conseil. Il est directeur des ventes dans une usine de cosmétique de l'immense zone industrielle autour d'Alep, « ville réputée pour son bon goût et son industrie de la mode », dit-il. Son produit vedette était la teinture. « Blonde, bien sûr. Quelle femme ne rêve pas d'être blonde ? » L'usine est aujourd'hui arrêtée, comme 90 % d'entre elles. Une trentaine de bénévoles s'activent devant l'unique benne à ordures. Seul le responsable du nettoyage faisait partie de l'équipe précédente, du temps de Bachar. Tous les autres se sont enfuis. « Pas sûr qu'ils oseront revenir, soutient un bénévole. Trop corrompus : il fallait donner un bakchich pour tout. Nous, on va construire un monde nouveau. »

Dans un immeuble de Tarik Al-Bab, quartier tranquille, ça râle en douce en voyant un rebelle grimper dans les étages. « Qu'est-ce qu'il vient faire ici, celui-là ? Le bâtiment va se faire bombarder à cause de lui. » Le soldat n'est pas dupe : « Les gens nous font des sourires par devant, mais la moitié du quartier attend que Bachar revienne. »

A l'école Mustapha Al-Aïssa, un groupe de professeurs a dû négocier longuement le départ des soldats des bâtiments, qu'ils avaient annexés en caserne, comme souvent. Depuis un mois, 550 élèves sont inscrits en primaire mais Abou Laai, le directeur, 22 ans, refuse de prendre plus de 200 écoliers. « Au moins, le massacre sera limité s'il y a un bombardement. » Abou Laai se laisse stoïquement interroger sur le système scolaire.

Oui, l'éducation est un des piliers du régime de Damas et tous les livrets portent, sous une photo du président, l'inscription : « Avec Bachar, les enfants sont heureux ». Oui, certains enseignants – pas tous – demandent aux écoliers de dénoncer leurs parents, par exemple s'ils regardent des chaînes de télé étrangères. Oui, il faudrait tout changer, jusqu'aux manuels scolaires. Et aussitôt il précise : « De toute façon, les livres, on les brûle. » Sont-ils mauvais à ce point ? Et là, soudain, son joli visage d'enfant modèle se fronce. Il n'en peut plus de ces questions « qui ne sont pas les vraies questions pour nous maintenant » : les livres sont mauvais, certes, mais on ne les brûle pas à cause de ça. On les brûle pour se chauffer.

À l'étage en dessous, une trentaine de gamins scandent : « Hello, my friend » dans une pièce si sombre qu'on n'arrive pas à lire au tableau. Ceux qui ont un manteau ne l'ont pas retiré, la plupart sont pieds nus dans leurs chaussures. Le mois dernier, un donateur du quartier a



offert 1000 dollars. « On n'a pas acheté de cahier, mais du lait parce qu'aucun enfant n'a de quoi manger avant de venir. »

**« On n'a pas acheté de cahier, mais du lait parce qu'aucun enfant n'a de quoi manger avant de venir »
Un habitant d'Alep**

ger avant de venir. » Certains ont la gale, tous des poux et de plus en plus la leishmaniose, qui avait été éradiquée. Au lieu de prendre un nouveau prof, Abou Laai préférerait une infirmière.

Sous le porche, deux gamins trafiquent des munitions comme des billes et jouent aux « martyrs », la nouvelle mode des cours de récréation qui consiste à s'écrouler à terre, comme fauchés au combat en s'écriant « Allah akbar ».

La réouverture de l'école Mustapha Al-Aïssa s'inscrit dans une initiative privée, fédérant déjà une cinquantaine de profs dans douze établissements. Ils tiennent réunion plusieurs fois par semaine, les femmes doivent porter un foulard pour y assister. « Il y a deux ans, le régime de Bachar a chassé toutes les enseignantes avec un voile. Nous

voulons dire aujourd'hui à ces femmes : « nous sommes avec vous » », dit le coordonnateur du projet. Il a appelé son organisation « La ligue de charité sunnite » et annonce d'emblée : « Je sais qu'on nous prend pour des islamistes. »

Comme partout, le problème du financement s'est posé très vite et là encore, chacun fait ce qu'il peut. Pour son réseau d'école, « La ligue de charité sunnite » a essayé de faire le tour des ONG et des institutions. Toutes ont décliné, sauf une : le front Al-Nousra.

C'est le nom sur lequel tout le monde bute aujourd'hui en Syrie : personne n'arrive à définir véritablement la réalité qu'il recouvre, les journalistes ne sont pas les bienvenus et les États-Unis viennent de le classer sur la liste des organisations terroristes. Le phénomène a surgi, il y a un an, très rapidement, sous forme d'une katiba de combattants aguerris, à la fois étrangers et syriens, prônant un islam assez radical pour attirer des fonds notamment d'Arabie Saoudite et du Qatar.

La grande majorité des rebelles syriens s'en sont longtemps ouvertement défini, défendant leur « révolution ». « Mais au bout d'un moment, on n'a plus eu le choix », estime un commandant de l'ASL. « On avait commencé à se battre

avec une kalachnikov pour deux soldats. Puis une pour dix et à la fin, on n'avait plus de munitions. » Alors qu'aucun pays ni institution n'acceptent de se mouiller pour ces rebelles exsangues, Jabat Al-Nousra distribue de l'argent, vite et beaucoup. « Aujourd'hui, la nouveauté est que le Front Al-Nousra n'applique plus seulement cette stratégie dans le domaine militaire, mais aussi dans toute la société civile », reprend un professeur.

Dans la boutique d'un charpentier, une distribution alimentaire s'organise quand les portables se mettent soudain à sonner en même temps. C'est un message, comme le gouvernement en envoie régulièrement à tous les abonnés du réseau syrien en les ciblant par région : « Peuple d'Alep, les terroristes sont parmi vous. Si vous ne les combattez pas, vous serez bombardés. L'armée est forte. »

Cela fait rire Moustapha, un traducteur d'anglais, venu proposer de l'aide. Lui aussi, il y a quelques mois, a essayé de lancer un « appel pour Alep », en contactant des dizaines d'ONG internationales par internet. Il a rencontré « la solitude au cœur du chaos », dit-il. People in need, petite structure tchèque, a été la seule à répondre, envoyant 5000 dollars et 50 tonnes de farine allemande. Selon Moustapha, c'est

l'unique association internationale

« Peuple d'Alep, les terroristes sont parmi vous. Si vous ne les combattez pas, vous serez bombardés »

Un SMS envoyé par le régime

ayant une antenne en ville. Ce jour-là, il y a 300 colis à donner pour 3 000 familles. Alors, il faut choisir, ou essayer. « *Quand est-ce que tes enfants ont mangé pour la dernière fois ?* » demande un bénévole.

Dans la file, une femme ne répond pas. Elle a honte. Plus tard, pour la Syrie, elle voudrait un Etat « *qui ait quelque chose à voir avec Dieu* ». Quoi exactement, elle ne sait pas, mais « *qu'est-ce que les partis comme en Europe ou Bachar*

nous apportent de bon ? ». On demande au bénévole si la situation aujourd'hui à Alep pourrait préfigurer la Syrie future avec ces poussées de religion à travers la société. Il hausse les épaules. « *On le sait de moins en moins. On vit ici dans une autre dimension.* »

18 heures. Bientôt le moment de se coucher. « *Que faire d'autre ?* », rit un étudiant devant La fleur d'Alep, le meilleur kebab de la ville, qui fournit « *tout ce qui est bon, même une épouse* ». Et l'étudiant ajoute : « *Rendez-moi au moins Facebook et ma fiancée, qui vit de l'autre côté de la ligne de front.* »

Les bombardements ont repris sur le « quartier de la jeunesse », un programme résidentiel que le régime venait de construire pour ses cadres et ses privilégiés. Avec les combats, ils ont fui et des réfugiés s'y sont installés. Des premiers habitants, il ne reste qu'une

seule famille à qui personne ne rend visite. On les aperçoit seulement quand les avions de combat arrivent : alors, une main sort à la fenêtre et agite un drapeau blanc.

Plus bas, dans le quartier de Salaheddine, cinq enfants sont assis face à un poêle éteint. Pour les invités, on s'ingénie à vouloir offrir un café : une femme allume un feu sur le palier. L'eau met un temps infini à chauffer. La pièce est vide, tout ce qui a pu être vendu l'a été, y compris un balai presque neuf à poils roses. Reste la télé, recouverte d'un voile de dentelle, noué par des rubans rouges. « *Qui achète une télé quand il n'y a plus d'électricité ?* », sourit le mari. On demande des nouvelles d'un voisin. Il est mort. Et cet autre ? Non, lui n'est pas mort. Blessé. On se félicite.

Le père raconte qu'ils se sont d'abord enfuis chez des proches, dans la région d'Idlib. Là-bas aussi,

ça bombarde, au point que les rebelles doivent parfois se replier, ce qui n'arrive pas ici. Alors « *des soldats de l'armée régulière se déploient dans les rues, entrent dans les maisons où ils peuvent, au hasard, et tuent les gens, parfois au couteau* ». Tout le monde s'enfuit, pourchassé par un hélicoptère. Cela dure quelques heures, puis l'ASL revient.

Le père affirme qu'en un mois ils ont vécu trois fois de telles offensives. Personne n'en parle ni ne sait vraiment ce qui se passe là-bas : la zone – comme tant d'autres en Syrie – est inaccessible pour les journalistes. Le père balaie de la main la pièce nue, les rues presque entièrement démolies et baptisées « *le quartier martyr d'Alep* ». Soupir d'aise : « *Ici, on est mieux.* » Une vingtaine de familles sont déjà revenues à Salaheddine. D'autres ont annoncé qu'elles arrivaient. ■

FLORENCE AUBENAS

Le Monde

Samedi 29 décembre 2012

Une cité prospère devenue l'épicentre du conflit syrien

Longtemps restée à l'écart de l'embrasement qui gagnait le pays, la ville du nord a basculé dans les combats à la mi-juillet

Beyrouth
Correspondante

Alep va-t-elle devenir, ainsi que le jure un militant local, « *le tombeau de l'armée de Bachar Al-Assad* » ? Longtemps fleuron de l'économie syrienne, deuxième ville du pays avec environ 2 millions d'habitants, Alep bénéficie, de par sa proximité avec la Turquie, d'une position géographique stratégique. La bataille qui y fait rage depuis juillet est donc un enjeu capital pour le régime comme pour ses adversaires.

Alep n'a pas la réputation d'une cité docile. En 1982, elle était, avec Hama, le théâtre d'une rébellion menée par les Frères musulmans contre le régime d'Hafez Al-Assad. La répression, qui aboutit à la destruction d'Hama et à la mort de 10 000 à 20 000 de ses habitants, a été moins féroce à Alep, mais y a laissé des traces.

Malgré les appels incessants des militants, la ville semblait imperméable au climat insurrectionnel qui s'était emparé de la Syrie depuis mars 2011. Alors que Deraa, Homs, Hama et Idlib s'embrasaient, la riche cité du nord restait silencieuse, à l'exception de manifestations à l'université.

« *Les marchands soutenaient le régime, ils voulaient poursuivre leurs activités à tout prix* », expli-

que un porte-parole de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) pour le secteur ouest d'Alep joint par téléphone. Mais la raison principale qui a retardé l'entrée d'Alep dans la révolution était la présence massive des forces de sécurité et des *chabihia* – miliciens à la solde du régime – qui y ont fait régner la terreur.

La révolte ne gronde pas à Alep, où vivent en bonne entente une majorité de musulmans sunnites et d'importantes communautés arménienne et kurde, mais elle a très vite gagné la campagne, où des manifestations s'organisent.

Les premiers combats à Alep éclatent à la mi-juillet, avec une intensité qui prend de court le régime, mais aussi de nombreux militants qui n'y croyaient plus. De fait, les rebelles proviennent en grande majorité des campagnes. Ils sont soldats déserteurs, fermiers ou agriculteurs. Les violences se dirigent aussitôt contre les *chabihia* et le redoutable clan Nabih dont le chef, Zino Berrih, est massacré le 31 juillet par une foule déchaînée. Les images de son exécution se répandent sur Internet. Pour la première fois, l'ASL est mise en cause pour des exactions que personne ne peut nier ou mettre sur le compte du régime.

Un concentré de la guerre

A bien des égards, la bataille

d'Alep apparaît comme un concentré de ce que la guerre en Syrie recèle de plus radical. Alors que les bombardements aériens et de l'artillerie pilonnent la ville, les riches fuient pour Damas ou l'étranger. Certains rejoignent de loin l'insurrection en finançant les rebelles. Les plus démunis changent de quartier, au gré des défaites et des victoires.

Depuis le début des combats, au moins 4 792 Aleppins, civils ou rebelles, ont été tués, selon le décompte du Centre de documentation des violations en Syrie, un groupe de militants des droits de l'homme. Un chiffre qui exclut les pertes de l'armée régulière et les morts étrangers.

Cela est une autre spécificité d'Alep : seule ville insurgée à disposer d'un arrière-pays « libéré » et d'une portion de frontière qu'elle contrôle, elle est devenue la destination logique des combattants étrangers. Y ont afflué des révolutionnaires venus prendre les armes pour la cause du « printemps arabe » et des djihadistes, affiliés ou non à Al-Qaïda.

Parmi ces derniers, Jabat Al-Nousra, apparu en Syrie en janvier, a fait du gouvernorat d'Alep son champ de bataille privilégié. Mieux armés et plus entraînés que les soldats de l'ASL, ses hommes se sont imposés (avec parfois leur vision très radicale de l'islam) malgré les réticences initiales d'une

partie des brigades rebelles.

Plus ou moins réunies sous le commandement du conseil militaire de l'ASL, les brigades rebelles (dont la principale, At-Tawhid, comprend 116 bataillons) mènent aujourd'hui des opérations conjointes régulières avec Jabat Al-Nousra.

Au départ pauvrement équipée, l'ASL a vu son efficacité considérablement améliorée grâce à ce partenariat et depuis la prise de deux grands entrepôts d'armement à Lahan Khan et à Touman.

Même si elle affirme contrôler 80 % de la ville, l'ASL n'a cependant toujours pas réussi à s'imposer dans l'ensemble d'Alep. Les batailles décisives se déroulent désormais à l'extérieur.

La première cible des rebelles est le village chiite de Zaharaa, à une vingtaine de kilomètres au nord-ouest, depuis lequel l'artillerie du régime pilonne toute la région. Selon la même source de l'ASL contactée par *Le Monde*, Zaharaa serait actuellement encerclé par les rebelles et n'est plus ravitaillé que par hélicoptère.

L'autre grande bataille se déroule près de l'aéroport d'Alep où des combats très violents opposaient, dans la nuit du jeudi 27 au vendredi 28 décembre, les insurgés au 18^e bataillon de l'armée de Bachar Al-Assad, dernier rempart du régime avant la prise de ce lieu hautement stratégique. ■

CÉCILE HENNION

Spinoff: The Syrian Crisis and the Future of Iraq

HENRI J. BARKEY

There is an unremarked paradox in the tumult of the contemporary Middle East. Syria is an economically impoverished country of a little more than 20 million people that has been politically stagnant until 23 months ago. Egypt, by contrast, never socially at rest and with its ancient energies newly bestirred, is at 80.5 million people more than four times larger. Yet it is the carnage in Syria, not the continuing multiparty political tightrope act in Egypt, that is more likely to unleash a torrent of violence and instability throughout the Middle East. Before it has run its course it could undo multiple existing regimes and even alter the region's post-World War I territorial boundaries.

This is because as a consequence of the Syrian uprising the fate of Iraq now hangs in the balance and, with it, the fate of the Middle East. The overflow of Syria's civil war into Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and even Israel (via the Druze in the Golan Heights) has been often noted, but, surprisingly, the mainstream Western press seems to have forgotten that Syria also shares a border with Iraq. Iraq's strategic location and its cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic fault lines make its implosion a great threat to the long-term stability and well-being of the region. The shock waves—unbridled sectarian and ethnic violence, possible interstate interventions and warfare, and much higher oil prices—could also jolt the international economy, sparing no one.

It is helpful to contrast the Syrian crisis with the 2011 Egyptian revolt and its aftermath. Only a few years ago, the suggestion that a Muslim Brotherhood government would one day replace the solidly pro-Western Mubarak regime in Egypt, through elections no less, would have sent shivers through most regional as well as Western capitals. Egypt's military-backed regime collapsed without grave effects or a dramatic shift in the regional balance of power, at least not yet. Iran, which had assumed that Mubarak's demise would herald a new anti-Israeli and anti-Western power center in Cairo, has been sorely disappointed. Egypt's new

President, Mohammed Morsi, has demonstrated that he can be an adept realpolitiker in regional politics, particularly during the December 2012 edition of the Gaza crisis.

Only a few years ago, too, the notion that the Syrian police state would be brought to its knees by a profoundly under-armed and disorganized opposition movement would have been dismissed as fantasy. But it is happening now before our very eyes, and the consequences of the Assad regime's downfall are unlikely to be as tame as those that have emanated so far from Egypt. Three reasons help explain the differences.

First we must consider blood and time. The Egyptian transformation, unlike the uprising in Syria, has been relatively bloodless. Fewer than 1,000 people died in Egypt; the count in Syria is at least 40,000 and mounting. Mubarak's fall was also swift: Protests began on January 15, 2011, and he was gone by February 11. Assad's regime has weathered more than 20 months of first civil unrest and then very violent civil war. All indications are that the Ba'athi regime in Damascus will continue fighting for as long as it can. One ought not be too surprised if a year from now it is still clinging to power, albeit it perhaps in a rump state distant from Damascus. However, the length and extent of the bloodletting will permanently stain Syria's body politic. The longer the insurrection takes to resolve one way or another, the worse will be society's future divisions.

Second, the Egyptian state did not collapse with Mubarak's demise. As cranky, inefficient and inept as the Egyptian state and bureaucracy may have been in the past, they remain a principal source of stability and employment. These institutions were for the most part untouched by the events of 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood, as a result, has inherited the structures of a state that has remained largely intact—though it is not yet clear how loyal those structures may be to a new leadership that differs in kind from that under which those structures took shape. By contrast, the highly sectarian Syrian state is unlikely to survive the civil war. This is partly because the Alawi core and its co-opted Sunni partners

will no longer be physically secure in what has been, compared to Egypt, a personalized and under-institutionalized arrangement. But it is also because of the sheer physical destruction the country is experiencing. Assad's policy of leveling towns that have fallen into rebel hands destroys not only physical infrastructure but also the tools and institutions of state power, from police stations to municipal offices and all kinds of bureaucratic records. Worse is that there still is a great deal more violence and destruction yet to come. If the fighting culminates in an onslaught on Damascus, then the remnants of the Syrian state are bound to suffer from terrible physical and psychological violence. There will be no state left to inherit.

Third, Egypt, in contrast to Syria, is fairly homogenous. It has a substantial Coptic minority that has been rendered powerless after years of discrimination, but the Copts have no political ambitions, kindred regional connections or territorial claims. They constitute a strictly Egyptian phenomenon that exhibits none of the cross-boundary characteristics of many minority groups in the region. Syria, however, lies on two important sectarian and ethnic fault lines. The ruling Alawis, whose religion is a heterodox offshoot of an already heterodox Shi'a Islam, enjoy support from Shi'a-dominated Iran and the Lebanese Shi'a paramilitary group, Hizballah. In the region's burgeoning Sunni-Shi'a conflict, which pits Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries against Iran, Syria is a significant prize. Its importance has been even more enhanced since the ascent of Shi'a power in Baghdad. We should remember that in the 1980s Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf countries financed and supported Saddam Hussein's war on the Iranian revolution. Those sectarian animosities continue to haunt the region.

Syria is also on the cusp of Arab-Kurdish, Persian-Kurdish and Turkish-Kurdish divisions. Emboldened by the current civil war, Syrian Kurds have been swept by a nationalist euphoria. They had been brutalized by Damascus; many were also denied citizenship and with it access to schools, hospitals and other government

■■■ services. Untrusting, too, of the rebel Free Syrian Army and the political groupings that constitute the political opposition, they have remained on the sidelines looking to consolidate their power. The Syrian Kurdish strategy for the time being seems to count on the civil war weakening both the opposition and the central government, leaving them in a better bargaining position when the carnage comes to an end.

The developments in Syria's Kurdish region are alarming for both Turkey and Iran. Were Syrian Kurds to win significant autonomy in a post-Assad Syria, akin to the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (the KRG), then two of the region's Kurdish territories will have achieved a modicum of self-governance and no doubt will coordinate to some extent. The demonstration effect on Turkey and Iran would be hard to contain. Turkish Kurds are already demanding the devolution of central government powers to all of Turkey's regions. Long-dormant Iranian Kurdish formations are also showing signs of waking from their slumber. The emergence of a Syrian Kurdish enclave is also putting pressure on Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG, who has developed a careful and harmonious relationship with Ankara.

The waves created by sectarian and ethnic discord in Syria, however, will be most harmful to Iraq. Syria's intrinsic power, role and influence in the region are vastly overestimated. The belief that Syria is the "heart of the Arab world" reflects the dramatic magical thinking that permeates the region. Hafez al-Assad, the current President's father, played on this to successfully marshal Syria's meager resources into what appeared to be a winning diplomatic strategy. He understood that Syria's importance was directly tied to Israel, so he crafted a spoiler's foreign policy in part by nurturing both Hizballah and Hamas (although Israeli missteps had much to do with the emergence of both) and employed them to fashion a "rejectionist bloc" that included Iran. This more than anything else made Father Assad and Syria actors of consequence on the international stage. In turn, this bought him time and peace at home not just to consolidate his and his family's rule but to also bat away criticisms of mismanagement and the lack of economic progress. In one sense at least, little has changed: The current President's defensive narrative on the Syrian civil war emphasizes only one issue: Syria's critical role in the rejectionist front against Israel, whose supporters are claimed to be the real source of opposition to the government.

Damascus was once the seat of Islam's first great empire, the Umayyad Dynasty. Under the Ottoman Empire and since, independent Syria has stagnated. With its poorly managed economy perpetually in shambles, Syria has been barely getting by. Its agriculture remained underdeveloped despite the country's relatively abundant hydrological riches. Syria's centuries-old sophisticated Sunni trading class plies its wares mostly outside of its homeland. The authoritarian Syrian state has stifled its agricultural and industrial/trading sectors alike with an omnivorous and burgeoning class of crony businessmen.

For these reasons as well as those of geography, Syria pales in comparison to Iraq when it comes to regional political significance. Iraq, a nation of nearly 33 million, is first and foremost a major oil producer. Its relevance as a producer will only grow with time because so many new fields and hydrocarbon sources are in the process of being discovered and brought online. Global oil demand, especially because of the growth in emerging economies such as China, India, Turkey and Brazil, will continue to increase while new oil becomes more expensive and more difficult to find. Iraqi ambitions, even if exaggerated at times, are likely to make that country a pivotal state in the global and regional oil equation. Already Iraqi oil production has overtaken that of neighboring Iran.

Both Syria and Iraq are situated on the Sunni-Shi'a fault line. As contentious the current sectarian-driven conflict may be in Syria, the Shi'a offshoot there, the ruling Alawis, constitute a small minority, maybe 12 percent of the total population. The Alawis owe their privileged position to Hafez al-Assad, who as an Alawi general went about systematically embedding fellow Alawis in senior positions throughout the security bureaucracy. The security agencies also became a source of jobs and upward mobility for poor Alawis, as well as allied minorities like Druze and some Christians. The state assumed a sectarian character. The Syrian uprising, if successful, will result in the Sunnis toppling the Alawi-dominated state.

In Iraq the situation is different. The Shi'a majority (some 55 percent) has finally assumed power thanks in large measure to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. It has been difficult for Iraqi Sunnis to accept the rise to power of the Shi'a majority after having enjoyed unrivaled power throughout Ottoman rule and since Iraqi independence. Many Sunnis in the region, not just in Iraq, perceive themselves in a Manichaean struggle with the Shi'a and their powerful

patron in Tehran. For these Sunnis, the probable collapse of Shi'a offshoot Alawi rule in Damascus is a potential sign that the pendulum is swinging back in their favor. Change in Syria, given the porous borders between the two countries, especially in the Sunni-controlled provinces of Anbar and Nineveh, is likely to give further impetus for Sunnis to resist the Nuri al-Maliki government in Baghdad. It is for this reason that the Iraqi Prime Minister has supported Assad's beleaguered regime. His policy is likely to earn even more enmity from Sunnis who see him acting on sectarian impulses. After all, Iraqi Shi'a had been the victims of Assad's policy of facilitating the flow of foreign jihadis into Iraq during the American occupation, for the sole purpose of killing Shi'a.

Today Iraq is held together by a shoestring. Violence is on the upsurge, and Maliki is increasingly demonstrating his authoritarian tendencies as he pushes forward with an agenda that has not won him any friends in the region. The Saudis have not given him much quarter and would like to see him go. He has made an enemy of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as each accuses the other of putting sectarian interests ahead of regional interests and stability. Turks provided refuge to the Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who escaped following his indictment on charges of helping Sunni death squads to operate in Baghdad. This increasing regional rift may be music to the ears of many Iraqi Sunnis, who have been heard saying, in effect, "the Ottomans are back in Istanbul, the Umayyad are about to re-conquer Damascus, and next Sunni Abbasid power will return to Baghdad."

A Sunni victory in Damascus will necessarily mean a shift in the regional sectarian balance of power. Sunnis in Iraq have also revived the idea of seeking autonomous arrangements like the KRG, something they had violently suppressed earlier. What is at stake is the 1916 Sykes-Picot Anglo-French-drawn regional boundaries. Having "lost" Syria, Iran's natural reaction will be to double down in Iraq, where it already has a great deal of influence. It will want Iraq to provide strategic depth. It is even conceivable that Tehran will create a Shi'a analogue of the Brezhnev Doctrine—once a government is Shi'a, it stays Shi'a, even if we have to send expeditionary forces to keep it that way. Will the neighbors stand idly by if this were to occur?

Iranian behavior even well short of a military intervention can mightily complicate matters in Baghdad as Maliki tries to navigate treacherous waters: He will not ■■■

■ ■ ■ want to appear to be in Tehran's pocket while trying to extend a branch to Sunnis, something that will be extremely difficult in any case. Iraq will therefore become the new front line in the Sunni-Shi'a war, and one naturally expects the Saudis and other Gulf countries to pour resources into this conflict even beyond those they are already putting forth.

The intensification of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq also has repercussions for the KRG. Buoyed by increased oil earnings, the KRG has done well but has found itself increasingly at odds with the central government in Iraq. The exploration and sale of oil and gas, as well as the federal competencies and disputed territories, mainly those claimed by the KRG, are among the issues that divide the governments in Erbil and Baghdad. The Iraqi government has threatened international companies doing business in the petroleum sector in KRG territory without its permission. Still, several big international oil companies, including ExxonMobil, Chevron and Total, have decided to risk Baghdad's wrath as they elected to expand their investments in the KRG, sometimes by abandoning or selling their assets in southern Iraq.

The KRG has also pursued a policy of rapprochement with Ankara despite the latter's deepening problems with its own Kurdish minority. Ankara, long opposed to Kurdish ambitions in northern Iraq, has made its peace with the KRG, hoping that under the careful leadership of Barzani Iraqi Kurds will cooperate with Turkish efforts to contain both the Turkish Kurdish insurgent group, the PKK, headquartered in the mountains of northern Iraq, and Turkish Kurds' increasingly bolder demands. Turkish companies have found a welcome haven in the KRG; from banks to consumer durable makers to construction firms, hundreds if not thousands of Turkish companies are now doing business with Iraqi Kurds. Turkey, with its expanding need for energy, is also eyeing the KRG's carbon resources for both its own needs and for shipment into Europe. In the struggle between Erbil and Baghdad, Ankara is increasingly siding with the Kurds. Strengthening the KRG is a way for Ankara to weaken Maliki.

Although the KRG has no intention at the present time of initiating a process that would lead to de jure independence and hence the formal territorial breakup of Iraq, it will not shy away from declaring independence were Iraq to fall victim to centrifugal forces emanating from the Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Reluctant to antago-

nize its Turkish ally, KRG leader Barzani has been careful not to push the independence issue. Tensions with Baghdad are mounting beyond the oil and gas issue. KRG claims to Kirkuk and other parts of northern Iraq not formally under its federal sovereignty lurk behind all questions; these were supposed to have been resolved through a referendum that kept being postponed. In November 2012, a skirmish between KRG military forces and the Iraqi police risked flaring into a major confrontation until cooler heads on both sides prevailed. Complicating matters further for Iraq is the precarious health of its President, former Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, who has not only managed to get Maliki and the Kurdish leadership to compromise but has also worked hard to contain sectarian tensions.

The Kurds of the region are not united, and therein lays the greatest challenge for Barzani. The Syrian uprising has brought that country's Kurds to the forefront. Biding their time, they have so far remained largely on the sidelines of the Syrian civil war, mistrustful of both sides. Syrian Kurds are themselves divided by geography and political allegiances. The largest and most powerful organization is the PYD, the Democratic Union Party, which is affiliated with the PKK. Barzani has tried to bring the PYD and its much weaker opponents, the KNC, Kurdish National Council, together on a number of occasions, but with limited if any success. The PYD's brand of Kurdish nationalism is at odds with that of Barzani's: The Syrian group, while not participating in any violence against Turkey, nevertheless has declared its allegiance to the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.

In effect, there is a clash between two forms of nationalisms. One is pan-Kurdish, leftist and militant, the other is prudent, centrist and privileges the interests of the KRG above all else. The PYD's resistance to Barzani is curious considering the Iraqi Kurdish leader's political and economic assets: He is, after all, in control of a territory that is welcomed in many capitals, including Washington, and possesses significant oil-derived resources. The pragmatic thing for Syrian Kurds in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising would be to gravitate toward the KRG in search of resources and protection. But the slow but forceful gathering momentum of the Turkish Kurdish nationalist movement and its transformation into an autonomy-seeking one is casting a long shadow. The Turks had hoped that both Barzani and Talabani, would exert a calming influence on Turkish Kurds; both leaders have

indeed counseled Turkish Kurds to settle with Erdogan on account that he is the most likely and capable Turkish Prime Minister. So far, feeling the winds of change at their backs, the PKK and its supporters in Turkey have appeared most reluctant to take this advice. This reluctance and Erdogan's mismanagement of the situation have led to increased tensions and hostilities. All this puts Barzani and the KRG in an impossible situation, and were the Syrian uprising to end with an all-out Arab-Kurdish clash in that country, the region could be faced with a new ethnic conflagration, and its first casualty would be the tenuous stability of Iraq.

Perhaps few countries today are as susceptible as Iraq to the meddling of outside powers. The Iraqi government has to fend off the encroachment of states that fear the implications for their own domestic politics of developments in Iraq. Outside meddling is not always motivated by expansionary or grandiose goals but sometimes by defensive ones. Saudi Arabia, most of the Gulf countries and Jordan fear the consequences of Shi'a power; Iranians, Turks and Syrian have eyed Iraqi Kurds with a great deal of consternation because of the demonstration effects of their successes. That said, the complexity of Iraqi domestic politics also means that different internal groups seek the patronage and meddling of the outside powers. Turcoman groups have closely aligned themselves with Turkey and have occasionally entangled Turkish authorities in their dangerous plans.

Even the United States, by virtue of its long occupation of Iraq, has a stake in that country that exceeds its traditional regional interests, whether in balance of power or stability. The descent of Iraq into civil war and chaos would be particularly damaging to Washington's self-image, domestic politics and, of course, its international standing, precisely because it has invested so much blood and treasure there.

Following the most recent Iraqi parliamentary elections, the United States, Turkey and the Iranians were heavily involved in influencing the composition of the governing coalition. The unavoidable proliferation of outside actors in Iraq does not bode well for the future of Iraqi cohesion. It may be that Iraq is destined to break up, but, if this is the case, the significance of the Syrian crisis is that it can certainly hasten the process.

Iraq impasse costing \$20 million a day

Hadeel al Sayegh
thenational.ae

Iraq is losing US\$20 million (Dh73.5m) a day, cutting into the country's budget, after oil exports from the Kurdish autonomous region halted because a deepening political crisis is delaying payments.

At the heart of the dispute are fundamentally different approaches in giving foreign companies access to the fields.

Kurdistan grants companies production-sharing agreements in which companies can take a share of the output. In contrast, Baghdad uses a service-contract model that pays foreign partners a per-barrel fee, which many executives say is not high enough to compensate for the risk involved.

"The Kurdish authorities have committed to 200,000 barrels a day [bpd]. If we take an average of \$100 for the price of oil, that's taking \$20 million from the budget," said Abdel Ilah Qassem, the adviser to Baghdad's deputy prime minister for energy affairs Hussain Al Shahristani.

"It's a political crisis, one that even the politicians don't know how long it will take to resolve."

Crude exports halted on Saturday, the latest show of hostility between Iraq's central government and the Kurdish Regional Government since the withdrawal of US forces last year.

Ali Hussein Balo, the adviser to the



A worker at Tawke oil field in Iraqi Kurdistan. DNO is producing 100,000 bpd at Tawke but production could be higher, says the company, if it was not hampered by bureaucracy. Sebastian Meyer / Corbis

Kurdish ministry of natural resources, said the regional government had no choice but to halt exports after Baghdad failed to fulfil a commitment to pay 1 trillion Iraqi dinars (Dh3.16 billion) owed to companies working in the region for their output. Mr Balo said it paid only 650bn dinars.

The US majors ExxonMobil and Chevron, along with the French major Total, have angered Baghdad by signing oil deals with KRG this year without the central government's permission.

The political row has had major repercussions for Sharjah-based Dana Gas, an explorer and producer, which was forced to restructure its \$1bn sukuk after disruptions in payments from Iraq and Egypt.

In April, the Kurds stopped the exports of around 100,000 bpd due to delays in payments. Four months later, exports resumed. That allowed the Kurdish and central governments to reach a new agreement on payment. Baghdad says the subsequent suspension of payments was because the Kurds were pumping less than the 200,000 bpd they had pled-

ged.

Iraq exports 2.6 million bpd of crude and will increase this to 2.9 million next year, Mr Qassem said. The nation's average crude output is 3.2 million bpd. Capacity is 3.4 million bpd and will increase to more than 3.5 million in 2013, he said.

Political tensions peaked after central and Kurdish forces, called the Peshmerga, clashed for the first time last month. The president, Jalal Talabani, of Kurdish origin and seen as a unifying force among rival factions, asked forces on both sides to exercise restraint and patience.

Mr Talabani suffered a stroke and was hospitalised last week, before being sent to Germany for care leaving political matters on hold.

Iraqi Kurdistan has aligned its economic foreign policy with Turkey. The autonomous region plans to build an independent oil pipeline in the next two years, Ashti Khawrami, the Kurdish natural resources minister, told Bloomberg last month. ♦



December 28, 2012

Iraq militia issues threat against Turkish interests

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - An Iraqi militia on Thursday issued a threat against Turkish interests in Iraq, responding to what it described as Turkey's "blatant interference" in the country's internal affairs.

Relations between Turkey and Iraq have been deteriorating over the past year, with the two countries trading accusations of inciting sectarian tensions, and summoning each other's ambassadors in tit-for-tat manoeuvres.

Ankara has angered Baghdad by cultivating close ties with Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, which has defied the central government by signing contracts with

foreign oil firms.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan this week accused Iraqi premier Nuri al-Maliki's government of behaving in a sectarian manner and warned Iraq was in danger of being plunged into strife like that in neighbouring Syria.

"We refute and denounce the recent comments of the Turkish prime minister and consider them a blatant interference in the internal affairs of Iraq," read a statement released by Asaib al-Haq, which carried out some of the most prominent attacks on foreigners during the Iraq war.

"Any attempt to rip apart (Iraq's national

fabric) by playing on sectarianism and spreading the poison of division damages the interests of all, and whoever does this will not be safe from harm."

Asaib al-Haq fighters broke away from anti-U.S. Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army. The militia, one of several in Iraq, is well-organised but its numbers are unknown.

Another source of tension between Baghdad and Ankara is the presence in Turkey of fugitive Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, who has been sentenced to death in Baghdad on charges of running death squads.

Hashemi, a Sunni Muslim who fled to Turkey earlier this year when Shi'ite-led Iraqi authorities sought his arrest, has denied the charges against him and accused Maliki, a Shi'ite Muslim, of conducting a political witch-hunt against Sunni opponents. ■

Syrian conflict threatens to fracture Iraq

Semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan and the central Iraqi government are on a collision course as the Kurds increasingly side with the Syrian opposition and Baghdad stands by the Assad regime.



Kurdish Peshmerga soldier holds a Kurdistan flag in August during a deployment in the area near the northern Iraqi border with Syria, which lies in an area disputed by Baghdad and the Kurdish region of Ninawa province.
AzadLashkari/Reuters/File

By Mohammed A. Salih
Christian Science Monitor

Erbil, Iraq — In September, as the Iraqi government reached one of its lowest points in relations with Turkey in years, Ankara welcomed Iraqi Kurdistan's President Massoud Barzani as a guest of honor at a convention hosted by the ruling Justice and Development Party.

The semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and the federal government in Baghdad have not seen eye to eye for years, and the gap between the two is now widening, particularly when it comes to foreign policy. That's been put in stark relief by the ongoing civil war in Syria, which has shifted the fortunes of Iraq's Kurds.

A decade ago, Iraq was a Sunni Arab-dominated dictatorship that shared many problems with the Sunni Turks to the north. Both countries had restive ethnic-Kurdish separatist movements and uneasy relations with their Shiite and Persian neighbor, Iran.

Today, Iraq has a Shiite-dominated government that is close to Tehran, which is supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria's civil war. Turkey, still eager to prevent Kurdish separatist sentiments within its borders, now sees the Iraqi Kurds as a potential ally in opposition to the interests of Iran, Baghdad and Damascus.

The emerging sectarian alliances have prompted Baghdad and the KRG to throw themselves into opposing camps in the Syrian war, creating conflicting interests in the supposedly unified country.

As regional and Western diplomats point fingers at Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for aiding embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad — a charge which Baghdad vehemently denies — Iraqi Kurds are increasingly involved with the opposition, lured by the possibility that in a post-Assad Syria, Kurds there might achieve some degree of autonomy. That would allow the KRG to expand its foothold.

The KRG has hosted leaders of the Syrian opposition in its regional capital, Erbil, much to Baghdad's dismay. It has also lent support to Kurds in northeastern Syria — Barzani publicly admitted in July that his government is providing them with military training. And now some of the Kurdish factions there are holding talks with the mostly Arab Syrian opposition to decide whether and how to join them in the fight against President Bashar al-Assad, even though the relationship between the two camps has been strained by several bouts of fighting.

"The Syria crisis is forcing everyone around Syria to choose sides," says Joost Hiltermann, who follows Iraq for the International Crisis Group (ICG).

"Maliki is worried about the emergence of a post-Assad Sunni Islamist order in Syria... he finds that he has to support Assad by default. This puts him de facto in the Iranian camp and in conflict with Turkey."

The Iraqi Kurds are at the opposite end of the equation from Maliki. Though Turkey treats its own Kurdish population poorly, the KRG's deep mistrust of Baghdad has seen a tactical relationship developing between Ankara and Erbil and, by extension, the regional Sunni powers backing the Syrian uprising.

Although the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, Hiltermann says the KRG's interest is not about religion, but an attempt to further nationalist goals. "They [Kurds] have long-term aspirations to independence, and today this means allying themselves with Turkey, which is encouraging them to take distance from Baghdad," Hiltermann says.

Although Iraq's constitution gives the federal government theoretical control of the country's foreign policy, the KRG seldom defers to Baghdad on matters of international relations.

Iraq's Kurds have enjoyed a high level of autonomy in northern Iraq since the 1990s, when the West backed a no-fly zone to protect the Kurds during an uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime. The KRG has its own diplomatic representatives in some key international capitals — Washington, London, Paris, and Moscow among them — and more than 20 countries, including the US, have diplomatic missions in Erbil.

To say that Baghdad has a problem with the KRG's overtures to the Syrian opposition and its backers is to put it mildly.

"They have completely gone their way and are sometimes on a collision line with the federal government [in Baghdad]," says Saad al-Muttalebi, a prominent figure in Maliki's

» coalition. "Unfortunately the KRG behaves as if it's an independent state and sets up its own international policies... without any consideration to the central government."

Politicians in Baghdad are particularly unhappy with KRG's closer ties to Turkey, which harbored exiled Sunni Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi after he fled Iraq earlier this year. Mr. Muttaledi, who used to serve as an adviser to Maliki, lashed out at Turkey for choosing "an unwise course of action" and "misusing its relations with Iraq."

But Erbil sees Ankara as a critical counterbalancing factor against Baghdad, which the Kurdish government accuses of being increasingly heavy-handed.

"It is true that there is a federal broad-

based coalition government in Baghdad, but day after day we see it becoming more autocratic," Safin Dizayee, the official spokesperson for the KRG, told The Monitor at his office in Erbil.

"[Iraq's] foreign policy is determined not by the institutions of the state, but by certain individuals within the state or a certain party," Dizayee explains, referring indirectly to Maliki and his Shiite Dawa Party. "And when it comes to the policy of that party toward Syria, that might be actually questionable."

Turkey's annual trade with Iraq stood at around \$11 billion in 2011, according to Turkish government's figures, but Kurdish officials say about 70 percent of the trade occurs with the Kurdish region. The discovery of large oil reserves in Iraqi Kurdistan has only

made the energy-thirsty Turkey more interested in developing closer ties with the KRG without much regard for Baghdad's opposition. Erbil has been happy to go along.

But for a country with a long history of internal conflict and instability, the current regional shift may not pay off in the end.

"Baghdad and Erbil are taking decisions that they believe will enhance their regional and domestic positions," says Ahmed Ali, a Middle East analyst at Georgetown University. But in a region of ever-shifting alliances, there is danger in charting "domestic policy while thinking that regional alliances are permanent and will help them fulfill their plans." □



December 28, 2012



of them looking for jobs, according to Khider Domle, a Kurdish journalist.

"There is no food now, everything is expensive, there is no work," Domle said. "A lot of them cross because they think they can find a job here."

Others, like Mohammed, come to escape the fighting. The Syrian Kurd, who studied in the city of Aleppo, talks about snipers, bombardments and the daily sense of fear. While war was raging in Aleppo, Mohammed's native region of northeastern Syrian, where the bulk of Syria's Kurdish minority resides, had remained calm. But the violence between the regime of President Bashar Assad and the opposition has since spread north.

CLASHES WITHIN THE OPPOSITION

"They attacked my home and stole everything from my home and destroyed my shop," Mohammed said, referring to the Syrian insurgents. In the past few weeks there have been repeated clashes between Syrian rebels and supporters of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The PYD is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group which has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey. The PYD is also believed to be an ally of Assad, whose regime has largely withdrawn from the Kurdish territories over the past few months leaving the PYD in charge. This is apparently the reason why the Syrian rebels have been trying to drive back the Kurdish militia.

According to Assos Hardi, publisher of the northern Iraqi newspaper Awene, the PKK is playing a "dangerous game." Hardi fears that the collapse of the Assad regime might make life even more dangerous for Kurds in Syria, as the rebels might want to take revenge on them.

But the Syrian civil war is also splitting the Kurds. There have been reports of clashes among different Kurdish groups. The reason: In addition to the PKK and PYD, the Kurdish government of northern Iraq has also been playing a role in the conflict. According to Hardi, by supporting the rebels the government is seeking to ensure its influence in Syria's Kurdish territories after the downfall of Assad.

Mohammed said the current situation has him scared.

"The Free Syrian Army will kill us because we are Kurds," he said, referring to the radical factions within the rebel groups.

He said none of his friends joined any of the fighting sides, but that he initially supported the uprising against Assad.

"We had nothing under Assad," he said. "We were not allowed to

Naomi Conrad

A GROWING number of Syrian Kurds are fleeing to northern Iraq. They are afraid of being caught up in a civil war between Syrian rebels and Kurdish fighters. But also fear neighboring Iran may be drawn into the fighting.

"They force you to shoot and kill children, women and men, but I was not able to do that," Mohammed said. In order to avoid conscription in the Syrian Army, he managed, under the cover of darkness, to sneak across the border into northern Iraq. The 27-year-old engineer has been living in a refugee camp located in the small town of Dohuk since April. Every day there are hundreds of people who, like Mohammed, decide to cross the border into neighboring Iraq.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, there are around 67,000 Syrian refugees living in the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq. Many

speak our own language or say anything against the regime."

A FURTHER ESCALATION?

Domle was hopeful that an agreement reached between the various Kurdish factions at the end of November will last. However, his colleague Hardi was less optimistic. He said he fears further escalation of the conflict, possibly even between the northern Kurdish government and the central government of Iraq.

"The government in Baghdad is closely affiliated to both Iran and the

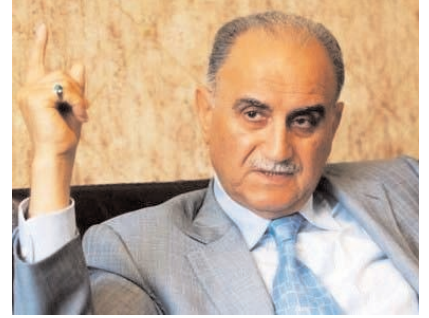
Assad regime. On the other hand, the Kurdistan Regional Government seems to sympathies with the Syrian rebels."

More than anything, Mohammed wants to be able to go back home to his parents and five sisters, who still live in Syria. But he said he believes it will take a while until calm is once again restored. ■

Thousands bid farewell to Kurdish politician Elçi



Thousands of people attend the funeral ceremony for Şerafettin Elçi, a prominent Kurdish politician, that was held in his hometown of Cizre in Şırnak. AA Photo



mosque. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, also a Kurd and who is receiving care in a German hospital following a stroke, sent a wreath.

The flag of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was hung briefly on two occasions from the walls surrounding the mosque, while the portrait of its jailed leader, Abdullah Öcalan, appeared at the moment the coffin entered the mosque.

"He was the uncle of my friend. [He was] a very good person. I am not a Kurd but he cared a lot for me," said Yalçın Yardımcı, who is currently working as a notary in Kızıltepe, a mainly Kurdish town 170 kilometers away from Cizre.

"We are the last generation [that can] solve this problem," Elçi said in his last public statement.

"This is very important. I have been in Kızıltepe for three-and-a-half years and our work is very difficult with the new generations," Yardımcı said.

"His presence served as a bridge between two communities that are increasingly falling apart," said Gencay Gürsoy, a human rights activist. "I hope his last statement will [encourage] the current political elites." ●

Hürriyet Daily News / Barçın Yınanç

CİZRE -Thousands flocked to the streets of the southeastern district of Cizre yesterday to bid farewell to late politician Şerafettin Elçi, one of the most iconic figures of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey.

Elçi, who died on Dec. 25, was buried in his native town of Cizre in the province of Şırnak, where his body will be "washed by the waters of the Tigris," according to his wishes.

"I believe people are here to salute the courage that brought him from the desk of the ministry to a prison cell," said Hüseyin Aygün, a lawmaker of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and part of a younger generation of politicians advocating Kurdish rights. Elçi caused turmoil in the 1970s when he said, "I have Kurdish origins" – the first-ever member of Turkish Parliament to openly declare his Kurdish roots – and

for speaking in Kurdish to constituents from Diyarbakır who did not know Turkish.

While the CHP was represented by a delegation headed by two deputy leaders, it was the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) that no doubt enjoyed huge popularity, as co-leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Gültan Kışanak, along with many high-level figures, were applauded by thousands as they approached the mosque where the religious ceremony was held.

KRG OFFICIAL AT FUNERAL

A delegation from Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), to which Elçi was known to be close, also came to Cizre from northern Iraq. Flags of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) were seen in the hands of several children, while a bigger one led the group that brought the coffin to Ulucami, a 12th-century

Abdallah, un djihadiste antichiite en Syrie

Des centaines de combattants étrangers sont venus prêter main-forte à l'ASL contre le régime « impie » de Damas

Reportage

Selma (Djebel Akrad, Syrie)

Envoyé spécial

Avant de partir pour la guerre sainte, Abdallah s'est séparé de tout : « *Son appartement, sa voiture et sa femme* ». C'est lui qui énumère, précisément dans cet ordre. Il insiste sur

le fait que le logement et l'automobile étaient « *neufs* ». On ne sait pas ce qu'il est advenu de la femme.

C'est son premier djihad et Abdallah ne voulait pas s'encombrer de tout ce qui pourrait lui donner la nostalgie d'une « *vie confortable* ». Il s'est dit qu'un petit pécule en liquide ne serait pas de trop en Syrie. Il a également vendu son magasin de parfumerie. « *Tout ce*

que j'ai fait, c'est en pensant aux larmes des enfants syriens », se contente-t-il de répondre quand on lui demande les raisons de son engagement. Joufflu et un peu corpulent, il n'a pas l'allure d'un combattant aguerri. C'est plutôt un jeune homme de 26 ans à peine sorti de l'adolescence, l'ovale de son menton souligné par un collier de barbe.

Il est l'un de ces centaines de dji-

hadistes étrangers venus en Syrie combattre contre le régime « impie » de Bachar Al-Assad. Très

La guerre qu'Abdallah est venu mener est un djihad contre l'hérésie chiite, pire, à ses yeux, que l'impérialisme occidental

Les combats gagnent la région alaouite. cœur et bastion du système Assad

C'EST UN NOUVEAU développement dans le conflit syrien. Désormais, la rébellion, qui s'enhardit de semaine en semaine, s'attaque au « réduit » alaouite, cette zone montagneuse et côtière dont la population est considérée comme acquise au régime du président Bachar Al-Assad.

La montagne alaouite et la bande maritime, qui court de Tartous à Lattaquié, sont souvent présentées comme l'ultime refuge possible du clan au pouvoir, qui y aurait stocké une grande quantité d'armement lourd. Les alaouites, communauté dont est issu le clan Assad, originaire du village de Qardaha, relèvent d'une branche dissidente du chiisme et seraient soutenus par la solidarité confessionnel-

le face à une insurrection essentiellement sunnite et de plus en plus fondamentaliste, au point de tenir les alaouites et les chiïtes pour des « *apostats* ».

Attaquer la région alaouite, c'est donc viser le cœur du système puisque c'est là que se recrute l'essentiel des officiers et des recrues fraîches qui tombent chaque jour sous les balles de l'insurrection. Dans le djebel Akrad et le djebel turkmène, à l'extrême nord-ouest de la Syrie, mais aussi dans la région centrale de Hama, les insurgés n'hésitent plus à attaquer des villages alaouites. Dans le Nord-Ouest, les insurgés, en position de force sur les hauteurs, s'approchent peu à peu de Lattaquié, la principale ville côtière, et

de Jisr Al-Choughour, attaquant sur leur passage les villages alaouites, qui se vident de leurs habitants à l'approche de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL). Au centre, ils s'attaquent à des villages isolés. L'armée a repris mercredi 26 décembre Maan, une localité alaouite tombée aux mains des rebelles deux jours plus tôt.

Massacres communautaires

Cette stratégie a trois objectifs. Elle vise d'abord à empêcher le régime de se constituer une zone de repli homogène. L'insurrection est ainsi en passe d'empêcher toute continuité territoriale entre alaouites de Syrie et de Turquie. Ensuite, ces attaques mobilisent des forces au moment où l'insur-

rection intensifie sa pression sur la capitale, Damas, et continue de tenir une bonne partie d'Alep.

Car le régime ne peut laisser les localités alaouites sans défense : elles fournissent l'essentiel des forces armées qui combattent aujourd'hui sur le terrain. Ce serait une trahison qui ne passerait pas dans une communauté loin d'être enthousiaste envers Bachar Al-Assad, mais solidaire pour l'instant face à la menace sunnite.

Enfin, il y a une dimension psychologique non négligeable dans ces attaques. Les insurgés veulent faire payer à leurs voisins le prix de la répression qu'ils subissent depuis plus de vingt et un mois et qui a déjà causé plus de

45 000 morts. Les massacres communautaires, à l'instar de celui d'Houla en mai (108 morts, principalement sunnites) et de celui d'Aqrab (125 à 150 personnes, essentiellement alaouites, semble-t-il), le 11 décembre dans des circonstances encore troubles à ce jour, risquent de se multiplier.

L'influence croissante du Front Al-Nousra, qui vient d'être classé par Washington comme organisation terroriste en raison de sa proximité idéologique avec Al-Qaïda et de la présence de nombreux djihadistes étrangers en son sein, ne va certainement pas apaiser les choses : l'obsession anti-alaouite – et par extension anti-chiïte – y est aussi forte, sinon plus, que le rejet du régime

de Damas. Le 21 décembre, le conseiller spécial de l'ONU pour la prévention du génocide a mis en garde contre les risques de représailles qui pèsent sur les communautés minoritaires en Syrie : « *Je suis profondément préoccupé par le fait que des communautés entières risquent de payer le prix des crimes commis par le gouvernement syrien* », a souligné Adama Dieng dans un communiqué.

« *Le conflit est devenu franchement communautaire dans sa nature* », déplorent, quant à eux, les membres de la commission d'enquête indépendante sur les droits de l'homme pour le compte des Nations unies en Syrie. ■

CHRISTOPHE AYAD

méfiant, Abdallah ne consent qu'à donner un prénom, probablement faux. Il ne veut pas dire de quelle ville il est originaire en Arabie saoudite, ni par où il est passé pour arriver en Syrie. « Dieu » a donc guidé ses pas, probablement via Antakia, dans le sud de la Turquie, jusqu'au djebel Akrad, un massif montagneux du nord-ouest de la Syrie presque entièrement acquis aux mains de la rébellion. La frontière turque n'est pas ouverte à cet endroit-là, mais les passeurs la franchissent sans difficulté, surtout dans le sens Turquie-Syrie.

Abdallah dit être arrivé seul, à titre individuel, pas en groupe. A chaque question précise, il esquive et répond par une généralité appuyée d'une sourate du Coran, dont l'exactitude laisse parfois dubitatif mais qui en impose beaucoup à ses coreligionnaires syriens. A l'évidence, sa motivation est avant tout religieuse. « *Le Prophète – la paix et la miséricorde soit sur Lui – a dit que l'armée de l'islam reviendrait un jour sur terre et que ce retour commencerait au pays de Cham* [le nom arabe de la Syrie]. C'est pour cela que je suis ici. » Il n'aime pas désigner la Syrie par son nom officiel, trop occidentalisé à son goût. Et il parle de « *la terre des deux sanctuaires* » (La Mecque et Médine) pour évoquer son propre pays, l'Arabie saoudite. Pieux à l'extrême, il force d'un regard un combattant à éteindre sa cigarette à peine allumée. « *Haram* » : c'est péché.

Abdallah n'a jamais songé à se rendre en Egypte, en Tunisie ou même en Libye au début des révolutions arabes qu'il a suivies passionnément à la télévision. Mais

quand les troubles ont éclaté en Syrie, son sang de fidèle n'a fait qu'un tour. «Je savais par mes amis syriens en Arabie saoudite que la Syrie était dirigé par un régime opposé à l'islam. Aller à la prière de l'aube ou le simple fait de posséder un ouvrage sur la vraie religion [c'est-à-dire, pour lui, l'islam sunnite dans sa version la plus rigoriste, le wahhabisme] est passible de trois ans de prison. Les filles n'ont pas le droit de porter le voile à l'école, comme chez vous, en France», croit-il savoir.

Pour le jeune homme, qui se présente comme un «salafiste», la Syrie est dirigée par des «apostats», des «chiïtes», auxquels il assimile la confession alaouite de la famille Assad au pouvoir. Et la guerre qu'il est venu mener est un djihad contre l'hérésie chiïte, bien pire, à ses yeux, que l'impérialisme occidental. A la question de savoir ce qui est pire, de l'invasion de l'Irak par George Bush ou de la répression de Bachar Al-Assad en Syrie, Abdallah répond sans hésiter une seconde: «Bachar est pire parce qu'il se fait passer pour un musulman et qu'il cherche à convertir les sunnites au chiïsme. Les Américains, ce sont des ennemis et des mécréants, mais au

moins, ils ne cherchent pas à nous convertir au christianisme.»

Ses opinions reflètent fidèlement la rhétorique haineuse du cheikh Aarour, un religieux salafiste syrien installé en Arabie saoudite depuis le début de la révolte, d'où il délivre ses prêches anti-alaouites sur une chaîne de télévision par satellite. Mais elles rejoignent aussi celles du pouvoir saoudien, qui ne ménage pas son soutien à la rébellion syrienne, pour faire pièce à l'alliance stratégique entre le régime de Damas et l'Iran, l'ennemi juré des monarchies du Golfe.

Arrivé il y a quelques mois en Syrie, Abdallah prétend avoir appris le maniement des armes lors d'une courte formation avec la brigade Souqour Al-Ezz (les Aigles de la volonté) et se vante d'avoir participé, début septembre à l'assaut victorieux contre la position gouvernementale de Burj Al-Qasab. Son groupe de combattant (katiba) compte moins de dix étrangers sur une centaine de membres, assure-t-il, sans qu'il soit possible de vérifier. Et son compagnon syrien, Moataz, assure que le nombre de combattants étrangers ne dépasse pas 10% dans les différentes katibas du djebel Akrad.

Il semble que les Libyens, en par-

La plupart des djihadistes étrangers sont arrivés à partir du mois de mars 2012, lorsque la rébellion s'est militarisée

ticulier, et les Maghrébins, en général, forment le principal contingent de djihadistes internationaux venus en Syrie. La plupart sont arrivés à partir du mois de mars 2012, lorsque la rébellion s'est militarisée, contrairement aux affirmations du gouvernement syrien qui a décrit le soulèvement, dès ses premiers jours en mars 2011, comme une entreprise de déstabilisation menée par des «bandes armées salafistes» venues de l'étranger.

Abou Burhan, un ancien officier déserteur aujourd'hui à la tête d'un groupe armé à Selma, assure contre toute évidence n'avoir vu aucun étranger dans le djebel Akarak: «Je suis contre la présence de combattants étrangers. Ils ne connaissent pas le pays, viennent avec des idées loin de notre culture. Ce n'est pas d'hommes que nous manquons mais d'armes.» Certains sont des

combattants aguerris, notamment les Tchétchènes, les Libyens ou les Irakiens. Ils préfèrent partir combattre à Alep, théâtre de féroces combats urbains depuis juillet 2012. D'autres sont «utilisés» pour mener des attentats suicides, surtout par le Front Al-Nousra.

Abdallah, lui, est avant tout un idéologue. Peu expérimenté militairement, sans connaissance sérieuse du terrain et de la société syrienne, il contribue essentiellement à radicaliser ses coreligionnaires par un discours anti-alaouite sans nuances. Assis aux côtés d'Abdallah, Moataz, son ami syrien qui semble en voie de «salafisation» accélérée, paraît moins tranché dans ses positions: «Je sais qu'il y a des alaouites qui sont pour la révolution, et des sunnites qui défendent le régime», concède-t-il.

Abdallah quittera la Syrie, non pas à la chute du régime mais à «la conversion du pays au vrai islam», c'est-à-dire l'instauration de la charia (loi islamique). Moataz lui coupe la parole: «Nos frères étrangers quitteront le pays quand le régime sera tombé. La suite, c'est au peuple syrien d'en décider librement.» Pour une fois, c'est au tour d'Abdallah d'opiner en silence. ●

LEWIS ROTH.



Turquie/PKK : un responsable turc confirme des négociations avec Öcalan

ISTANBUL, 31 décembre 2012 (AFP)

UN RESPONSABLE TURC a confirmé lundi une information de presse faisant état de discussions entre les services secrets turcs et le chef emprisonné des rebelles kurdes, Abdullah Öcalan, avec pour objectif le désarmement de l'organisation.

«Ce sont les services de renseignement qui sont en pourparlers avec lui (...) L'objectif est le désarmement du PKK (Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, interdit). Tout dialogue en ce sens qui peut aboutir à un arrêt des violences est soutenu par le gouvernement», a déclaré Yalçın Akdoğan, principal conseiller politique du Premier ministre turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

M. Akdoğan, qui s'exprimait sur la chaîne de télévision d'information NTV, a estimé qu'«Öcalan était toujours l'acteur principal» pour régler le conflit kurde qui perdure depuis 1984, tout en émettant un doute sur son influence sur les quelque 2.000 militants retranchés dans le nord de l'Irak, d'où ils attaquent la Turquie.

«Il faut voir comment Qandil (zone montagneuse irakienne où se trouve le commandement militaire du PKK) va réagir à ce processus», a-t-il dit.

M. Akdoğan, qui est aussi député du Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP, issu de la mouvance islamiste), au pouvoir, s'est voulu «réaliste» et a estimé que l'arrêt des combats entre les forces turques et les rebelles n'était pas pour demain.

«Il ne faut pas donner de faux espoirs au peuple. Soyons réalistes. A court terme, cela ne paraît pas faisable», a-t-il souligné.

Il a cependant insisté sur le fait que l'usage de la force «ne suffit pas pour en finir avec le PKK», qui a engagé une lutte armée contre les forces d'Ankara il y a près de 30 ans.

Selon le quotidien Hürriyet, des responsables du MIT, l'Agence nationale de renseignement, se sont entretenus pendant quatre heures le 23 décembre avec

Öcalan, qui purge une peine de prison à vie depuis 1999 sur l'île-prison d'Imrali, dans le nord-ouest de la Turquie.

Les parties à la négociation espèrent mettre à profit la trêve de fait imposée par l'hiver pour parvenir à un accord débouchant sur un désarmement des rebelles du PKK au printemps, indique Hürriyet.

Sont notamment en discussion le sort des cadres du PKK, qui seraient accueillis par un ou des pays tiers, la Turquie recommandant que cet exil n'ait pas lieu dans un pays limitrophe de son territoire, comme l'Irak ou les rebelles disposent de camps, ou en Europe, souligne le journal.

Öcalan réclame de son côté une amélioration de ses conditions de détention, un contact direct avec son organisation et des gestes en faveur de la minorité kurde pour la convaincre du bien-fondé de ce désarmement, ajoute le quotidien.

M. Erdogan a mentionné vendredi dans une interview télévisée la poursuite d'entretiens avec Öcalan, sans en préciser la nature.

«Les rencontres sur l'île se poursuivent parce que nous devons obtenir un résultat. Tant qu'il y a une lueur (d'espoir) nous poursuivons ce processus», a-t-il déclaré.

Une précédente tentative de négociation avec le PKK en 2009 avait échoué.

Le conflit kurde en Turquie a fait, selon l'armée, plus de 45.000 morts. Les rebelles ont d'abord revendiqué l'indépendance du Sud-Est anatolien, peuplé en majorité de Kurdes, avant d'évoluer vers une demande d'autonomie régionale.

En parallèle au dialogue amorcé avec Öcalan, l'armée turque continue de combattre les rebelles, a précisé M. Akdoğan, qui a fait état de 10 rebelles abattus lundi à Lice, dans la province de Diyarbakir (Sud-Est anatolien).

Les rebelles ont été tués au cours d'une opération menée conjointement par des unités des forces spéciales de l'armée de terre, de la gendarmerie et de la police, secondées par des miliciens kurdes pro-Ankara et disposant d'un soutien aérien, a annoncé dans un communiqué le gouverneur de Diyarbakir, Mustafa Toprak. L'opération se poursuit, a ajouté le gouverneur. ○

Tens of thousands of Iraqi Sunnis rally, intensifying pressure on Shiite-led government

KARIM KADIM , Associated Press

FALLUJAH, Iraq – Tens of thousands of Iraqi Sunnis angry over perceived second-class treatment by the Shiite-led government massed along a major western highway and elsewhere in the country Friday for the largest protests yet in a week of demonstrations.

The well-organized rallies, which took place after traditional Friday prayers, underscore the strength of a tenacious protest movement that appears to be gathering support among Sunnis, whose sense of grievance has been increased by arrests and prosecutions that they feel underscore Shiite political dominance.

The biggest of Friday's demonstrations took place on a main road to Jordan and Syria that runs through the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in the Sunni-dominated desert province of Anbar, west of Baghdad.

Several thousand protesters took to the streets in Fallujah, holding aloft placards declaring the day a "Friday of honor." Some carried old Iraqi flags used during the era of former dictator Saddam Hussein, whose Sunni-dominated government was ousted in the U.S.-led invasion nearly a decade ago.

Others raised the current flag, which was approved in 2008. A few hoisted the banner of the predominantly Sunni rebels across the border who are fighting to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Massive crowds also blocked the highway in Ramadi, further to the west, to demand "fair treatment" from the government and the release of prisoners, said Dhari Arkan, the deputy governor of Anbar province.

"The people have demands that must be met by the Baghdad government immediately or these demonstrations will spread nationwide," Arkan said. "The people can bring down the regime, just like what happened in other Arab Spring countries."

In the northern city of Mosul, about 3,000 demonstrators took to the streets to denounce what they called the sidelining of Sunnis in Iraq and to demand the release of Sunni prisoners. As in protests earlier in the week, demonstrators there chanted the Arab Spring slogan: "The people want the down-



Dec. 28, 2012 - Protesters chant slogans against Iraq's Shiite-led government as they wave national flags during a demonstration in Fallujah, west of Baghdad, Iraq. (AP)

fall of the regime."

Thousands likewise turned out in the northern Sunni towns of Tikrit and Samarra, where they were joined by lawmakers and provincial officials, said Salahuddin provincial spokesman Mohammed al-Asi.

At a conference in Baghdad, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warned against a return to sectarian conflict and cautioned that the country is close to returning to the "dark days when people were killed because of their names or identities."

He also used the occasion to take a jab at the protesters in Anbar.

"Nations that look for peace, love and reconstruction must choose civilized ways to express themselves. It is not acceptable to express opinions by blocking the roads, encouraging sectarianism, threatening to launch wars and dividing Iraq," he said. "Instead we need to talk, to listen to each other and to agree ... to end our differences."

The demonstrations follow the arrest last week of 10 bodyguards assigned to Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi, who comes from Anbar and is one of the central government's most senior Sunni officials

While the detentions triggered the latest

bout of unrest, the demonstrations also tap into deeper Sunni fears that they are being marginalized by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Although the government includes some Sunni Arabs and Kurdish officials as part of a power-sharing agreement, it draws the bulk of its support from Iraq's majority Shiites.

Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, another top-ranking Sunni politician, is now living in exile in Turkey after being handed multiple death sentences earlier this year for allegedly running death squads -- a charge he dismisses as politically motivated.

Sunni-dominated Anbar province has been the scene of several large demonstrations and road blockages since last Saturday. The vast territory was once the heart of the deadly Sunni insurgency that emerged after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

Al Qaeda is believed to be rebuilding in pockets of Anbar, and militants linked to it are thought to be helping Sunni rebels in Syria.

Marking a new epoch in Kurdish history? The legacy of Mam Jalal



The Kurdish Globe
By Behrooz Shojai

President Jalal Talabani, or Mam (Uncle) Jalal, as his friends and foes call him, marked a new epoch in Kurdish history. This is true not only for Southern Kurdistan but for all of greater Kurdistan. Mam Jalal started his career as a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), advancing as the first chairman of KDP's Youth organization and later on as a member of its politburo. There was however a split between the members of politburo and the head of party, the late Mustafa Barzani.

Mam Jalal along with the left wing party members left the KDP in 1966. Mam Jalal eventually founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), an umbrella organization which comprised of several Kurdish leftist parties in the aftermath of 1975's breakdown of Kurdish nationalist movements. The split of Kurdish national movement in southern Kurdistan had direct implications on other parts of Kurdistan. After 1975's organizational split in the south, a whole set of organizations were founded on the basis of their allegiance to either the KDP (called Melayis, indicating the title of Mulla Mustafa Barzani) or PUK (so called Jalalis relating to Jalal Talabani).

The Marxist organizations in northern Kurdistan were consequently pro-PUK and center-left organizations were pro-KDP. The same could be said about Western and Eastern Kurdistan. This was important for the democratic development of the Kurdish national movement, although it implied armed conflicts between various Kurdish organizations that cost the Kurdish people the life of thousands of their youths. This bipolar political culture could be quite fruitful for the Kurdish democracy if the Kurds had a tradition of democratic interaction, but in absence of such, the 1990s - the first period of Kurdish self-

government - was characterized by civil war between these two main organizations in South.

However, the outcome of this political constellation showed to be not only good but a sheer necessity after the constitutional implementation of the Kurdistan Region within a Federal Iraq. Mam Jalal has in two ways supported the consolidation of Kurdistan Region since 2003. Firstly, his office as President of Iraq gave a strong Kurdish hand in Baghdad. Without a strong Kurdish presence in Baghdad the Kurdish region would probably not have the strength and the power it has now. As a political veteran with tremendous cultural competence, Mam Jalal has been able to tackle many problems with various political factions in Baghdad.

No other figure could be a better representative of the New Iraq than Mam Jalal. With his compromising approach and his familiarity with the ways of the world, he has probably changed the world's impression about Iraq, which was characterized by a tyrant like Saddam. As a talented political personality and culturally competent leader, Mam Jalal could interact with adventures and eccentric dictators in Middle East, relating to the words of Imam Khomeini without any difficulties, as well as interacting with political leaders in the West without any problems of miscommunication due to his extended knowledge of western way of thinking.

Mam Jalal has been the most talented head of state in Iraq, a fact that the Kurds should take pride in. His ethnic background never constituted any bias in his decision-making, on the contrary his Kurdish background made him equally distanced to both Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq. It also eliminated a conflict-triggering situation between Shiites and Sunnis, who equally claim that the president should be of them. His office as President of Iraq satisfied also Kurds and gave them a sense of psychological recovering from Saddam's rule of terror. Overall, Mam Jalal alone has



Iraqi President and Head of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Jalal Talabani. PRESS PHOTO

constituted the greatest peace-keeping force in Iraq. He has been the only one who, as the President of Iraq, could satisfy all constituent parts of Iraq.

For Kurdish concern, the existence of PUK has been important for the process of democratization in Kurdistan Region. PUK's foundation was necessary for the diversification of political atmosphere for the Kurds in the South. The armed conflict that resulted after its foundation should rather be ascribed to the assabiatic and parochialist political culture of the Kurds in the South. In the peaceful Kurdistan Region, Mam Jalal's PUK has played a major role in the consolidation of the practice of democracy. Even the emergence of Change List, headed by Nawshirwan Mustafa, the former ally of Mam Jalal and the political theorist of PUK, should be ascribed to the existence of PUK and Mam Jalal. The Change List is the only opposition party in the Kurdistan Parliament. No doubt, Mam Jalal's PUK has been of immense importance for the sake of Kurdish democracy.

Since the foundation of KDP in 1946, a new generation of Kurds comprised of highly educated individuals had entered the party's political body. Until 1966, the KDP was the only political current in Southern Kurdistan

including a wide range of social groups. The members could be tribal leaders and urban educated young, the traditionalists as well as modernists, the conservatives as well as Marxists. A political party can't include all these current at the same time without internal conflicts. As mentioned before this motley crowd could not co-exist within the same political party, the intellectuals and leftist finally left the party or were perhaps forced out of the party.

Mam Jalal and his father-in-law Ibrahim Ahmad headed the "renegades". It is also important to acknowledge the role of Mam Jalal in the resumption of the Kurdish national movement in the South in the aftermath of 1975's collapse. Betrayed by allies, frustrated and disillusioned, the KDP leadership had almost submitted to the circumstances. I can't imagine that without the emergence of PUK in 1975 the KDP would resume the struggle again. The PUK was not only a new ignition of Kurdish national movement, but also a home for a new generation of alienated Kurdish patriots.

PUK could coordinate and incorporate the efforts of several Kurdish leftist organizations, who by then would never find an ally within the KDP and their scattered struggle would be wasted. Mam Jalal's PUK became eventually an asylum for a new generation of Kurdish nationalists. KDP members may be of other opinion, but PUK's emergence and ideas profoundly helped to improve KDP's political structure, ideas and democratization of its body. PUK was the necessary opposition that KDP needed to ransack and reform itself. PUK set about a mechanism of checks and balances in the Kurdish politics in the South. The existence of PUK improved the accountability of the Kurdish political body. The Kurdish society is characterized by a diversity of political communities were Mam Jalal created a political space for this diversity.

Mam Jalal marked a new epoch in the Kurdish history that eventually ended in more democratization of the Kurdish movement.

An Interview with Nechirvan Barzani: Will There Be an Independent Kurdistan?

By Jay Newton-Small

Brbil —If there is one man who deserves the credit for the growing Turkish-Kurd rapprochement, it's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani of Iraqi Kurdistan. Five years ago Kurds and foreigners alike laughed in his face when he told them that not only did he want Iraqi Kurdistan to export its own oil, but that he wanted to export it to Turkey, which has had an intractable problem with its own large Kurdish minority. Barzani's strategy was one of patience: starting with confidence-building with the Turks and then coaxing small oil companies and then larger ones to risk Baghdad's ire to drill for oil not only in the autonomous region but in territory disputed by both Barzani's government and the Iraqi central government. Barzani sat down with TIME on December 13 to talk about the Turks, his stormy relationship with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the potential for an independent Kurdish state—and how that would affect members of the non-Arab ethnicity, which lives in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. He spoke sometimes in English and other times through the translation services of his Foreign Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir. Below are excerpts from that interview:

TIME: My understanding is that the people laughed at you when you first suggested that Kurdistan drill and export its own oil. True?

Barzani: That's true [laughs].... We started with small projects. Small companies. I mean of course always we've been accused of bringing small companies but now we have big companies like Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Total, Gazprom. It has been changed a lot. The total investment so far in spending has been about \$15 billion. \$15 billion they spending in this country. It's a lot of change. But of course we have a long way to go — this is not all. So the first company that we started with was a Norwegian Company called DNO. Of course at the beginning there was a huge campaign on me personally as well [saying that] I'm corrupt, I'm benefiting from this personally, stories about me personally. But I resisted and ignored all these accusations and we continued the path.

TIME: The U.S. State Department said they oppose the Turkish pipeline because they worry that it could threaten the integrity of Iraq. Do you

think building this pipeline could threaten the integrity of Iraq?

Barzani: That's a joke [chuckles]. No, really, that's a joke. First of all everybody knows and realizes Turkish policy. Turkish policy is against any Kurdish independence, I mean it's obvious. So this is the fate that we have been given. Turkey has always had that power, that authority to militarily stop us. I will gladly say the opposite. What threatens Iraq's integrity is the performance of Prime Minister Maliki in Baghdad. Maliki wants to utilize that campaign against us. We have a door of hope, which is Turkey. And if that door, that hope is closed, it will be impossible for us to surrender to Baghdad. We will do something that will put in danger the interests of all those concerned.

TIME: Is it ironic that you're pinning your hopes on Turkey, given how badly they have treated the Kurds in the past?

Barzani: Things have changed in Turkey. It's very simple. Turkey needs something that it doesn't have. We need certain things that we don't have. This has been the proper understanding on both sides. And it doesn't have anything to do with politics. It's an economic matter. They would like, and we would like likewise, to achieve progress. Because Turkey is a very important country for us. Of course if we are able through economic cooperation to further develop this relationship, we will certainly do it.

TIME: You have a large number of Iraqi troops mustered at your border, could this turn into a war?

Barzani: They are not far from each other, the forces. But let me discuss that in a different way. Unfortunately, Prime Minister Maliki wants to create tension in these areas. We sent our own delegation to Baghdad. They had a memorandum of 14 points. Our military forces and the Iraqi side, both sides of the military they had agreed on that. And we were pleased that this would be implemented and the problem would be solved. When we went to Maliki he rejected all of that. So the point is in what way he moves to solve the problems? The way we see it his is more interested in sorting out the differences through violence. The areas that are called the disputed territory, this is a very sensitive issue for KRG, for Kurdish. It's extremely sensi-



tive. When we agreed to all these 14 points he rejected it. We don't know what formula that we use to create an understanding. But of course we're expecting these things to happen. We knew that after the withdrawal of the American troops, things would change and this would be a normal thing to happen in Iraq. America came to this country, spent huge amounts of money and have sacrificed lives. But they handed over the keys to others.

TIME: To the Iranians?

Barzani: I said to others, okay [laughs]. Whatever problems, whatever you like, they have left all these problems behind. I'll pose a question: Why did you come to Iraq? What's the reason? If the only intention was to hand over Iraq's keys to others, then why did you come? Why? This is really the question for Americans. Therefore, America is also responsible for the situation and what happens now. There is a moral responsibility on the United States. Because until the last moment when then Americans were here they did not help us to solve these problems. And they knew that these were problems that would linger. How does Baghdad act? Baghdad believes or perceives that they will be stronger, but especially I'm talking about Prime Minister Maliki, he's waiting for F16s and M1 tanks, and being in that strong position to come and talk to us. To impose a solution on us. Imposing any kind of solution would create a problem on the ground. There has to be an agreement, a compromise. We are ready for that. We know that we cannot solve this problem through who's strong and who's weak. Ok, we have to be ready for compromise, both sides. And we as the KRG are ready for that, we're ready for dialogue, for compromise, for talk, for everything.

TIME: Will there come a point where you feel you can no longer bargain with Maliki and it's better to be on your own?

Barzani: We have a constitution in this country. We will not take any other step until we lose hope in that constitution. ➤

» There is no doubt if and when we lose hope that the constitution is not adhered to, certainly there are other options.

TIME: Also for Turkey, the PKK are here. Is that awkward? For them, for you, for the Turks?

Barzani: Regarding that, it's only the issue of the PKK. Turkey has to understand one thing: this is a political question. It cannot be solved militarily. There has to be a political decision to solve this question. We have continuously raised and discussed this issue with Turkey. Always. And we will continue to do so. We are attempting to play a role so that there will be a political solution for this question.

TIME: Did you imagine five years ago that you would be receiving heads of state here? That Kurdistan would have come so far as an independent

region?

Barzani: Five years ago, it was so difficult, really. Five years or more, it was difficult to expect that, really. Because I remember, Turkey especially, they had 200,000 troops on the border. They threatened us, we will enter here. And instead of that right now we have almost \$8 billion in trade with Turkey. Only with the KRG. And the major Turkish companies in construction, in other areas, they are active here. And for the opening ceremony of the new Erbil airport Prime Minister Erdogan, he came here. So, it's a big change. It's a really big change in terms of the relationship with Turkey.

TIME: Is it possible to say that you are closer than ever to an independent Kurdistan?

Barzani: I believe, yes, we have a very

good opportunity. But we have a lot of challenges as well. How we can – I mean an independent Kurdistan – first of all we have to convince at least one country around us. Without convincing them, we cannot do this. Being land locked we have to have a partner, a regional power to be convinced and internationally, a big power to be convinced to support that. What we want right now is to have an economic independence within Iraq. And the biggest threat on Iraq's unity is Prime Minister Maliki. Because Prime Minister Maliki is acting very unilaterally and as a one man show. This will not help to solve Iraq's problems. The Kurdish concern about Maliki is not only the Kurdish concern. If you go talk to any Shi'a, Turkman, Sunni, they have exactly the same concern about the Prime Minister. This is the reality. Everybody is unhappy with the performance of the prime ministe ♦



December 31, 2012

Turkey discussing disarmament with Kurdish leader

Seda Sezer / Reuters

ISTANBUL - Turkey has begun discussing disarmament with Kurdish militants after concluding that it is unlikely to defeat them militarily, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's chief adviser said on Monday.

The government has been in talks in recent months with Abdullah Ocalan, jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), to end a hunger strike by jailed PKK members, but Monday's comment was the first confirmation that attempts to negotiate a wider peace settlement were on the agenda.

"The main aim for the government is to disarm them. You cannot get results and abolish an organization only with armed struggle," Yalcin Akdogan said in an interview with NTV television.

He said the government was cautious about the prospects of progress: "We have to see how Qandil (PKK headquarters in northern Iraq) will react ... The organization (PKK) also saw that they cannot get anywhere through armed struggle."

After his capture in 1999, Ocalan let it be known that he was open to a political settlement that secured more rights for the Kurds who inhabit Turkey's southeast.

In July 2011, a month after Erdogan's AKP party won a third term, he proposed

peace talks with Ankara, and leaked recordings indicated that senior intelligence officials had held secret meetings with PKK leaders in Oslo.

But the initiatives ran aground, and the last nine months have been some of the bloodiest of a conflict that has now lasted almost three decades and claimed more than 40,000 lives, most of them PKK fighters.

With any hint of concessions to the PKK fiercely opposed by nationalists, and therefore politically fraught, it is not clear on what basis the government now considers it might be able to negotiate a truce.

DECLARATION

Akdogan gave no further details but the daily Hurriyet said directors of the MIT intelligence agency had met Ocalan for four hours on December 23 with the goal of issuing a declaration on ending the conflict in the first months of 2013.

"Getting the group to put down its weapons formed the main item on the agenda in the talks," the paper said, without specifying its sources.

"If the target is achieved, the PKK, which has halted operations due to winter conditions, would begin to disarm in the spring."

Hurriyet said Ocalan had demanded to be put in direct contact with the PKK, and

given better jail conditions. It said he would not talk with his lawyers or the main legal pro-Kurdish party until the talks with the state were completed.

Ocalan, who founded the PKK in 1974 to fight for an independent Kurdish state, is in virtual isolation on the island of Imrali in the Sea of Marmara and has not even seen his lawyers for months.

But after he gave the order through his brother in November to end the 68-day hunger strike by hundreds of PKK militants in prisons across Turkey, it was obeyed immediately.

The justice minister then said there would be further talks with the PKK, and Akdogan made clear on Monday that Ankara saw Ocalan as its main interlocutor.

Negotiations with a group designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the European Union would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

But Erdogan for his part is under pressure to stem the violence, which has included Kurdish bomb attacks in major cities as well as fighting in the mountainous southeast.

Akdogan said 10 militants had been killed in fighting in southeast Turkey on Monday.

Erdogan's government has widened cultural and language rights for Kurds, who make up around 20 percent of Turkey's 75 million population, since taking power a decade ago.

But Kurdish politicians want greater political reform including steps towards autonomy for their region. ●

Les sunnites mobilisés contre le gouvernement Maliki en Irak

par Raheem Salman et Kamal Naama

RAMADI, Irak (Reuters) - Plusieurs dizaines de milliers de membres de la minorité sunnite irakienne ont manifesté vendredi contre la politique du Premier ministre chiite Nouri al Maliki, une démonstration de force susceptible de raviver les tensions religieuses.

Soixante-mille personnes se sont rassemblées à Falloudja, 50 km à l'ouest de Bagdad, sur le principal axe routier est-ouest bloqué depuis une semaine.

"L'Irak dehors ! Bagdad doit rester libre !", ont scandé les manifestants, qui ont brûlé des drapeaux de la République islamique.

Le mouvement a débuté la semaine dernière après l'arrestation de gardes du corps du ministre des Finances, un sunnite. Beaucoup de ses coreligionnaires, qui ont dominé l'Irak jusqu'au renversement de Saddam Hussein, accusent le chef du gouvernement de s'opposer au partage du pouvoir et le jugent trop proche de l'Iran chiite et non arabe.

Le Premier ministre avait déjà ordonné l'arrestation du vice-président sunnite Tarek Hachémi, qu'il accuse de diriger des escadrons de la mort, juste après le retrait des troupes américaines d'Irak, en décembre 2011.

Un an après ce retrait, les tensions religieuses qui s'ajoutent aux contentieux entre Arabes et Kurdes, notamment sur le partage des revenus pétroliers, menacent à nouveau la stabilité de l'Irak, où les violences intercommunautaires ont culminé entre 2005 et 2007.

Les manifestants réclament l'abrogation d'une législation antiterroriste qu'ils jugent pénalisante pour les sunnites, et la remise en liberté de détenus.

"Je suis venu à Falloudja pour exprimer mon soutien à leurs revendications.



Des sunnites irakiens manifestent contre le gouvernement à Ramadi, à l'ouest de Bagdad, le 28 décembre 2012. REUTERS/Ali al-Mashhadani

J'espère que nous irons à Bagdad", a déclaré l'un d'eux.

VERS UNE INTERVENTION ARMÉE AU KURDISTAN ?

D'autres rassemblements ont eu lieu à Mossoul et à Samara, dans le Nord, où le slogan-phare du printemps arabe, "Le peuple veut la chute du régime !", a retenti.

"Il n'est pas acceptable de s'exprimer en bloquant des routes, en incitant à la sédition et au sectarisme, en tuant, en sonnant la charge et en divisant l'Irak", a déclaré le chef du gouvernement, lors d'une conférence sur la réconciliation nationale retransmise à la télévision.

Ces derniers jours, des manifestants sunnites ont brandi le drapeau irakien en vigueur sous le règne de Saddam Hussein et celui des rebelles syriens, qui combattent un gouvernement lui aussi proche de l'Iran.

Des activistes d'Al Qaïda se regrouperaient dans la province occidentale d'Anbar, majoritairement sunnite, et passeraient la frontière syrienne pour aller prêter main forte aux insurgés.

A Ramadi, chef-lieu de la province, des manifestants ont défilé avec le portrait du Premier ministre turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan, qui a pris fait et cause pour l'insurrection syrienne et affiche de plus en plus ses divergences avec son homologue irakien.

Un modeste rassemblement contre le chef du gouvernement turc a en revanche eu lieu à Nadjaf, ville sainte chiite située à 160 km au sud de la capitale.

L'influent imam chiite Muktada Sadr, rival du chef du gouvernement, a toutefois exprimé son soutien aux manifestants sunnites et a condamné la "politique sectaire" de Nouri al Maliki.

Le Premier ministre chercherait à monter ses rivaux les uns contre les autres pour renforcer ses alliances avant les élections régionales de l'an prochain et les législatives de 2014.

Certains commentateurs évoquent la perspective d'une confrontation armée avec le Kurdistan autonome pour le contrôle des gisements pétroliers du Nord, qui permettrait à Nouri al Maliki de rallier la minorité sunnite à sa cause. ●

AP Associated Press

Irak: le Kurdistan suspend ses exportations pétrolières

BAGDAD - 25 décembre 2012 Associated Press

LES EXPORTATIONS pétrolières en provenance de la région du Kurdistan, en Irak, ont été suspendues en raison d'un différend

commercial avec Bagdad, a annoncé mardi un responsable kurde irakien.

Cette situation pourrait mener à une escalade des tensions, déjà vives, entre les Kurdes et le gouvernement central irakien.

Depuis l'invasion américaine, en 2003, les Kurdes ont unilatéralement conclu plus de 50 ententes avec des compagnies pétrolières étrangères, et ce, même si Bagdad soutient qu'ils n'en ont pas le droit.

En 2011, les deux parties en étaient arrivées à une fragile entente: les Kurdes exporteraient leur pétrole à Bagdad, et gouvernement central serait responsable de vendre l'or noir, puis de verser 50 pour cent des profits aux promoteurs afin de rembourser les coûts de développement.

En avril dernier, les Kurdes avaient cessé d'exporter environ ➔

➔ 100 000 barils par jour, soutenant que Bagdad avait effectué seulement deux versements et n'avait pas déboursé quelque 1,5 milliard \$ auquel ils disaient avoir droit.

Quatre mois plus tard, les Kurdes avaient accepté de reprendre les exportations, afin de témoigner de leur bonne foi.

Cela avait permis aux deux parties de conclure une nouvelle entente en vertu de laquelle Bagdad paierait environ 848 millions \$ aux entreprises en septembre.

Or, Bagdad a versé seulement 550 millions \$ et retenu le reste de cette somme, soutient Ali Hussein Balo, conseiller du ministère kurde des Ressources naturelles.

«La région (du Kurdistan) se voit contrainte de suspendre les exportations de pétrole puisque Bagdad n'a pas respecté les engagements pris en

septembre en ce qui a trait aux paiements», a dit le responsable lors d'une entrevue téléphonique avec l'Associated Press.

Selon Ali Hussein Balo, le Kurdistan irakien exportait environ 180 000 barils quotidiennement avant de commencer à diminuer les charge-ments.

Il n'a pas spécifié à quel moment les exportations ont cessé, mais a affirmé que cela s'était produit au cours des derniers jours.

Le porte-parole du vice-premier ministre irakien chargé de l'Énergie, Faisal Abdullah, a confirmé que Bagdad n'avait pas versé la somme d'argent dans son intégralité. Il a cependant précisé que les paiements avaient été suspendus puisque les Kurdes n'arrivaient pas à fournir les 200 000 barils quotidiens qu'ils s'étaient engagés à exporter. Il n'a pas fourni plus de détails. ○

Le Monde 31 décembre 2012

La Turquie discuterait d'un désarmement avec le chef du PKK

Le Monde avec Reuters

Abdullah Ocalan, principale figure du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, est emprisonné à Imrali, une île de la mer de Marmara, depuis son arrestation en 1999. Abdullah Ocalan, principale figure du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, est emprisonné à Imrali, une île de la mer de Marmara, depuis son arrestation en 1999. | AP/Abdurrahman Antakyali

Des responsables des services de renseignement turcs ont discuté de la perspective d'un désarmement des séparatistes kurdes avec Abdullah Öcalan, le dirigeant kurde emprisonné depuis 1999, rapporte le quotidien turc Hürriyet lundi 31 décembre. Ces informations ont été confirmées dans l'après-midi de lundi par Yalçın Akdoğan, principal conseiller politique du premier ministre turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"Ce sont les services de renseignement qui sont en pourparlers avec lui [...]. L'objectif est le désarmement du PKK [Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, interdit]. Tout dialogue en ce sens qui peut aboutir à un arrêt des violences est soutenu par le gouvernement", a déclaré Yalçın Akdoğan sur la chaîne de télévision d'information NTV.

Ankara a entamé ces derniers mois des discussions avec



Abdullah Ocalan, principale figure du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, est emprisonné à Imrali, une île de la mer de Marmara, depuis son arrestation en 1999. | AP/Abdurrahman Antakyali

le chef historique du PKK dans le but de mettre un terme au mouvement de grève de la faim observé par des centaines de ses partisans dans les prisons turques. Le conseiller du premier ministre a estimé qu'"Ocalan était toujours l'acteur principal" pour régler le conflit kurde qui perdure depuis 1984, tout en émettant un doute sur son influence sur les quelque 2 000 militants retranchés dans le nord de l'Irak, d'où ils attaquent la Turquie.

Les directeurs de l'agence des renseignements turque (MIT) ont rencontré Ocalan le 23 décembre pendant quatre heures pour travailler à l'élaboration d'une déclaration sur la fin du conflit dans les premiers mois de l'année 2013, rap-

porte Hürriyet.

UN DÉPÔT DES ARMES AU PRINTEMPS ENVISAGÉ

"Obtenir que le groupe dépose les armes était le point principal figurant dans l'agenda des négociations, écrit Hürriyet, sans toutefois préciser ses sources. Si l'objectif est atteint, le PKK, qui a stoppé ses opérations à cause de l'arrivée de l'hiver, déposerait les armes au printemps."

Mais M. Akdoğan, qui est aussi député du Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP, issu de la mouvance islamiste), au pouvoir, s'est voulu "réaliste" et a estimé que l'arrêt des combats entre les forces turques et les rebelles n'était pas pour

demain. Il a cependant insisté sur le fait que l'usage de la force "ne suffit pas pour en finir avec le PKK", qui a engagé une lutte armée contre les forces d'Ankara il y a près de trente ans.

Ocalan aurait, quant à lui, déclaré qu'il devait être mis en relation directe avec le PKK et que ses conditions de détention s'étaient améliorées. De telles négociations auraient été impensables il y a encore quelques années. Des contacts récents se sont révélés tendus, certains membres de l'opposition nationaliste ayant fermement condamné toute idée de négociation.

Abdullah Ocalan, surnommé parfois "Apo" ("l'Oncle"), est emprisonné à Imrali, une île de la mer de Marmara, depuis son arrestation en 1999. Le PKK, considéré comme une organisation "terroriste" par Ankara, les Etats-Unis et l'Union européenne, est tenu par le gouvernement central pour responsable de la mort de plus de 40 000 personnes depuis qu'il a pris les armes pour obtenir l'autonomie des Kurdes de Turquie.

Les rebelles ont d'abord revendiqué l'indépendance du Sud-Est anatolien, peuplé en majorité de Kurdes, avant d'évoluer vers une demande d'autonomie régionale. En parallèle au dialogue amorcé avec Ocalan, l'armée turque continue de combattre les rebelles, a précisé M. Akdoğan, qui a fait état de 10 rebelles abattus lundi à Lice, dans le Sud-Est anatolien. Une précédente tentative de négociation avec le PKK en 2009 avait échoué. □