SECURITY men, most in plain clothes, speckle the main market square of Deraa, a town of 350,000 near Syria’s border with Jordan. Yet in the brief time given for visiting journalists to stray from a scripted tour that highlights “terrorist” attacks on state property, a few ordinary citizens dare to speak. “We are so scared,” says a woman clutching a boy’s hand. “I come out to buy food, which costs more every day, but never know if I can make it home again.” A young man with burning, bloodshot eyes lifts his shirt, revealing two bullet scars. “We will never give up,” he declares as men in leather jackets approach to hustle him
off. A middle-aged shopper pauses briefly before slipping into an alley. “God help us,” he whispers in deliberate English.

It was in Deraa that Syria’s uprising began last March, with riots protesting against the arrest and nail-pulling torture of teenage boys who, inspired by other Arab revolts unfolding on satellite television, had daubed a wall with the words, “The people demand the fall of the regime”. An ongoing government crackdown has left perhaps 1,000 civilians dead in the town and surrounding villages, imposing an ice-thin calm. Most shops and schools are open only some of the time. Internet-video footage reveals daily combat between chanting, rock-throwing citizens and soldiers shooting live rounds. Officials speak of sporadic “terrorist” attacks on sandbagged checkpoints. As proof they parade a collection of captured pipe bombs and rusted firearms. Clearly though, should the government withdraw its armoured vehicles, combat troops, rooftop snipers and gun-toting thugs, then Deraa would swiftly revert to rebel rule.

The poison in New York

Meanwhile, the world looks on impotently. At the UN Security Council on February 4th, Russia and China raised Western ire by vetoing a mild resolution that would have urged Bashar Assad, the president, to adhere to a peace plan drafted by the Arab League. It pressed him to cede at least some unspecified powers to a deputy, pending the outcome of reconciliation talks. Russia objected to this, and more generally to the West imposing a diktat on a sovereign state it considers an ally.

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, accompanied by the overseas intelligence chief, Mikhail Fradkov, flew to Syria on February 7th. Mr Lavrov described their meeting with Mr Assad as productive, insisting that the Syrian president was committed to speedy reforms, including a new constitution and elections, an end to violence and dialogue with his foes. The Russians said that, as a first step, Mr Assad had directed a vice-president, Farouk Sharaa, to initiate talks with opposition groups. “Only Syria can decide the fate of Mr Assad,” Mr Lavrov declared.

America and many of its European allies, along with Arab Gulf states, responded with outrage to the UN vetoes. Saying that Russia and China
had granted Mr Assad a licence to kill his own people, they jointly withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus. Sanctions on Syria include export bans on American technology, a European ban on oil imports and strict financial controls, including a freeze on the overseas assets of members of the regime.

Diplomats now speak of further options to press Mr Assad’s regime, such as tabling a vote of condemnation at the UN General Assembly, where no country wields a veto, and forming a contact group together with neighbouring Turkey and Jordan to co-ordinate stronger action. This might include the imposition of safe havens along Syria’s borders as well as direct aid to the Free Syrian Army, a patchwork of guerrilla cells led by defecting soldiers that has harassed government forces across the country.

Even as international diplomacy has degenerated into a power tussle reminiscent of the cold war, Syrians are confronted with scenes of bloody wreckage in their own cities. Since the uprising began 11 months ago, the pattern has been for government forces to single out one rebellious village or urban district at a time for punishment. Some 7,000 civilians have perished as a result of such tactics. Since December frequent protests have taken place even in the heavily populated suburbs ringing Damascus, the capital, and Aleppo, the second city and the country’s commercial hub. Usually, government troops have then withdrawn, taking “terrorist” prisoners with them but leaving behind only token checkpoints.

More recently, the state-owned press has spoken ominously of the need to shift away from what it terms “restraint”. A new security plan does indeed seem to have been launched on February 3rd, a day seared in Syrian memories as the anniversary of a merciless 1982 artillery assault on the then-rebellious city of Hama, during the rule of Mr Assad’s father, Hafez, that left the ancient town’s picturesque old quarter in ruins and some 20,000 dead.
Since that date, Bashar Assad’s troops have mounted an unprecedentedly brutal show of force. They have showered artillery and rocket fire on Baba Amr and Khaldiyeh, two rebel-held districts of Homs, Syria’s third-largest city and the hub of the current uprising. They have also attacked the nearby town of Rastan, the mountain resort of Zabadani, near the Lebanese border, the city of Idlib, close to Turkey, and other towns. Attacks have taken place simultaneously and relentlessly. Opposition sources say they think the shelling is a prelude to ground assaults on all these areas.

With up to several hundred projectiles raining into Homs every hour, the nationwide casualty toll has surged from around 20 a day to more than 50. Transport and telephone links, along with power, water and fuel supplies have been severed to many of the stricken areas, which were poor to begin with and have seen their incomes shrivel during the long months of unrest. With thousands of civilians choosing to abandon their homes despite cold winter weather, Syria is likely soon to confront a grave internal refugee crisis within its sealed borders. “We ask for nothing from the world, except for coffins, since there are not enough of them here for our bodies,” declares a sarcastic tweet from Homs.

Mr Assad’s government seems to believe that such tactics will succeed in stanching the revolt. A Syrian businessman recounts that in a chance meeting with a senior security official at a posh gym he was told confidently that the current offensive would be decisive. It would in effect “decapitate” the Free Syrian Army, the official boasted.

There are nearby precedents for such success. Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi dictator, ruled for more than a decade following his brutal suppression of an uprising in the country’s south after the first Gulf war. Turkey’s army has put a fairly tight lid on Kurdish separatism, just as Israel has crushed two Palestinian intifadas. And Mr Assad’s own father outlived the rebels in Hama.

There are other reasons why Mr Assad might feel he will prevail. The centre of Damascus does, on the surface, appear surprisingly normal. Shops and cafés are open, if largely empty. Traffic is busy at times. Syria’s president felt secure enough recently to venture out to a restaurant.
Despite the rotting of state institutions under one-party rule, Mr Assad’s army and security forces have, to general surprise, so far suffered relatively few defections. Conscripts typically serve far from their hometowns, and the army is believed to have culled potentially disloyal soldiers from active units. Nor has Syria’s army yet unleashed its full array of firepower, which could include helicopter gunships and jet bombers. Despite making inroads, the rebels, who have briefly controlled areas close to Damascus, have as yet neither the supply lines, nor the communications capacity and heavy weaponry, to mount more than localised pinprick raids.

Perhaps more importantly, Mr Assad still enjoys at least tacit backing from a fair proportion of Syrians. The very brutality of his crackdown has, ironically but perhaps deliberately, bolstered loyalty among minorities that together make up a third of Syria’s 23m people. The Assad clan, which has ruled since 1970, are Alawites, an esoteric branch of Shiism that dominates Syria’s coastal mountains as well as the armed forces. Poor Alawites also make up much of the rank and file of more shadowy government militias, such as the plainclothes thugs known as the shabiha. Vicious government tactics have served to implicate the Alawites as a whole, raising fears of retribution should the regime fall.

**Sectarian quicksands**

Other minority sects, including half a dozen Christian groups as well as Shias and Druze, are less privileged by or attached to the state. Yet they have benefited from the regime’s secularist doctrine, which has maintained a degree of religious freedom unique in the region. Although Syria’s opposition leadership is cross-sectarian, on the streets it is the country’s Sunni Arab majority that has suffered the brunt of the oppression.

It is no accident that the areas which have fallen under rebel control are almost entirely Sunni. In line with much of the region, Syria’s Sunnis have grown religiously conservative in recent decades, and increasingly influenced by the harsh anti-Shia rhetoric propounded by Saudi Arabia. As in Iraq, the Sunnis’ predicament has pushed many into outright radicalism. Comments posted below a YouTube video of an Alawite tank commander captured by the Free Syrian Army, for
instance, proposed that he should be sodomised before being ritually slaughtered as an “infidel animal”. Many of the rebel army’s local brigades carry names associated with Sunni triumphalism. Mosque sermons in rebel areas habitually describe government forces as satanic hordes.

Such talk, seemingly reflecting a Sunni rage that has long simmered under the surface, frightens other Syrians—and with good reason. Alawites recall that what prompted the atrocity in Hama was a far smaller massacre of Alawite army cadets, carried out by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Fear of empowered Sunni radicals has pushed many Christians, who are keenly aware of the decimation of neighbouring Iraq’s equally large and ancient Christian community, grudgingly to accept the government’s characterisation of the rebels as terrorists. “We were all with the revolution so long as the demonstrations were peaceful,” says a Christian housewife in Damascus. “But how can we support an armed criminal mob?”

For reasons of class, many Sunnis, particularly among the privileged business elite that has profited under the Assads, also fear the revolutionaries. Middle-class Syrians, too, are often warier of growing economic hardship than of oppressive rule. Even the country’s long-repressed 15% Kurdish minority, which is mostly Sunni Muslim, has only tepidly embraced the uprising. “They are hedging bets,” says a Syrian analyst. “What they want is guarantees of Kurdish national

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### Foreign friends and foes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreign country</th>
<th>Historical</th>
<th>Current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Strategic ties since 1979. Syria is transit route for weapons to Iranian proxies in neighbouring countries</td>
<td>Elite Iranian units advising regime on quashing protests and monitoring internet. Reportedly sent $9 billion to help Syria weather sanctions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Patron and supplier of weapons for four decades. Syria is its last hold in the Middle East</td>
<td>Vetoes resolutions against Syria in the UN Security Council. Sold $550m of fighter jets to Syria in January</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>After decades of mutual suspicion, relations warmed in recent years. This led to a trade pact in 2004 and visa-free travel in 2000</td>
<td>After initial attempts to mediate, turned against Assad regime. Hosts refugees, army defectors and helps opposition. Yet has failed to apply sanctions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gulf states (Qatar/Saudi Arabia)</td>
<td>Long suspicious over Syrian ties to Iran and interference in Lebanon but recent thaw in relations; Saudi ambassador withdrawn in 2008, returned a year later</td>
<td>Led Arab League efforts against Syria. Qatar emir suggested military intervention. May arm Syrian rebels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>France led efforts to bring Syria back from international isolation after assassination of Lebanese PM, Rafik Hariri, in 2005</td>
<td>Keen to see Assad go. France has suggested safe havens. Britain says it will send secure communications equipment to rebels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>Long-standing animosity. Ambassador returned to Damascus in January 2011 after five-year absence</td>
<td>Closed embassy on February 6th. Working with opposition but says it will not arm rebels. Suggested setting up contact group for rebel allies</td>
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Source: The Economist
rights, and so long as the opposition cannot give these, they can hope Bashar will reward them for staying quiet.”

**Divided opposition**

The fissures within Syrian society have stymied efforts to organise opposition to the regime. When Mr Assad succeeded his father 12 years ago, a flush of optimism emboldened intellectuals to demand democratic reforms in a movement known as the Damascus spring. Most were eventually jailed or exiled and have lost credibility. But even with much coaxing from Western powers, products of the uprising such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) and a rival group, the National Co-ordination Body (NCB), have gained little diplomatic traction. Neither do they have much influence in Syria, where local committees organise resistance. The two main opposition groupings have bickered over strategy, as the NCB at first counselled dialogue with the state and the SNC backed foreign intervention. In fact, neither course has proved fruitful. Some Syrians suspect the Muslim Brotherhood of being too powerful within the SNC, whereas others say it is a tool of America. Even the head of the Free Syrian Army has complained that the exiled opposition groups are dominated by plotters and traitors.

All this has comforted Mr Assad, who appears to reckon that he is not as isolated as some think. True, 19 of the Arab League’s 22 member states now shun him, along with the West and even countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa. And Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that was long backed by Syria, has abandoned its Damascus headquarters. But two crucial neighbours, Iraq and Lebanon, are politically dominated by Shia parties with no love for Mr Assad’s foes. Hizbullah, the powerful Lebanese Shia party-cum-militia, is a staunch friend. Strong rumours suggest that Iraq’s prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, has quietly funnelled money to his beleaguered neighbour. And Iran, the Shia superpower and a longstanding ally, views Mr Assad’s regime as its most important strategic buffer.

Two of Syria’s other neighbours, meanwhile, may have little interest in seeing radical change. Israel would dearly love to break the axis linking Iran to Hizbullah. Yet despite Syria’s rhetoric about liberating the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in 1967, the Syrian border has in fact been Israel’s quietest for the past 40 years. Fearing that Syria’s stockpile of
missiles and chemical weapons could fall into less restrained hands, Israel may also calculate that maintaining a feeble, delegitimised Assad regime is in its interest. Despite his own family’s history of tense relations with Syria, Jordan’s King Abdullah, too, may prefer the devil he knows to the possibility of an Islamist republic next door, though he has publicly called for Mr Assad’s ouster.

As for Russia, Mr Assad seems to believe that much as in his father’s time, when Syria was a Soviet client state, the Kremlin will be willing to pay a high diplomatic price to prop him up. Syria has certainly been an avid customer for Russian arms—though whether it will have money to spend in future is another matter. It has encouraged Russia to revamp a naval station at Tartus that represents Russia’s only military base outside the old Soviet Union.

Yet on all these scores, Mr Assad could be overplaying his hand. Russia is driven less by nostalgic delusions than by cold calculation. Perhaps it believes that, as in Chechnya, a scorched-earth policy can fix a deathly peace. Like Israel, it would prefer to see its southern flank bordered by weak and polarised states, rather than an emerging Sunni Islamist bloc dominated by an increasingly powerful Turkey. Russia may also be happy to cock a snook at Western powers it regards as hypocritically manipulative of public opinion, particularly in advance of next month’s presidential election. But only if the price is right.

**The zombie regime**

That price could soon rise, dramatically. Most independent observers in Damascus believe that indeed, in the short term, the Syrian regime’s savage offensive may succeed in containing most forms of armed resistance. But if Deraa is any indication, Mr Assad has little chance of long-term survival. As in a vampire film, citizens go through the motions of daily life, fearful of contact with officials. In the eyes of most, the government is totally discredited, at best an evil to be suffered. The cold fury that clearly burns in many homes, linked now in many hearts to religious fervour, may flare at any time.

Even with the army’s offensive at its peak, flash protests are frequently breaking out across Syria, including in the security-infested heart of Damascus. Over a recent weekend, protesters staged some 400 separate demonstrations. Israel’s military-intelligence chief reported in
a recent public briefing that only a third of conscripts answered the latest call-up for Syria’s compulsory military service. He also cited intelligence of cracks in Syria’s command structure, with officers speaking of the need to replace Mr Assad and his clan.

This may be disinformation, designed to dismay Israel’s enemy, Iran. But in economic terms Syria is pitching into a deepening crisis. The central bank’s reserves are believed to have topped $20 billion before the uprising. Since then they are thought to have fallen by as much as two-thirds. Syria’s currency has slipped by nearly 50% in the past few weeks, stoking already fierce inflation. Power cuts and fuel shortages are common, and many of the country’s factories have closed. The tourist industry is all but dead. Syria’s modest oil exports, the staple of government revenue, have virtually dried up.

Many Syrians are convinced that, eventually, Mr Assad will go. What worries them is how. Few expect the opposition to seize Russia’s bait and engage in talks with the regime. Nor do they see Mr Assad retiring willingly. On the other hand, few expect much help from the outside world either. Those who can are leaving the country. Those who cannot are waiting, resigned to their fate.