

Shadows of Surveillance: Government Documents Confirm Syrian Embassies Monitored Syrians Abroad

Confirming long-standing reports, the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) has obtained official government documents that prove Syrian intelligence agencies systematically kept tabs on dissidents' activities overseas. These documents, which detail the coordination between intelligence officials and Syrian embassies in Spain and Saudi Arabia to profile Syrian dissidents abroad who participated in protests against the Assad government in 2012, substantiate the existence of a global surveillance network of which many Syrians are already aware. The [documents](#) bring to light the decision-making behind the surveillance, repression, and punishment of Syrians in the diaspora and their families, and raise concerns about the ability of refugee host countries to protect refugees from further intimidation and guarantee the safety of survivors and witnesses participating in universal jurisdiction cases.

The first set of documents shows how the Syrian Embassy in Riyadh collected names of Syrians whom they claimed were exposing pro-government Syrians online. The document, was sent between two different branches of the Military Intelligence Directorate, considered the most powerful of the Syrian government's intelligence branches. The cover sheet acknowledges the existence of a Military Intelligence "office" embedded within the Syrian Embassy in Riyadh. At the top of the cover sheet, a handwritten message advises the recipient branches to "do the necessary" with the included information. This [phrase](#) is used regularly within SJAC's collection of government documents, and is understood to provide the recipient with broad discretion on how to proceed. The cover sheet is followed by several sheets of personal information on Syrian citizens in Saudi Arabia, including the individuals' names, family history, professions, and places of work and residence.¹

The second set of documents reveals that the Syrian embassy in Madrid profiled dissidents in a pro-opposition demonstration in July 2012.² The first page is a request from Branch 243, the Military Intelligence branch in Deir Ezzor, to Branch 294 for more information about the individuals whose names had been identified as participants in protests in front of the embassy in Madrid. A second entry from the Madrid embassy includes a list of names and identifying information about protestors.³ The letter is signed "Witnessed and Verified, Head of Branch 294," demonstrating that these activities were known and authorized by the upper echelons of intelligence.

Both sets of internal documents offer a glimpse into a larger network of embassy-sponsored surveillance, substantiating claims of other embassies' tracking and repression of Syrians in Sweden, the [US](#), [UK](#), [Germany](#), and elsewhere. While the Syrian government has [denied allegations](#) that its embassies are or were involved in monitoring and intimidating Syrian expatriates, the embassy documents obtained by SJAC disprove those claims.

¹ Documents 1 & 2 found in the Appendix

² Document 3 found in the Appendix

³ Document 4 found in the Appendix



“Eyes and ears everywhere”

Further evidence paints a more complete picture of the extent of Syrian intelligence agencies’ reach. In Sweden, for example, Syrian residents “[expressed conviction](#) that part of the goal when opening the Syrian Embassy in Sweden in 2001 was to be able to monitor and report activities, views and discussions held by Syrians.” This was corroborated in 2012, when a defected Syrian diplomat, former Syrian ambassador to Sweden Bassam Imadi, [confirmed](#) that embassy staff routinely surveilled Syrians in Sweden. Elsewhere, [Syrians have attested](#) that they had been summoned by Syrian embassy officials, after which they and their families in Syria were verbally threatened.

The Syrian government has also sponsored Syrian organizations and social clubs abroad that many in the Syrian diaspora perceive as another method by which the government enacts a measure of control. Numerous Syrians in the United States and the United Kingdom [reported that informants were embedded](#) in their communities for the purpose of surveillance. Even prior to 2011 [many Syrians living in the diaspora reported avoiding socializing](#) with other Syrians as it was not possible to determine who was connected to the government. One former Syrian diplomat whose career spanned several diplomatic missions [told Syria Direct](#) that “the regime relies on immigrants and refugees to track their peers and to ascertain who is against it and who is with it. They do what the embassy cannot do directly with regards to refugees.”

Syrians abroad who have family members still residing in Syria deal with exaction and intimidation through the threatening of their relatives. Several Syrians [interviewed by sociologist Dana Moss](#) reported that their relatives “were imprisoned and tortured specifically because of their opposition” to the government, or that their family members had been punished by imposed separations and travel bans by the Syrian government. The harassment, restriction of movement, and physical harm of relatives in the country of origin serves as a tactic by which the government is able both to gather information and to [punish the dissident abroad](#). Interviewees [reported to Amnesty International](#) that their “relatives living in Syria have been visited and questioned by the security forces about their activities abroad and, in several cases, have been detained and even tortured as an apparent consequence.”

The Amnesty report, released in October 2011, documented more than 30 cases across eight countries of Syrians who had faced intimidation, threats, and violence from embassy officials and others relating to their pro-opposition activism. As Syrians expatriates grew vocal and anti-government protests spread worldwide, Syrian intelligence enacted more drastic measures to deter and repress dissent amongst the diaspora. “Hundreds of Syrians were arrested in the 80s and 90s when they landed at the Damascus airport, based on reports by spies and informants abroad,” said Mohammad Al Abdallah, SJAC’s Executive Director. “After 2011, the Syrian government expanded the practice and dared to reach countries like the United States and several European countries.”

One prominent case was that of Mohammad Anas Haitham Soueid, a Syrian-born naturalized U.S. citizen, who [was convicted as an unregistered foreign agent](#) of the Syrian government in 2012 for targeting and monitoring individuals protesting against Assad. Soueid had collected and provided video and audio recordings of protests and conversations with protestors, contact



information of dissidents, and details of the protest movement to the Syrian government with the goal of silencing and intimidating the pro-opposition movement. One such individual was Al Abdallah, who was informed by the FBI that he may have been under surveillance by the Syrian government. When the details were revealed at [Soueid's trial](#) months later, Al Abdallah was “truly shocked” by the extent of the resources allocated to the operation and the level of the government’s organized and systematic efforts to spy on Syrians in the diaspora.

Furthermore, as the Syrian government does not have the ability to monitor all refugee populations, some “reconciliation” agreements with refugee-hosting countries have included stipulations designed to fill this gap. As part of [small-scale return deals](#) between the Lebanese General Security Directorate and Syrian intelligence, groups of Syrians who wish to return must agree to undergo vetting by Syrian intelligence to apply to return to government controlled territory along the Lebanese border. In practice, hundreds of such [returnees have been arrested](#) upon return, interrogated, and forced to inform on family members. Many have been subjected to extortion, detention, and torture to gain information about their activities while outside of the country.

In some cases, the Syrian government’s reach abroad can even include the threat of force directly against expatriates. In the European Union, Syrian refugees have [reported](#) facing threats of physical violence and intimidation by Shabiha who are affiliated with the Syrian government and living as refugees.

Protecting Refugees and Witnesses from Harassment and Intimidation

Though there are significant limitations for prosecuting extraterritorial surveillance and harassment due to diplomatic immunity of Syrian government officials, states of refuge can expel spies. In addition, prosecutors in special war crimes units should be aware of and sensitive to the reach of these surveillance structures. Potential witnesses to human rights violations in Syria who are currently residing in the EU may be dissuaded from coming forward to support universal jurisdiction cases if they are subject to intimidation. The difficulty of ensuring safety not only for witnesses abroad, but for their relatives who may remain in Syria, presents a particular challenge for supporting victims and gathering witness testimony. The Syrian government’s program of oppression and intimidation should not be allowed to follow victims to their countries of refuge. Prosecutors and immigration authorities in receiving states should therefore remain cognizant of Syrian government abuses, take such claims from Syrians seriously, offer protections to those under surveillance, and, where possible dedicate resources to investigate, prosecute or expel Syrian government agents observed to be intimidating or illegally surveilling overseas Syrians.



Document 1: The document sent between two different branches of the Military Intelligence Directorate

syriaaccountability.org

syriaaccountability.org

Name			Surname		
Father's name			Mother's name		
Sex	Male		Nationality	Syrian	
Place of Birth	Hama		Date of Birth	Redacted /1977	
Type of Passport	Passport		Passport No.		
Place of Issue	Riyadh		Date of Issue		
Civil Registry			Family Status		
Military Service			Degree		
Occupation	Computer Typist		Place of Work	Riyadh	
Address in Syria	Hama		Phone number in Syria		
Name in English			Current phone number		
Zip Code			City		
Address	Riyadh		Residency number		
Date of first entry		Date of terminating residency		Date of terminating residency	
Remarks	A replacement for a lost document				

Head of Mission

Form: ١٥-٢٠١٦-0812 00:11

**سفارة الجمهورية العربية السورية
الرياض**

جميع بياناته مدققة من قبل مديرية الأمن العام في دمشق
مدققته والميل على رقمها

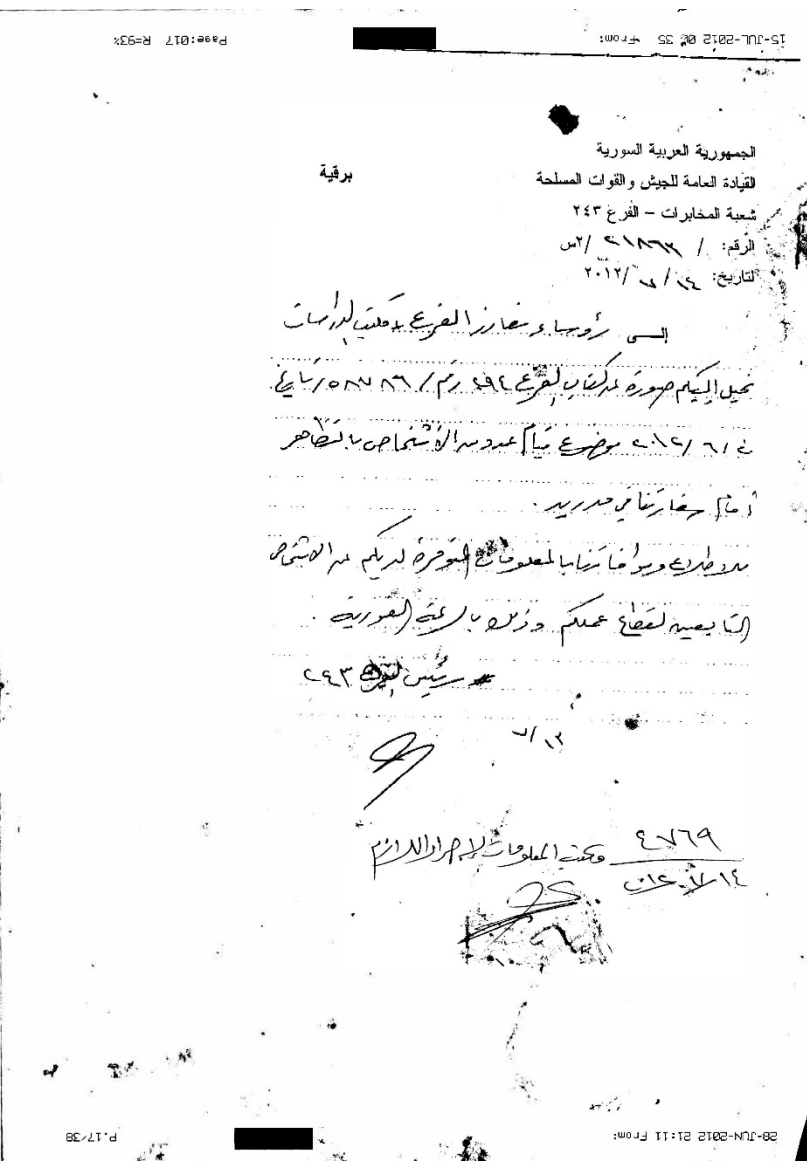
الرقم القسبي ٤٤٨١

الاسم	[REDACTED]	الشهرة	[REDACTED]
اسم الأب	[REDACTED]	اسم الأم	[REDACTED]
المجنس	ذكر	المهنية	مطوري
مكان الولادة	حماة	تاريخ الولادة	١٩٧٧ [REDACTED]
نوع الخوأن	عجواز	رقم الخوأن	[REDACTED]
مكان الاصدار	الرياض	تاريخ الميع	[REDACTED]
الفئة المدنية	[REDACTED]	التوقيع المدني	[REDACTED]
خدمة العلم		الشهادة	
الفئة	طابع كمبيوتر	مكان التمثيل	الرياض
العنوان في سوريا	حماة	العنوان في سوريا	
الاسم باللغة الأجنبية		الهاتف الدولي	[REDACTED]
الرمز		الفئة	
الصفحة	الرياض		
تاريخ أول دخول	رقم نظام الإقامة	تاريخ انتهاء الإقامة	رقم الإقامة
ملاحظات	بدل لاند		

رئيس اللجنة



Document 3: The second set of documents reveals that the Syrian embassy in Madrid profiled dissidents in a pro-opposition demonstration in July 2012



<p>Syrian Arab Republic General Command of the Army and Armed Forces Military Intelligence Directorate Branch 243</p>	<p>Telegram</p>
<p>Ref: 21862/2s Date: July 14, 2012</p>	

To: The Heads of the Branch Detachments + Studies Bureau.

Kindly find attached a copy of Branch 294 letter, Ref: 58786 dated June 20, 2012,

Re: A number of protesters staging a demonstration in front of our embassy in Madrid.

Please review and get back to us with the information available about the individuals within your sector as soon as possible.

Head of Branch 243

(Signed)

4769/July 14, 2012, Information Bureau to do the necessary.



Document 4: A second entry from the Madrid embassy includes a list of names and identifying information about protestors

Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic
Madrid

الجمهورية العربية السورية
مدرسة

الرقم: ٢٩٤
التاريخ: ٢٠١٢/٩/٤

موضوع: قائمة أسماء المتظاهرين الذين شاركوا في التظاهرات التي جرت أمام القنصلية السورية في مدريد بتاريخ ٢٣/٤/٢٠١٢.

أولاً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
ثانياً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
ثالثاً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
رابعاً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
خامساً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
سادساً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
سابعاً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
ثامناً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
تاسعاً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
عاشراً: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
الحادي عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
الثاني عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
الثالث عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
الرابع عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
الخامس عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
السادس عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
السابع عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
الثامن عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
التاسع عشر: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]
العشرون: [Redacted]
والدته: [Redacted]

عدد الأوراق المرفقة: ٢٦
ملاحظات: [Redacted]

2012-09-04 11:11 From: [Redacted]

Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic
Madrid

Ref: 719

illegible handwriting

Date: September 4, 2012

External Branch

In reference to your Letter Ref: 4083 dated April 23, 2012, regarding the demonstration in front of our Embassy in Madrid, kindly be informed that we managed to identify some of the protestors who took part in the above-mentioned demonstration and the demonstrations that were organized later in front of our embassy in Madrid:

1. [Redacted] His mother [Redacted] born in Aleppo on [Redacted]/19 [Redacted]
2. [Redacted] His mother [Redacted] born in Masyaf on [Redacted]/19 [Redacted]
3. [Redacted] child of [Redacted] His mother [Redacted] born in Aleppo on [Redacted]/19 [Redacted]
Civil register: Raqqa Recruitment Division: Raqqa.
4. [Redacted] His father [Redacted] He has no consulate entry in our embassy in Madrid
5. [Redacted] His father [Redacted] and his mother [Redacted] born in Hama [Redacted] on 19/[Redacted]
6. [Redacted] child of [Redacted] and his mother [Redacted] born in [Redacted] Ayn Al-Arab on 19/[Redacted]
7. [Redacted] child of [Redacted] and his mother [Redacted] born in Idlib – Jisr Al-Shughur on 19/[Redacted]
8. [Redacted] child of [Redacted] and his mother [Redacted] born in Aleppo on 19/[Redacted]
9. [Redacted] child of [Redacted] and his mother [Redacted] born in Madrid on 19/[Redacted] Civil Register: Damascus [Redacted] ([Redacted]), Address in Syria: Damascus [Redacted] Street, Building Number [Redacted] – Ground Floor
10. [Redacted] child of [Redacted] and his mother [Redacted] born in Madrid on 19/[Redacted] Civil Register [Redacted] Address in Syria, [Redacted] Homs [Redacted] Street

Number of pages photocopied: 26

Witnessed and verified,

Head of Branch 294

(Signed and sealed)