

**THE LONG  
REACH OF THE  
*MUKHABARAAT:***

VIOLENCE AND  
HARASSMENT AGAINST  
SYRIANS ABROAD AND  
THEIR RELATIVES BACK  
HOME

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



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# INTRODUCTION

Many Syrians abroad have been vocally expressing their solidarity with the mass pro-reform protests which have rocked Syria since March and to which the Syrian authorities have responded in a manner that Amnesty International has characterized as amounting to crimes against humanity.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, they have found themselves systematically monitored and harassed by embassy officials and others believed to be acting on behalf of the Syrian regime and learnt that relatives in Syria have been exposed to intimidation and worse, apparently as a result. The long reach of the feared Syrian *mukhabaraat*, or intelligence services, seems to be in evidence.<sup>2</sup>

In this briefing, Amnesty International is documenting the cases of more than 30 Syrian activists living in eight countries in Europe and North and South America - Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the USA – who say they have faced intimidation from embassy officials and others apparently because of their activities in solidarity with the pro-reform movement in Syria. Many have been filmed and orally intimidated while taking part in protests outside Syrian embassies, while some have been threatened, including with death threats, or physically attacked by individuals believed to be connected to the Syrian regime. Some of the activists have told Amnesty International that 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.

In conducting its research, Amnesty International has interviewed 20 individuals who say that they and/or their families in Syria have been targeted because of their pro-reform activism outside Syria, as well as other members of Syrian communities abroad, authorities in the countries concerned and others. It has also studied media reports about instances of harassment and intimidation. The briefing reflects statements from authorities in the countries concerned where Amnesty International has been able to obtain them, including any comments that Syrian officials had given them about the allegations. The Syrian authorities have not responded to any previous correspondence this year from Amnesty International raising human rights concerns or requesting access to the country, but the organization will reflect any comments they make on the cases and issues detailed in this briefing in future publications.

Amnesty International recognizes that the cases and countries reflected in this briefing may reflect only part of a much wider pattern of harassment and intimidation against Syrians living abroad and will be seeking further information in this regard and documenting it wherever possible.<sup>3</sup>

The overwhelming responsibility for the reported harassment and intimidation lies of course with those alleged to be responsible and the Syrian authorities must put an immediate end to such practices. However, the governments of all countries in which abuses and misconduct have occurred also have a responsibility to ensure that individuals under their jurisdiction are not being threatened or assaulted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. The law enforcement authorities in these countries should take

steps to protect these rights, and should take action when people within their jurisdiction who are seeking to exercise these rights are subjected to criminal acts including assault and threats of violence. The authorities should act on any credible allegations of such abuses, without necessarily requiring the making of a formal complaint to the police by the people concerned, who may fear that harm may befall them or their families in Syria if they do so. Allegations of such acts should be investigated and, where there is sufficient evidence, the individuals responsible should be prosecuted or, if their diplomatic immunity precludes prosecution, other appropriate measures should be taken against them, which could include declaring them *personae non gratae* or not acceptable in the receiving country. The authorities in host countries should also take action where there are credible reports that, as a result of the participation of Syrians abroad in pro-reform protests, their family members in Syria have been subjected to human rights violations. Such action could include official complaints made to the Syrian ambassador in the host country or representations made to the Syrian government by the host country's diplomatic representative in Syria.

It is Amnesty International's intention, by publishing this briefing, to draw attention to the widespread and disturbing nature of the campaign of monitoring and harassment of Syrian activists abroad and thereby to encourage further action by governments around the world to bring such practices to an end.

# 1. NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA

## CANADA

The harassment of Syrians living in Canada has been reported to Amnesty International by two individuals there who prefer to remain anonymous. They have spoken of the role of a certain Syrian community organization said to be very close to the Syrian authorities (which they named) in monitoring demonstrations in Canada in solidarity with the pro-reform protests in Syria and intimidating people from participating in them. They said that some members of the organization had turned up at the homes of Syrians who had participated in such demonstrations and warned them not to continue doing so. As an apparent consequence of such monitoring, the relative in Syria of one woman received calls about her from intelligence agencies and another received a message from the Syrian embassy advising her not to return to Syria.

“Abeer”<sup>4</sup> told Amnesty International that she had lived in Canada for more than five years, having left behind most of her family in Damascus. In Ottawa, where she currently resides, she met a number of Syrians who told her to beware of a certain local Syrian association which they said worked closely with the Syrian regime. Since the mass protests in Syria began to be met with lethal force in March, she has participated in a number of demonstrations outside the Syrian embassy in the Canadian capital, Ottawa. She said that during demonstrations embassy staff took pictures from inside the building, while members of that community association monitored the situation outside, took pictures and notes on those taking part, and approached demonstrators to encourage them to instead participate in pro-regime demonstrations. She added that she had information that representatives of the association had approached many members of the Syrian community in Canada, both at their homes and elsewhere, and threatened them with “consequences” if they did not go to the pro-regime rallies.

“Abeer” also said that she had once appeared on Canadian TV and spoken about the situation in Syria and that soon afterwards she had received a Facebook message from someone she knew to be a relative of a member of the association telling her that she was a traitor, and that she should stop criticizing Bashar al-Assad or she and her family “would be sorry”. “Abeer” says that she reported the threat to the Ottawa police, who said that they warned the woman not to continue. A few days later her sister in Syria began receiving phone calls from the Syrian security forces asking about her activities in Canada.

“Aziza” told Amnesty International that she had also participated in demonstrations in Ottawa and had been photographed there by representatives of the same Syrian community group. A contact at the Syrian embassy sent her a message in July that she ought to stop going to demonstrations and that she should not go back to Syria ever again.

## USA

A large number of cases of harassment of Syrians in the USA by people believed to be linked to the Syrian regime have been reported. In at least three cases researched by Amnesty International, individuals in Syria have suffered negative consequences apparently as a result of relatives’ activities in the USA; notably, the parents of one man living in the USA were

beaten up in Syria and the brother of another was taken into secret detention

A number of activists have spoken of a pattern of harassment at protests outside the Syrian embassy in Washington, being photographed or filmed by embassy staff and unidentified individuals assumed to be working with or for them. One regular protester, Mohammad al-Abdallah, who is 28 years old and left Syria in January 2007, told Amnesty International: "Among the Syrian protesters there are people put amongst us who are working with the embassy. Sometimes you can see one with an earpiece or microphone, saying something like 'Film that man in the red shirt'."

Ahed al-Hindi, a 26-year-old former political prisoner now living in the USA, described what happened at one particular demonstration: "We were protesting at the Syrian embassy in Washington on 15 March. A man came straight out of the embassy, marched up to me and rudely said 'Ahed, let me take your picture'. They were letting me know they know who I am." Mohammad al-Abdallah also recounted his experiences of that day: "On 15 March, as a result of arrests that took place that day in Damascus, we went to protest outside the embassy. Two officials came and spoke to me and Radwan Ziadeh [see below] and suggested we talked inside rather than outside of the embassy. We went in and they photographed us. So we took a picture of one of them too. While inside, we saw staff watching images on a screen of the protesters outside. At every demonstration the embassy cameras follow the protesters."

The Syrian authorities are also said to monitor activists in the USA by other means. Alaa Basatneh, a 19-year-old student originally from Damascus and now living in Illinois, is one of the administrators of a Facebook page known as the Syria Page of Rage (<https://www.facebook.com/SyrianDayOfRage>), which carries information relating to human rights violations in Syria and to pro-reform protests. She told Amnesty International that around August 2011 one of her friends - who is also a Facebook friend - was detained in Syria for two days after he was caught protesting at his university. While in detention, security agents forced him to open his Facebook account, a procedure which has been widely reported during these events as a way of monitoring activists and their networks. Shortly after he was released, Alaa Basatneh received a Facebook message: "These words are directed at you, you agent, you traitor. Your messages have come to us. There is nothing that can be hidden from us, 'Chicago girl'. We are waiting for you to come to the airport so we can show you what is good for you and for what you are doing. We will make an example out of you."

Syrian activists in the USA have reported that family members in Syria have been subjected to intimidation and physical abuse by the authorities. In some cases, security forces have appeared at the homes of relatives in Syria and indicated they would suffer negative consequences if family members continued their perceived anti-government activism in the USA. Ahed al-Hindi told Amnesty International: "A few months ago, the family in Syria of a friend of mine here, who wants to remain anonymous, were interrogated and shown a picture of him demonstrating outside the embassy. The *mukhabaraat* told them: 'Tell your boy not to bring snakes into the family nest'."

Sirwan Kajjo, a Syrian Kurd, aged 24, who left Syria in 2006, described what happened to his relatives following his participation in a protest outside the Syrian embassy in Washington:



*“One Sunday in May, I was protesting with others outside the embassy when out came an official who asked if he could take our photo. We declined. He went inside the embassy from where we could soon see them filming us. Two or three days later, Military Intelligence agents visited my family at their home in ‘Amouda, north-east Syria. They spoke with my mum and brother, and threatened them that they would not be safe unless I stopped my activities in the US.”*

A woman from Syria who has lived in the USA for almost three decades and wishes to remain anonymous out of fear of reprisals told Amnesty International about a separate, but similar, incident:

*“Among a delegation of five pro-reform Syrian-origin demonstrators protesting outside the Syrian embassy on 24 May who were invited inside to discuss the issues with the Syrian ambassador was a relative of mine, a 73-year-old doctor who had left Syria four decades earlier. A mere few hours later, his family heard that one of his brothers back home in Dera’a was visited at home by agents of the intelligence services. They told him that his ‘American brother’ was ‘creating problems in the USA’.”*

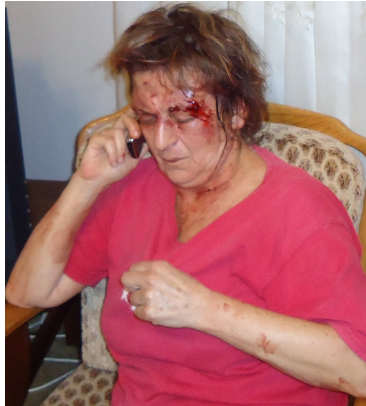
In one case known to Amnesty International, relatives in Syria of have been violently attacked. Malek Jandali left Syria in 1994 on a scholarship to the USA, where he has since lived. Now 38 years old, he lives in Atlanta, Georgia. A pianist and composer, he became angered by the repression of the Syrian government and on 23 July attended and performed at a pro-reform demonstration in front of the White House in Washington. There he played the song *“Watani ana”* (I am my homeland), whose lyrics include (in Arabic) *“O my homeland, when will I see you free?”*, as well as the Syrian and US national anthems. Web videos of the event include Malek Jandali’s piano accompaniments to peaceful protesters’ chants including *“Wahid, wahid, wahid, al-sha’b al-souri wahid”* (One, one, one, the Syrian people are one) and *“Allah, souriye, hurriye wa bas”* (God, Syria, freedom – that’s all). He recounted to Amnesty International what his parents say happened to them four days later in Homs, Syria. He said that his father, Mamoun Jandali, a 73-year-old doctor, had returned from buying groceries, had parked his car beside his home and was then attacked:

*“A man suddenly grabbed my father from behind and said ‘Hey doctor, we need you to help an injured person’ and handcuffed him and duct-taped his mouth. It was like a professional operation as both the street lights in the area had just been temporarily cut and a very large and noisy truck was passing which made it less likely that anyone nearby would see or hear anything. Two other agents arrived, and the three of them forced my dad upstairs to my parents’ flat, which is on the first floor, and opened the door with his keys. They went to my mum, Linah Droubi, who is 66 years old, who was lying in bed recovering from a cold. She was on the phone to my aunt. One of the men went over to her and beat her on the head, to her eye*



Mamoun Jandali, 73, was beaten in Syria after his son performed at a protest in the USA. © Private

and her mouth. 'Who are you and why are you beating me?' she was crying. The first man continued holding my dad and giving orders. Several of my mum's teeth were broken, there was blood on her clothes, the bed and the wall. Can you imagine, my petite 66-year-old mum lying in bed suddenly finding strange men bursting in and beating her up? And my aunt, suddenly hearing the beating and shouts on the phone?



Malek Jandali's mother, Linah Droubi, 66, was beaten and several of her teeth were broken.  
© Private

"They beat my dad too. His face and lips were cut and bruised. 'This is what happens when your son mocks the government' the agents said. Then they locked my mum and dad in the bathroom. While my parents were locked in the bathroom, the agents had looted the flat, stole a considerable amount of money as well as my dad's watch, various important documents and also vandalized the furniture.

"When my aunt had heard my mum scream, she called a relative who contacted the Political Security agency which sent agents to the home. They unlocked the handcuffs on my dad. Relatives arrived also, and called the police to record the incident. The agents and police pretended to be concerned - it was like a Shakespearian play."

In another case known to Amnesty International, it is reported that as a result of the pro-reform activities of a Syrian in the USA the Syrian regime sent agents to detain a family member in Syria. Radwan Ziadeh is director of the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies, an unauthorized NGO, and currently a visiting scholar at Harvard University. He left Syria in October 2007. His family have been prevented from travelling outside Syria since February 2008, apparently on account of his human rights activities. He told Amnesty



Yassin Ziadeh was arrested on apparent account of his brother's activities.  
© Private

International that his brother Yassin Ziadeh, a 37-year-old businessman, was arrested on 30 August 2011 despite having taken no part in the pro-reform protests. According to their family, Yassin Ziadeh was seen being arrested by three men in plain clothes believed to be agents of Air Force Intelligence in Daraya, in the governorate of Rif Damashq, which surrounds Damascus. A released detainee told relatives of Yassin Ziadeh that he had seen him in a detention centre run by Air Force Intelligence and that an official of the ruling Ba'th Party had spoken with the family and confirmed his detention. It is not thought that he has been charged with any offence. Radwan Ziadeh said he was sure that the arrest of his brother was due to his, Radwan's, activities abroad. Amnesty International is aware of other cases in Syria where relatives of activists have been detained as a means of indirectly punishing the activists or of forcing them to hand themselves over to the authorities.<sup>5</sup>

Syrian activists in the USA speak favourably of the steps taken by the US government in response to such reported harassment. At the US State Department's daily press briefing on 8 July 2011, the following announcement was made:

*"the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security... called Syrian Ambassador Imad Mustapha into the State Department on Wednesday, July 6, 2011 to express a number of our concerns with the reported actions of certain Syrian embassy staff in the United States. We received reports that Syrian mission personnel under Ambassador Mustapha's authority have been conducting video and photographic surveillance of people participating in peaceful demonstrations in the United States. The United States Government takes very seriously reports of any foreign government actions attempting to intimidate individuals in the United States who are exercising their lawful right to freedom of speech as protected by the U.S. Constitution. We are also investigating reports that the Syrian government has sought retribution against Syrian family members for the actions of their relatives in the United States exercising their lawful rights in this country and will respond accordingly."*<sup>6</sup>

## CHILE

Naima Darwish is a 30-year-old fashion designer living in Santiago who left Syria nearly five years ago. She says she was threatened and insulted by a Syrian embassy official in Chile. Her testimony is the only one from Chile received by Amnesty International, although she has said that others have also been harassed but are too afraid to speak publicly on the issue.

She told Amnesty International:



Naima Darwish said she was insulted and threatened by an official of the Syrian embassy in Chile. © Private

*"On 25 March [2011], I set up a Facebook page denouncing the violence in Syria and calling for a protest in front of the Syrian embassy here. Two hours later I began receiving calls from friends saying that the embassy was trying to find my number. Two days later, [a senior embassy official] contacted me and requested that I visit the embassy. I declined, as I was afraid, but said I would meet in a public place, so we agreed upon a café in Santiago. We met at the café and he told me that I should not to do such things, that I am too young and successful to lose my life for such stupidities. He said I would lose the right to return to Syria if I continued doing such things. He then insulted me, as well as the Arabs who live in Chile who he called 'dangerous' and 'dirty'. Then he called me 'a lesbian'. I have continued with my activities, have met with politicians from the left and the right, and I have been on TV and in the newspapers more than once. I have not tried to return [to Syria] and fear what would happen if I did."*

Naima Darwish's Facebook page sets out the reasons why she called for a protest outside the Syrian embassy in Chile. It reads, in Spanish and Arabic:

*"Support the Syrian people. No to violence! Dear friends, the aim of this event is to support the people of Syria in general, we are not against the government nor against the people being able to say what they want, we are against violence, we are all Syrian, whether we are Sunni or Alawite or Christian or whatever religion, we love Syria."*

## 2. EUROPE

### FRANCE

Amnesty International is aware of two apparently connected assaults on Syrian pro-reform protesters in Paris on 26 August 2011 that were allegedly committed by individuals belonging or close to the Syrian authorities.

Rabee al Hayek, a 35-year-old engineer who has lived in France for seven years, was one of those attacked. He told Amnesty International:

*“For five months we had been demonstrating at the Place du Châtelet [a public square in Paris] without any problems. But then during a peaceful protest there on 26 August, at about 6.30pm, a group of five or six men with and four women, carrying pro-Bashar [al-Assad, President of Syria] flags, arrived and attacked us. Three of us were hurt, including a young woman, Georgette Alam. At that time there were three plain-clothed police officers there, and they called other police who quickly arrived. Uniformed police arrived, talked with the three plain-clothed policemen, then with the group of aggressors for up to an hour, then again with the plain-clothed policemen. The three plain-clothed policemen then came and reported back to us. They told us to be calm, that the police will be in control of the matter, and that two of the aggressors have diplomatic passports and therefore no action can be done towards those two. Tens of us heard them say that. The whole group which attacked us were taken away by the uniformed police and as they left they made obscene gestures towards us. We followed them to the police station and we saw all the original group get off the bus.”*

Rabee al Hayek said that he and others who had taken part in the protest followed the police to the *commissariat central* (central police station) of Paris' second *arrondissement* (district) as they wanted to see what would happen and in particular whether the aggressors would be charged. He told Amnesty International:

*“Around midnight, we left that police station. Some went in my car, others went walking to the Metro and home. Fifteen minutes later I got a phone call from Shevan Ahmani, one of our group, crying ‘Rabee, save me, we are covered in blood’. Then the line was cut. A little later we got another call saying where they had been attacked. We drove back, and found the police already there. Our friends told us that individuals from the same group of aggressors had attacked them with baseball bats. Some of our group ran away and took refuge in a bar, whose barman had rung the police. While sheltering there, the attackers tried to break the door, made obscene signs including threats that they would slit our throats. They left and were caught later and taken to a second police station in Saint-Georges in the ninth arrondissement. When we left the bar we went to hospital to see our injured friends, Georgette Alam, Shevan Amhani, Mohamad Taha and Salem Hassani.”*



Mohamad Taha was attacked after a protest in Paris. © Khaled Sid Mohand

A lawyer representing the group which was attacked told Amnesty International that an official investigation into the events is under way. Officials from both the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Presidency told Amnesty International and other human rights organizations in a meeting with them in mid-September that the alleged aggressors did not have diplomatic status, contradicting what the police were reported to have told some of those attacked. However, Amnesty International has spoken to several sources who have knowledge of the incident but are not part of the Syria community in France or elsewhere and learnt that they have information indicating that the aggressors did indeed have connections to the Syrian regime.

## GERMANY

Two Syrians in Germany have told Amnesty International of the harassment of pro-reform Syrians there. They said that as a result of their activities their families in Syria were visited and interrogated by the security agencies. Each of them has a brother who was arrested; one was forced to make a statement on Syrian state TV denouncing his sister and the other was reportedly tortured and then forced into hiding.

Sondos Sulaiman lives in Germany and has family in Hama and Damascus. She started speaking out against the Syrian regime about seven years ago and for that her family in Syria has apparently been harassed and intimidated by the authorities in recent years. She told Amnesty International:



Sondos Sulaiman, who believes her brother had to denounce her on TV after she made this video. © Private

*“Members of the Political Security force would come to the family homes in Hama and Damascus and ask them about my activities. As a result, my family stopped contacting me for a year or so. Their mobile phones have been monitored, which my brother found out one of the times that they arrested him. They repeated word for word a phone conversation he had had with a friend. This year Political Security agents just call him on his mobile to summon him for questioning. He’s not active in the pro-reform protests but pressure on him and my family has increased and my contact with them has declined. They told my brother that it is his duty to tell me, his sister, not to act in such a way, that he needs to control me, otherwise he will get arrested.”*

Sondos Sulaiman is a member of the Alawite community in Syria – the minority group to which the ruling al-Assad family belongs – and recorded a video urging her fellow Alawites to see that the regime was killing both civilians and security force members and that it was not true that there was a “conspiracy” against Syria, as the regime claims. After posting it on YouTube,<sup>7</sup> she said that her brother appeared on Syrian state TV denouncing the video. According to her, he was “saying bad things about me to ruin my credibility. I’m sure he would not have done this out of his own free will.” Sondos Sulaiman says she has been unable to contact her family recently to find out more about the circumstances of her brother’s appearance on TV, or about her family’s situation in general. However, Amnesty International is aware of numerous examples in Syria where it is alleged that individuals have been forced to make televised statements.

She added that she and like-minded friends in Germany have recently been receiving emails from unknown senders expressing views in favour of President al-Assad and that her Facebook and Twitter accounts updated with pro-al-Assad slogans, apparently after being hacked.

“Khaled” (not his real name) has lived in Germany since 2001 and told Amnesty International that as a consequence of his activities in Germany in support of reform in Syria his family in Idleb, Syria, has been harassed by the security forces. As a result of his activities in Germany, he said, that in 2004 his brother and sister were banned from working in public positions by the security forces and that in 2006 his family was banned from travelling outside of the country, a ban apparently still in force. He said that the harassment has worsened since the pro-reform demonstrations started and that his brother had been subjected to torture in the custody of an intelligence agency as a result;

*“In April this year my brother, who doesn’t go to the protests, was arrested and held at the Palestine Branch [of Military Intelligence, in Damascus] for more than a month. They tortured him and questioned him about my activities, whether I send money to my family, who my friends are and so on.”*

After the brother was released, the security forces came to the home again and then he went into hiding. “Khaled” told Amnesty International:

*“The security forces continue to come to the family home. Last month [August 2011] they came four times and every time they broke down the front door and destroyed property. They threaten the family and ask about my activities and my brother in hiding.”*

## SPAIN

Members of the Syrian community in Spain decided that the harassment they and their families in Syria were experiencing as a consequence of their peaceful protests had reached such a level that they were preparing to submit a complaint to Spain’s judicial authorities.

According to information provided to Amnesty International by the Asociación de Apoyo al Pueblo Sirio (Association to Support the Syrian People), people who have participated in peaceful protests against the violence and other human rights violations being committed by the Syrian regime have suffered various types of harassment from individuals connected to the Syrian embassy in Madrid.

According to the information, embassy staff have photographed and videoed protests opposite the embassy so as to identify participants and thereafter impeded administrative procedures which they needed to undertake, harassed and intimidated participants at their homes and workplaces, and located and then punished family members in Syria.

Case information was provided on six individuals and it was stated that many more examples are known but that other individuals were too afraid of reprisals to publicize them.

Two of the individuals complained of the Syrian embassy’s refusal to carry out necessary administrative procedures. Imad Mouhalhel stated that the embassy refused to renew his expired visa and Bader Akkad Acaid said that the staff refused him a document as they said

his brother had been participating in demonstrations in Spain.

Several individuals - "Sara" (not her real name), Sirin Adlibi Sibai and Amjad (surname withheld) – said that they had been subjected to various forms of harassment, insults and threats, apparently as a result of participating in demonstrations in solidarity with pro-reform protests in Spain. Sirin Adlibi Sibai, a PhD student, stated that the threats included a thinly veiled one against the safety of her husband and son made on 30 August 2011 by a woman who approached her on her way home one day and insulted her for participating in protests. Among other apparently related incidents her husband was also approached by a suspicious woman near his workplace on 1 September 2011 and on the same day their house was broken into. Journalist Mazen Yaghi, who had been promoting demonstrations via the internet, including on Facebook, stated that the official Syrian Cultural Centre in Spain had sent a defamatory email message to members of the Syrian community in Spain claiming that Mazen was suspected of stealing money from the Syrian treasury and also discouraging them from attending protests which he was promoting.

Two individuals said that they had been physically attacked outside the Syrian embassy. "Sara" said that on 16 August 2011, while seated with three women opposite the embassy, a group of two dozen pro-regime individuals accosted her, touching and pulling at her and her belongings. Amjad said that the next day, 17 August 2011, while in front of the embassy collecting signatures calling for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, a group of individuals who appeared to be supporters of the Syrian regime approached him, insulted him and threatened him, before the leader of the group shoved him to the ground.

In two cases, families in Syria appeared to suffer negative consequences. On 3 September 2011, Sirin Adlibi Sibai was contacted by a cousin who informed her that Sirin's grandfather and uncle had been briefly detained and interrogated by members of the security forces about the activities of Sirin and her husband in Spain. The security forces apparently forced them to sign documents disowning Sirin and threatened them saying that if they had any contact with her at all that "they would come for them and they would see something unimaginable". Similarly, according to Imad Mouhalhel, his brother in Syria, Aladdin Mouhalhel, was detained for a period of four days around mid-July 2011, shown photos and videos of protests outside the Syrian embassy in Spain and forced, after being subjected to torture, to identify his brother among the participants. On 29 August 2011, Aladdin was arrested once again and forced to phone Imad to ask him to stop going to the protests against the Syrian regime otherwise he, Aladdin, would be at risk. Since that date, according to the family in both Spain and Syria, they have received no information about Aladdin and fear that he may have died under torture in custody. Amnesty International has researched over 100 reported deaths in custody since April 2011.

According to an article in Spanish newspaper *El Pais* on 21 August 2011, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was reported as saying that it had not been in contact with the Syrian embassy on this matter as no one had filed a complaint. Another Spanish newspaper, *El Mundo*, reported on 26 September 2011 that sources in the same ministry said they would be reading the content of the complaint after which they would decide whether any action could be taken.



## SWEDEN

Several people from Syria now living in Sweden who have publicly expressed support for pro-reform protests in Syria have said that they have received threats, including death threats against them and threats against their families in Syria, in the post, by phone and via the internet. Relatives in Syria have been reportedly arrested, interrogated about the activities of their relatives abroad, and tortured. One of those detained in Syria was apparently forced to disown their relative in Sweden.

Iman al-Baghdady, who moved from Syria to Sweden one year ago and has previously been in contact with Amnesty International, was interviewed by the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. In its edition of 30 July 2011, Iman al-Baghdady said that when the mass pro-reform protests began in Syria, she began video-blogging and spreading information through social media from her apartment in Stockholm and that she and her husband participated in several pro-reform demonstrations in the city. On 27 May a letter arrived on her door mat. It was written in Arabic and the message was clear: "Keep quiet or neither you, nor your family in Syria is safe". The sender used Iman's maiden name, which the couple say only the embassy would have known. The couple reported the threat to the police. Shortly afterwards, Iman's brother was arrested in Damascus. "He was arrested and tortured. They broke both his hands. Then they forced him to sign a document where he promised that my family would repudiate me," said Iman in the interview. In July Iman spoke about the situation in Syria on Swedish radio, under a pseudonym. Then a new letter came to the couple: "We recognize your voice and we know who you are", it said

She told *Dagens Nyheter* that she knows of 17 other people who have received threats. All of them suspect that the Syrian regime is behind them but few have dared to report the incidents to the Swedish authorities.

Yasir al-Sayed Issa is the 22-year-old son of a Syrian from Idleb who fled the country some 30 years ago. Yasir told Amnesty International that he and his brother Fida have been posting films on Facebook that they receive from people inside Syria. As a result, he believes, the family has received death threats both on the phone and via the internet. Given that the threats use their full names, which are not in any official records in Sweden, they believe the threats are linked to the Syrian authorities.

Meanwhile in Syria, according to Yasir, state TV there has shown pictures of his brother Fida and his father, picturing them as traitors and exhorting the public to provide information about them. At least nine close relatives have been arrested, of whom six are believed to be still held at unknown locations. His father, Tarif Issa, has spoken with two of those released, who told him that during interrogations they were tortured and questioned about the family in Sweden.

The family has continued to speak openly about these threats to the Swedish media. In one appearance, on Sweden's Channel 4 on 14 September 2011, Yasir said that the family had reported all threats they had received to the Swedish police, while another man, Jaber Zain, recounted the fact that protesters have been photographed by staff at the Syrian embassy during their protests outside the embassy.<sup>8</sup>

A representative of the Swedish Security Service told Amnesty International that they were

aware of several cases of harassment of Syrians living in Sweden and had contacted those individuals whose cases they had learnt about in the media.

## UNITED KINGDOM

According to Syrians living in the UK, the Syrian authorities have waged a campaign of harassment and intimidation against them and family members in Syria. They have told Amnesty International that Syrian embassy staff have filmed and photographed protests outside the embassy and protesters who have been invited inside the embassy; telephoned protesters and visited them at their homes in the UK and made threats against them, including that they would face the death penalty on return to Syria and that their families in Syria would be harmed; and encouraged them to spread pro-regime propaganda and join pro-regime rallies. Several have said that security forces have visited and questioned family members in Syria, in at least one case briefly detaining one of them and in another vandalizing the family home.

Three Syrians from the city of Dera'a, Mahmoud, Umran and Mohammad (they preferred not to give their full names), told Amnesty International what happened to them after they joined a rally opposite the embassy on 18 March. Mahmoud said:



The Syrian embassy in London. © Amnesty international

*“The ambassador himself came out and invited a group of us inside to talk. Standing inside, he asked us what are calls were. We said it was for the armed forces to end the attack on Dera’a.<sup>9</sup> He told us that Dera’a was fine, there was no attack, it was all media lies. While we spoke one of his colleagues was taking pictures of us under his arm.*

*“Ten days later, on 28 March, I got a call from the embassy saying they wanted to come and pay respects since a relative had been killed in Dera’a. They know my address. Four men [he mentioned their names] came and told me, Umran and two others to go and organize pro-regime rallies. ‘If you don’t do it,’ they said, ‘there’ll be problems for you here and your families in Syria.’ We reluctantly said we would do it, but we wouldn’t hold any pictures of [President] Bashar or join any chants.*

*“The following Saturday, 2 April, we protested again at the embassy and chanted ‘The people want the downfall of the regime’. We could see them watching and videoing us from inside. One of those men phoned us and said ‘You are with the Israelis and the Muslim Brotherhood and so will get the death penalty too.’”*

A fourth Syrian, from Damascus, told Amnesty International that he had also been threatened the same way and had twice been visited at home by individuals who said they were from the

embassy.

Mahmoud continued:

*“At 3pm we left the demonstration and returned home. At 6pm one of them [he mentioned the name] phoned again and said he was coming to visit. He took out papers claiming that Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia was leading a worldwide plot against Syria and told us to distribute them. He said too that Barada TV [a UK-based satellite channel] was faking the videos of the protests and killings in Syria. Then he opened his laptop and showed us images and files he had, and the first one was of me.*

*“On 8 April the mukhabaraat, I think Military Intelligence, went to my family home in Dera’a. They took away my brother and asked about him about me. They told him he had to appear on Dunya TV [a Syrian channel considered close to the authorities] and say that the protests in the UK were all faked. Four hours later they let him go and he went into hiding. Every week or two they go back to the home looking for him and asking about me.*

*“The British government says they can’t do anything unless we file a complaint with the police. I can’t do that as my papers are not in order and so they might deport me to Syria. I can’t go to Syria as they will kill me.”*

Another Syrian, Imad, aged 35 and currently unemployed, told Amnesty International about harassment he says he experienced and two incidents in July in which his family in Syria were targeted:

*“Since the start of February I was trying to organize protests via Facebook. I had few problems from the embassy because they didn’t know who I was. But at one demo there I saw an old friend of mine who had started working there as security. A little later I got a call from an embassy official – I presume it was [name withheld] because of his Dera’a accent – and he told me I have been brainwashed by people close to [the former Vice-President of Syria, Abd al-Halim] Khaddam. They called me a few more times but I kept protesting. At the start of July, the mukhabaraat went to my mum’s home in Damascus – she lives alone – and confiscated all my stuff – books, photos, papers, my computer – without explanation. They had visited her twice before, asked her about me but been polite. Days later, on 12 July, my mum got a call from neighbours while she was out telling her not to return home as the mukhabaraat were there, having broken down the front door and were smashing the place up. Thankfully we had thought this might happen and so my mum had been keeping her documents with her. She fled across the border.”*

In a statement to Amnesty International on 21 September 2011, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Metropolitan Police said that they “have encouraged demonstrators to report any evidence of harassment and other crimes by embassy staff to the police”, that “FCO officials have discussed this issue with the Metropolitan Police”, that they “have raised our concerns directly with Syrian Embassy officials on several occasions including the Syrian Ambassador. He gave assurances that Embassy staff were not involved and that he would take action if there was evidence to suggest they were,” and that they “will continue to liaise with the Metropolitan Police and where appropriate, we will take action”.

20 The long reach of the *mukhabaraat*:  
Violence and harassment against Syrians abroad and their relatives back home

# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For reports and other further information on Amnesty International's concerns in relation to the repression of mass protests in Syria and why the organization believes the actions undertaken by the Syrian authorities amount to crimes against humanity, see the country page on Syria on the organization's website (<http://www.amnesty.org/syria>).

<sup>2</sup> The main *mukhabaraat*, or intelligence agencies, in Syria are Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, Political Security and General Intelligence, which is usually referred to as State Security.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International has, for example, heard a number of reports about harassment and intimidation by individuals believed to be close to the Syrian regime against Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, all of which neighbour Syria and to which many Syrians have fled the violence and other threats in their country. Such reports deserve further investigation.

<sup>4</sup> This and other names given in quotation marks are not the real names of the persons concerned.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the case of 'Abd al-Rahman Hammada in Amnesty International, *Syrian activist and his brother detained* (Index: MDE 24/020/2011), 23 May 2011 (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/020/2011/en>); and of Zainab al-Hosni in Amnesty International, *New evidence of Syria brutality emerges as woman's mutilated body is found*, 23 September 2011 (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/new-evidence-syria-brutality-emerges-womans-mutilated-body-found-2011-09-23>). For the Amnesty International Urgent Action on the case of Yassin Ziadeh, see *Syria: Brother of rights activist held incommunicado: Yassin Ziadeh* (Index: MDE 24/048/2011), 2 September 2011 (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/048/2011/en>).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/07/167959.htm>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcccULWeVf8&feature=related>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.nyheter.se/1.2279698>

<sup>9</sup> The first deaths during the ongoing events occurred on 18 March in Dera'a, south-west Syria, during protests against the detention of schoolchildren who had put political graffiti on a school wall. This led to further protests and shootings in the city and governorate of Dera'a and helped spread the pro-reform protest nationwide. See Amnesty International, *Independent investigation urged into Syria protest deaths*, 22 March 2011, (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/independent-investigation-urged-syria-protest-deaths-2011-03-22>).



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