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World

Diplomat 'leads secret police threats against Syrian opposition in Britain'

Syria

Laura Pitel

A senior diplomat at the Syrian Embassy in London has been accused of masterminding a campaign of harassment, intimidation and threats against activists in London.

Mohammad Samouri's official job title at the embassy is Vice-Consul but members of the Syrian community in Britain have told *The Times* that his true role is that of representative of the Syrian intelligence service at the mission.

The repressive tactics of the vast secret police network that operates inside Syria are notorious. It has led a crackdown on dissent in the country where an estimated 1,400 people have been killed during the uprising against the regime of President Assad.

According to Syrians living in London, Mr Samouri is the chief of another Syrian secret police network that has been allowed to operate in the capital.

Malik al-Abdeh, the head of the UK-based opposition channel *Barada TV* and a prominent opposition figure, said that one of his employees was approached by Mr Samouri at the start of last year. "He gave him two options," Mr al-Abdeh said. "He said, 'Leave or become a spy and tell us who comes to meet him, how much money is going through the business.' He was the typical kind of guy who might be recruited by the opposition [so they were worried]. Frightened for himself and his family, the employee resigned and went to work for the embassy instead."

Another Syrian, a former political activist, said that he was recruited by Mr Samouri after applying to return to Syria. He was told that if he wanted to go home, he must spy on the embassy's behalf.

"He said that I made a very serious strategic mistake by working against the regime," said the man, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He said that he was the only one able to clear my file."

The man was offered cash, which he declined, but he agreed to write reports on the Syrians he knew in London. He went undercover to attend an anti-regime demonstration to discover the names of those who attended.

On Tuesday *The Times* revealed that Syrians attending anti-regime protests in London had been bullied and threatened. Four men told of phone calls and visits to their homes, and of pressure put on family members in Syria. The threats and warnings, they said, were carried out by "henchmen" working on the orders of Mr Samouri.

Britain is one of the main centres of dissent for expatriate Syrians or exiled members of its outlawed political parties. The head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, much feared by the Baathist regime, lives in London, as do several members of the Assad family who fell out with President Assad's father.

Activists said that the capital's reputation as a hotbed of dissent made it one of the Syrian intelligence services' most closely-monitored cities outside the Middle East. Mr Samouri, who is



Syrian refugees flooded across the Turkish border yesterday as troops and tanks advanced into Khirbat al-Joz, increasing tensions between Damascus and Ankara



Mohammad Samouri is accused of being chief of secret police network

Inside today

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Concluding
her Middle
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believed to live in Brentford, West London, is a Sunni Muslim married to a member of the Alawi sect, the branch of Shia Islam to which the ruling Assad family belong. He is said to have risen through the intelligence ranks before being posted to London.

His name is well known among the Syrian community, as is his reputation. "He is a feared character," Mr al-Abdeh said. "He can write a report to the intelligence directorate back home saying that you are involved in the opposition or have been saying bad things about the President."

A spokesman for the Foreign Office said: "We are aware of media reports that Syrian embassy officials are intimidating Syrians in the UK. Any such action would be wholly wrong and unacceptable. We've taken action in the past against diplomats whose activities were inappropriate and contrary to the interests of the UK, and we would do so again."

"We are looking into the allegations and we spoke to the police on Wednesday. We continue to urge anyone who's been the subject of any intimidation to report it to the police."

The Syrian Embassy in London said: "The embassy denies categorically these false allegations. The embassy has and will continue to work in accordance with diplomatic norms and regulations."

Refugees flee as troops and tanks storm border village

Alexander Christie-Miller Güveççi

Syrian troops backed by tanks stormed a village on the Turkish border yesterday, increasing tensions between Damascus and Ankara and prompting a fresh exodus of refugees to Turkey.

Fleeing Syrians reported gunfire and arrests in the village of Khirbat al-Joz, less than a mile from Turkish soil, and there were fears for 16,400 displaced people camped along the border.

From the Turkish village of Güveççi, Syrian troops, armoured personnel carriers and a sniper on a rooftop could be seen. It is the first time that Damascus has sent its army to the frontier in more than a decade, violating a 1999 accord with Ankara.

Those fleeing spoke of arrests and killings. Mohamed Fizo, 31, who had just crossed into Turkey, said that at least eight people had been arrested in Khirbat al-Joz and eight had been killed yesterday in Jisr al-Shughour.

Derwish Fedo, 23, from Khirbat al-Joz, said: "My sister, my mother, my grandparents are still there waiting

inside. They do not want to go into the Turkish refugee camps. I know the Assad forces will kill them."

Mr Fedo said that he was called up as a reservist for the security forces in April and sent to crush protests in the city of Homs. He deserted after being granted two days' holiday. "I remember the things we did in Homs, and it will be the same in Khirbat al-Joz," he said.

The Turkish Red Crescent responded by announcing plans to create a secure zone in Syria. In a sign of deteriorating relations, Syria's Ambassador to Turkey was summoned to the Foreign Ministry yesterday.

Tensions between Ankara and Damascus have increased since pro-democracy protests started in March.

Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, voiced concern last night about the situation. "Unless the Syrian forces immediately end their attacks and their provocations that are not only now affecting their own citizens, but endangering the potential of border clashes, then we're going to see an escalation of conflict in the area," she warned.