

Indicting a Syrian American: Diplomatic Implications

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Brief Analysis

U.S. policy toward the Asad regime could be affected by the recent indictment of a Syrian American for spying on U.S.-based opposition figures, especially if both governments respond with diplomatic expulsions.

U. S. policy toward the Asad regime could be affected by yesterday's announcement that the Justice Department has charged a Syrian American resident of Leesburg, Virginia, with spying on U.S.-based opposition figures. According to the fifteen-page indictment, Muhammad Anas Haitham Soueid recruited individuals to collect information on protests and protestors, providing it to Syria's military intelligence arm, the Mukhabarat, in order to "undermine, silence, intimidate and potentially harm those in the United States and Syria who engaged in the protests." If convicted, Soueid could serve forty years in prison.

The indictment is a significant sign of progress in the FBI investigation of allegations -- as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* -- that Syrian ambassador to Washington Imad Mustafa and his staff "threatened or harmed" Syrian Americans. Based on the details included in the document, it is all but assured that additional Americans and/or Syrian nationals will be charged. Notwithstanding Mustafa's routine denials, Syrian embassy personnel may find themselves implicated in the conspiracy. In fact, the indictment mentions at least one embassy "official" with whom Soueid had contact regarding his activities. Although the identity of this official is unclear from the indictment, it may be Mustafa himself.

In any case, given the seriousness of the charges, the Obama administration would most likely respond by expelling the diplomat(s) in question. And there is little doubt that Syria would retaliate in kind.

If a junior Syrian diplomat were expelled, it would be a mere annoyance for Damascus. Yet Mustafa's expulsion could have much wider consequences. A longtime Asad regime functionary, he has served as Syria's chief apologist in Washington since 2004. There are plenty of reasons to send him home, not the least of which are his continued outrageous denials of the regime's ongoing atrocities in Syria.

The difficulty for the Obama administration, however, is that taking action against Mustafa would spur Damascus to expel the just-confirmed U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford. This in turn would require an overhaul of the administration's Syria policy. Over the past few months, Ford has been effectively demonstrating U.S. support for the peaceful opposition in Syria. In fact, aside from frequent White House condemnations, some contacts with the opposition, and energy sanctions that will likely prove insufficient to curb Bashar al-Asad's repression, much less force him to step down, Ford's presence in Damascus is U.S. policy on Syria.

If Ford were expelled, the massacres would surely continue, if not escalate. This would leave the administration with two choices: continuing to call for Asad's resignation, or upping the ante and implementing a more robust policy focused on regime change.

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