

Over the Wall: A Tale of Two Embassies

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Although the recent storming of the U.S. embassy in Syria ended without bloodshed, American personnel may not be so lucky in the future.

There's no blast wall around the Syrian embassy in Washington. Nor is the wrought iron gate crowned with barbed wire. During a handful of peaceful protests outside the embassy in the Kalorama neighborhood in recent months, no one threw tomatoes or attempted to scale the fence. The embassy and its staff are safe here, no matter how much most Americans might detest a government that has helped kill American troops in Iraq, while supporting attacks against U.S. allies in Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's latest outrage against the United States was the assault on the U.S. embassy in Damascus on July 11.

The targeting of the U.S. embassy was classic behavior from the Assad regime. For instance, Hafez, the president's father, orchestrated a raid of the ambassador's residence in 1998 when he ruled the nation. Under Bashar, the U.S. embassy was stormed in 2000. Just months after he came to power, he allowed demonstrators to breach the facility's perimeter. Extensive damage was done to the compound, but it could have ended much worse. During the incursion, a Syrian attempted to desecrate the American flag and was met atop the embassy roof by a U.S. Marine, who -- after drawing his sidearm -- informed the protestor that should the flag hit the ground, the protestor would soon follow.

The 2000 incident ended without bloodshed when the Syrian gave up the flag. Fortunately, no U.S. casualties resulted from last week's outrage, either -- although regime thugs roughed up one American diplomat back in March. With Damascus upping the ante, U.S. personnel may not be so lucky in the future.

Ostensibly, the rationale for the "spontaneous" demonstration at the U.S. embassy was Ambassador Robert Ford's decision to travel to Hama in advance of what appeared to be an impending government-perpetrated massacre. Damascus rebuked Ford's Hama cameo as "gross interference in domestic affairs of the state."

In light of the ongoing atrocities in Syria, not only was Ford's trip lawful, it was appropriate. It was also quite embarrassing for Damascus. Both the diplomatic reprimand and the attack on the compound were intended to dissuade Ford from future fact finding missions. And this week, the Assad regime officially warned Ford not to venture outside Damascus to witness further demonstrations. Should he continue to take these trips, it's possible he will be declared *persona non grata* and expelled from Syria.

But it's a chance Washington has to take. Last week's regime sponsored rent-a-crowd overrunning of the U.S. Embassy seems to have spurred a shift in U.S. policy on Syria. Previously, the administration argued that Ford's purpose in Damascus was to engage in dialogue with Assad. After last week, it's become clear that Ford's purpose in Syria should be to demonstrate support for Syria's democratic opposition and to serve as an additional point of pressure on the regime.

In contrast to Ford's role, consider the activities pursued by the Syrian embassy in Washington, where Ambassador Imad Moustapha's mischaracterizations of U.S. policy have complicated the already troubled bilateral relationship. Now Moustapha is lobbying American citizens to oppose U.S. sanctions in response to the ongoing massacres in Syria. In June, Moustapha sent a letter to Syrian-Americans encouraging them to contact their congressmen and urge them not to "endor[se] negative and counterproductive measures" against the Assad regime.

More troublingly, the State Department is investigating reports that the embassy has violated U.S. law by putting protestors outside the Syrian embassy under surveillance, and that the Assad regime has "sought retribution" against family members in Syria for the activities of their American relatives.

Given his track record, it is tempting to expel Moustapha, but for the time being patience may be the best counsel. As for the U.S. envoy in Syria, so long as Ford continues to be effective on the ground, he should stay in Damascus. If, as promised, the Assad regime curtails his activities or movement, however, Washington should recall him. If and when this occurs, the administration should also take the opportunity to expel Moustapha.

The situation on the ground in Syria these days is fluid and increasingly dangerous for Syrians, and perhaps for U.S. diplomatic personnel as well. It's impossible to predict when the regime will again deploy its loyalists over the wall. But one thing is certain: If the White House has chosen to stand with the

Syrian people's demands for freedom, the pressure on the Assad regime will increase. And if the past is any indication, the regime will respond -- in Washington or in Damascus -- by threatening, intimidating, and, quite likely, attacking its adversaries.

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