

February 2012

# Avoiding Syria's secret police

By Tim Whewell BBC News, Damascus



In Syria's police state, opponents of President Assad and reporters try to keep one step ahead of the security services.

It was the little potted plants on the breakfast table I could not decide about. They were so unnecessary as decoration and yet so perfectly positioned to catch every word of a whispered conversation.

Braving the ridicule of colleagues and the obviously feigned indifference of waiters, I ostentatiously removed them each morning before settling down to my muesli.

Call it paranoia if you like but, in Syria, for those involved in - or reporting on - the opposition to President Assad, such precautions are completely justified.

Perhaps there were no bugs - of the electronic variety - infesting the busy lizzies but certainly it is not coincidence that foreign journalists (on the rare occasions they get visas) are always placed in the same few rooms of the hotel, equipped for listening by the secret police.

And it is certainly not from having read too many spy novels that opposition activists almost never arrange meetings over the phone, relying instead either on Skype or other forms of internet chat which are harder to monitor.

It is from having seen too many comrades in the movement arrested, tortured and sometimes extra-judicially executed.

## Government spooks

What, to your own correspondent, is a game of cat and mouse to get the true story - and to protect contacts - is a matter of life and death to those struggling for democracy in Syria.

And so, when my colleagues and I set off for one anti-Assad demonstration in a Damascus suburb, we chatted as loudly as possible as we passed the government spooks lounging in the hotel entrance about the purchases we planned to make on our shopping expedition.

We wandered, as pre-arranged, around a fashion store, examining caps and scarves before clocking the presence of our contact across the bag display in women's accessories and - without making eye contact - followed her at a discreet distance out onto the street.

She waited, we waited - seemingly, we hoped, unconnected - for what seemed an unbearably long and suspicious time, until finally a car drew up, she climbed in and, wordlessly, we climbed in too.

A silent 20-minute drive through the bustling, traffic-filled, brightly-lit centre of a capital that does not look rocked by revolution brought us to a quieter, darker district of squat factories and jerry-built concrete housing, where we stopped outside a shuttered workers' cafe and waited - again, longer than my nerves felt comfortable.

Finally a check call came - no name asked for or given - from an unknown number, presumably from a Skype address.

And then, two minutes later, the outline of a man appeared out of the blackness, only his eyes visible through the woollen scarf that bound his face.



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He guided us - first in our car and then on foot - through a maze of increasingly narrow back-streets until, as the eerie sound of distant drumming and chanting grew ever louder, we suddenly emerged into an open plot of wasteland.

Framed in silhouette against the flickering flames of a bonfire, a crowd of 100 or so protesters were dancing, waving banners and calling for the hanging of their president.

Just visible in the shadows of the houses around, men in knitted balaclavas with rifles - defectors, we were told, from the Syrian army who now support the rebellion.

## **'Liberated' zone**

What lesson should I draw from that extraordinary, edgy hour-long progression from the bland tinkling of the piano in the hotel lobby through the handbag department of Zara to the drum-beating heart of Free Syria?

Is it that parts of the capital itself - just a short distance from the presidential palace - are now under the effective control of the revolution?

Or that Assad's police state is still so powerful and all-encompassing that opposition activists must behave like hunted animals, constantly glancing over their shoulders even as they stand innocently on a street corner?

Even in the so-called "liberated" zone that I visited that night, we were forced to flee after half an hour as word spread that government security forces were coming.

And so I left Syria unable to answer the first question most people asked when I returned: how much longer will the regime survive?

All I can tell you is that the dictatorship is very well constructed and that the people who oppose it are very brave.