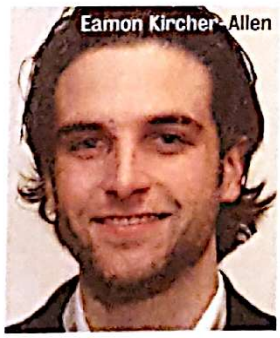
State of Emergency

BY EAMON KIRCHER-ALLEN

The plainclothes Syrian policeman arranged to meet me at the park next to my house in Damascus, after an exasperating series of phone calls from his office to my office. It was October 2005, and I had already been in Syria for nearly a year, first studying Arabic and then working for the United Nations coordinating reform and development aid. I was about to extend my contract with the U.N., which meant I could live in Syria with a residency visa and would no longer have to visit the chaotic Department of Immigration and Passports every two months to renew my tourist visa. It also meant I was due for an interview with Syria's notorious intelligence services, the *mukhabarat*.

At the park, the policeman shook my hand and explained the calls. The police hadn't been able to locate my house on An-Nabulsi Street. "There's a mosque called An-Nabulsi on the other side of town," he said. "We were looking for you over there." I guess they weren't using Google Maps.


Eamon Kircher-Allen

After that, I felt a little less intimidated by the policeman. We walked to my house, I served him tea in my courtyard beneath the orange tree, and he interviewed me. He took fastidious notes in pencil in a schoolchild's notebook with a colorful cover. He was friendly enough, but I didn't like having to answer all his questions. They seemed completely irrelevant: "How many siblings do you have?" "What are their names?" "What's your address in America?" "Oh, and have you ever belonged to a political party?"

The Syrian police may not have the most advanced technology, but they do know how to monitor their society the old-fashioned way—combining a dense network of informers with calculated brutality. Syria's Emergency Act—in place since 1962—gives security agencies and the government's executive branch far-reaching powers. The law helped the government end a decades-long cycle of coups and, later, crush insurrections. Syrians I spoke with accept the increased security measures that the state of emergency entails in part because they fear the very real threats emanating from both inside and outside the country. Over time, those threats have become an excuse for the consolidation of power with the president and the police, and for secrecy about government workings.

But I'm an American, so what frightens me more than the power of the Syrian police is what I see as the growing similarities in our own system. When I first returned from Syria for a visit home in January 2006, I was singled out for an interview by customs at the San Francisco airport. An official asked me a variety of questions so broad, it made my Syrian interview look cursory: He asked me where I lived, what middle school and high school I attended, what I had studied in college.

"What are you going to do with all of this?" I asked.

"Oh, we already have all this information," he said, glancing at his computer. "And I would think my superior will be very interested in your case." He didn't need to ask me about my political affiliations. That information and a myriad of other facts could easily be obtained by consulting both public records and a variety of private sources to which our government has expanding access.

I was shocked to hear that I even had a "case," whatever that meant. I was just a secular-minded U.N. employee. Sure, I had heard the Bush administration's harsh rhetoric regarding the country, but what did that have to do with my legitimate, well-documented reasons for being there? Singling me out for such detailed questioning seemed arbitrary. What other steps would they take to scrutinize me? Did my "case" make me a likely candidate for the government's domestic-wiretapping program? I was supposed to be returning to the "free world," but it didn't feel that way.

Of late, there has been an encouraging backlash against government spying programs inside the United States. The Bush administration has retreated from a policy that permitted eavesdropping on us without obtaining court approval. But at the same time, we're growing to accept heavily armed soldiers at airports, Department of Homeland Security trucks cruising our streets, and imprisonment of noncitizens without charges being filed. The Patriot Act—our own "emergency law"—would seem to make just about anything possible. How far will our fear let it go?

Kent Kirby Dog

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