

Wife of British-born 'aid worker' demands Syria rebels release him

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ATME: The wife of a self-described aid worker stripped of his British nationality has called for his release after he was detained by rebels in Syria's last major rebel bastion.

Tauqir Sharif, 33, was detained on June 22 by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a dominant group in Syria's northwestern region of Idlib, his supporters say. "We haven't been given anything from HTS to even say what the allegations are" against him, his wife Racquell Hayden Best told AFP in the town of Atme, adding that she had been scrambling for information on his detention.

"We have heard ourselves that he is innocent. If he is an innocent man, why are you holding him in prison?" she asked.

Sharif, whose father is originally from Pakistan, hails from Chingford on the eastern outskirts of London and first arrived in Syria in 2012, according to the Live Updates From Syria organization he founded with his wife.

Britain stripped him of his British nationality in 2017, accusing him of links to an Al-Qaeda-aligned group it did not specify, the British press has said, but Sharif has denied the allegation.

HTS has not commented on Sharif's detention, which comes at a time of heightened tensions between the group and other fighters in the Idlib region. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said Sharif was detained over his alleged ties with rival rebels.

A fragile cease-fire has since March stemmed a Russia-backed regime offensive against Idlib.

The region is home to some three million people, a large proportion of whom have been displaced from their homes by Syria's nine-year-old war and are dependent on humanitarian aid.



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Dozens killed in Daesh, regime clashes in Syria Families of Syria detainees hope for news amid US sanctions

[Fire flares at Iranian power plant, latest in series of incidents](#)

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Sat, 2020-07-04 13:47

DUBAI: A fire broke out at a power station in southwestern Iran on Saturday, Iranian media reported, the latest of several recent fires and explosions some of which have hit sensitive sites.

The blaze, which affected a transformer in the power station in the city of

Ahvaz, was put out by fire fighters and electricity was restored after partial outages, Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi, a spokesman for state-run power company TAVANIR, told the semi-official news agency Tasnim. On Thursday, a fire broke out at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility but officials said operations were not affected. A former official suggested the incident could have been an attempt to sabotage work at the plant, which have been involved in activities that breach an international nuclear deal. Nineteen people were killed on Tuesday in an explosion at a medical clinic in the north of the capital Tehran, which an official said was caused by a gas leak. On June 26, an explosion occurred east of Tehran near the Parchin military and weapons development base that the authorities said was caused by a leak in a gas storage facility in an area outside the base.



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Iran threatens retaliation after what it calls possible cyberattack on nuclear site
Iran's Sumar border crossing with Iraq to be transformed into trading route

Turkish minister in Libya for defense cooperation talks

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Fri, 2020-07-03 17:51

TRIPOLI: Turkey's defense minister and military chief visited war-torn Libya's capital on Friday, the country's Government of National Accord (GNA) said, the second visit in weeks by a minister from its main international backer.

Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and Chief of General Staff Yasar Guler discussed "military and security cooperation" with the head of the GNA Fayez Al-Sarraj and military officials, the government said.

The visit comes a month after GNA forces declared they were back in full control of Tripoli and its suburbs following a year-long offensive by eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar to seize the capital.

On June 17, Turkey's foreign and finance ministers Mevlut Cavusoglu and Berat Albayrak, along with intelligence chief Hakan Fidan, visited Tripoli for talks with Sarraj.

Friday's talks covered defense and security training programs under a deal signed by Tripoli and Ankara in November last year, a statement said.

"Turkish support for (the GNA) continues in the areas of military and security cooperation," said GNA deputy defense minister Salah Namrush.

Libya has been torn apart by bloodshed since the NATO-backed uprising which toppled the regime of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, with two rival administrations now vying for power and control of the country's vast oil wealth.



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Erdogan in new bid to cash in on Libyan war
With foothold in Libya, Erdogan's Turkey eyes influence and energy riches

[Iraq sets up border posts to try to prevent Turkish advance](#)

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By SALAR SALIM and SAMYA KULLAB | AP

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Fri, 2020-07-03 16:43

IRBIL: Iraqi troops were enforcing positions along the border with Turkey, officials said Friday, to prevent Turkish forces from advancing deeper into Iraqi territory after two weeks of airstrikes as Ankara continues to target

Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq.

Security officials said Ankara has established at least a dozen posts inside Iraqi territory as part of a military campaign to rout members of the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or PKK, who Turkey says have safe havens in northern Iraq. The airborne-and-land campaign, dubbed "Operation Claw-Tiger," began June 17 when Turkey airlifted troops into northern Iraq.

Since then, at least six Iraqi civilians have been killed as Turkish jets pound PKK targets, and several villages in Iraq's northern Kurdish region have been evacuated.

The invading Turkish troops set up posts in the Zakho district in northern province of Dohuk, about 15 kilometers (9 miles) inside Iraqi territory, said the officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the military operations.

Zerevan Musa, mayor of Darkar, said there were five Turkish posts close to his town, including two on the nearby Mt. Khankiri. He said Turkish airstrikes have hit Sharanish and Banka villages in the area.

"We demand from both sides, the Turkish government and the PKK, to keep their fight away from us," said Qadir Sharanshi, a resident from Sharanshi village. He said his village has been hit several times.

Iraqi border guards erected two posts along the Khankiri range, said Brig. Delir Zebari, commander of the First Brigade of the Iraqi Border Guards, tasked with securing a 245-kilometer (153-mile) stretch of border territory. Speaking from the brigade base, he told The Associated Press that his troops' task is to "eliminate attacks on civilians in the area."

Turkey regularly carries out air and ground attacks against the PKK in northern Iraq. It says neither the Iraqi government nor the regional Iraqi Kurdish administration have taken measures to combat the group. The recent incursion into Iraqi territory has drawn condemnation from Baghdad, which has summoned Ankara's ambassador to Iraq twice since the campaign was launched. Turkey maintains that until the Iraqi government take actions against the PKK, it will continue to target the Kurdish group, considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the European Union for its decades-long insurgency within Turkey.

Turkey's latest campaign poses a dilemma for the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, which relies on Turkey for oil exports through a pipeline running from Iraq's Kirkuk province to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Kaiwan Kawa, a 30-year-old store owner displaced with his family from the area, said a Turkish airstrike last month struck his mini market in the village of Kuna Masi in Sulaymaniyah province. The airstrike targeted a pickup truck with PKK members who had stopped by his store to buy some eggs. At least one of the fighters was killed, his body torn to pieces, Kawa said. Kawa's wife, Payman Talib, 31, lost a leg in the bombing while their 6-year-old son, Hezhwan, had shrapnel wounds to the head. Doctors say it's too dangerous to remove the shrapnel.

Kawa said he had opened the shop just a month before. Now he can never go back.

"I will always carry the fear in my heart," he said. "It will never be the same."



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Strained Iraq doctors crack under virus spike fears

[Broadcasting bans on critical Turkish outlets rise amid free press concerns](#)

Fri, 2020-07-03 20:13

ANKARA: Turkey's media watchdog has put a five-day ban on broadcasts from two opposition news channels.

The Radio and Television High Council (RTUK), most of whose members are assigned by the government, decided on July 1 to punish Tele1 TV and Halk TV for referring to the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II as a "despicable dictator" as well as for critical remarks about Turkey's Directorate for Religious Affairs and the government.

Both channels may lose their broadcasting licenses if they are fined again by the RTUK.

The International Press Institute condemned the decision, saying that the RTUK must stop acting as a “government tool” to threaten news outlets and start acting like an “impartial media monitor” that upheld the rights to press freedom and free expression.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday threatened social media sites, warning about possible restrictions to control platforms or shutting them down completely.

Eleven people were recently detained over Twitter insults directed at Erdogan’s daughter and son-in-law.

“These platforms do not suit this nation,” the president said. “The Turkish nation deserves better. Turkey is not a banana republic. Do you understand why we’re against social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Netflix? To get rid of these immoralities. They are immoral.”

The Press Advertisement Institution recently cut public sector adverts from the anti-government Evrensel newspaper for 45 days over a critical story it had published, having concluded that the boundaries of free expression had been exceeded.

Utku Cakirozer, a former journalist and a parliamentarian from the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), decried the “massive attack” on press freedom.

“The move meant to take back the right of people to be informed,” he told Arab News, referring to the broadcast ban. “They want to silence the newspapers and TV channels to discourage them: 95 percent of the media landscape is already dominated by pro-government outlets and now they target the remaining five percent. Society becomes free when the journalists are set free.”

Turkey topped the number of legal demands submitted to Twitter last year and came second in court orders against Twitter.

“We have a stark choice to make,” Burak Dalgin, a technology expert and a founding member of the recently founded breakaway party Deva (Remedy), told Arab News. “We want a colorful Turkey, which enjoys universal liberties and a roaring economy. The alternative is an isolated country, which would inevitably be dull, oppressive and poor.”

According to Dalgin, there was already wide-ranging legislation to monitor social media usage in Turkey. He mentioned law number 5651, which was passed over a decade ago, and said that any crime in real life was also crime in cyberspace. “We should fine-tune regulations through deliberation and international cooperation, rather than reacting to things we don’t like personally,” he added.

Last year, 408,494 Twitter sites were banned from being accessed in Turkey, while 130,000 URLs, 7,000 Twitter accounts and 40,000 tweets were blocked.

Max Hoffman, a Turkey analyst from the Washington-based Center for American

Progress, said there was very little trust in the media overall.

"In our latest poll, 70 percent of respondents said the media was mostly untrustworthy, and just 30 percent said mostly honest," he told Arab News. "Even 50 percent of AKP (the ruling party) voters said the media was mostly untrustworthy."

People knew the government exerted huge influence on the media, he said, with 56 percent saying the government was mostly controlling it and that this influence drove mistrust. The rapid rise of social media and online platforms was also a factor. "TV remains dominant, but young people and opposition voters are flocking to new platforms in the face of widespread censorship."

According to Hoffman, there was no news source that everyone trusted and opinion was starkly polarized in Turkey.

"That context helps explain some of what is going on now. The government finds it more difficult to tightly control these new outlets, despite very serious efforts to influence social media users and stifle criticism on platforms. So, the AKP know they have a problem in controlling social media and are trying hard to crack down."

The Center for American Progress' survey ran a regression analysis of the data and found that those who relied on online platforms or social media for news, as opposed to TV, were significantly more likely to disapprove of Erdogan, even after controlling for a range of other factors.

"So, using social media does contribute to more critical views, and it's feeding into a wider disillusionment among young voters," Hoffman said. "Many young voters only know the AKP as the political establishment at a time when people are very angry about the direction of the economy, youth unemployment, and the erosion of democratic principles. And the internet offers ways to connect about this anger and voice it. The government is basically trying to stifle that anger."

In the last 17 years Turkey's dissident news channels Halk TV, Tele1, Fox TV and KRT received 28 administrative fines and eight broadcasting suspensions.

Fox TV incurred administrative fines totalling TRY4,421,775 (\$643,433) between Jan. 1, 2019 and March 25, 2020.



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Turkey determined to control social media platforms, Erdogan says
Committee to Protect Journalists slams Turkey over media rights