

Nine policemen abducted and killed in south Syria: monitor

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BEIRUT: Unknown gunmen abducted and killed nine policemen Monday in southern Syria in a rare attack on a government building in the defeated cradle of the nine-year uprising, a monitor said.

The killings, for which there were no immediate claim of responsibility, occurred in a town called Muzayrib in Daraa province, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"Unknown assailants attacked the municipality building... abducting nine members of the security forces before shooting them dead and abandoning their bodies in a square," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said.

State news agency SANA quoted the interior ministry as the nine policemen were killed "after a terrorist group attacked them as they were performing their job," using the government's term for rebels and jihadists.

Attacks are common in the province, which was retaken by regime forces from rebels in 2018, usually targeting loyalists and civilians working for the state, according to the Observatory.

But the nature of Monday's incident and high toll are unusual.

"Usually attacks against regime forces target checkpoints or patrols, not government buildings," Abdel Rahman said.

Daraa is considered to be the birthplace of the popular uprising that erupted across Syria in 2011, before spiralling into a full-blown conflict.

After its recapture by Russia-backed regime fighters in 2018, state institutions returned but the army is still not deployed in the whole province, says the Observatory, which relies on a network of sources in Syria.

Many former rebels stayed instead of evacuating under a Moscow-brokered deal, either joining the army or remaining in control of parts of the province and some neighborhoods of the provincial capital, also called Daraa.

The Daesh group has in the past claimed attacks in the area. In July last year it said it had killed six soldiers at a checkpoint.

The jihadists lost the last scrap of their territorial "caliphate" a year ago, but retain a presence in Syria's vast Badia desert.

The civil war has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions from their homes since starting with the brutal repression of government protests.



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Daesh prisoners riot again in northeast Syria
Daraa – cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south

[Young Jordanians on lockdown showcase 'talent from home' for hit contest](#)

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Mon, 2020-05-04 01:29

AMMAN: An online talent contest created to keep young Jordanians busy as they sit out their country's coronavirus lockdown has proved a hit, with thousands participating and millions watching.

Mahmoud Azzazi, 22, lives in a working-class neighborhood of the capital Amman and is studying culinary arts, but has been turning his mind to music during the lockdown.

He was among the prize winners for his rendition of the song "Sway," made famous by the likes of Dean Martin.

Jordan's culture ministry launched the "My talent from my home" contest in late March, and says it has since attracted more than 67,000 participants and 18 million views on social networks.

With children under 16 prohibited from leaving their homes except in case of emergency, and with schools and universities still closed, the contest has provided a creative outlet for many young people.

Azzazi said the win had encouraged him to work on his voice.

"I hope to become a professional singer in the future," he said.

Jordanian authorities imposed a strict round-the-clock curfew on March 21, with hundreds arrested in the following days for breaches.

Daytime movement restrictions have since been eased, but the curfew remains in force at night.

"I want to fly, nobody can clip my wings," Taleen Hindeleh belted out from her bedroom in Amman, in a prize-winning rendition of a song by Lebanese artist Hiba Tawaji.

Contestants are divided into two groups – those aged 10 to 14 and 15 to 25. Categories include music, poetry, drawing and storytelling.

Participants must post a short video on social media with the Arabic hashtag "my talent from my home," which is picked up by the culture ministry's Facebook and YouTube accounts.

Five artists judge the videos – the number of views and likes on social media are considered – and Jordanian television broadcasts a selection of award-winning entries each week.

Hindeleh said being in lockdown at home in Amman with her father, a professional singer, had its advantages.

"He guides me and coaches me," said the 20-year-old student, who also plays piano.

Jordan has officially declared 461 cases of novel coronavirus, including nine deaths.

A hundred prizes are awarded weekly, with the winners announced on television and on the culture ministry's website.

Prizes range from 100 to 1,000 dinars (\$140-\$1,400) – not bad in a country where the monthly wage is around \$600.

Ebaa Akroush, a 24-year-old music graduate, was one of the first-prize winners in the contest's opening week for his performance on the flute.

"I didn't expect to win because the video was poor quality," he said.

Akroush said he had initially made a short video to share with his friends, but added the hashtag after hearing about the competition.

"Now people are contacting me with questions about the flute," he said from his balcony in Al-Fuhais, near Amman.

Locked down in Ajloun, north of the capital, 25-year-old Nabil Al-Rabadhi won a prize for his performance of "Enta omri" ("You are my life"), by legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kalthoum, played on the qanun – a stringed instrument similar to a zither.

He said he felt it was important to showcase a traditional Middle Eastern instrument, while many other contestants were using Western ones.

"Thanks to the curfew, I'm spending more time playing each day," Rabadhi said.

The contest is scheduled to run until Eid Al-Fitr, which marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and this year falls later in May.

And while some seek the limelight, others, young and older, are happy just to be part of the audience.

Roula Al-Jmaili, a 45-year-old housewife from Amman, said the contest provided a welcome distraction from "the curfew and boredom."

Issa Qaysar, a 24-year-old music arranger from Al-Fuhais, said he hoped the competition would continue.

"There is great artistic talent that deserves to win and be supported," he

said.







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[Oman locks down industrial zone over coronavirus fears](#)

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DUBAI: Omani authorities on Monday sealed off a third district as part of efforts to combat the novel coronavirus.

Al-Wadi Al-Kabir industrial area in Muscat governorate will remain closed until further notice in order "to take health and safety measures," Oman Municipality said.

The Gulf Arab state has since April 10 banned movement into or out of Muscat governorate, which includes the capital, after locking down Muttrah town, home to one of Oman's oldest souqs, due to the spread of infection among low-wage foreign workers.

Later that month it closed off a textile market in Southeastern governorate's

Jalan Bani Bu Ali town, which is a tourist destination and home to historic watchtowers and a fort.

Oman has recorded 2,637 infections and 12 deaths from the virus.

Last week it allowed a limited number of commercial businesses to reopen, including money exchanges, car and fishing boat repair stores, and shops selling electronic goods.



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[Lebanon relaxes coronavirus restrictions by opening seaside promenades, restaurants](#)

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Sun, 2020-05-03 22:02

BEIRUT: People in Lebanon will be able to go for walks on the seaside promenades along the Lebanese coast starting Monday, provided they commit to wearing masks and maintaining safe distances. This move comes following a ban imposed since March 15 due to the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Lebanon on Sunday reported four new cases, two of whom had returned from Guinea.

Lebanon will enter its second week of relaxed measures, with restaurants allowed to resume receiving customers until 9 p.m., provided they do not offer hookah services, which spread COVID-19. Barbers will be allowed to reopen salons for pre-booked appointments.

Protesters are violating measures by continuing to take to the streets and staging sit-ins against the corrupt government. A number of protesters in Tripoli raised a banner on which they wrote: "You are the thieves and you are the disease."

The Lawyers' Committee to Defend Protesters claimed that a number of activists who had been arrested by the security forces last week have been tortured. The committee protested "enforced disappearance."

The committee said in a statement that the military prosecution released six detainees, including a child, who were arrested in Sidon. According to the committee, "some of the detainees confirmed that they were subjected to beatings and torture by the intelligence branch through various means, especially via electrocution," and some detainees had to be hospitalized upon their release.

Attention has been drawn to the invitation extended by President Michel Aoun to political and parliamentary leaders for a meeting in the Baabda Palace on Wednesday. During the meeting, Aoun will brief the participants about the reform plan approved by the government that represents Hezbollah, the Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement and their allies.

The Future Movement's parliamentary bloc announced on Sunday that it will not attend the meeting.

It said that "the natural place for briefing the parliamentary blocs on the government's reform program is the parliament." It warned of "political and legal practices and advisory opinions that cross the lines of the constitution to establish the concept of a presidential system at the expense of the parliamentary democratic system."

Former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora expressed fears over "practices that are taking place and actually leading to the weakening of the prime minister's position and pushing toward giving all power to the president." He stressed that "this is against the constitution."

Siniora warned of parties "trying to tighten their grip on the state and control it." He talked about "pressure exerted by sectarian, confessional and militia movements and parties that have taken control of the government."

He said: "The economic plan prepared by the government of Hassan Diab lacks what contributes to addressing the problems and the possibility of implementing reform measures, especially in terms of strengthening social protection networks."

He added: "How can the government restore the confidence of the Lebanese and friends in the world if it does not respect the law and has not yet issued the judicial formations prescribed by laws?

"And how can the government gain confidence when it has not yet been able to address the chronic power problem?"

Siniora highlighted that "Lebanon is part of the Arab world and has no interest in a position, axis, or dispute (that impacts its relationship) with the Arab region and the world."



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Economic worries trump coronavirus pandemic fears in LebanonCoca-Cola fizzles out in Lebanon with economic downturn

[Egyptian circus performer brings lions home](#)

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Sun, 2020-05-03 20:54

CAIRO: The Egyptian government has ordered the shutting down of the National Circus to counter the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Following the closure, Ashraf El-Helw, 26, who belongs to the famous lion taming El-Helw family thought of a new idea to entertain people: He decided to bring his lions home.

El-Helw transported the lions using his own jeep. Once home, he allocated a special space for them to live and performed with them. The performance was shot on video by El-Helw and posted on his official Instagram account.

"The show was easy since I usually hold lots of performances and take part in entertainment shows and pranks that depend on lions. I grew up with lion cubs at home," he said.

Although he now trains his animals at home, El-Helw admits it is not easy.

"Changing the venue was rather hard for the animals because they are used to the circus.

"The family encouraged me to hold an online performance via social media.

However, they did not expect me to be in such good control of the situation because it was the first time to have the lions at home."

When El-Helw posted videos of the home performance he was naturally asked about having lions inside the house. He said it was unsafe for the animals to be in the house "because they need special care and attention and a special way of dealing with them that is different from dealing with household pets."

El-Helw added that he had thought of the idea of performing at home with the lions after becoming bored due to the lockdown. He said he felt the animals were also bored after live performances were halted because of the pandemic.

"I rehearsed many times before the show at home," El-Helw said, adding: "In the beginning, the lions felt the surroundings in the house were strange, but eventually they started interacting with me."

"The family owns about 50 animals," El-Helw said. "When the virus crisis erupted, the family divided the animals into groups. Some of them are in the National Circus while others are in the ranch" on the Cairo-Alexandria desert road.

He said he has decided to hold future performances in the ranch since the venue is better-equipped than his home.

Zaghloul Khedr, a researcher at the Animals Health Institute, shared concern over El-Helw's videos. He said that they could encourage people to buy wild animals and raise them at home, "which is very dangerous."

He added: "It is very hard to trace the trade of wild animals in Egypt since the deals are done behind closed doors and come in various forms and prices." Khedr said that some animals are sold for thousands of dollars.

He said there were special ranches for breeding tigers and lions and that some are licensed to sell the big cats internationally in circuses, but not to individuals.

A source in the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture told Arab News that the ministry was the only body authorized to issue licenses for sheltering and breeding wild animals.

According to the ministry's website, the General Authority for Veterinarian Services issues private licenses for wild animal ranches including lions,

tigers, and cheetahs. The ranches are licensed following the approval of the environment and interior ministries.

Conditions include sending a special committee from the authority to draft reports on the location of the ranch, which must be 500 meters away from urban communities. Moreover, special committees are set up to examine the ranch in terms of safety rules and regulations and meeting health and environmental standards.

Dina Zulfakkar, an animal rights activist and board member of the Giza Zoo, told journalists that bringing wild animals into homes was a violation of the law. She added that the video posted by El-Helw on social media "gives the wrong impression regarding how dangerous lions can be."

El-Helw started dealing with animals, especially lions, at the age of six when he started taking part in circus rehearsals. He said he ditched a promising career as a footballer for Al-Ahly because of his passion for the circus.

Before he started performing under the big top, El-Helw learned how to deal with animals, how to care for them and also understand their nature.

The El-Helw family has been in the circus business for more than 100 years. Ashraf El-Helw's grandmother, Mahasen, was the first Arab female lion tamer. El-Helw, Egypt's youngest lion tamer, is the grandson of famed lion tamer Mohamed El-Helw who died after being mauled by a lion inside a cage in 1972.





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