

Palestinian journalist wins appeal over Gaza graft report

Author:

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GAZA CITY: A Palestinian journalist was acquitted on appeal over an investigative report about corruption in the Gaza Strip Monday, according to Amnesty International and a campaign group.

In a 2016 report for Al-Araby TV, Hajar Harb alleged that doctors were writing false medical reports to let people leave Gaza for treatment, one of the few reasons Israel allows Palestinians out of the blockaded strip run by Hamas.

In October that year, two doctors launched legal proceedings accusing her of defamation and "publishing false information," according to Amnesty International.

The 34-year-old had been sentenced to six months in prison and fined, but the appeals court overruled the decision, said Fathi Sabah, head of a group supporting Harb.

The appeals court in Gaza "acquitted journalist Hajjar Harb of all charges and closed her file," he said.

"This represents not just a victory for Hajjar but for freedom of the press," he added.

Amnesty said Harb had been questioned by police at least four times following her report, but welcomed the decision of the court.

"It is really good news that Hajjar Harb was acquitted today, she was standing a trial that should not have taken place to begin with," said Saleh Higazi, Amnesty's deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"We hope that the Gaza authorities take this opportunity to signal that they are serious about freedom of expression and the press."

In 2018, the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms recorded 77 violations of press freedom in the Palestinian Authority-run West Bank and 37 such cases in Gaza.

Hamas have controlled Gaza for more than a decade and have recently cracked down violently on street protests.



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Palestinian journalists want curbs on Israel media
Palestinian journalists targeted by all sides

[Syria's Kurds hand three Russian orphans to Moscow](#)

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Mon, 2019-03-25 16:58

QAMISHLI: The Kurdish administration in northeast Syria said Monday it handed over three Russian orphans to a delegation from Moscow who will transfer them back home.

Kurdish foreign affairs official Abdel Karim Omar said the children, aged

five to seven, are being sent back at the request of Russia. He told AFP their parents had been affiliated with the Daesh group, although it was not immediately clear how or when they arrived in Syria.

A member of the Russian government delegation said the siblings are from the country's North Caucasus region. The majority-Muslim southern territory is home to most of the Russians that joined Daesh.

Nelly Kouskova said the children were orphaned nearly one year ago, without providing details.

Their aunt back in Russia had asked authorities to help bring them home, Kouskova told a press conference.

Since the death of their parents the children have been living in the Al-Hol camp, a Kurdish-run shelter designed to accommodate 20,000 people.

But due to the mass exodus of people fleeing the battle to oust Daesh from its final strip of territory – over which Kurdish-led forces claimed victory on Saturday – the numbers have swelled to 70,000.

More than 9,000 foreigners, including over 6,500 children, are being held in the overcrowded camp, the Kurdish administration said on Monday.

Syria's Kurds have repeatedly called for the repatriation of foreign Daesh suspects and their relatives.

But the home countries of suspected Daesh members are reluctant to take them back, due to potential security risks and the likely public backlash.

Russia, however, can be seen as a pioneer in systematically returning children of suspected jihadists home.

Last month, 27 children aged four to 13 were flown from Iraq to the Moscow region. That followed the repatriation from Iraq of 30 children in late December.

Russian President Vladimir Putin in late 2017 called the drive to return the children "a very honourable and correct deed" and promised to help.

Some other foreign governments have also taken steps to bring the children of militants home.

France has repatriated five orphaned children of French militants' from camps in northeast Syria, the government said on March 15, in the first such transfer.

Belgium has said it will help the repatriation of children younger than 10, as long as the link with one Belgian parent is proven.



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[Erdogan: Istanbul's Hagia Sophia could be turned into mosque](#)

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ANKARA: Istanbul's Hagia Sophia – a Byzantine-era cathedral that now serves as a museum – could be reconverted into a mosque, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said.

Erdogan made the comments during a television interview late on Sunday ahead of Turkey's March 31 local elections.

The former Byzantine cathedral had previously been converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of the city, then-known as Constantinople, in 1453. Turkey's secular founder turned the structure into a museum in 1935

that attracts millions of tourists each year.

There have however, been increasing calls for the government to convert the symbolic structure back into a mosque, especially following reports that the gunman who killed Muslim worshippers in New Zealand left a manifesto saying the Hagia Sophia would be “free of minarets.”

Erdogan himself recited prayers inside the Hagia Sophia last year.

The suggestion that Hagia Sophia could be turned into a mosque drew ire in Greece.

“It is not only a great temple of Christendom – the largest for many centuries – it also belongs to humanity. It has been recognized by UNESCO as part of our global cultural heritage,” Greek Foreign Minister George Katrougalos said. “So any questioning of this status is not just an insult to the sentiments of Christians, it is an insult to the international community and international law.”

“We want to hope that the correct statements of March 16 by the Turkish leadership will be valid and there will be no change of this status,” he added, in reference to a speech by Erdogan when he ruled out its conversion into a mosque.



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Netanyahu in Washington with Golan Heights recognition on tap

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Jim Mannion with Mike Smith in Jerusalem | AFP

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Sun, 2019-03-24 16:54

WASHINGTON: Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in Washington Sunday, looking for an electoral boost from Donald Trump amid expectations the US president will formally recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

Trump broke longstanding international consensus last week over the status of the Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in the 1967 Six Day War, saying the US should recognize Israeli sovereignty over the strategic plateau.

Israel's foreign minister said the US president will go one step further on Monday when he welcomes a grateful Netanyahu to the White House.

"President Trump will sign tomorrow in the presence of PM Netanyahu an order recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights," Foreign Minister Israel Katz wrote on Twitter on Sunday.

Netanyahu has long pushed for such recognition, and many analysts saw Trump's statement, which came in a tweet on Thursday, as a campaign gift ahead of Israel's April 9 polls.

The prime minister is locked in a tough election fight with a centrist political alliance headed by former military chief Benny Gantz and ex-finance minister Yair Lapid.

New opinion polls last week showed Netanyahu losing ground to his electoral rivals, and the Washington visit was seen as an opportunity to regain momentum.

The prime minister has a "working meeting" at the White House on Monday and a dinner on Tuesday.

Also Tuesday, he is to address the annual conference in Washington of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Gantz speaks at the high-profile event on Monday.

The Golan Heights decision is the latest major move in favor of Israel by Trump, who in 2017 recognized the disputed city of Jerusalem as the country's capital.

Syria and other states in the region condemned Trump's pledge, saying it violates international law. France said the same.

Israel annexed the Golan Heights in 1981 in a move never recognized by the international community.

Netanyahu phoned Trump to tell him he had made "history," and called the gesture a "Purim miracle," a reference to the Jewish holiday that Israel was celebrating that day.

Although Trump professed no knowledge of the Israeli politics in play,

Netanyahu's relationship with the US president has long been a central feature of his campaign.

Trump appears on giant campaign billboards in Israel shaking hands and smiling with Netanyahu, and the premier has shared video of the US leader calling him "strong" and a "winner."

On the same day as Trump's Golan Heights tweet, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Jerusalem, where he joined Netanyahu in a visit to the historic Western Wall, offering his host a prime pre-election photo opportunity.

It was the first time such a high-ranking American official had visited one of the holiest sites in Judaism, located in mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem, with an Israeli premier.

Trump relies on pro-Israel evangelical Christians as part of his electoral base and has moved US policy firmly in Israel's favor.

But Netanyahu has also deployed his considerable powers of persuasion to charm the mercurial president he calls his "friend."

"Trump is very affected by personal things, and Bibi's stroked him a lot," said Jonathan Rynhold, a political science professor at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, using Netanyahu's nickname.

"I'm sure he's also very affected by the last thing that was said to him, so whispering in his ear is (Trump's son-in-law Jared) Kushner, who's got a good relationship with Bibi."

There has been talk in recent weeks about similarities in style between Trump and Netanyahu – although there are key differences.

Michael Oren, a former Israeli ambassador to the United States and now a deputy minister for diplomacy, said "they share a disdain for political correctness."

Using phrases that echo Trump's, Netanyahu has castigated the corruption investigations into his affairs as a "witch hunt" and a plot aimed at forcing him from office.

He has sought to demonize his enemies and brokered a deal with an extreme-right political party many view as racist.

Like Trump, he has employed the phrase "fake news" to combat tough coverage of him.

But, as Rynhold points out, underneath the rhetoric the 69-year-old Netanyahu is an "extremely cautious politician," intensely attuned to the direction of the electoral winds.

He has been prime minister for a total of 13 years and will be on track to surpass founding father David Ben-Gurion as Israel's longest-serving premier if he wins next month.



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[US clinches strategic port deal with Oman](#)

Sun, 2019-03-24 19:36

WASHINGTON: The United States clinched a strategic port deal with Oman on Sunday which US officials say will allow the US military better access to the Gulf region and reduce the need to send ships through the Strait of Hormuz, a maritime choke point off Iran.

The US embassy in Oman said in a statement that the agreement governed US access to facilities and ports in Duqm as well as in Salalah and “reaffirms the commitment of both countries to promoting mutual security goals.”

The accord is viewed through an economic prism by Oman, which wants to develop Duqm while preserving its Switzerland-like neutral role in Middle

Eastern politics and diplomacy.

But it comes as the United States grows increasingly concerned about Iran's expanding missile programs, which have improved in recent years despite sanctions and diplomatic pressure by the United States.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the deal was significant by improving access to ports that connect to a network of roads to the broader region, giving the US military great resiliency in a crisis. "We used to operate on the assumption that we could just steam into the Gulf," one US official said, adding, however, that "the quality and quantity of Iranian weapons raises concerns."

Tehran has in the past threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil shipping route at the mouth of the Gulf, in retaliation for any hostile US action, including attempts to halt Iranian oil exports through sanctions. Still, the US official noted that the agreement would expand US military options in the region for any kind of crisis.

Duqm is an ideal port for large ships. It is even big enough to turn around an aircraft carrier, a second official said.

"The port itself is very attractive and the geostrategic location is very attractive, again being outside the Strait of Hormuz," the official said, adding that negotiations began under the Obama administration.

For Oman, the deal will further advance its efforts to transform Duqm, once just a fishing village 550 km (345 miles) south of capital Muscat, into a key Middle East industrial and port center, as it diversifies its economy beyond oil and gas exports.

The deal could also better position the United States in the region for what has become a global competition with China for influence.

Chinese firms once aimed to invest up to \$10.7 billion in the Duqm project, a massive injection of capital into Oman, in what was expected to be a commercial, not military, arrangement.

"It looks to me like the Chinese relationship here isn't as big as it appeared it was going to be a couple of years ago," the second official said. "There's a section of the Duqm industrial zone that's been set aside for the Chinese ... and as far as I can tell so far they've done just about nothing." Still, China has in the past shown no qualms about rubbing up against US military facilities.

In 2017, the African nation of Djibouti, positioned at another geostrategic choke-point, the strait of Bab Al-Mandeb, became home to China's first overseas military base. The US military already had a base located just miles away, which has been crucial for operations against Daesh, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups.



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Oman oil minister excited to be part of Sri Lanka oil refinery project