

Lebanon unlikely to comply with Interpol request to hand Carlos Ghosn over to French authorities

Fri, 2022-05-20 21:53

BEIRUT: Lebanon has received an Interpol red notice for the arrest of businessman Carlos Ghosn at France's request but is unlikely to extradite him, according to a judicial source.

The 68-year-old car industry tycoon, who holds French, Lebanese and Brazilian citizenship, fled to Lebanon in December 2019 while awaiting trial in Japan. He had been under house arrest since 2018.

The Lebanese judiciary received the notice on Thursday. It is based on an international arrest warrant issued by the French authorities about a month ago.

A judicial source told Arab News that Lebanon's prosecutor general, Judge Ghassan Oueidat, received the warrant based on hearings held by a delegation of French judges who visited Lebanon for the first time in June 2021. They listened to Ghosn over the course of four days in regard to a lawsuit filed against him in Paris.

BACKGROUND

The former head of the Nissan-Renault alliance fled to Lebanon in 2019, while out on bail facing financial misconduct charges in Japan.

Ghosn was chairman of Nissan and Mitsubishi and CEO of Renault when he was arrested in 2018 on charges of "not disclosing his full wages and using company funds for personal purposes."

France accuses him of being responsible for "over €15 million (\$15.8 million) in suspicious payments between his Renault-Nissan alliance and activities Ghosn held at the opulent Palace of Versailles, including knowingly using company resources to host a party for personal purposes."

The source added that Judge Oueidat was expected to refer the Interpol notice to the discriminatory attorney general, Judge Imad Qabalan, who attended the hearings of the French judicial delegation with Ghosn.

Based on the notice, Judge Qabalan may interrogate Ghosn and decide whether he should be arrested, the source said.

"If Judge Qabalan finds Ghosn guilty of any crime, he can request his full file from the French authorities and try him in Lebanon under the Lebanese

Penal Code,” the person added.

“In the event that the crimes charged against Ghosn are not mentioned in the penal code, or if they are charges that the Lebanese penal code does not criminalize, he will leave him be.”

The source said that although Lebanon and France had an extradition treaty, Ghosn would be prosecuted in Lebanon as he had Lebanese nationality, adding that Lebanon had banned the executive from traveling.

Lebanon confiscated Ghosn’s passports in 2020 and he has not submitted a request to get them back.

The tycoon made his escape from Japan by hiding in luggage on a private plane that took off from Kansai International Airport. He has been in Lebanon ever since and has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

An American father and son helped Ghosn flee Japan. The US handed them over to Japanese authorities and they confessed in a Tokyo court that they had been paid \$1.3 million to do so. They face a prison sentence of up to three years.

Meanwhile, Lebanese judicial authorities on Thursday released 72-year-old Ziad Taqi Al-Din, whose name had been linked to lawsuits related to charges of fraud and forgery filed in Paris against former French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Taqi Al-Din, who has dual Lebanese and French nationality, was arrested in Beirut in 2020 based on an international arrest warrant issued by Interpol. He was later released on bond with a travel ban and his passport was confiscated.

The Lebanese judiciary requested his file from Paris for trial in Beirut, refusing to hand him over to the French judiciary.



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Former Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn: 'Am I guilty or innocent? Let's finish this ordeal' France issues international arrest warrant for former Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn

[Turkey, Iran race to fill Russian 'void' in Syria](#)

Fri, 2022-05-20 21:05

ANKARA: The withdrawal of tens of thousands of Russian troops from Syria to bolster its forces in Ukraine may mark a turning point in the Syrian conflict, and lead to a race between Tehran and Ankara to fill the void left by Moscow in the country, leading analysts suggest.

Russia, Iran and Turkey are guarantor countries of the Astana talks on Syria that aim at brokering a permanent peace deal by bringing warring sides together.

However, Russia has been the balancing force in this trio, preventing the uncontrolled entrenchment of Iranian-backed militia.

But now abandoned Russian bases are believed to have been transferred to Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah, while Tehran is expected to send more troops into Syria to fill the gap left by Ukraine-bound Russian military personnel.

FASTFACT

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Iran is believed to have created a new militia, similar to its elite forces, to assume the tasks previously handled by Russian troops. The new force, under the control of Hezbollah and the IRGC, is stockpiling drones, chemical weapons and ballistic missiles.

Ankara and Tehran back rival sides in the Syrian conflict, with Iran supporting the Assad regime, while Turkey backs the Syrian opposition.

Russia's maritime supply of its forces in Syria has been complicated in recent months by Ankara's decision under the Montreux Convention to restrict the use of Turkish straits by Russian warships based in the Black Sea.

However, Mehmet Emin Cengiz, research fellow at Al-Sharq Strategic Research, believes Russia is unlikely to give up its presence in Syria.

"Russia has invested a lot in Syria over the years, and there has been a long-standing rivalry between Russia and Iran for influence in Syria. Even if Russia relocates some of its soldiers or withdraws them from Syria, it will not leave the field entirely to Iran," he told Arab News.

Cengiz believes that with the Ukraine crisis allowing Iran to fill some of the gaps left by Russia in Syria, it is likely that the conflict will increase the regime's dependence on Iran.

"After the Ukraine crisis, contacts between Syrian and Iranian officials increased. Recently, Bashar Assad paid a visit to Tehran. He might receive economic assistance from Tehran in the face of a deep economic crisis in Syria," Cengiz said.

According to Aron Lund, a fellow at the New York-based Century Foundation think tank, the Ukraine war has upset the balance between Turkey and Russia in Turkey's favor, which could be consequential for Syria.

"It could end up destabilizing a long-frozen situation, but it won't necessarily lead to renewed conflict," he told Arab News.

"Even under pressure in Ukraine, Russia may be able to deter advances by Turkey-backed forces in Syria, and Turkey may still want Russia's cooperation to secure its own interests," he added.

Lund believes that both countries could trade concessions and favors in ways that avoid trading territory, or waging war, in Idlib.

"For example, Russia could agree to be more flexible on humanitarian issues, including an upcoming vote in the UN Security Council in July that Turkey really wants to pass. Or Russia could lend support to Turkish cross-border operations against Kurdish forces, which it has previously been reluctant to do," he said.

Last week, Geir O. Pedersen, UN special envoy for Syria, recently sent invitations to the Syrian regime and opposition for the eighth round of talks starting in late May.

Lund expects new deals regarding the UN-brokered Syrian constitutional committee.

"But renewed fighting in Idlib remains a live risk, either because of a breakdown in the balance or as a way to test the strength and determination of the other side," he said.

Noah Ringler, an expert from Georgetown University, believes that although Turkey and Iran have cooperated in the past against PKK-affiliated groups against a shared threat, this time Iran may recognize the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, a Syrian affiliate of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, as a different faction and be open to assuming Russia's role in negotiation and coordinating between the Assad regime and administrative authorities in northeastern Syria.

"As Iran expands its role in Syria, Turkey will likely seek opportunities to confront Assad regime forces and their partners for expanded territory or trade near Manbij or Tal Rifaat, or even near Ayn Issa, especially as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's previous operations have proven popular and as public support for forced refugee return to Syria has increased," he told Arab News.

"Assad's forces still seek to launch another phase of the Idlib operation, and Iran may consider supporting one in the future to destabilize NATO's southern flank, depending on nuclear negotiations and other factors, but Iran is not prepared to do so at this point," Ringler said.

However, the current disagreements between Turkey and Iran are not limited to Syria, with disputes over transboundary waters and dam construction further straining bilateral ties.

Turkey's dam projects on the Tigris and Aras rivers angered Tehran, which fears the schemes could reduce water flow in the Tigris and Euphrates, and

pose an environmental threat as shown by recent dust storms.

However Turkey's Foreign Ministry has said that Ankara is open to any "rational and scientific cooperation" with Iran.

The illegal transit of Afghan refugees to Turkey from its border with Iran has also angered Ankara, which claims that Tehran facilitated the uncontrolled passage.

"Relations between Iran and Turkey have become increasingly strained on a number of files: Dam construction; Ankara's warming relations with Israel; tensions with Iran-backed militias in Iraq; and now Russia's shifting of resources from Syria to Ukraine will add further complications," said Jason Brodsky, policy director of United Against a Nuclear Iran.

A new Pentagon report claimed that Iran-backed militias have been coordinating with the PKK for attacking Turkish troops in northern Iraq.

"All of these developments have the potential to shift the balance in Syria given the crowded landscape there. In 2020, Iran's advisory center in northern Syria issued a warning to Turkish forces that they could be targeted after they retaliated following 33 Turkish soldiers being killed in a Syrian airstrike in Idlib," Brodsky told Arab News.

As Russia in the past has tried to reduce tensions between Turkey and the Syrian government in the area, Brodsky believes that Moscow's troop withdrawal could empower the Assad regime as well as Iran in Idlib.

"This is not to say Russia will be completely absent, but if it is shifting resources to contend with Ukraine, that has the potential to scramble the battlefield dynamics in Idlib," he added.



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Pentagon finds no wrongdoing in 2019 Syria strike that killed civilians
Erdogan says NATO should understand Turkey's security sensitivities

[Sudan arrests Communist Party figures as thousands protest coup](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-19 23:22

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces arrested leading anti-coup figures on Thursday, their party said, during protests by thousands against last year's military takeover.

"Security forces raided the house of the political secretary of the Sudanese Communist Party Mohammed Mukhtar Al-Khatib," the party said in a statement.

Another leading party member was also arrested at Khartoum airport, and the two men were taken to an "unknown location," the party said.

The arrests came despite a pledge by coup leader Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan to free political detainees to set the stage for talks among Sudanese factions.

Last month, authorities released several anti-coup civilian leaders arrested in a crackdown.

The Communist Party members were detained following a trip to Juba, South Sudan where they met with rebel leader Abdel Wahid Nour who has refused to sign a landmark 2020 peace deal with the Sudanese government, according to the party statement.

They also visited rebel-held areas in South Kordofan controlled by Abdelaziz Al-Hilu, who also abstained from the 2020 deal, it said.

Thousands of protesters on Thursday took to the streets, mainly in Khartoum but also elsewhere, to again call for civilian rule in the latest rally against the October coup led by Gen. Burhan, according to AFP correspondents.

The pro-democracy Central Committee of Sudan Doctors said security forces fired tear gas "in large quantities" to quell the protests.

Regular mass demonstrations have rocked Sudan since the coup which derailed a fragile political transition set in motion after the 2019 ouster of longtime autocrat Omar Bashir.

Demonstrations have been met by a violent crackdown which has so far killed at least 95 protesters and wounded hundreds of others, according to medics.

The UN, along with the African Union and regional bloc IGAD, have been pushing to facilitate Sudanese-led talks to resolve the crisis after the northeast African country's latest coup.

UN special representative Volker Perthes in late March said the country was heading towards "an economic and security collapse" unless its civilian-led transition was restored.

The military leader threatened to expel Perthes for alleged "interference" in the country's affairs.



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Violence in Sudan's restive Darfur kills 168: aid group

[Trawling Iraq's threatened marshes to collect plastic waste](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-19 23:12

CHIBAYISH: Iraq's vast swamplands are the reputed home of the biblical Garden of Eden, but the waterways are drying out and becoming so clogged with waste their very existence is at risk, activists warn.

"For 6,000 or 7,000 years the inhabitants have protected the marshes," said Raad Assadi, director of Chibayish Organization for Ecotourism, who this week began work on a boat to try to clear some of the worst areas of trash.

"But we have reached a stage where the marshes are threatened with extinction."

The swamps, nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, are one of the world's largest inland deltas.

The wetlands barely survived the wrath of dictator Saddam Hussein, who ordered they be drained in 1991 as punishment for communities protecting insurgents and to hunt them down.

But after Saddam was toppled, Iraq pledged to preserve the ecosystem and provide functional services to the marshland communities, and they were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2016 both for their biodiversity and their ancient history.

Tourists have returned, but one of the main visible sources of pollution in the area are visitors who throw away their "plastic waste," said Assadi.

After decades of brutal war, Iraq lacks structures for the collection and disposal of waste, and 70 percent of its industrial waste is dumped directly into rivers or the sea, according to data compiled by the UN and academics.

A team of 10 joins the boat, cruising the maze of narrow waterways to collect the piles of plastic bottles filling the channels, and erecting signs urging people to "respect our land," and not to litter.

But it is far from the only threat: Iraq's host of environmental problems, including drought and desertification, threaten access to water and livelihoods across the country.

The UN classifies Iraq "as the fifth most vulnerable country in the world" to climate change, having already witnessed record low rainfall and high temperatures in recent years.

The water level of the marsh is falling, a phenomenon accentuated by repeated droughts and by the dams built upstream of the two rivers, among Iraq's upstream neighbors, Turkey and Iran.

"There is a threat to this ecosystem, which has significant biodiversity," said French ambassador Eric Chevallier, at the launch on Thursday of the French-funded boat project.

Chevallier called for "much greater mobilization, Iraqi and international, to meet all the challenges" that a heating planet is causing.

A string of sandstorms in recent weeks have blanketed Iraq, with thousands needing medical care due to respiratory problems.

The Middle East has always been battered by dust and sandstorms, but they have become more frequent and intense in recent years.

The trend has been associated with overuse of river water, more dams, overgrazing and deforestation.

The rubbish collectors are not the only unusual team in the marshes: earlier this year, the Iraqi Green Climate Organization launched a veterinary

ambulance to help farmers treat their water buffalo.



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Iraqis turn to budding ecotourism to save marshes Iraq's vast marshes, reborn after Saddam, are in peril again

[US military review of civilian casualties in Syria flawed, claims Human Rights Watch](#)

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Thu, 2022-05-19 22:36

LONDON: Internal US military reviews of operations resulting in civilian harm remain “fundamentally” flawed and require urgent redress despite pledges made

last year, Human Rights Watch said on Thursday.

On Tuesday, the US Department of Defense released a public summary, but not the full report, of an airstrike it conducted against Syria in 2019 in which it acknowledged faults for the handling of the operation but found no one accountable.

Sarah Yager, Washington director of Human Rights Watch, said: "It's disappointing but not surprising the DOD has once again refused to hold itself accountable for civilian deaths."

She added: "In addition to resolving obvious flaws in its investigative process, the US military should publish the full review, as a show of respect to the victims' families and to prevent future abuses."

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin initiated the review after a November New York Times article condemned an initial investigation for its failure to acknowledge that dozens of civilians had been killed by the strike on Baghouz in March 2019 and alleged individuals within the DOD had sought to cover up the extent of civilian harm.

Despite Austin's intervention and pledge to create a Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan, HRW said this latest review failed in its commitments to transparency, lacked information from witnesses, used "an overly elastic definition of combatants" and did not provide amends for the civilians harmed.

The NGO claimed the DOD classified all adult males as combatants, regardless of their participation in hostilities, contravening international humanitarian law standards on distinguishing between civilians and combatants; relied on incorrect Syrian allies, rather than properly verifying information received; and provided no evidence of interviews with people outside the US military.

In a statement, HRW said: "Instead, it appears that the military reviewers relied upon the same incomplete information in the review that they relied upon to conduct the airstrike."

Yager pointed to the failure to investigate as proof that the US Congress needed to intervene to urgently address the military's handling of civilian harm.

"We had high hopes for Secretary Austin's commitments earlier this year to reform, but the many missteps in this inquiry leave us deeply concerned that the US military hasn't gotten the memo," she said.



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Pentagon finds no wrongdoing in 2019 Syria strike that killed civilians
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