

Shooting in Syria could mark new phase in Israeli campaign

Author:

Mon, 2021-10-18 02:17

JERUSALEM: The death of a former Syrian Druse lawmaker, allegedly by Israeli sniper fire, could mark a new phase in what Israel calls its war against Iranian entrenchment in neighboring Syria.

Syria's state-run news agency said that Midhat Saleh was fatally shot Saturday in Ein el-Tinneh, a village along the Israeli frontier in the Golan Heights where he ran a Syrian government office. Israeli media said Saleh had been assisting the Iranian military against Israel.

The Israeli military declined to comment, but if Saleh was indeed killed by Israel, it would mark the first time that Israeli snipers are known to have killed someone identified as an Iranian-linked target across the border. Israel has said it will not tolerate a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria and has acknowledged carrying out scores of airstrikes on alleged Iranian arms shipments and military targets in Syria in recent years.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed the strategic territory, which overlooks northern Israel. Most of the world does not recognize the annexation, though the Trump administration declared the territory to be part of Israel.

Saleh was born in Majdal Shams, in the Israeli-controlled side of the Golan, and was jailed several times by Israel, most recently for 12 years until 1997. He later moved to Syria, was elected to parliament in 1998 and served as an adviser to the government on the Golan issue.

The small Druse community living in the Israeli-controlled side of the Golan generally has good relations with Israel. But many members still profess loyalty to Syria, in part because they have relatives on the other side of the border.

Samih Ayoub, a resident on the Israeli side of the Golan, told Israel's Army Radio station Saleh had "no connection" to Iran or to any militia. "He's just a quiet man who works in an office. They killed him next to his house," he said.

Saleh's brother, Yasser Saleh, a doctor in Damascus, said his brother also lived in the Syrian capital but visited the border area periodically, slept there and sometimes spoke with relatives across the frontier. He said his younger brother had survived an earlier assassination attempt in early 2011 and remained committed to ending Israel's control over the Golan Heights until the end. He said his brother was survived by a wife and two children, including a son named Golan.

While there was no official comment, Israeli military commentators – who are given high-level background briefings with top army brass – said Saleh was intimately involved in assisting the Iranians build up their capabilities along the Israeli front. Iran has sent thousands of forces to Syria to back the army of President Bashar Assad during the country’s decade-long civil war.

“He answered directly to the Iranians,” wrote Yossi Yehoshua, a military correspondent for Yediot Ahronot, Israel’s largest paid daily newspaper.

Giora Eiland, a former Israeli national security adviser, told Army Radio that if Israel killed Saleh, it was meant to send a message to the Iranians and not connected to the past. “I assume this was not an act of revenge,” he said. “We’re not talking about a mass murderer.”

Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow and expert on Iran at the Institute for National Security Studies, a Tel Aviv think tank, said it was not a sure thing that Israel had even been involved. He said that Saleh was not an especially valuable target and also had tense relations with Iranian proxy Hezbollah and objected to the group’s activities in the Golan.

But he said that if Israel did indeed kill Saleh through an unprecedented sniper attack, it sent a powerful message to Iran and Syria about their activities near the Israeli border.

“It says that we have many ways and many techniques,” he said. “We’re watching you.”



Main category:
[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Israel](#)

[Bashar Assad](#)

Syrian constitutional committee agrees to start drafting constitutional reform: UN envoy Syrian refugees resettled in US face challenges, uncertainty

[‘De-radicalization’ offers Moroccan prisoners route to freedom](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-10-18 02:06

RABAT: Saleh has been languishing in Moroccan jails for 19 years on terrorism charges, but he hopes to be freed soon thanks to a de-radicalization program.

The former hard-line militant, today a bearded prisoner in his 50s, said he once held beliefs that justified violence.

“I believed Muslims had a duty to fight oppressive rulers who don’t apply Islamic law, and to attack states that fight Muslims,” he told AFP in the library of Kenitra Prison, near Rabat.

But those ideas were based on a literal reading of the Qur’an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad “that I wasn’t qualified to understand,” he says.

Today, after passing through the North African kingdom’s Moussalaha (“Reconciliation”) program, he is hoping for a reprieve.

The program, launched in 2015 and led by Morocco’s DGAPR prison service with several partner organizations, aims to help terror detainees who are willing to question their beliefs.

Saleh said his journey into militancy began after he emigrated in the 1990s to Italy, where he met an imam at a Turin mosque who belonged to Jamaa Islamiya, the Egyptian jihadist group that assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

In 2001, he left what he used to call “the country of the infidels” and moved with his family to Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

But the Sept. 11 attacks in the US forced him to change his plans.

With the US threatening to invade and topple the Taliban, he fled home to Morocco – and was promptly arrested.

He says he does not have blood on his hands, but he has been in detention

ever since.

Morocco has had painful experiences with militancy at home and abroad.

In 2003, five suicide attacks killed 33 people and wounded scores more in the economic capital Casablanca.

Fifteen years later, two Scandinavian tourists were murdered by Daesh-linked militants during a hiking trip in the High Atlas mountains.

The security services have dismantled more than 2,000 extremist cells and made over 3,500 arrests linked to terrorism since 2002, according to official figures published in February.

Many cells busted in recent years have been linked to the Daesh group, which seized a swathe of territory in Syria and Iraq and proclaimed a "caliphate" there in 2014.

More than 1,500 Moroccan fighters are known to have traveled to the area over the past decade, a security source said.

But in 2015, Moroccan authorities launched Moussalaha as part of "a new approach" to detainees, said DGAPR official Moulay Idriss Agoulmam.

The program "includes monitoring the participants and helping those who express a need for guidance," he said.

It also includes studies on law and the economy, as well as a three-month psychological accompaniment.

It has so far reached 207 detainees, including eight women. Around 116 have received royal pardons and been freed, while 15 have had their terms reduced.

Mohamed Damir, another ex-detainee who had been sentenced to death in 2003 on terror charges, said many radicalized people "only realize they need to leave their extremist ideas once they find themselves alone" in a prison cell.

The 47-year-old said he reached that point after seven years of prison. That began a long process to convince the authorities to help out convicts in a similar situation.

In 2011, his sentence was commuted to 30 years in jail.

Then he was released in 2017 after taking part in the first round of Moussalaha.

Part of his re-education involved reading the works of philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, some of whose ideas "are not far from the spirit of Islam."

"I discovered the concept of the social contract, which allows everyone to live in peace, as we are obviously all different," he said.

After leaving prison, Damir joined an Islamic scholars' association in the

town of Mohammadia that oversees the religious aspect of Moussalaha.

Today, he is helping guide detainees through the program.

“It’s not always easy,” he said.

“Most of them don’t know much about the Islamic religion,” he said, adding that he uses religious texts to change their views.

“I try to persuade them that they will not earn God’s favor by following the path (of violence).”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Morocco](#)

[terrorism](#)

[prisoners](#)

Morocco breaks up Daesh-linked cell, arrests 5 Moroccan startup that wants to digitize small retail stores gets \$5m seed funding

Date set for Iran nuclear talks

Author:

Mon, 2021-10-18 00:59

JEDDAH: Talks aimed at reviving the collapsed Iran nuclear deal will resume this week, two Iranian members of parliament said on Sunday.

After a private meeting with Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, MP Ahmad Alirezabeigui said “talks with the 4+1 Group will restart on Thursday in Brussels.” Another Iranian MP, Behrouz Mohebbi Najmabadi, said negotiations would resume “this week.”

The 4+1 Group consists of four UN Security Council permanent members – Britain, China, France and Russia – and Germany. They began negotiations with Iran in Vienna in April over reviving the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the agreement with world powers to curb Iran’s nuclear program in return for lifting economic sanctions.

That deal collapsed in 2018 when the US pulled out and President Donald Trump reimposed sanctions, and Iran responded by breaching the deal’s restrictions on its enrichment of uranium.

Trump’s successor Joe Biden is keen to revive the deal and the US is taking part indirectly in the Vienna talks. However, discussions have been suspended since June in a stalemate over who concedes first – Iran by complying with the agreement, or the US by lifting sanctions. US allies in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, are also concerned that the agreement fails to address wider issues such as Iran’s ballistic missiles and its malign regional activities.

EU diplomatic chief Josep Borrell said at the weekend he was ready to meet Iranian leaders. “The goal remains to resume negotiations in Vienna as quickly as possible,” his spokesman said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran nuclear talks](#)

Saudi FM: There should be 'quick suspension' by Iran of activities that violate nuclear deal EU envoy on nuclear talks meets Iran deputy minister in Tehran

[Lebanon MPs hide in fear of Hezbollah assassins](#)

Author:

Sun, 2021-10-17 00:50

BEIRUT: Members of parliament hid in their homes on Saturday in fear of assassination by Hezbollah gunmen as new turmoil in Lebanon threatened to spiral out of control.

Security services advised MPs from the Lebanese Forces party not to venture out amid growing tension over a judicial investigation into the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, which killed more than 200 people and devastated swaths of Beirut.

“Yes, this advice was given to the MPs of the Lebanese Forces,” party media chief Charles Jabbour told Arab News. “There is fear of them being exposed to assassination and murder, which Hezbollah has practiced before. The solution requires that Hezbollah hand over its weapons to the state.”

The crisis surrounds the investigation being conducted by Judge Tarek Bitar, who wants to question former and serving ministers linked to Hezbollah and the allied Amal Party about their responsibility for the deadly port blast. The ministers claim the judge’s actions are political, and have refused to cooperate.

Tensions erupted into violence last Thursday, when seven people were killed after gunfire erupted during a Hezbollah and Amal protest against the investigation in a mainly Christian area of central Beirut.

Justice Minister Henry El-Khoury said on Saturday he supported Judge Bitar, who had the right to summon whoever he wanted in the case. “I stand by the ... investigator,” El-Khoury said. He said he did not have the authority to replace Bitar, and faced no pressure to do so.

The minister held crisis talks on Saturday to discuss the investigation with Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Supreme Judicial Council president Suhail Abboud and public prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat. They decided to invite Bitar to a meeting of the council on Tuesday.

“Judge Abboud is committed to judicial, not political, approaches to resolving the problem,” a judicial source told Arab News.

There was also support for Bitar’s investigation from a surprising source – former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Lebanon’s largest Christian bloc. “The Free Patriotic Movement is for continuing the probe, revealing the truth and putting those responsible on trial,” Bassil said on Saturday.

Bassil, who is President Michel Aoun’s son-in-law and is widely thought to be angling to replace him, is under US sanctions for alleged corruption, and for having ties to Hezbollah.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Hezbollah](#)

Lebanese Christian group denies Hezbollah claim it planned Beirut bloodshed
Lebanon president says people behind violence will be held accountable, PM announces day of mourning

[Merkel vows continuity on last visit to Erdogan](#)

Sun, 2021-10-17 01:00

ISTANBUL: Chancellor Angela Merkel on Saturday vowed continuity in Germany's relations with Turkey that included both cooperation and criticism of Ankara as she paid her final visit to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Merkel and Erdogan developed complex but close relations over the German chancellor's 16-year term that navigated the perils of Turkey's tumultuous ties with the West.

Their personal bond was instrumental in helping Europe manage a refugee

crisis in 2016 and calm simmering tensions in the east Mediterranean last year.

Merkel also helped iron out some of the difficulties that have crept into Erdogan's relations with Washington and French President Emmanuel Macron.

The two leaders had lunch and private talks in a presidential villa overlooking the Bosphorus on the latest leg of Merkel's parting foreign tour.

"I have always said that our collaboration was very good in the years that I worked with Mr. Erdogan," Merkel told reporters after the talks.

The 67-year-old German leader said her "advice" to Turkey today was to expect "the same thing for the coming government in Germany.

"The relationship between Turkey and Germany, with its negative and positive sides, will go on. It will be recognised by the next government," she said.

Erdogan referred to Merkel as his "dear friend" twice during the closing media event.

But he also hinted at the difficulties Turkey might have in promoting its interests after Merkel formally gives way to a new coalition government taking shape in Berlin following elections last month.

"If there had been no coalition government, (Germany's) relations with Turkey might have been easier. Of course, it is not easy to work with a coalition government," Erdogan said.

Erdogan headed Turkey as prime minister when Merkel became the first woman to head Germany in 2005.

The two have since shared a long list of differences and numerous testy exchanges on issues ranging from Turkey's crackdown on human rights to its military campaigns in Syria and Libya.

But Germany also played a central role in defusing a crisis in the east Mediterranean last year that erupted when Turkey began searching for natural gas in disputed waters claimed by Cyprus and Greece.

Analysts say Merkel was more sympathetic to Erdogan's position because of the presence of an estimated 3 million ethnic Turks in Germany.

She has also been sensitive to Erdogan's threats to let an estimated 5 million migrants and refugees temporarily living in Turkey under a 2016 deal with the EU to leave for Europe unless Ankara's interests are respected by Brussels.

After admitting hundreds of thousands of refugees to Germany in 2015, she stressed Turkey's role in preventing a repeat of such large-scale migration to Europe and helped engineer a deal for Turkey to stem the flow of people seeking to cross the Aegean Sea.

“Their relations were very difficult in many respects but they managed to establish and maintain working cooperation,” analyst Gunter Seufert of the German Institute for Security and International Affairs told AFP.

Seufert predicted that the new German government will be more “sceptical” about extending the terms of the Turkey-EU agreement on migrants or continuing arms sales to Ankara – particularly submarines.

“With the new chancellor, no matter who they will be ... it will be more difficult to coordinate the European policy with Turkey to the level and degree Angela Merkel did.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Angela Merkel](#)

[Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)

[Turkey](#)

Merkel says EU must resolve Polish problem in talks, not courts
Germany's Merkel tells Israel not to 'lose sight' of deal with Palestinians