

Lebanon vows to punish drug smugglers as Saudi import ban bites

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1619285830212698300

Sat, 2021-04-24 20:39

BEIRUT: Lebanon has vowed to punish drug smugglers after massive quantities of narcotics were intercepted and seized by Saudi Arabia and Greece.

Saudi authorities on Friday reported foiling an attempt to smuggle millions of amphetamine pills stashed in a pomegranate shipment from Lebanon at Dammam's King Abdulaziz Port. It said that five people involved in the case were arrested, four citizens and an expatriate.

There was another interception of a pomegranate shipment, also from Lebanon and also containing drugs, in Jeddah.

Shortly after the Saudi statement, Greek authorities announced seizing four tons of cannabis hidden in dessert-making machinery at Piraeus that was en route from Lebanon to Slovakia. The value of the drugs was estimated to be around €33 million (\$39 million).

The Greeks said they received help on the case from Saudi Arabia's drug enforcement agency.

Lebanon's Foreign Ministry said that smuggling drugs in containers or trucks carrying fruit and vegetables from Lebanon to foreign countries was punishable by law. "Smuggling drugs harms the Lebanese economy, farmers and reputation," the statement added.

It urged authorities to exert "utmost efforts" to control all smuggling operations on border crossings in light of the laws that criminalized drug use, trafficking and smuggling.

Saudi Arabia said that Lebanese fruit and vegetable imports would be banned from Sunday because authorities had noticed an increase in smuggling operations targeting the Kingdom using Lebanese products.

The Kingdom's ambassador to Lebanon, Walid Al-Bukhari, said that the safety and security of the country and its people were the motives behind the ban. "Drug smuggling into the Kingdom reveals the extent of the challenges from local and international criminal networks being faced by Saudi Arabia," he told local media.

A security source told Arab News that the seized cargo was not Lebanese but had a Syrian certificate of origin, transiting through Lebanon from Syria between April 10 and 15.

Ibrahim Tarshishi, who is the head of the Bekaa Farmers' Association, said Lebanon's agricultural producers were innocent of smuggling drugs into Saudi Arabia, which imported more than 50,000 tons of Lebanese produce every year. He expressed his fears about the ban's impact.

"Lebanese authorities must contact their Saudi counterparts as soon as possible to confirm that Lebanon has no intention whatsoever of harming the Kingdom," he told Arab News. "Saudi Arabia is the largest importing country of our agricultural produce. Exports were supposed to kick off in May. The

Saudi decision means that our exports will not reach further than Jordan and will not be transited through the Kingdom to the rest of the Gulf states. This is a disaster that threatens the whole agricultural sector in Lebanon." Lebanon did not have pomegranates to export and had been importing them from Syria, Egypt and Tunisia for the last 20 years, he said.

"We export our vegetables, citrus, peaches, pears, apricots and cherries to Saudi Arabia. This export relationship with Saudi Arabia was established 50 years ago and the exports are carried out by land, sea and air, and our work is completely legal."

Non-Lebanese agricultural cargo had transited through Lebanon and the drugs that were seized turned out to be smuggled in Syrian trucks, he said.

"Lebanese farmers have nothing to do with this matter. The cargo is controlled by Lebanese Customs. They go through a scanner at the Masnaa border crossing with Syria. However, scanners at Beirut airport have been damaged since the Beirut blast on Aug. 4. New scanners were provided but have not been installed yet. Therefore, cargo is emptied at the free zone where a customs' member handles the cargo before they are shipped."

The founding committee of the Lebanese-Saudi Friendship Association issued a statement expressing regret over the actions that had led the Kingdom to introduce the import ban. It was "proof of the regressive level" that Lebanon had reached due to some people trying "to take control of the country and its assets and seeking to jeopardize its public institutions," the statement added.

Lebanon's security bodies have pounced on many drug factories, especially ones producing Captagon pills in the Bekaa valley, as well as drugs to be smuggled abroad.

On April 10, Hassan Daqou was arrested over suspicions of drug dealing, production and smuggling. He is from the town of Tufail, which is 57 kilometers from Damascus.

The former mufti of Baalbek, Sheikh Ayman Al-Rifai, said that the Hermel region suffered from drug use, dealing and production.

"This has led to several social problems and family issues that we are trying to solve," he told Arab News, saying he wished that authorities would carry out more raids and arrests.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[Saudi Arabia](#)

Saudi Arabia bans fruits, vegetables from Lebanon after drug busts
Panic in Lebanon as desert locust swarms hit farmland

[Iran fuel tanker attacked off Syria: Monitor](#)

Sat, 2021-04-24 18:27

BEIRUT: An Iranian tanker was attacked off the coast of war-torn Syria Saturday, sparking a fire but not causing any casualties, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

State news agency SANA quoted the oil ministry as saying the fire erupted after "what was believed to be an attack by a drone from the direction of Lebanese waters".

The fire was extinguished, it said.

The Observatory was unable to say whether it was a drone attack or a missile

fired from a warship.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the attack near the Baniyas refinery in the regime-controlled coastal province of Tartus.

"It's the first such attack on an oil tanker, but the Baniyas terminal has been targeted in the past," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said.

Iran's Al-Alam television said the oil tanker that was hit on Saturday near Baniyas in Syria was one of three Iranian tankers that arrived a while ago at the oil terminal.

Early last year, Damascus said divers had planted explosives on offshore pipelines of the Baniyas refinery but the damage had not halted operations. Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes on Syrian soil since 2011, mostly targeting Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah forces as well as allied Syrian government troops.

On Thursday, Israeli strikes killed a Syrian officer east of Damascus, in apparent retaliation for a missile fired hours earlier from Syria towards a secretive nuclear site in southern Israel.

Before Syria's war, the country enjoyed relative energy autonomy, but production has plummeted during the war, pushing the government to rely on importing hydrocarbons.

Western sanctions on oil shipping, as well as US punitive measures against Iran, have complicated these imports.

Pre-war production was 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) in Syria.

But it stood at just 89,000 bpd in 2020, Syria's oil minister said in February, of which up to 80,000 came from Kurdish areas outside government control.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Iran](#)

Syrian missile exploding in Israel not intentional: US general
UN reiterates it is not involved in Syrian presidential election

[Protests shed light on Jerusalem's status in upcoming elections](#)

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1619277405352114800

Sat, 2021-04-24 18:20

AMMAN: The sudden escalation and spread of Palestinian protests in reaction to racist incitement by Jewish groups have brought the issue of the status of

occupied Jerusalem to center stage.

Majdi Khalidi, the senior diplomatic adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, told Arab News that contacts have been made with other Arab and Islamic countries around the world, calling on them to make public statements on the importance of elections that should take place in Jerusalem.

Khalidi said that no one can bypass the people of Jerusalem.

"What is happening reminds the world that East Jerusalem is an occupied territory and the capital of the Palestinian state," he said. "It shows that Jerusalem Palestinians must be allowed to participate in the elections."

Tor Wennesland, UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, condemned "all acts of violence" and called upon "all sides to exercise maximum restraint and avoid further escalation, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan and this politically charged time for all."

The UN coordinator's statement, which said that efforts are being made to de-escalate the situation, failed to condemn the racist calls for the death of Arabs, nor did it reiterate the rights of Jerusalem Palestinians to participate in the upcoming Palestinian legislative elections.

Ayman Safadi, Jordanian deputy prime minister and foreign minister, called on Israel not to play with fire.

"Jerusalem is a red line," he said. "Any attempts against it are tantamount to playing with fire. The Israeli occupiers have an international obligation to stop the racist violations against the people of the old city of Jerusalem."

Safadi described the attackers as representing "hatred and racism."

The Israeli media reported a high-level security meeting for the defense ministry in Tel Aviv concluded that there is a need for Israel to prepare for escalation that could take a long time and spread throughout the occupied territories. The chief of the army staff, Aviv Kohavi, who headed the security meeting, canceled a planned trip to the US because of the escalation of tensions and violence.

Anees Sweidan, director of the Arab Affairs department in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) believes that the protests in Jerusalem will strengthen the hands of those calling for Jerusalemites to be included in the May 22 elections.

However, Radi Jirai, a former Fatah prisoner who believes that the future now is for Palestinians and Israelis to agree on a single state with equal rights, told Arab News that the explosion that was initiated in Jerusalem will not be good news for Abbas.

"President Abbas is in an unenviable position," he said. "His support to the protesters will mean that he will have a hard time if pressed by Israelis to calm the situation down."

Khalil Assali, the publisher of the East Jerusalem news site Akhbarelbalad, told Arab News that politicians should not interfere or try to hijack the protests.

"Leave the youth of Jerusalem to oppose Israeli racism and to Jerusalemites, who called for holding the tarawih (post-isha prayers) at the steps of Damascus gate in defiance of Israel's unilaterally imposed ban against the use of the stairs by the Palestinians of the city," he said.

Aviv Tataraski, of the Ir-Amim NGO, which is focused on the human rights situation in East Jerusalem, told Arab News that the real problem is the police.

“If the police wanted, they could easily disperse or keep them at bay,” he said.

Tataraski said Israeli police turned a blind eye to calls for the death of Arabs by the extremist groups while brutally attacking Palestinians who just came for prayer, shopping, or were protesting with calls of Allah-o-Akbar. He said that the real power of Palestinians is their numbers.

“When the Israeli police decided to block people from sitting and gathering at the Damascus gate without any justification, the motive was clear,” Tataraski said. “The police wanted to show Palestinians that even in this central place they have to bow down to Israeli whims.”

Tataraski, who was an eyewitness to the events over the past few days, said the actions against Palestinians have backfired.

Wadie Abu Nassar, director of the Haifa-based International Center for Consultations, told Arab News that Israel has no intention to approve or disapprove Palestinian elections in Jerusalem.

Abu Nassar insists that “nobody is pressing Israel seriously, even not Hamas, to allow Palestinian elections in Jerusalem.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Jerusalem](#)

Jerusalem tension triggers Gaza-Israel fire exchange

130 Europe-bound migrants feared dead off Libyan coast

Author:

AP

ID:

1619205056425440000

Fri, 2021-04-23 22:23

CAIRO: More than 100 Europe-bound migrants are feared dead in a boat wreck off Libya, independent rescue groups said, in the latest loss of life as attempts to cross the Mediterranean increase during the warmer months. Humanitarian organizations have accused the Libyan coast guard and European authorities of failing to meet their responsibilities to save lives.

A Libyan coast guard official told The Associated Press that they searched for the boat but could not find it with their limited resources.

SOS Mediterranee, which operates the rescue vessel Ocean Viking, said late Thursday that the capsized rubber boat, which was initially carrying around 130 people, was spotted in the Mediterranean Sea northeast of the Libyan capital, Tripoli.

The aid vessel did not find any survivors, but could see at least ten bodies near the wreck.

"We think of the lives that have been lost and of the families who might never have certainty as to what happened to their loved ones," it said in a statement.

The migrant traffic has raised the question among European Union countries and Libya over who is responsible for saving those at sea.

The European humanitarian organization said that those missing will likely join the 350 people who have drowned in the sea so far this year.

It accused governments of failing to provide search and rescue operations. In the years since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that ousted and killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, war-torn Libya has emerged as the dominant transit point for migrants fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East. Smugglers often pack desperate families into ill-equipped rubber boats that stall and founder along the perilous Central Mediterranean route.

"These are the human consequences of policies which fail to uphold international law and the most basic of humanitarian imperatives," tweeted Eugenio Ambrosi, Chief of Staff for the International Organization for Migration.

Alarm Phone, a crisis hotline for migrants in distress in the Mediterranean, said that it had been in contact with the boat in distress for nearly ten hours before it capsized.

Alarm Phone said in a statement that it had notified European and Libyan authorities of the GPS position of the boat but only non-state rescue groups actively searched for it.

Alarm Phone accused European authorities of refusing to coordinate a search operation, leaving it solely in the hands of the Libyan Coast Guard.

Libya Coast Guard Spokesman Commander Masoud Ibrahim Masoud described allegations that they had been negligent as untrue.

“We coordinated the search operation,” he told The Associated Press. “The ships kept searching in the sea for more than 24 hours but the waves were very rough.”

Masoud told the AP that the Libyan coast guard had received around noon on Wednesday two rescue alerts from two different rubber boats in distress to the east of Tripoli. A patrol vessel was immediately dispatched and rescued 106 migrants, including women and children, who were aboard one of the two boats. Two bodies were also pulled out of the water near the capsized boat. He said the same vessel continued to search, but visibility was low and seas rough. He said the vessel eventually returned to port so that the other migrants onboard could receive medical attention.

In the meantime, he said Libyan authorities asked three merchant ships and Ocean Viking to look for the missing rubber boat, until the Libyan patrol vessel could join them again.

In recent years, the European Union has partnered with Libya’s coast guard and other local groups to stem such dangerous sea crossings. Rights groups, however, say those policies leave migrants at the mercy of armed groups or confined in squalid detention centers rife with abuses.

“We are not as equipped as the US coast guard and the support we get from the EU does not meet our needs,” said Masoud.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Libyan coast](#)

[migrants](#)

[Mediterranean sea](#)

34 migrants dead after boat capsizes off Djibouti: IOMUN says 41 Europe-bound migrants drown in Mediterranean

[Panic in Lebanon as desert locust swarms hit farmland](#)

Fri, 2021-04-23 19:42

BEIRUT: The arrival of locust swarms in Lebanon has caused panic among the country's farmers.

Videos showing the insects flying over farmland in the towns of Ersal and Ras Baalbek in Bekaa circulated on social media, with the hashtag #locust trending in Lebanon on Friday as people made sarcastic comments about the latest crisis to hit the beleaguered country.

The Lebanese military said that helicopters had begun spraying pesticides over Baalbek and Ras Baalbek to "fight and eradicate" the desert locusts.

Ersal Mayor Bassel Al-Hujairi recounted seeing "millions" of locusts flying and attacking cherry trees and crops.

"Locusts have invaded one-third of Ersal," he told Arab News. "As we rushed to find out the size of the disaster, locust swarms had already gone across the town, which means that in the early hours of Friday locusts were able to cross 15 km, heading from barren areas toward Ersal. If these swarms multiply, they can cover the sun."

Ersal was home to more than two million cherry, apple and apricot trees that were located on the town's southern and eastern sides, said the mayor, and locusts were still on the northern side of the town.

"I hope wind will not take them to other directions," he added.

The swarms arrived in Lebanon after invading Syria, Iraq and Jordan.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said the appearance of desert locusts in Syria and Jordan was an "unusual and rare" event caused by several days of strong southerly winds and high temperatures that brought the adult groups to these areas.

It added that while the swarms did not represent a "large-scale invasion" and could be controlled, it feared that some of the mature adults may lay eggs and reproduce.

The ministries of agriculture and defense have mobilized to address the problem as Lebanon is a member of the FAO's Commission for Controlling the Desert Locust in the Central Region.

Agriculture Minister Abbas Mortada inspected Ersal and said that ministry teams had witnessed "locust waves" and were able to define their approximate scope.

"But we still have fears that these locusts may reproduce and invade fields and farms. People are filming the locust swarms, but they are still relatively far."

Ras Baalbek Mayor Menhem Mhanna reported "huge numbers" of locusts over the town's barren areas and expressed his fears about these swarms reaching inhabited areas.

"Locusts will not find anything in Lebanon since the politicians have devoured everything," said one person on social media, while another said: "Lebanon's politicians are more dangerous than these swarms."

"Locusts are the cherry on the top to be added to Lebanon's economic collapse, political gridlock and starvation," read another comment.

The crisis has brought the Lebanese back to the beginning of the 20th century, when swarms stripped the country of almost all its vegetation.

At that time Lebanon was already grappling with economic hardship and a double blockade by both the Ottoman Empire and the Allied Forces, resulting in a famine that led to more than a third of the population dying.

In 2013, historians and researchers Dr. Christian Taoutel and Father Pierre Wittouck released a book compiling the previously unpublished French chronicles of Jesuit priests during the famine called "The Lebanese people in the turmoil of the Great War of 1914-1918."

According to the book, "famine started with a hungry swarm of locusts that devoured everything, where the Lebanese called the year of 1915 'The Year of Locusts' which were impossible to control."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[locusts](#)

[Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#)

Disaster looms as locusts threaten livelihood of millions in region
Plague to protein: Israeli firm seeks to put locusts on the menu