

Israel returns 2 shepherds to Syria amid reports of swap

Author:

Thu, 2021-02-18 23:22

JERUSALEM: The Israeli army on Thursday said it has returned two shepherds who crossed into Israeli territory back to Syria, a development that an Israeli official said was part of a prisoner swap that Syria had reported the previous day.

Syria's official news agency SANA said Wednesday that with the help of Russian mediation, Syria has negotiated the release of two Syrians held by Israel in exchange for an Israeli woman who had entered Syria by mistake. It made no mention of the two shepherds in that report.

Israeli media reported that a business jet took off from Tel Aviv for Moscow on Thursday night amid expectations that an Israeli woman held by the Syrian regime would soon be transferred to Israel, by way of Russia.

The reports said an Israeli government coordinator was on the plane and would bring the young woman back with him as part of the swap. She has not been identified by name, and Israeli media only reported that she is a 25-year-old originally from the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Modiin Ilit.

The two Syrians were identified as Nihal Al-Makt, who had been under house arrest in her village in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights, and Ziyab Qahmouz, detained in 2016 and serving 14 years in Israeli jails.

Al-Makt, SANA said, was serving a three-year suspended sentence in addition to reporting daily for a year to Israeli authorities. She said those restrictions were lifted on Wednesday and speaking to Syrian Al-Ikhbariya TV through Skype, she said she was now free.

Qahmouz reportedly refused to leave Israeli custody as he wanted to go back to his village in the Golan and not be deported to Syria. According to the Israeli side, Al-Makt also refused to be deported to Syria. The report did not say what charges the two Syrians had faced.

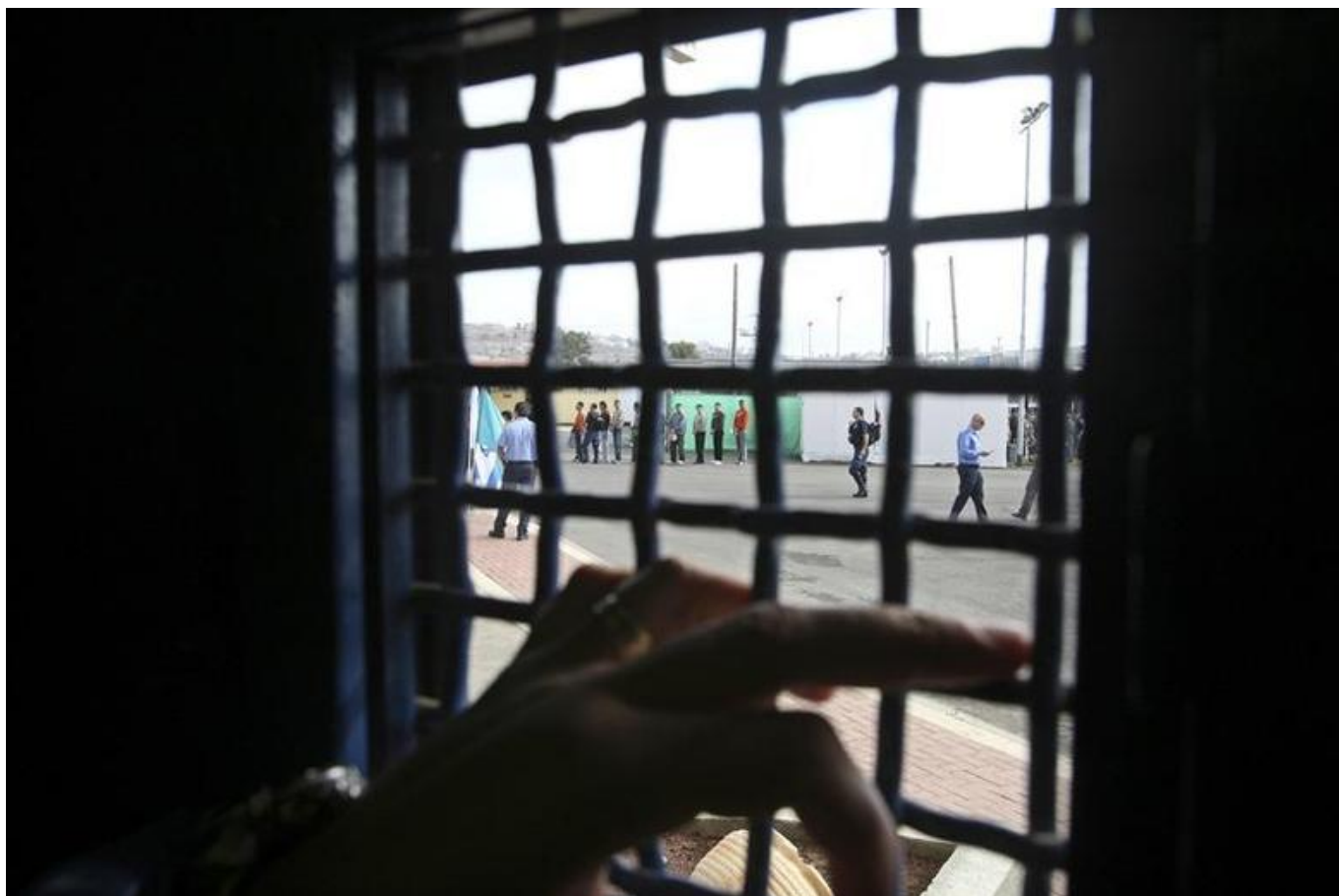
Israel captured the Golan in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed the territory in 1981, a move that is not widely recognized internationally.

The Israeli army said the two shepherds, whom it did not identify, had been apprehended in the Golan Heights in recent weeks after crossing in from Syria and that their release was ordered by the government.

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter with the media, said the release of the shepherds was part of the deal with Syria.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office declined comment.

Syria's SANA later said that two more Syrians – likely the two shepherds – returned home to their villages in Quneitra province in Syria on Thursday, in continuation of the mediated swap that began a day earlier. They were identified as Mohamad Hussein and Tareq Al-Obeidan.



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Author:

Thu, 2021-02-18 22:18

Algeria dissolves lower house of parliament, calls early legislative elections – President Tebboune on state TV.

Developing...



[Qatar's emir meets Lebanese PM-designate Saad Hariri](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-02-18 21:08

RIYADH: Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani held a meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri in the capital Doha, Qatar News Agency (QNA) reported on Thursday.

During the meeting, they discussed the latest developments in Lebanon and efforts related to forming a government.

Hariri, who is on an official visit to the country, said in a tweet following the talks that he briefed the Qatari emir on the most prominent developments in Lebanon.

Sheikh Tamim affirmed Doha's support for Beirut and called on "all Lebanese parties to prioritize national interest to accelerate the formation of a new government to face the crises and challenges facing Lebanon."

Lebanese President Michel Aoun assigned Hariri with forming a cabinet on Oct. 22 last year.



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Lebanon MPs bicker over World Bank loan for the poor Lebanese president blasts Hariri over 'inaccuracies and incorrect information'

[US, Europeans urge Iran to keep allowing nuclear inspections](#)

Thu, 2021-02-18 20:24

LONDON: Top European and US officials are urging Iran to keep allowing United Nations nuclear inspections to salvage a 2015 deal between Tehran and world powers and to cool global tensions over Iran's atomic ambitions.

The foreign ministers of France, Germany and Britain met Thursday in Paris to discuss security in Iran and the region, and US Secretary of State Tony Blinken joined them by videoconference.

The ministers expressed their "shared fundamental security interest in upholding the nuclear non-proliferation regime," Britain said.

"Regarding Iran, the E3 and the United States expressed their shared fundamental security interest in upholding the nuclear non-proliferation regime and ensuring that Iran can never develop a nuclear weapon," the foreign ministry said.

The ministers also "expressed their shared concerns over Iran's recent actions to produce both uranium enriched up to 20% and uranium metal," it said in a statement.

Iran has said it will stop part of International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of its nuclear facilities next week if the West doesn't implement its own commitments under the 2015 deal. The accord has been unraveling since Donald Trump pulled the US out of the agreement in 2018.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned that Iran was "playing with fire" and could jeopardize efforts to get the United States back as a signatory now that Trump no longer is in office.

"We are the ones who have kept this agreement alive in recent years, and now it's about supporting the United States in taking the road back into the agreement," Maas told reporters in Paris.

"The measures that have been taken in Tehran and may be taken in the coming days are anything but helpful. They endanger the Americans' path back into this agreement. The more pressure that is exerted, the more politically difficult it will be to find a solution," he said.

The accord aims to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear bomb, which it says it doesn't want to do. Tehran has been using its violations of the deal to put pressure on the remaining signatories – France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China – to provide more incentives to Iran to offset crippling sanctions the Trump administration re-imposed after pulling out of the 2015 deal.

The United States is working closely with allies to engage and coordinate about the future of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

“Iran is a long way from compliance,” Psaki told an online briefing, saying the US government was focused on preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the president of the European Council spoke with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani this week to try to end the diplomatic standoff.

Michel said that he told Rouhani that the European Union backed full implementation of the nuclear deal.

“Preserving a space for diplomacy, underpinned by positive steps, is crucial at this stage,” Michel tweeted.

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN nuclear watchdog, is scheduled to travel to Iran this weekend to find a solution that allows the agency to continue inspections.

In Iran, Rouhani expressed hope Thursday that the Biden administration will rejoin the accord and lift the US sanctions that the United States re-imposed under Trump, according to state television.

Ahead of Thursday’s talks in Paris, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price urged Iran to “provide full and timely cooperation with the IAEA.”

He insisted that “the path for diplomacy remains open...We hope to be able to pursue it together with our allies and partners.”

(With AP and Reuters)



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Bolton: Iran has never abandoned idea of acquiring nuclear capability
Europe, US to meet on Iran as nuclear deadline looms

Beirut blast investigation falters as judge removed from case

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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1613667939763835100

Thu, 2021-02-18 17:01

BEIRUT: Six months on from the deadly explosion in Beirut Port, the investigation into its causes has gone back to square one. Lebanon's court of cassation on Thursday removed Judge Fadi Sawan from the case, after a request from two of the former ministers he had charged – Ali Hassan Khalil and Ghazi Zeaier.

Youssef Fenianos, former minister of public works, was due to be questioned on Thursday but said he would not turn up because he did not receive a formal summons, he claimed.

The court's unanimous decision was expected. Two months ago, Khalil and Zeaier, who had also refused to be questioned over the Beirut blast, submitted a request to remove Sawan from the case because of "legitimate suspicions" over his neutrality.

A judicial source told Arab News: "The court's decision was based, in addition to 'legitimate suspicion,' on another argument: Sawan's house in Ashrafieh was damaged by the blast, (for which) the judge received 13 million Lebanese pounds from the High Relief Committee in compensation."

Sawan has faced political pressure since the investigation into the blast – which killed 202 people, injured more than 6,000, wrecked thousands of homes and destroyed Lebanon's main grain silo – began, having issued several arrest warrants against senior port officials and security officers.

He was also criticized for summoning the prime minister of the caretaker

government, along with current and former ministers, to question them about 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which had been stored unsafely for more than six years at the port.

The media, too, has been campaigning against Sawan. On Thursday, he was accused by Lebanon's pro-Hezbollah newspaper Al-Akhbar of "heresy."

Marie-Claude Najm, Lebanese justice minister, is expected to nominate another judge to take over from Sawan, but any appointment must be approved by the Supreme Judicial Council.

The judicial source also told Arab News: "The new judge will study the case again and might annul the decisions of Sawan regarding the measures taken against those who have been detained."

The source described any new judge agreeing to handle the investigation as "suicidal."

Media and activists criticizing the state's performance are also the subjects of political pressure. On Thursday, activist Rami Fanj was released after being arrested on Wednesday for feeding the poor in the city. A campaign was launched on social media and in Tripoli to voice support and solidarity with Fanj.

Fanj said he was interrogated about "the source of funding to distribute food." He added: "Even if they consider that feeding the poor is a crime, we will not stop."

Meanwhile, the parliamentary Media and Communications Committee has summoned the chairmen of local TV stations to "address some media incidents that have occurred lately," according to the head of the committee and Hezbollah lawmaker Hussein Al-Haj Hassan.

Al-Haj Hassan said: "Some mistakes must be addressed, such as conspiring to incite sedition, threatening national stability and security, inciting sectarian and confessional strife, and falsely accusing someone of murder, without relying on investigations." Hassan was likely referring to widespread accusations that Hezbollah was responsible for the killing of the prominent anti-Hezbollah critic and activist Luqman Slim two weeks ago. Several pro-Hezbollah figures have launched their own protests over those accusations.

Joseph Kossaifi, president of Lebanon's Syndicate of Press Editors, revealed to Arab News that a meeting will be held on Friday in the presence of political media offices' heads, asking politicians to "carefully and responsibly choose their words while talking on TV channels in order not to hold media outlets responsible for any insults and accusations."

"When MP Al-Haj Hassan summoned the chairmen of TV stations to parliament, he did not consult us. Nobody can cover the mouths of journalists or anyone else. The country is in complete chaos and politicians must choose their words carefully," added Kossaifi.

Lebanon's Kataeb and Progressive Socialist Party criticized what it described

as an “attempt to make Lebanon a police state and oppress others’ opinions and media freedom.”



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Lebanese ex-army chief testifies in Beirut port blast probe