Lebanese wait for answers on missing relatives in Syria after man 'freed' in Hama

Many families in Lebanon are watching developments in neighbouring Syria, waiting for answers on loved ones long detained in the country

3 min read

The New Arab Staff
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Rebels captured Hama on Thursday, following a lightning offensive in northwestern Syria [Muhammad Haj Kadour/AFP/Getty]

Lebanese whose relatives went missing during the country's Civil War have regained hope of meeting their loved ones after Syrian rebels reportedly freed dozens of Lebanese and Syrian detainees on Thursday.

Opposition groups in Syria have captured the two key cities of Aleppo and Hama and are advancing onto Homs, barely a week since launching a lightning offensive on 27 November.

The rebels said they seized Hama's central prison and released its inmates. By the afternoon, regime forces admitted losing control of the city,

strategically located on the M5 highway between Aleppo and the Syrian capital Damascus.

Later on Thursday, news arose that a man from northern Lebanon who had been imprisoned in Syria for around four decades was among those released, but this is yet to be verified.

Ali, whose image went viral on social media after he was reported as being among 100 Lebanese nationals freed, was arrested when he was 18 years old. He is now 56, having spent 38 years in prison.

He hails from the village of Tashaa in Akkar, a rural and largely marginalised district of north Lebanon, according to reports.

"Yesterday, a picture circulated on social media with the name of Ali Hassan Ali...the townspeople noticed the great resemblance he had" to his male relatives, his brother told *The New Arab*'s sister site, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*.

"We are more than 90 percent sure that he is my brother, Ali, but we'd rather wait...we are trying to contact the person who took the photo, or appeared in the photo with him, so we can confirm his identity," he told told *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*'s Lebanon correspondent, Rita Jammal.

Ali was taken by Syrian forces in the early 1980s on the pretext that he belonged to the Islamic Unification (Tawheed) Movement that was founded in the city of Tripoli amid Lebanon's multi-faceted Civil War.

He wanted to join the Lebanese army, his brother said. The family hadn't heard of him for months, and only found out 20 years later by a fellow Palestinian inmate that Ali was held in Syria.

'Government needs to act immediately'

Syria was largely involved in the Lebanon's 1975-1990 conflict, along with other regional and international powers, and pulled out its forces in April 2005 following large protests against Syria's military presence.

It is believed that thousands of Lebanese were taken to Syria by regime forces before the end of the war or during the Syrian military domination of Lebanon, but Damascus has long denied that it was keeping any Lebanese detainees.

The families of those who went missing have rallied ever since to uncover the fate of their loved ones, but with very little progress.

Families of those who went missing now await anxiously to receive news – whether good or bad.

The Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, an NGO formed in 1982, confirmed in a statement on Friday news of Lebanese inmates being freed in Hama.

The committee called on the Lebanese state to bear its responsibilities and take immediate measures to verify the identities of those released.

"Until now, we have no way to accurately confirm the identities of the released individuals, except one person [which is] Ali Hassan Ali from Akkar, whose name we have listed," the statement said.

"We hope to confirm the accuracy of this information, which does not rule out there may be more" released prisoners, the committee added.

The committee said its record of missing persons included other nationalities and not just Lebanese, adding that the state had a humane duty of helping uncover their fates.

It called on anyone who has knowledge on the detainees to come forward.

The New Arab tried to contact Act for the Disappeared, another Lebanese organisation founded in 2010 with the mission on finding answers on missing persons in Syria.