

Lebanese man missing for 40 years freed from Syrian prison, family says

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December 7, 2024 7:29 PM GMT+2



[1/2]Muammar Al-Ali, who says he has been searching for his brother in Syria, who went missing for nearly 40 years, gestures during an interview with Reuters in Berqayel, Lebanon December 6, 2024. REUTERS/Omar Ibrahim

BEIRUT, Dec 7 (Reuters) - Muammar Al-Ali knew at once that the bearded man filmed after being freed by Syrian rebels from a prison in Hama when the city fell to them this week was his brother, Ali, who had been missing for nearly 40 years.

"Your heart tells you this is your brother," said Al-Ali at his home in northern Lebanon.

They had not yet been able to make contact since seeing a video of him posted online on Thursday, Al-Ali said, and a Syrian journalist in Hama told them the man they thought was Ali had totally lost his memory and could not say who he was.

Ali Al-Ali was arrested aged 18 at a checkpoint by the Syrian army when it was in Lebanon during the country's 1975-90 civil war, said his family, who spent decades knocking on every door searching for him.

It was all in vain, until Syrian rebels this week took city after city in a lightning advance, freeing thousands of prisoners from the notorious Syrian prison system.

Thousands of families now hope that they may be reunited with loved-ones held in Syrian prisons during the Assad family's half century in power.

More than 100,000 Syrians are thought to have gone missing during the country's 13-year insurgency, many of them held in prison, according to human rights groups.

Social media has been flooded with videos of Syrian detainees leaving prisons after the fall of Aleppo, Hama and Suweida to rebels, with some reunited with their families.

Around 700 Lebanese people are also thought by relatives to be held in Syria, taken during the three decades Syrian troops were in their country, many of them held for their political views.

Russian news agencies confirmed his arrival to the capital on Sunday after speaking to a Kremlin source.

Syrian officials have said that there were no more Lebanese prisoners in Syrian jails.

Fatima Kabbara, from northern Lebanon, said her brother Mohammed went missing in 1985, kidnapped by a Lebanese militia before being handed over to Syrian authorities.

People who have since managed to get out of Syrian detention centres told the family they had seen her brother, a father of three, at a Syrian military intelligence detention centre in Damascus.