What do we know about Lebanese freed from Syrian prisons?

A man identified as Lebanese and missing from Akkar since the '80s, was reportedly freed by Syrian opposition forces from the main prison in Hama, recently taken during their surprise offensive.

OLJ / By **L'Orient Today staff**, 07 December 2024 19:53
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Syrian anti-regime fighters patrol in the recently captured city of Hama, Dec. 6, 2024. (Credit: Mohammad Haj Kadour/AFP)

Special portfolio
The fall of the Assad regime

Much has been brought to the surface amid the Syrian opposition's offensive in Syria, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). One such rekindled issue is the case

of Lebanese missing since the 1975-1990 Civil War. After the capture of Aleppo last week and then Hama on Thursday, "hundreds of prisoners" were released from these two major cities' prisons, according to the opposition groups. Among the now-freed detainees of the regime are at least one Lebanese who had been held there since the 1980s.

What we know

• A video of an elderly, bearded man released from Hama prison in northern Syria has been circulating online since Thursday. It was published by the Syrian media outlet "Zaman al-Wasl" and shows a man in a beige jacket and beanie next to a man wearing a vest with the insignia "Press", presumably in front of the city's prison, which has just fallen into rebel hands. The journalist announces the capture of the town and the release of prisoners from the "central prison." The man beside him murmurs "*Allahou akbar* [God is great]."

• The man's photo went viral. He has been identified by the inhabitants of his native village as Ali Hussein al-Ali, a Lebanese from Tasheh in the Akkar region who has been missing for 39 years. He was arrested at a checkpoint in the North in 1985 by the Syrian authorities for alleged membership with the Islamic Unity Party, a political movement advocating a Greater Syria and opposing Arab identity — and a movement that the Assad regime fiercely opposed in return. Over the years, his family made several enquiries about his fate but never received a clear answer from the Syrian authorities.

• Since the video first surfaced, his family and residents of Tasheh have been calling on Lebanese authorities to follow up the case and ensure his safe return home. They only learned of his presence in Hama through the video and have not yet managed to contact him directly.

• Information is circulating that hints at there being other Lebanese who were released from the same Hama prison, but there has been no confirmation as to how many or who they are.

• Contacted by L'Orient-Le Jour, the NGO ACT for the Disappeared, which works to elucidate the fate of missing persons and support their families, and the Committee of Families of Kidnapped and Missing Persons in Lebanon declined to confirm the identity of the man in the video, adding that they would issue a

statement at a later date. They did, however, mention two names circulating in the lists of released detainees, which have yet to be confirmed.

The background

• Rebels led by HTS launched a surprise offensive from their stronghold of Idlib (northwest) on Nov. 27, seizing dozens of localities, most of Aleppo (north) and Hama, and advancing towards the city of Homs on Friday. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 800 people were killed in the fighting. The capture of Hama, a strategic city, was a further blow to President Bashar al-Assad.

• When they took Aleppo on Nov. 29, the opposition forces also released prisoners from regime jails.

• More than 600 Lebanese were detained by the Damascus regime during the Lebanese Civil War and the subsequent occupation of the country by Syrian troops (1990-2005). No information on their fate was ever made available, and only a few have been released when Syria withdrew from Lebanon.

• For years, the file on the disappeared has been neglected, and the work of the State on this subject has been considered insufficient and lacking in depth, with the authorities often closing cases rather than carry out serious investigations, according to ACT for the disappeared, interviewed at the end of August by OLJ.

• The question of relations between Beirut and Damascus remains controversial, with one part of the political class refusing to deal with the Assad regime since the start of the Syrian civil war, while the other is in favor of the government. In June 2023, Lebanon abstained from voting on a decision by the U.N. General Assembly to create the "Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic."

• ACT reports that between 7,000 and 10,000 people, from all regions of Lebanon and all socio-economic backgrounds, have gone missing or been abducted since the start of the Lebanese Civil War. The majority of these missing persons are civilians, victims of arbitrary arrests and detentions carried

out by the various forces and militias involved in the conflict. Other organizations estimate that some 17,000 people were abducted or disappeared.

• The fate of tens of thousands of Syrians who have disappeared, been abducted and detained by all parties to the conflict in Syria, particularly in the Syrian regime's prisons and detention centers, is still unknown.

Reactions

The president of the Committee of Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, Wadad Halwani, held a press conference on Saturday in the Gebran Khalil Gebran garden in downtown Beirut. "We ask the outgoing government and the security and judicial authorities to ensure the identity of the prisoners released from the central prison of Hama, and to consider this issue as an emergency," Halwani said.

Kataeb leader Samy Gemayel called on the Lebanese government to "give the highest priority" to the issue of detainees in Syria. The aim, he said, was to "gather the necessary information and send, as soon as possible, specialized teams to determine the fate of the detainees, including Boutros Khawand," a member of the party's political bureau kidnapped in 1992. "The Lebanese authorities have a responsibility not to abandon their citizens ... after decades of inaction and submission to the criminal Syrian regime. It is high time to close this file," Gemayel wrote on X.

Former Aounist MP Ziad Assouad spoke of "good news for all Lebanese," citing "reliable sources confirming that the Syrian opposition has released Lebanese from the Hama prison. If this information is true [former President] Michel Aoun will be the first to be held to account, because he abandoned the case and considered them dead."

In general, responses to the topic online criticize the Lebanese state for its lack of responsiveness on this issue.