

Sudan's President Omar Al-Bashir arrives in Damascus in first such visit by Arab leader to Syria since crisis – Syrian state media

Sun, 2018-12-16 23:15

AMMAN: Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir arrived in the Syrian capital Damascus on Sunday, the first such visit by an Arab leader since the start of the Syrian conflict, Syrian state media said.

President Bashar Assad welcomed him at the airport, official photos showed. Many Arab countries have shunned Assad since the conflict that began early in 2011 after protests calling for his downfall swept Syria.

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Israeli general denies role as US slaps sanctions for arms sale

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-16 22:33

JERUSALEM: A retired Israeli Army general hit by US sanctions for alleged involvement in the South Sudan conflict denied the charges on Sunday, saying they were based on false information and that he was available for investigation by the Trump administration.

The US Treasury on Friday slapped sanctions on Israel Ziv and three firms he controls, accusing him of using an agricultural consultancy as cover for weapons sales worth \$150 million to the Juba government while also arming the opposition.

“He (Ziv) has also reportedly planned to organize attacks by mercenaries on South Sudanese oil fields and infrastructure, in an effort to create a problem that only his company and affiliates could solve,” a Treasury statement said.

Interviewed by Israel’s Army Radio, Ziv said he had never trafficked in weaponry and called the charges against him “ludicrous, baseless, completely divorced from reality.”

“We have an amazing agriculture project there ... that many communities depend on. Tens of thousands of people are employed through this project and it feeds the South Sudan market. So anyone who claims this project is a cover should come see it.”

The Trump administration has championed international arms embargoes against South Sudan to pressure President Salva Kiir into ending the country’s civil war and humanitarian crisis.

Two South Sudanese nationals, Obac William Olawo and Gregory Vasili, were named alongside Ziv in Friday’s US Treasury sanctions notice. Neither was immediately available for comment.

“This is not the first time the (US) administration has used sanctions to enforce its foreign policy,” Ziv said.

“I am approachable ... I want to believe in the decency of the administration. And they are welcome to come, to check, to investigate. We will open up everything for them.”

South Sudan erupted in conflict in 2013 after Kiir sacked Riek Machar as vice president. Ethnically charged fighting soon spread, shutting down oil fields and forcing millions to flee.

At least 383,000 South Sudanese have died as a result of the war, through combat, starvation, disease or other factors, according to a recent study by

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine researchers.

Under pressure from governments in East Africa and from UN and Western donors, Machar's group, other rebel factions and the government in September signed the peace accord under which he will again become vice president.



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[North Cyprus journalist takes on Turkey's mighty Erdogan](#)

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-16 22:27

NICOSIA: Jail time, angry mobs and assassination attempts – editor Sener Levent has paid a price for challenging Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and authorities in breakaway northern Cyprus through his tiny newspaper.

Alongside the stacks of old papers on his desk in northern Nicosia, a luminous screen displays footage from security cameras at his office's entrances. The cameras are part of protective measures in place since gun attacks in 2011 targeted Levent, who has run the leftist daily Afrika for the past 20 years.

“There is always a price you pay for freedom of expression,” said the 70-year-old Turkish Cypriot, grey hair combed back and sporting a mischievous grin.

“We paid this price... but I believe that a person should get rid of his fears.”

In January, hundreds of protesters attacked the paper’s offices after it ran an article criticizing a Turkish military offensive against the Kurdish border enclave of Afrin in Syria.

“Afrin, a second occupation by Turkey” after Cyprus, ran the article’s bold headline.

Levent is a native of Cyprus, a Mediterranean island whose northern third has been under Turkish military control since 1974.

Turkish troops invaded that year in response to a coup backed by the military junta then in power in Athens that sought to unite the island with Greece – a union staunchly opposed by Turkish Cypriots. Only Ankara recognizes the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). It also bankrolls the entity.

Ankara regards the use of the term “occupation” for its deployment of some 35,000 troops in the TRNC – as well as criticism of its operations against the Kurds in Syria – as defamation. After Afrika’s article on Afrin, Erdogan called on Ankara’s “brothers in north Cyprus to give the necessary response.”

The following day, a crowd of ultranationalists attacked the offices of Afrika – a tiny daily with a 1,500 circulation in a statelet of around 300,000 people – as Turkish Cypriot police stood back and watched.

For media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF), “the hunt for critical media conducted by Erdogan’s government” is so widespread that “we can fear a collateral effect in Cyprus.”

Turkey ranks 157th out of 180 countries on RSF’s 2018 press freedom index.

Ankara holds more than 160 journalists in detention, according to P24, a platform that promotes editorial independence in Turkey.

Contacted by AFP, Turkey’s embassy in northern Cyprus refused to comment on “unfounded allegations” that Ankara interferes with the media. But the head of RSF’s European Union and Balkans desk, Pauline Ades-Mevel, said “a freelance journalist critical of Turkey like Sener Levent can fear the worst.”

Levent currently faces three separate trials in north Cyprus for “defaming a foreign leader,” “insulting religion” and “publishing fake news with the intent to create fear and panic among the population,” his lawyer Tacan Reynar said.

He faces up to five years in prison for the article on Afrin and for

republishing a cartoon from social media of a Greek statue urinating on Erdogan's head captioned: "Through Greek eyes." To avoid possible arrest, Levent shuns travel to Turkey, a country he says "is no longer a democracy."

The TRNC leadership has said Turkish Cypriots cannot be extradited to Turkey, and Levent also sees EU citizenship as his protection.

"They know in Turkey that they can't really do what they are doing to their citizens to a European citizen," said Levent, a seasoned campaigner for reunification with the island's Greek Cypriot south, an EU member state since 2004.

His two-decade career has long brought pressure from the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

In 2002, he and colleague Memduh Ener were jailed for nearly two months after "offending" the Turkish Cypriots' veteran leader Rauf Denktash.

The previous year, an assailant who considered Levent a "traitor" tried on two separate occasions to gun him down.

He has carried a revolver ever since, but remains undaunted.

"The thing that upsets me the most is the silence of people in front of injustice," he said.

And so, every night, the pages of Afrika continue to roll out from an old-fashioned press in Nicosia. But Levent remains modest.

"The true heroes are those people who are living today in Syria, in Yemen," countries blighted by war where "women have to face incredible dangers every day."



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Turkey says Trump working on extraditing wanted cleric Gulen
Bomb kills 8 in Syrian town held by Turkey-backed forces

[Israel irked at Australia's 'mistaken' W. Jerusalem recognition](#)

Author:

Sun, 2018-12-16 22:22

JERUSALEM, DUBAI: Israel signaled displeasure on Sunday with Australia's recognition of West Jerusalem as its capital, with a confidant of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying it was a mistake to gainsay Israeli control over the whole city. The premier stayed silent on Canberra's move at a weekly Israeli Cabinet meeting.

US ally Bahrain has meanwhile defended Australia's formal recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, saying the move would not affect a future Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Australia's government announced the decision on Saturday, reversing decades

of Middle East policy, but said it would not immediately move its embassy there.

The US in May opened its embassy in Jerusalem.

The Arab League had issued a statement criticizing the Australian decision as “blatantly biased toward the positions and policies of the Israeli occupation.”

But Bahraini minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa described the statement as “mere rhetoric and irresponsible.”

“Australia’s stance does not impact the legitimate Palestinian demands, first among them being East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and it does not contradict the Arab Peace Initiative,” he tweeted on Saturday.

The status of Jerusalem, home to sites holy to the Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths, is one of the biggest obstacles to a peace agreement between Israel and Palestinians who want East Jerusalem recognized as the capital of a Palestinian state.

Israel regards all of Jerusalem as its capital, including the eastern sector that it annexed in a move not recognized internationally, after the 1967 war. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as capital of the state they hope to found in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The UN says the status of Jerusalem can be resolved only by negotiations.

Israel has diplomatic relations with only two Arab states, Egypt and Jordan. Netanyahu has on several occasions hinted at warmer relations with Gulf Arab states and made a surprise visit to Oman in October to meet with its ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

A year ago, US President Donald Trump outraged Palestinians by recognizing Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, a designation that did not acknowledge their claim on the east of the city though it left open the question of its final borders.

On Saturday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Canberra formally recognizes West Jerusalem as Israel’s capital but reaffirmed his country’s support for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem under a two-state peace deal.

Israel’s Foreign Ministry responded tepidly, calling the Australian move “a step in the right direction.” At the Cabinet meeting on Sunday, Netanyahu declined to elaborate.

“We issued a statement at the Foreign Ministry. I have nothing to add to it,” he told reporters at the outset of the meeting.

Tzachi Hanegbi, Israel’s minister for regional cooperation and a Netanyahu confidant in the right-wing Likud party, was more openly critical of Australia, though he deemed it a “deep and intimate friend of many years’ standing.”

“To our regret, within this positive news they made a mistake,” Hanegbi told reporters outside the Cabinet room.

Morrison’s move first surfaced in October, when it was viewed cynically in Australia because it came days before a crucial by-election in an electorate with a strong Jewish representation. His party lost that poll.

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat said Saturday’s move was born of Australian “petty domestic politics.”

“All of Jerusalem remains a final-status issue for negotiations, while East Jerusalem, under international law, is an integral part of the occupied Palestinian territory,” he said.



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Israeli military finds 4th Hezbollah tunnel from Lebanon
Israel’s tech sector faces challenge from shortage of workers

[Iran confirms death of blogger held on](#)

security charges

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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DUBAI: Iranian authorities have confirmed the death of a social media activist jailed on security charges, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported on Sunday, after Western rights groups said he had died following a 60-day hunger strike in prison.

"The political prisoner Vahid Sayyadi Nasiri, on hunger strike since October 13, 2018 to protest the denial of his right to counsel and inhumane prison conditions..., has died at the Shahid Beheshti Hospital in Qom," the US-based Center for Human Rights in Iran said on its website.

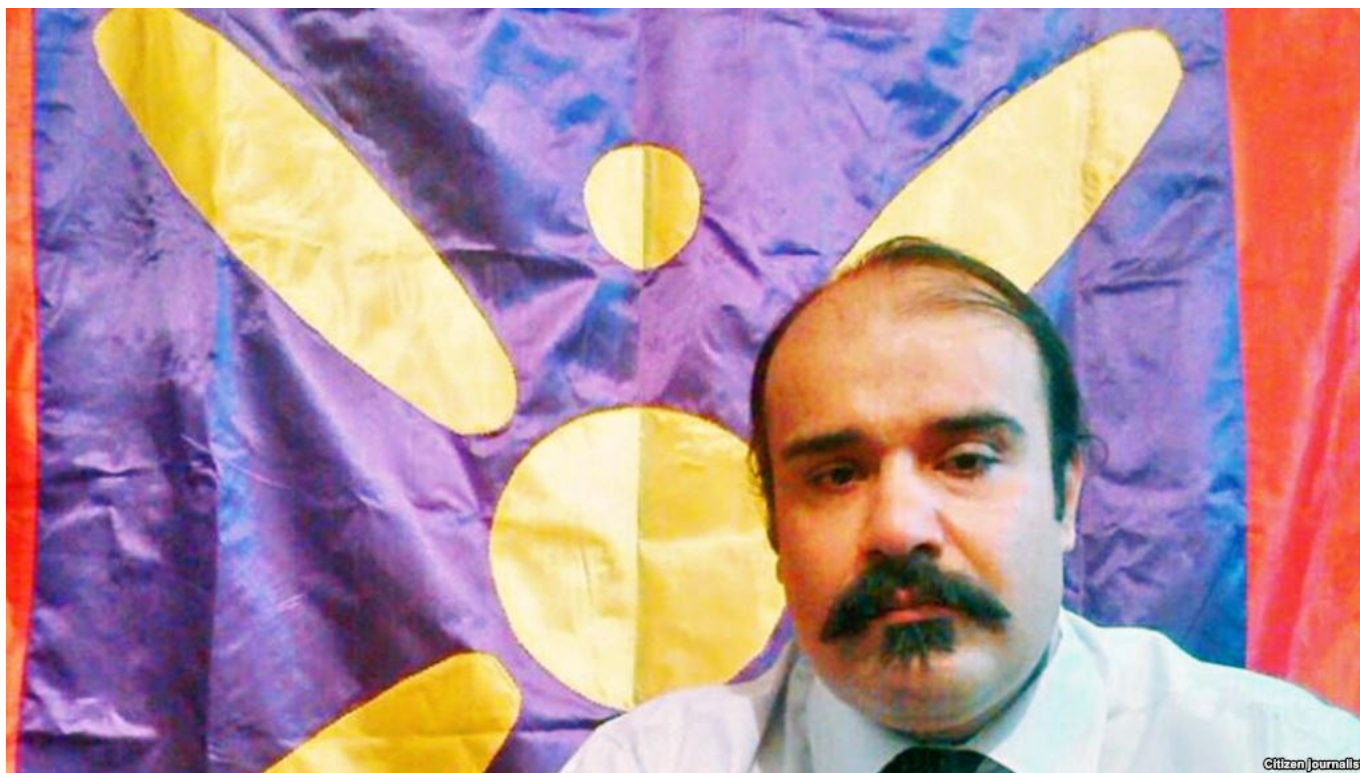
ISNA quoted an unidentified source as saying Nasiri had been jailed twice for belonging to a royalist group and planning acts of sabotage including an explosion. He had been taken from prison to a hospital where he died due to a liver disease on Dec. 12, the source said, without referring to a hunger strike.

Mehdi Kaheh, the prosecutor in the city of Qom, earlier said Nasiri had been serving a sentence for "insulting Islamic sanctities" on social media when he fell ill and was taken to hospital where he died, the state broadcaster IRIB reported on its website. Kaheh did not refer to a hunger strike.

Iran, whose officials often warn of efforts by foreign enemies to infiltrate state institutions, has detained scores of journalists and social media activists in recent years, and many others have gone into exile.

In November, Reporters Without Borders said Iran had launched a new crackdown on journalists in which several had been questioned and three arrested in connection with social network posts.

Iran rejects criticism of its human rights record by international human rights bodies as politically motivated and based on a lack of understanding of Islamic laws.



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