

[Iran says Belgium prisoner swap 'finalized', Brussels denies](#)

TEHRAN: Iran said Wednesday a prisoner exchange with Belgium was "finalized," hinting at the release of Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele which Brussels swiftly rejected as "manipulation." Vandecasteele, 42, was sentenced in January to 40 years in prison and 74 lashes for "espionage," Tehran's judiciary said at the time, after a trial his family and Belgian authorities dubbed "unfair."

[As Assad returns to Arab fold, Syrians watch with hope, fear](#)

BEIRUT: Syrians living on opposite sides of the largely frozen battle lines dividing their country are watching the accelerating normalization of ties between the government of Bashar Assad and Syria's neighbors through starkly different lenses.

In government-held Syria, residents struggling with ballooning inflation, fuel and electricity shortages hope the rapprochement will bring more trade and investment and ease a crippling economic crisis.

[Israeli 'desecration' of Al-Aqsa chapel angers Palestinians](#)

RAMALLAH: Palestinians have condemned repeated Israeli attacks on the Bab Al-Rahma Chapel in Al-Aqsa Mosque, saying the site has been vandalized, while worshippers face daily threats and abuse.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said Bab Al-Rahma was an integral part of Al-Aqsa and only Muslims had the right to control its affairs.

Removal of items from the chapel and its vandalization by Israel were unacceptable, he added.

[Lebanese army deploys in response to calls for Syrian refugees to protest](#)

BEIRUT: Caretaker Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said on Wednesday that there were gangs smuggling Syrians into Lebanon illegally across the border through the Bekaa or Akkar in exchange for large sums of money, "while the country can no longer bear the burden of refugees."

Mikati expressed surprise at the criticism directed toward Lebanon for deporting Syrians who entered the country illegally.

The announcement of the deportation of around 50 Syrians from Lebanon to Syria two weeks ago sparked international protests.

[Egypt evacuates more than 1,500 nationals from Sudan](#)

CAIRO: Egypt evacuated 446 nationals and 189 others, including a Sudanese citizen in critical condition, from Sudan by road on Tuesday.

Ahmed Abu Zeid, a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry, said the Egyptian embassy in Khartoum, consulates in Khartoum and Port Sudan, and consular office in Wadi Halfa continued efforts around the clock to evacuate Egyptians. So far, 1,539 have been evacuated from Sudan.

Efforts were underway to evacuate a number of Egyptians and their families from an airport near Khartoum as soon as the security situation improved, he added.