

Families of Prisoners Urge Messi to Reject Saudi Tourism Deal

RIYADH (Middle East Eye) – The families of several Saudi prisoners of conscience have written a letter to footballer Lionel Messi urging him to reject a lucrative offer to become the face of the kingdom's tourism board.

Last month, Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, two of world football's greatest ever players, were both approached to front the "Visit Saudi" campaign, according to a report in the Telegraph.

Ronaldo rejected the deal, which was worth \$6m per year, and would have included his image being used on all promotional material and his making visits to the country.

Messi's views on the offer are not known – his representatives said that they did not comment on commercial projects, and declined to confirm whether he had been approached.

The uncertainty around the Argentine forward's involvement prompted relatives of Saudi detainees to speak out, as first reported in The Independent.

"You are an inspiration to millions and what you say and do really matters. To put it bluntly – you have enormous power,



Lionel Messi receives a trophy after Argentina defeat Brazil during a friendly match in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh.

but with that power comes great responsibility," the letter, compiled by human rights organization Grant Liberty, stated.

"The Saudi regime wants to use you to launder its reputation. Prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia have been tortured, sexually assaulted, and held in prolonged solitary confinement – often for months at a time – on an industrial scale."

Among the signatories are Lina al-Hathloul, the sister of Loujain al-Hathloul, the women's rights activist who was released earlier this month fol-

lowing nearly three years behind bars.

The letter was also endorsed by Abdullah al-Odah, the son of jailed preacher Salman al-Odah, and Areej al-Sadhan, the sister of detained Saudi aid worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan.

Sadhan, who has been held without any charges for nearly three years, is expected to be released soon, after he spoke to his family earlier this week for only the second time since being detained.

"If you say 'yes' to Visit Saudi you are in effect saying yes

to all the human rights abuses that take place today in modern Saudi Arabia," the relatives of detainees said.

"Lionel Messi, you are a hero to millions – please use that status for good. Stand up for human rights and say no to the butchers of Jamal Khashoggi and the brutalizers of peaceful campaigners in Saudi Arabia."

The 33-year-old and his Barcelona teammates drew criticism from activists last year when they travelled to Saudi Arabia for the Spanish Super Cup competition. Human rights campaigners protested outside the Saudi embassy in Madrid, holding football scarves and wearing t-shirts with Loujain al-Hathloul's name on it.

Hosting sports events and other forms of entertainment is part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 campaign to improve the kingdom's international reputation, and diversify its economy to become less reliant on oil. Campaigners have accused Riyadh of "sportswashing" its human rights record using high profile events.

Occupation, Peace Cannot Coexist: Jordan's King Abdullah

AMMAN (Dispatches) – Jordan's King Abdullah II has warned that continued unilateral actions will kill any chance for a solution between the Zionist regime and Palestine.

"Occupation and peace simply cannot coexist," he said during a virtual address to the Brookings Institute in Washington DC on Thursday.

"The Palestinian people have a right to an independent, viable, and sovereign state on June 4, 1967 lines," King Abdullah said.

"Occupation, injustice, despair and apartheid. History has shown us, there are no winners

in this formula. Only losers and tragedy," he added.

Last summer, the Zionist regime appeared ready to unilaterally annex parts of the occupied West Bank, including settlements around East al-Quds. Those plans were reportedly delayed as part of the regime's normalization deal with the United Arab Emirates.

However, the regime continues to pursue a longstanding policy of surrounding East al-Quds with settlements that over time have cut the city off from large parts of the occupied West Bank, and fragmented the remaining territory.

Meanwhile, the United Nations called on the Zionist regime to immediately halt its razing of Palestinian homes and structures in the occupied West Bank, saying such actions are contrary to international law and undermine humanitarian efforts across the occupied territories.

United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory Lynn Hastings said in a statement that the recent demolition of Palestinian homes by the Zionist regime and evacuation of local residents and confiscation of their lands contravened

international law, and were all in flagrant violation of human rights law.

The statement came a day after Hastings visited the community of Humsa al-Baqai'a, in the northern Jordan Valley, where the homes and belongings of families living there were either demolished or seized by the regime in an effort to drive them out of their lands.

More than 600,000 Zionists live in over 230 settlements built since the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and East al-Quds.

All settlements are illegal under international law.

with Iran. Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Chris Murphy were among the senators who supported the bill.

On Wednesday, however, 46 U.S. lawmakers introduced a resolution that opposed the lifting of sanctions on Iran, including the use of waivers, de-listing individuals or entities

The resolution, introduced by two notorious Iran hawks, Senator Tom Cotton and Congressman Mike Gallagher, also opposed the lifting of the "U-Turn" prohibition, which bans Iran from accessing the United States financial system for the purpose of conducting dollarized transactions.

First...

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and one of the most limited responses was allegedly chosen.

Over the week, numerous reports had emerged about unusual movements by U.S. troops near the border between Iraq and Syria.

A report on Monday said swarms of helicopter gunships and drones were flying over al-Anbar. Iraq's al-Maloumah news agency cited an unnamed security source as saying that the unusual overflights above Al-Qa'im District extended as far as the border with Syria.

U.S. troops are based across the border in Al-Tanf in Syria, where militants fighting the Syrian government are reportedly trained and armed and used for operations in Iraq and elsewhere.

Over the years, there have been numerous reports about the infiltration of Daesh ele-

ments from Syria into Iraq under the protection and logistical assistance of U.S. troops.

Hashd al-Sha'abi and its affiliates, which have been integrated into Iraq's regular forces, are deployed on the Syrian border and helping the army to stem the movement of terrorists between the two countries.

Suspicious attacks, supposedly against U.S. targets but often with little impact, have escalated over the past year, especially since the Iraqi parliament passed a law that mandated a full withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country.

Experts say the rise in terrorist activities is apparently aimed at creating a sense of insecurity in Iraq and providing a pretext for the U.S. to keep its troops in the country.

Since late 2019, the United States has carried out strikes against anti-terror Kata'ib Hezbollah resistance group in Iraq and Syria.

Syria's official news agency SANA on Thursday reported that U.S. military forces plan to transport a new batch of imprisoned Daesh terrorists from the northeastern Syrian province of Hasakah to Al-Tanf.

Local sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said U.S. military vehicles entered a prison at the southern flank of Hasakah, and left shortly with 10 jailed Daesh terrorists, among them commanders, on board.

The sources said military helicopters flew overhead as the vehicles headed to the U.S. base in Al-Shaddadi town.

In a meeting with Iraqi President Barham Salih in Baghdad earlier this month, Iranian Judiciary Chief Ebrahim Raisi said the United States was relocating Daesh terrorists from

their former bastions in Syria and Iraq under the guise of fighting terror.

"While Iraq, Syria, Iran and regional countries are working together to eliminate the remnants of Daesh, the Americans do nothing but relocate the Daesh terrorists in the region," Raisi added.

Syria condemned the new U.S. airstrikes as a cowardly act and urged Biden not to follow "the law of the jungle."

"Syria condemns in the strongest terms the U.S. cowardly attack on areas in Deir al-Zor near the Syrian-Iraqi border," the Syrian foreign ministry said in a statement. "It (the U.S. administration) is supposed to stick to international legitimacy, not to the law of the jungle as (did) the previous administration."

Russia also criticized the strikes. "What has happened is very dangerous and could lead to an escalation in the whole region," a Russian parliamentarian, Vladimir Dzhubarov, was quoted as saying by RIA news agency.

Police...

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veteran, was shot and killed by a Capitol police officer.

Several of the most prominent armed militia and extremist groups in the U.S. were at the forefront of the Capitol riot. The assault followed an incendiary rally by Donald Trump to promote his "big lie" that the November election was stolen from him by Biden.

A number of militia members have been arrested and charged as part of the giant federal

investigation into the events of 6 January. In an indictment handed down last week against six alleged members of the Oath Keepers militia, the justice department charged that the group had planned for several months to prevent Congress from certifying the electoral college results of the presidential election.

Several members of the far-right Proud Boys have also been charged with criminal conspiracy.

This week's congressional hearings are the start of what is expected to be a slew of official investigations into the drastic security failures that gave rise to the breach of the Capitol complex. In her testimony Pittman confirmed that some 800 rioters had entered the building and that the total number who were present amounted to as many as 10,000.

Pittman has stepped up to lead the Capitol police force after the chief at the time of the storming, Steven Sund, resigned days after the catastrophe. In his evidence to Congress earlier this week, Sund said: "These criminals came prepared for war."

The FBI and other law enforcement agencies are tracking closely far-right online chatter for early warnings on any possible repeat attacks in Washington or other cities. In addition to Biden's upcoming congressional address, law enforcement will also be on alert on the days leading up to 4 March – the date set by the extreme conspiracy theory QAnon for Trump to return to Washington to start a second term as president.

Followers of the crank movement have been growing increasingly agitated by the fantasy around Trump's comeback on 4 March, the date on which U.S. presidents were originally inaugurated.

Photos...

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nuclear bomb program. The nuclear facility is located near the city of Dimona.

What Tel Aviv "is doing at this secret nuclear weapons plant is something for the Israeli regime to come clean about," the AP quoted Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, as saying.

Kimball indicated that Israel may want to produce more tritium, a relatively faster-decaying radioactive byproduct used to boost the explosive yield of some nuclear warheads.

It also could want fresh plutonium "to replace or extend the life of warheads already in the Israeli nuclear arsenal," he added.

Last week, the International Panel on Fissile Materials (IPFM), a group of in-

dependent nuclear experts from 17 countries, noted it had seen "significant new construction" at the nuclear site through satellite photos.

The construction had "expanded and appears to be actively underway with multiple construction vehicles present," the IPFM reported, adding, however, that the purpose of the construction was not known.

New satellite images attained by the AP through Planet Labs Inc. provide a clearer view of the site, which shows that in the southwest of the reactor, workers have dug a hole about 150 meters long and 60 meters wide. Some 2 kilometers west of the reactor, boxes are stacked in two rectangular holes that appear to have concrete bases.

Envoy...

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The cowardly act of terror was carried out under the direction of former U.S. president Donald Trump, with the Pentagon taking responsibility for the strike.

Elsewhere in his address, Takht-Ravanchi commended as "one of the greatest accomplishments" of the Security Council the prohibition of the threat or use of force, save the two exceptional cases authorized by the UN Charter, and said the preservation and full observance of the cardinal principle of international law are a "collective responsibility that must be fulfilled responsibly."

The Iranian diplomat highlighted the importance of an obligation by all countries to protect their citizens and territories and enjoy an inherent right to self-defense.

He said, "the term 'inherent', clearly and adequately reflects the natural foundations and essential importance of this right, which of course, must be exercised only 'if an armed attack occurs'" while heeding the criteria of necessity, proportionality and immediacy.

He further added that all countries should "immediately" brief the Security Council of the main elements of their self-defense measures which might be different from one case to another.

"It is obvious that Article 51 has not obligated states to observe specific requirements, other than immediacy, in their reporting, and therefore, has left the decision to the discretion of reporting states," the Iranian envoy pointed out.

He stressed the importance of avoiding any reinterpretation or arbitrary interpretation of Articles 2 (4) and 51 of the UN Charter in order to "prevent the progressive erosion of the principle of prohibition of the threat or use of force."

Immortal ...

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along with the Chief of Martyrs, her brother Imam Husain (AS). She was the picture of patience, and endured the equally tragic aftermath of the tragedy, when she and the rest of the womenfolk and children of the Prophet's Household were taken as captives and paraded along with the severed heads of the martyrs all the way from Karbala to Kufa, and thence to Damascus in Syria, to the court of the tyrant Yazid. Zainab (SA) was now the leader of the caravan, and she bravely rose to the occasion to unmask hypocrisy and tyranny in its true colours. In such a state she took the battle to the enemy's camp and triumphed. Her words in the court of the tyrant Yazid resonantly ring out till this day, as she said: "Is it justice O' sons of freed slaves." This phrase is part of an eloquently moving sermon in the presence of the ruler of a realm that was the superpower of the age. It was spoken by her when she was in fetters, while the heads of her brother, nephews, sons, and kinsmen lay in a tray, in a gory spectacle, in front of the elated tyrant. The granddaughter of the Prophet exposed Yazid and his Omayyad clan as nothing more than a bunch of ingrates, sired by Mu'awiyya, Abu Sufyan, and the liver-eater Hend, who were actually slaves freed by the Prophet, following the peaceful surrender of Mecca to Muslims in 8 AH. She meant to say that Islam had spared their rotten life, but in turn these Godless Omayyads had martyred the Prophet's grandson, Imam Husain (AS).

The eloquence of Hazrat Zainab (SA) was comparable to that of her parents. Her clarity of language and choice of words to expound the mission of her brother in the court of the tyrant Yazid is rather unique. History is incapable of doing full justice to her sermons that ensured eternity for the mission of Imam Husain (AS). Scholars, pointing to her memorable sermon in the court of Damascus, say that besides being an indicator of her firm faith, trust in God, sincerity of purpose and dauntlessness under the most adverse circumstances, it shattered to pieces the power and pride of Yazid. Her bold address to the arrogant caliph shook the very foundations of Omayyad rule and exposed its illegitimacy not only for the courtiers but for all generations to come. Her memorable sermons finally forced Yazid to release the noble household and allow them to return to Medina. Upon release, the noble lady laid foundations of the mourning ceremonies for the Martyrs of Karbala – ceremonies that continue to inspire the faithful in the months of Muharram and Safar.

It was thus the sister's patience that made the message of the brother resound with glory in the courts of the perpetrators of history's most heart-wrenching tragedy and ensured that as long as the martyrdom of Imam Husain (AS) is commemorated the name of Zainab (SA) will also shine with radiance.