Baalbek Priest Kidnapped after 'Baptizing Muslim Girl'

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Unknown individuals on Monday kidnapped the pastor of Baalbek's Our Lady of Good Help Church, Father Walid Gharious, aka Father Elias Maroun Gharious, on the Baalbek road near the intersection leading to the town of al-Ansar, state-run National News Agency reported.

The priest was driving his Toyota Avanza when the abductors who were in two silver- and black-colored Grand Cherokee SUVs intercepted him, NNA said.

The abductors whisked Gharious away to an unknown destination and left his car behind, the agency added.

"Security forces are pursuing the kidnappers after unveiling threads related to the kidnap operation," said NNA.

Citing preliminary information, the agency said the priest was kidnapped for "baptizing a Muslim girl who had fled her family home."

Later on Monday, NNA reported that the priest was released, without elaborating.

For its part, LBC television said Gharious was handed over to Hizbullah official Sheikh Mohammed Yazbek following his release.

Meanwhile, Archbishop of Baalbek-Deir al-Ahmar Semaan Atallah issued a statement confirming that the priest had been kidnapped, noting that he and Gharious were not aware of the girl's whereabouts.

"The girl had said she was physically and psychologically tortured by her father for converting to Christianity three years ago, although she is a 24-year-old adult," said Atallah in his statement.

"I have received an unconfirmed report that she had recently fled to an unknown destination after her father forced her to marry someone," the archbishop added.

"Last Wednesday, unknown assailants fired gunshots at the house of a priest from the Kairouz family in the town of Nabha, and the a similar incident occurred on Sunday before the start of the municipal elections when shots were fired at the Our Lady Church in Nabha, and we have conducted intensive contacts with the relevant parties in the area in order to settle the situations," Atallah said in the statement.