

Hostage negotiator returns home as talks stall

By Wassim Mroueh

BEIRUT: A preacher negotiating the release of 10 Lebanese hostages held by Syrian rebels has decided to return to Lebanon after nearly one week of negotiations reached a dead end.

Sheikh Nabil Rahim, a member of the Committee of Muslim Scholars, said Sheikh Salem Rafei, the deputy head of the committee, would return to Beirut on the first flight from Istanbul.

“He felt there was procrastination and no outcome [from the talks], so he decided to return to Lebanon,” Rahim told The Daily Star Tuesday evening.

Rafei’s decision came after he attended a meeting with Syrian religious scholars, who maintain ties with the captors, in the Turkish city of Gaziantep on the border with Syria Tuesday. Rahim said that one of the captors had likely attended the meeting.

The preacher added that the committee had now formed a group to follow up on the matter. “But my personal opinion is that the committee will no longer have a role in this issue,” he said. “Maybe Arab, Turkish or even Lebanese sides don’t want the committee to play a role in this issue.”

The hostages were kidnapped in the Aleppo district of Azaz on May 22, shortly after crossing from Turkey on their way back to Lebanon after performing pilgrimage in Iran.

Hussein Omar, the 11th captive, was released late last month by the rebels, who said their move came in response to a request by the Committee of Muslim Scholars.

In August, a group calling itself Saraya al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, affiliated with the families of the hostages, kidnapped a Turkish citizen in a bid to pressure Ankara to secure the release of the pilgrims. Another Turkish citizen was snatched by the Lebanese Meqdad clan, also in August, to pressure Turkey to help secure the release of their relative, Hasan Meqdad, kidnapped by Syrian rebels in Damascus.