

Syria Holds Lebanon Shiite Cleric as suspected Israeli Spy

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BEIRUT (AFP) – A Lebanese Shiite cleric known as a critic of Syrian-backed Hezbollah has been arrested in Syria on suspicion of spying for Israel, a high-ranking Lebanese security official said on Thursday.

"Sheikh Hassan Msheymish was arrested in July in Syria based on data Lebanese police intelligence had sent to Syrian authorities indicating that he was implicated in collaborating with Israel," the official told AFP.

Msheymish was still being interrogated by Syrian authorities as preliminary information gathered by Lebanese intelligence indicated he may have spied on targets in Syria, the official said.

The cleric's son, Ali Msheymish, told AFP there was no proof to the allegations against his father.

"These are unfounded accusations. How come we still know nothing of the results of the investigation two months after his arrest?" he asked, while confirming the Shiite cleric was a vocal critic of the Shiite militant group Hezbollah.

"His continued arrest is with the approval of political parties, especially Hezbollah," he said.

The sheikh's family told AFP in July that Msheymish had been detained while on his way for a pilgrimage to the Muslim holy city of Mecca in western Saudi Arabia.

A judicial source, meanwhile, said two Lebanese nationals and two Palestinians have been charged in military court with collaboration with Israel, including a telecom ministry official, Toni Boutros.

The other Lebanese, Joseph Kassis, is on the run, he said.

More than 100 people have been arrested in Lebanon on suspicion of espionage since April 2009, including several telecom employees, members of the security forces and active members of the military.

Many of the suspects are accused of having helped Israel identify targets during its devastating 2006 war with Hezbollah.

Five of those tried have been sentenced to death for spying for the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad.

Lebanon and Israel remain technically in a state of war, and convicted spies face life in prison with hard labour or the death penalty if found guilty of contributing to Lebanese loss of life.

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