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Israel's Netanyahu Thanks Russia for Mediating Syria Prisoner Swap

February 19, 2021

Israel exchanged two Syrian shepherds for an Israeli woman with Russian mediation. **Andrei Gryaznov / TASS**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has thanked Russian President Vladimir Putin for mediating a secretive prisoner swap with Syria, Moscow's ally in Damascus' ongoing military campaign against rebels and terrorists.

The Israeli government announced early Friday that it exchanged two Syrian shepherds for an Israeli woman with Russian mediation.

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pic.twitter.com/xB5tWeksXM

— Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu) February 19, 2021

The unnamed woman in her early 20s with a history of trying to illegally enter Israel's neighbors was flown to Moscow, The New York Times cited an unnamed Israeli official as saying. Israeli officials, who were reportedly communicating with Russia to facilitate the exchange since at least Feb. 8, met her in the Russian capital on Thursday.

Israel released the two Syrian shepherds who had been captured after crossing into the Israeli-held Golan Heights hours before the woman was allowed to fly to Moscow, according to NYT.

"I twice spoke with my friend, Russian President Vladimir Putin, asking him to assist in her return," Netanyahu said in a video posted on his Twitter account early Friday.

"He took measures and I would like to thank him for once again helping Israeli citizens come back home," Netanyahu added.

This is at least the third Russian mediation effort in recent years, according to NYT. In 2016 and 2019, respectively, Moscow helped return an Israeli tank that was seized and a tank driver who was killed by Syrian troops in southern Lebanon in 1982.

"I am using my personal contacts with President Putin to resolve the problem," Netanyahu told an Israeli military radio station.

Israel seized much of the Golan Heights from Syria in the Six-Day War of 1967 and later annexed it in a move not recognized by the international community.

The countries remain technically at war and Israel routinely carries out air strikes in Syria, mostly against targets linked to Iran.

Includes reporting from AFP.

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