

Al-Jazeera journalist remains in Germany awaiting extradition decision

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Berlin: A prominent Al Jazeera journalist will remain in German custody for a second night, prosecutors said Sunday, adding they have not yet decided whether to extradite him to Egypt or set him free.

As dozens of supporters protested Sunday in front of the Berlin court building where Ahmed Mansour was being held, his lawyer, Fazli Altin, called for the journalist's immediate release, saying that Germany was getting involved in a politically tainted case.

Mr. Mansour, 52, a well-known journalist with the Qatar-based broadcaster's Arabic service, was detained at Berlin's Tegel airport on Saturday on an Egyptian arrest warrant, his lawyers said. Mr. Mansour, who holds dual Egyptian-British nationality, was trying to board a Qatar Airways flight to Doha, the station reported.

Martin Steltner, a spokesman for the Berlin prosecutor's office, said Sunday that Mr. Mansour would be taken to a prison in the city .

A government judicial official told the Associated Press there would probably be a decision next week on whether Mr. Mansour has to remain in custody. In addition, the Berlin Court of Justice would decide "once it gets a request for extradition from Egypt" whether Mr. Mansour can be extradited or whether the case is politically motivated.

Even if the court rules in favour of an extradition, the German government can still veto that.

Mr. Mansour's detention is the latest in a long series of legal entanglements between Egypt and satellite news channels. According to court documents, he was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison, alongside two Muslim Brotherhood members and an Islamic preacher, for allegedly torturing a lawyer in Tahrir Square in 2011, a charge both he and the channel reject.

The lawyer had filed a complaint saying he had been held in a tourist agency office overlooking Tahrir Square at the height of protests against former president Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

Video footage of the incident aired by local media shows the lawyer being kicked to the ground, his hands tied behind his back. A member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who claims the lawyer was a police agent trying to infiltrate the protests, is seen in the video, but not Mr. Mansour. Later, the journalist interviewed the Islamic preacher about what had happened.

His arrest is the result of "Egypt's terrible revenge against journalists that cross the regime," press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders said in a statement Sunday, adding if Germany did extradite him "it will be putting itself at service of a dictatorial regime and will dishonour itself."

The Committee to Protect Journalists also issued a statement calling for Mr. Mansour's immediate release.

"Egypt has launched a politically motivated campaign against Al Jazeera and is now abusing the international system," said Sherif Mansour, the group's Middle East and North Africa program co-ordinator.

Mr. Altin said Ahmed Mansour was accused in the warrant "of having harmed the reputation of Egypt massively and of having committed torture."

“It’s unacceptable for the freedom of press and embarrassing for Germany that Mansour is being held here on these clearly political allegations,” he said.

Patrick Teubner, a second lawyer for Mansour, said the journalist had been travelling on his British passport when he was detained. The U.K. confirmed it was providing consular assistance to him.

Both of the journalist’s lawyers expressed surprise that Mr. Mansour had been detained at all. They said they thought Interpol had put out a note on Mr. Mansour, which would show up at passport controls, but that Interpol had not officially asked for his arrest.

“According to our knowledge, Interpol refused to initiate an international arrest warrant on Mansour, so it’s not really clear why he was detained at all,” said Mr. Altin.

The German prosecutor’s office declined to comment on the issue Sunday and the German border patrol refused to say on what allegations Mr. Mansour had been detained.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman Badr Abdelattie told the Associated Press, however, that Germany arrested Mr. Mansour based on the red flag put for him by the Interpol. He said Egyptian judicial authorities, including the chief prosecutor in Cairo, were speaking with German authorities to clarify what crimes he is wanted for.

Interpol didn’t immediately respond to calls and messages seeking a comment.

In a video posted on Mr. Mansour’s Facebook page after he was questioned, he lashes out at German authorities for detaining him.

“Regrettably, they told me that the request to arrest me is a German request and it is not based on Interpol,” he said, accusing Germany of being complicit with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s government in Egypt.

It wasn’t immediately clear who was posting to Mr. Mansour’s Facebook account, or who made the video.

Mr. Mansour, who is known for his Without Borders program, recently conducted an interview with the head of the Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda branch fighting in Syria’s civil war, which aired last month from an undisclosed location in Syria. German media reported that Mr. Mansour was in Germany for an interview he conducted for his show.

About 80 protesters gathered outside the Berlin courthouse Sunday, holding up his picture and shouting “Free Mansour!”

“We don’t understand why Mansour was detained in Berlin,” said Ali Alawady, a member of the German-Egyptian Union for Democracy who helped organize the protest. “He is an innocent journalist who is unjustly persecuted in Egypt.”

- AP