

American linguists in Kuwait seek help from US courts to return home

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A group of American contractors stuck for months on Army posts in Kuwait for fear of arrest by local police have asked a U.S. federal court to intervene.

In a motion filed three weeks ago by their attorney, 19 of the nearly 100 Arabic and Urdu linguists living in camps Buehring and Arifjan asked a district court in Virginia for an injunction that would require defense contractor Global Linguist Solutions to return the group to the U.S.

At the heart of the case is a dispute between GLS and a Kuwaiti firm that Global Linguists Solutions had hired to act as a local agent.

That company, Al Shora International General Trading & Contracting, gave linguists' names to Kuwaiti police as immigration violators earlier this year, leading to several contractor arrests and deportations.

"We just want to go home and get this thing over with," Sadiq Alsaïdi, one of the linguists, said in a phone interview from Camp Buehring.

Al Shora accuses GLS of trying to keep linguists on the firm's rolls — allowing them to maintain residency in the country — while it switched to another, cheaper Kuwaiti company as its agent. GLS officials said Al Shora is angry it lost the contract and didn't give the American firm a chance to change the linguists' status to the new local broker.

Kuwaiti law requires all foreign businesses hire a local firm as its agent, or sponsor, in the country, responsible for immigration paperwork and some aspects of payroll.

The linguists have been unable to leave their posts since May 31 without risking an arrest that many believe could end their careers in the region due to the coordination between Kuwait and other Gulf nations.

The complaint asks the court to demand GLS comply with Kuwaiti laws, pay damages to Al Shora and follow Kuwait government requirements necessary to get the linguists home. It accuses GLS of breaking Kuwaiti law for a business advantage that placed all the risk on employees.

Nine contractors were arrested outside the posts after Al Shora declared the linguists on its rolls absentee and turned their names over to Kuwaiti police. Some were held for days in jail cells before being deported.

GLS then barred the remaining linguists from leaving their posts. The Army, whose units rely on the linguists daily, said it couldn't help the contractors. The U.S. Embassy and State Department have called the dispute a private matter involving Kuwaiti law and say they are largely powerless to help.

"Our clients are blameless," the linguists' attorney, Joe Hennessy, said in a phone interview. "They did not break any laws. They completely relied on GLS."

Several linguists interviewed said they hold GLS responsible for their troubles.

"If GLS had done things correctly and had a legal entity in Kuwait, then Al Shora would have no reason to go against the linguists," said Ramzi Zinnekeh. "The linguists are just collateral fodder."

Zinnekeh is one of eight plaintiffs deported to the U.S. and placed on administrative leave without pay by GLS. The group is now seeking compensation for that leave time, which they say was out of their control.

GLS President Charles Tolleson told Stars and Stripes in June that he was trying to return Zinnekeh and others to Kuwait after their deportations. Zinnekeh said he was instead laid-off after being told he had used all his leave time.

"There was a lot of promises made, and myself like many, like to give the benefit of the doubt and we like to go on good faith," he said. "And none of that worked out."

Tolleson didn't return multiple messages left with his office and attorney in recent days.

Other linguists have tried working with Al Shora to have their warrants lifted. Several at Buehring said they canceled the power-of-attorney they gave GLS earlier in the dispute and that they say the company used to file a lawsuit against Al Shora in Kuwaiti court. Al Shora responded with a countersuit against the linguists for 250,000 Kuwaiti dinars, or about \$882,000, several of the linguists said.

The linguists said Al Shora owner Reham Aljelewi promised to clear them after they revoked the power-of-attorney and signed a statement of retraction. But nothing happened at a recent court date for Al Shora's countersuit — it was rescheduled for late October.

The linguists also said GLS tried to have them sign a statement admitting to having broken Kuwaiti laws, but that most refused.

"I haven't done anything. Why should I admit to such false accusations?" Alsaïdi said.

Those still at Buehring said that although they are still being paid, they missed family and wanted to work. Some have had to turn down other job opportunities because of their situation. Linguists are also unable to receive medical treatment on the posts outside of an emergency, leading to difficult situations for some.

Nada Malek, a linguist on Camp Arifjan, said medics on base refused to treat her after she broke her ankle. She instead waited days for a Kuwaiti doctor to come to the base, she said.

Army Forces Central Command declined to comment for this story, referring queries to the service's Intelligence and Security Command, which manages linguist contracts. A spokesman for that command did not discuss Malek's case, but said GLS is responsible for the routine care of its employees, while Army medics could treat emergency conditions.

In a prepared statement, a State Department official called the matter a "commercial dispute" and said the department was involved through its local embassy.

"The U.S. Embassy in Kuwait has reached out to Kuwaiti government officials at a variety of levels in order to seek clarification and identify a path to allow the citizens to depart Kuwait or otherwise address the matter," the statement said. "At the same time, the Embassy's consular section has worked to help all of the private parties involved find a solution to this difficult issue."

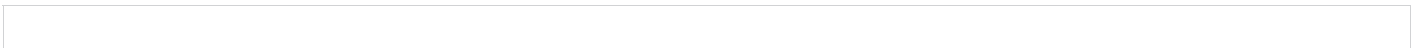
Malek was recently returned home to Nevada after a pair of emergencies involving her husband and son. Her case was unique due to her circumstances, Hennessy said, and offers little promise for others still on the bases; GLS fired Malek after she departed, citing her "unauthorized absence" from the base, according to a copy of the notice obtained by Stars and Stripes.

Before leaving Arifjan, Malek said linguists were in a difficult situation that was only growing worse.

"The pay is not important as much as your freedom," she said. "Most of us want to go to their families. Most of us want to go on vacation. Most of us want to go to other countries. But we have no freedom."

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