

10 pro-Iranian militiamen killed in eastern Syria

Author:

Tue, 2019-09-17 22:15

BEIRUT: Overnight airstrikes killed 10 pro-Iranian Iraqi militiamen in eastern Syria, a war monitor said Tuesday, without specifying who carried them out.

The strikes targeted “three positions of the (Iranian) Revolutionary Guards and allied (Iraqi) militias” in Albu Kamal, in the Euphrates Valley just across the border from Iraq, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

“Ten Iraqis from pro-Iranian militias were killed,” the Britain-based monitor said.

The strikes came as tensions mounted between archfoes Iran and the US after Washington blamed Tehran for weekend attacks on Saudi oil installations.

They were the second to hit pro-Iranian forces in eastern Syria in little more than a week.

On Sept. 9, airstrikes killed 18 fighters, including Iranians, according to the Observatory.

In June last year, strikes near the Iraqi border killed 55 fighters, most of them Syrian or Iraqi. A US official speaking on condition of anonymity said Israel was responsible.

Much of the east of Syria was held by Daesh militants before their defeat in March.

It is now divided by the Euphrates Valley into a zone held by forces loyal to the Syrian regime and its ally Iran and another held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and their allies in a US-led coalition, which has in the past carried out air raids on pro-regime forces.

Meanwhile, the leaders of Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed on Monday to ease tensions in northwest Syria’s Idlib region, but disagreements between the countries appeared to linger, especially over the threat from Daesh.

The summit of the three countries aimed to find a lasting truce in Syria. Recent attacks by the regime forces risk deepening regional turmoil and pushing a new wave of migrants toward Turkey.

“We are in a period when we need to take more responsibility for peace in Syria, when we (three countries) need to carry more weight,” Turkey’s Tayyip Erdogan said, adding that all three leaders were in agreement that a political solution was necessary to end the crisis in Syria.



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Outsider leads after divisive Tunisia presidential poll

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Mon, 2019-09-16 10:11

TUNIS: Political outsider Kais Saied was leading Tunisia's election with just over a quarter of votes counted, the election commission said Monday, in the country's second free presidential vote since the Arab Spring.

Saied was on 19 percent, leading imprisoned media magnate Nabil Karoui, who was on 14.9 percent, and ahead of the candidate from the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party Abdelfattah Mourou (13.1 percent).

The announcement came after both Saied and Karoui's camp claimed to have won through to the second round, in the highly divisive polls.

Local papers splashed photos across their front pages of law professor Saied and magnate Karoui, after exit polls showed they had qualified for the second round of voting.

"An unexpected verdict," ran a headline in La Presse.

Le Temps titled its editorial "The Slap," while the Arabic language Echourouk newspaper highlighted a "political earthquake" and a "tsunami" in the Maghreb.

The initial signs point toward a major upset for Tunisia's political establishment, in place since the 2011 uprising that ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

It could also usher in a period of immense uncertainty for the fledgling north African democracy, the sole success story of the Arab Spring revolts.

Tunisia's electoral commission (ISIE) reported low turnout at 45 percent, down from 64 percent in the country's first democratic polls in 2014.

Late Sunday, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed called on the liberal and centrist camps to band together for legislative elections set for October 6, voicing concern that low participation was "bad for the democratic transition."

Chahed, a presidential hopeful whose popularity has been tarnished by a sluggish economy and the rising cost of living, could well turn out to be the election's biggest loser.

The election comes against a backdrop of serious social and economic crises. Karoui, a 56-year-old media magnate, has been behind bars since August 23 on charges of money laundering and Tunisia's judiciary has refused his release three times.

A controversial businessman, labelled a "populist" by critics, Karoui built his appeal by using his Nessma television channel to launch charity campaigns, handing out food aid to some of the country's poorest.

His apparent rival is political neophyte Saied.

The highly conservative constitutionalist, known to Tunisians for his televised political commentary since the 2011 revolt, has shunned political parties and mass rallies. Instead, he has opted to go door-to-door to explain his policies.

He advocates a rigorous overhaul of the constitution and voting system, to decentralize power “so that the will of the people penetrates into central government and puts an end to corruption.”

Often surrounded by young acolytes, he also set forth his social conservatism, defending the death penalty, criminalization of homosexuality and a sexual assault law that punishes unmarried couples who engage in public displays of affection.

“It’s going to be new,” said a baker named Said on Monday, issuing a wry smile.

“We’ll have to wait and see. Anyway, what matters in Tunisia is the parliament.”

The first round was marked by high rates of apathy among young voters, pushing ISIE head to put out an emergency call to them Sunday an hour before polls closed.

On Sunday morning, senior citizen Adil Toumi had asked as he voted in the capital “where are the young people?”

Political scientist Hamza Meddeb told AFP “this is a sign of very deep discontent with the political class that has not met economic and social expectations,”

“Disgust with the political elite seems to have resulted in a vote for outsiders.”

Distrust of the political establishment runs high in Tunisia, where unemployment is at 15 percent and the cost of living has risen by close to a third since 2016.

Extremist attacks have exacted a heavy toll on the key tourism sector.

Around 70,000 security forces were mobilized for the polls.

The date of a second and final round between the top two candidates has not been announced, but it must be held by October 23 at the latest and may even take place on the same day as legislative polls, October 6.



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Tunisia sees 26 candidates for presidential poll on Sunday

[France to press to drop Sudan from US terror blacklist](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2019-09-16 15:27

KHARTOUM: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Monday that France will press to drop Sudan from the US blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism and to support efforts to reintegrate the country into the international community.

Le Drian was in Khartoum for a one-day visit, the first such trip to Sudan by France's top diplomat in more than a decade.

His visit comes as the northeast African country transitions to civilian rule after decades of authoritarianism.

"We will use our influence to ensure that Sudan is removed from this list," Le Drian said at a joint press conference with his Sudanese counterpart Asma Mohamed Abdalla after the two held talks.

"It is the way to ensure that we can consider a new relationship (for Sudan) with financial institutions, everything is obviously linked," he said, asked by AFP if France would back efforts to remove Sudan from Washington's blacklist.

Decades of US blacklisting along with a trade embargo imposed on Sudan in 1997 has kept overseas investors away from the country, in turn isolating it from the global economy.

Sudan's worsening economic situation was the key trigger for nationwide protests that finally led to the ouster of longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in April.

Washington lifted the sanctions in October 2017, but kept Sudan in the terrorism list along with North Korea, Iran and Syria.

Washington's measures were imposed for Khartoum's alleged support for Islamist militant groups.

Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden resided in Sudan between 1992 and 1996.

Le Drian said the pivotal role played by Sudan's army in the uprising against Bashir would help in removing Sudan from the US blacklist.

"The way the army perceived its role during this period, (that) goes in the direction of removing Sudan from this list," he said.

The army overthrew Bashir in a palace coup on April 11 on the back of months of nationwide protests.

But a military council seized power after ousting him and for months resisted calls from protesters to transfer it to a civilian administration.

Only last month after sustained agitation, a joint civilian-military sovereign council was sworn in to oversee Sudan's transition to civilian rule, the key demand of protesters.

On September 8, Sudan's first cabinet led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was sworn in to run the daily affairs of the country.

During his short visit to Khartoum, Le Drian also met Hamdok and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the civilian-military ruling council.

Le Drian also reiterated French support for Sudan's priorities such as rebuilding the economy and striking peace agreements with rebel groups in conflict zones of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.



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Sudan PM Hamdok arrives in Juba on first official trip
Five confirmed cholera deaths in Sudan since Aug. 28

[Lebanon tribunal charges Hariri suspect over three other attacks](#)

Mon, 2019-09-16 17:14

THE HAGUE: The Special Tribunal for Lebanon on Monday unsealed an indictment on new charges against Salim Jamil Ayyash, currently a fugitive from the court and on trial in absentia.

The court said in a statement that Ayyash faced five new charges relating to the killings of three men in 2004 and 2005.

The tribunal in The Hague was established in 2009 to prosecute crimes related to the Feb. 14 2005 bombing that killed 22 people, including Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik Hariri, and injured many others.

Ayyash, whose whereabouts are unknown, is being defended on charges of “conspiracy to commit terrorism” in the Hariri case by a publicly appointed defence lawyer. Prosecutors say Ayyash is a Hezbollah commander who led coordination of Hariri’s assassination.

The court said on Monday that Ayyash would be presumed innocent of the new charges, but that there is enough evidence against him to merit a trial. The court sent new warrants for his arrest to the Lebanese government and international police organisations.



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US conveys support for Lebanon’s stability