

Morocco puts brakes on migrant flow as Spain and EU pay out

Author:

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MADRID: The number of migrants arriving by sea in Spain has plunged with Morocco stopping boat departures since signing lucrative agreements with Madrid and Brussels, experts say.

So far this year 15,683 migrants have arrived by sea, 45 percent down on the first eight months of 2018, according to Spanish interior ministry figures. Spain became the main entry point for migrants seeking a better life in Europe in 2018 after Italy closed its ports and Greece began sending migrants back to Turkey under a 2016 agreement with the European Union (EU).

But that is no longer the case. The most used migrant sea route to Europe is once again from the eastern Mediterranean to Greece, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) says.

Moroccan authorities are stopping boats from setting sail to Spain "whereas before they let them leave," said Jose Encinas of the AUGC Guardia Civil police association in the southern region of Andalusia where most migrants land.

A migration expert at an international organization, who asked not to be named, said: "Moroccan maritime police have deployed means at strategic spots, especially in the north" to curb migrant departures to Spain.

Eduard Soler, a North Africa geopolitics specialist at Barcelona think tank CIDOB said "Morocco has realized that the migration card is a very effective pressure tool."

"Times when bilateral relations between Morocco and Spain were difficult have coincided with a rise in (migrant) arrivals in Spain and when they have improved there was a dramatic drop (in arrivals)," he added.

The arrival of migrant ships in Spain had soared in the six months before Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez took power in June 2018.

He promptly dispatched ministers to Rabat before visiting the Moroccan capital himself in November for talks with King Mohammed VI.

A state visit followed in February 2019 by Spain's King Felipe VI and 11 bilateral agreements were signed covering energy to cultural cooperation.

"There was then a radical drop in the number of migrant arrivals. This does not seem like chance. Morocco decided to change its policy" said Soler.

The number of migrant arrivals by sea fell to 936 in February 2019 from 4,104 in the previous month, IOM figures show.

"When Morocco wants more money, it opens the tap of immigration and when it receives money, it closes it," said Encinas.

Spain in August approved 32 million euros (\$35 million) to help Morocco control illegal migration.

In July, Madrid authorized spending 26 million euros to supply Morocco's interior ministry with vehicles.

A renegotiated fisheries agreement between Morocco and the European Union – which was approved by the European Parliament in February on the eve of King Felipe's state visit – has also warmed ties between Brussels and Rabat.

On a visit to Morocco on Wednesday, Spanish Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska hailed the “police cooperation” between the two countries which had led to a “significant decrease” in migrant arrivals. Within the EU, Madrid continues to highlight “Morocco’s crucial importance as a strategic partner for migration and other issues,” he added. The EU gave Morocco 140 million euros last year to help manage migration. “And that seems little,” Spain’s Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo said last week, before adding Europe should do more for Morocco. While Madrid praises its cooperation with Rabat, human rights groups accuse Morocco of forcibly preventing migrants from boarding boats to Spain.



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Morocco, Spain to bolster cooperation to curb illegal migration
Eighth body found after Morocco football match flood

[Turkish opposition figure sentenced to nearly 10 years in jail](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-09-06 21:13

ISTANBUL: A prominent Turkish opposition official was sentenced by a court on

Friday to nine years and eight months in prison for insulting the president and spreading terrorist propaganda, a lawmaker from the main opposition party said.

The Republican People's Party (CHP) said Canan Kaftancıoğlu, head of its Istanbul branch and one of the strongest opposition voices within the party, will not immediately go to jail pending appeals.

The indictment also accused Kaftancıoğlu of insulting the government and public servants, inciting hatred and enmity, mostly on the basis of tweets posted between 2012 and 2017.

Kaftancıoğlu played a significant role in municipal elections in Istanbul that saw the CHP take over the mayoralty, which had been held by President Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party and its Islamist predecessors for the last 25 years.

Speaking outside Istanbul's main courthouse following the verdict, Kaftancıoğlu said it would not silence her.

"Neither you all, nor I deserved this. If the court ruling is not in line with the law and is shaped by the wishes of the political power, it means there is no law in this country," she told reporters.

"The cases opened are concluded not in the courtrooms but in the rooms of the (presidential) palace," she added. A crowd of supporters chanted: "Shoulder to shoulder against fascism."

The first session of Kaftancıoğlu's trial took place five days after the CHP's Ekrem Imamoglu won a re-run election for mayor of Istanbul in June. Imamoglu said he was saddened by the verdict but believed it would be overturned by the appeals court.

Kati Piri, the European Parliament's Turkey rapporteur, tweeted that the verdict was "surreal and outrageous," adding, "Erdogan takes revenge for opposition's election victory. Unacceptable!"

Turkey's lira weakened to 5.7250 against the dollar from 5.70 when the court decision was announced.

The appeals court will deliver a verdict within six months and then the decision can be appealed with the Court of Cassation, Turkey's highest appeals court, the CHP said.

Since her appointment last year as the CHP's provincial head, Kaftancıoğlu has been heavily criticized by members of Erdogan's AK Party.

Turkey's judicial independence has been in the spotlight in recent years, especially since a crackdown on the judiciary and other state bodies after an abortive 2016 coup and the country's switch to an executive presidency last year.

Critics say the courts are under pressure from Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted AK Party. The government has repeatedly said the judiciary is independent and makes its own decisions.

Speaking to reporters in the Aegean coastal city of Izmir, Istanbul mayor Imamoglu said he thought the verdict would be overturned at appeal.

"Despite everything, our Turkey has judges who will make the right decision on this issue," he said.

"They are there despite everything and I believe they will make the right call. Personally, I will support Canan until the end, as my provincial chairwoman and as my comrade."



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[In divided Iraq, 'electronic armies' threaten activists, media](#)

Fri, 2019-09-06 20:59

BAGHDAD: Iraqi journalists, activists and researchers are facing a wave of accusations and threats by shadowy online groups they suspect are linked to powerful pro-Iran factions.

Parties, armed groups and even officials in Iraq benefit from legions of supporters dubbed "electronic armies," which take to social media to anonymously sing their praises or mock their detractors.

These online rivalries now appear to have been fanned by months of rising tensions pitting Iran against the US and Israel.

This summer, suspicious explosions hit five camps and arms depots run by Iraq's Hashed Al-Shaabi, a network of mostly Shiite armed factions linked to Iran.

The Hashed was quick to blame Israel and the United States, but also said it suspected "agents" of the two countries contributed to the attacks.

That accusation was followed by an online campaign accusing a broad range of Iraqi nationals of "collaborating" with Israel and the US.

One graphic shared by an Arabic-language page named "Don't Tread on Us" accused 14 Iraqis of de facto supporting a policy of "normalization with Israel."

Shared on social media, it named figures such as journalist Joumana Mumtaz and blogger Ali Wajih.

In response, Wajih penned a rare open letter to Iraq's prime minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, Hashed chief Faleh Fayyadh and his powerful deputy Abu Mehdi Al-Muhandis.

"For years, a group of us journalists and bloggers has faced incitements to murder by people and pages that may be close to the Hashed, or directly linked to it," he wrote.

Allegations they were "agents" or seeking normalization with Israel, Wajih said, were "empty and silly."

Iraqis have long been opposed to Israel because of its occupation of Palestinian land.

Baghdad has however developed close ties with Washington since the American-led invasion that toppled ex-dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Despite that, Washington's bitter rival Tehran also holds considerable sway in Iraq's political scene and within the Hashed.

In recent months, anti-Israel and anti-US rhetoric has been on the rise as Iraqis feel increasingly squeezed by the war of words between the two sides. Some Iraqi factions have used the purported Israeli strikes to relaunch calls for US troops to leave Iraq.

Just last week, many of the same figures lashed out against US-funded Al-Hurra TV for a documentary alleging corruption among Iraq's religious bodies, both Sunni and Shiite.

Perceptions Iraq was being "attacked" by Israel and America were "broadened to include critical and independent Iraqi voices, who have been maligned as agents in a broader plot," said Fanar Haddad, an Iraq expert at the National University of Singapore.

"In this way, entrenched domestic interests and rivalries have been folded into the ongoing tensions between the Iran-led axis of resistance and the United States, Israel and their allies in the region," he said.

Omar Al-Shaher, a journalist named in the graphic, said there was "not a shred of proof" to back up the claims.

"These days, it's more dangerous than ever to have your name associated with the Israeli camp," he told AFP.

Historian Omar Mohammad, who documented atrocities in Mosul under the Daesh group, said he suspected the new accusations came "as a result of the recent (purported) Israeli airstrikes and US-Iranian tensions."

Mohammad said the graphic's sleek production meant he was "absolutely" taking its threats seriously.

"It is institutional and professional. Seems there is a team specialized in dehumanizing us," Mohammad told AFP from outside Iraq.

Media rights groups are worried such incitement could lead to real violence.

"The sensitivity of the Palestinian question in the region means that accusing someone of working with Israel is tantamount to calling for their killing," said the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory.

On Thursday, monitor and rights group Iraqi Media House called for better

protection of journalists.

"The phenomenon of electronic armies has reached dangerous levels, issuing threats including incitement to violence and hatred," it said.

"We are surprised by the authorities' continued silence so far, including the judiciary, in a clear abandonment of its responsibilities when it comes to electronic crimes."



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Iraqi PMU leader returns as national security adviser
Iraqi authorities face new rage over Daesh-linked families

[Israeli troops kill two Palestinians at Gaza border protest](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Fri, 2019-09-06 16:50

GAZA CITY: Israeli forces shot and killed two Palestinians and wounded dozens

during protests along the Gaza-Israel border on Friday, Palestinian health officials said.

They named one of the dead as Ali Al-Ashqar, 17, but the second man remained unidentified. Seventy others were wounded, 38 of them by live fire, medical officials said.

An Israeli military spokesman said that troops guarding the border were faced with more than 6,000 demonstrators at several points along the fence, some hurling explosive devices and firebombs.

He said that some briefly managed to cross the fence, before returning to Gaza, and that Israeli forces responded with riot dispersal measures. The spokesman did not comment on the deaths.

Protesters have staged 18 months of weekly demonstrations called the "Great March of Return", calling for an end to a security blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel and Egypt, and for Palestinians to have the right to return to land from which their families fled or were forced to flee during Israel's founding in 1948.

Israel rejects any such return, saying that would eliminate its Jewish majority.

Egypt, Qatar and United Nations officials have been working to keep the border calm in recent months.

Around 210 Palestinians have been killed since the protests began in March 2018, Gaza medical officials say.

In that period, an Israeli soldier was shot dead by a Palestinian sniper along the frontier, and another was killed during an Israeli undercover raid into Gaza.

Israel seized Gaza in a 1967 war and pulled out its settlers and troops in 2005. It says the security blockade is necessary to stop weapons reaching Hamas, which has fought three wars with Israel and fired thousands of rockets at it in the past decade.



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Israel lifts Gaza fuel restriction after calm returns
Palestinian dies of wounds from Gaza-Israel border clashes

Pompeo thinks US to unveil Middle East peace plan in coming weeks

Fri, 2019-09-06 19:16

WASHINGTON: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Friday that the United States will present its long-awaited Middle East peace plan within weeks as he acknowledged a difficult task.

President Donald Trump's administration pushed back the plan after Israel unexpectedly headed back to new elections to be held September 17 and fresh questions arose Thursday when Jason Greenblatt, Trump's adviser on the Middle East, resigned.

But Pompeo, responding to a question at Kansas State University, dismissed speculation of a substantial new delay.

"We've been consulting broadly throughout the region for two and a half years now and I think in the coming weeks we'll announce our vision," Pompeo said. "And hopefully the world... will see that as a building block, a basis on which to move forward," he said.

He called Middle East peace "a difficult problem, one that ultimately those two peoples will have to resolve for themselves, but we've worked hard on that."

The Palestinian Authority has cut off formal contact with the Trump administration, saying it is not an honest broker after taking a series of unabashedly pro-Israel decisions such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state.

The administration has started to describe its upcoming proposal as a "vision" rather than a plan, leading observers to wonder if Washington will offer more of a statement of principles rather than seek to broker a major agreement.

Trump's adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner launched the administration's peace initiative in June with a conference in Bahrain in which he dangled \$50 billion in investment for the region if the Palestinians agree on a political deal.

The Palestinian leadership boycotted the conference, accusing the administration of ignoring key political issues and trying to buy its acceptance of Israeli rule.

Kushner has repeatedly said that a political component of the peace plan was in the pipeline.

Greenblatt cited personal reasons in leaving, with the father of six saying he wanted to spend more time with his family.



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