

[Egypt hands out 11 life sentences for joining Daesh](#)

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CAIRO: An Egyptian court has sentenced 11 people to life in prison on charges of joining the Daesh group in Syria and Iraq.

Giza criminal court on Monday says the defendants all traveled abroad to fight for Daesh and receive military training.

Two other defendants got 15-year sentences, and another was given three years for the same charges. These include possessing weapons and plotting attacks against security forces and state institutions.

The verdicts can be appealed, and the court has dropped the charges against another defendant.

Egypt is battling its own Daesh-led insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. That fight intensified in 2013 after the military overthrew an elected but divisive Islamist president.

Militants in Egypt have carried out scores of attacks, mainly targeting security forces and minority Christians.



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British intelligence fears Gulf crisis could lead to attacks on UK by Iranian terror cells

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LONDON: The UK could come under attack from Iranian-backed terror cells if the ongoing Gulf crisis worsens and relations between London and Tehran continue to deteriorate, intelligence sources have said.

Senior intelligence officers in the UK now rank the Islamic Republic only behind Russia and China as the severest threat to the national security of the UK, [a Daily Telegraph report](#) on Monday said.

Tensions between Britain and Iran have heightened following the seizure of UK-flagged tanker Stena Impero in the Strait of Hormuz last week, raising concerns of top intelligence bodies in Britain.

According to MI5 and MI6, Iran is funding a network of terror cells across the European continent – including in the UK – and, depending on how the Gulf crisis plays out, could give the green light for attacks to be carried out.

A counter-terror operation in 2015 against a Hezbollah-linked cell found the group had been stockpiling tons of explosives on the outskirts of London, something first [disclosed by the Telegraph in June](#), and described as “proper organized terrorism.”



A counter-terror operation in 2015 against a Hezbollah-linked cell found the group had been stockpiling tons of explosives. (AFP/File Photo)

A source told the newspaper: “Iran has Hezbollah operatives in position to carry out a terrorist attack in the event of a conflict. That is the nature of the domestic threat Iran poses to the UK.”

MI5 and Metropolitan Police said they were confident that the 2015 raids had “severely disrupted” Iranian terror activity in the UK, but that cells still existed on the European mainland.

The report also disclosed that Iran had been blamed for a series of

cyberattacks on the UK, including hacking of politician's and peers personal information, on the Post Office as well as local government bodies and private sector companies in 2018.

The UK government has sent a letter of protest to the UN Security Council over the seizure of the tankers in "Omani waters when it was interrupted by Iranian forces," which it says is an "illegal interference by Iran."

The UK government has consistently said it does not seek confrontation with Iran, but the letter added: "It is unacceptable and highly escalatory to threaten shipping going about its legitimate business through internationally recognized transit corridors."



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Iran seeking US-UK rift, releases footage of crew on board Stena Impero
British-flagged tanker was in collision with Iranian fishing boat: Tehran

Ennahda's Ghannouchi to stand for national elections in Tunisia

Author:

Sun, 2019-07-21 23:05

TUNIS: Rached Ghannouchi, the influential leader of Tunisia's moderate Ennahda Party, will stand in the next parliamentary elections in October, a move widely seen as an attempt to seek a leadership position in the country.

Exiled in London for about two decades during the time of former President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, Ghannouchi has been a major force since Tunisia's 2011 revolution, but he has never run for any official position.

The 78-year-old remains a dominant figure who critics say effectively controls the country in tandem with the secular-minded President Beji Caid Essebsi, 92, often dubbed the "two sheikhs" in reference to their age.

"The decision to present Ghannouchi at the top of the party's electoral list in Tunisia, is to have leaders of parties play a more important role at this crucial stage in the history of the democratic transition in Tunisia," Ennahda Party official Imed Khmiri told Reuters.

Ghannouchi's candidacy for a parliamentary seat reinforces expectations that he is seeking to play a bigger role, possibly as prime minister or speaker of Parliament, if his party wins the election.

Parliamentary elections are expected to be held on Oct. 6 with a presidential vote following on Nov. 17. They will be the third set of polls in which Tunisians can vote freely following the 2011 revolution.

The parliamentary race is expected to be fought closely by the Ennahda Party, the secular Tahya Tounes Party of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, the Nidaa Tounes Party led by Hamed Caid Essebsi, the president's son, and the Courant Democrat party.

Tunisia has been hailed as the only democratic success of the Arab Spring uprisings, with a new constitution, free elections and a coalition government with secular and moderate leaders in a region otherwise struggling with upheaval.

But political progress has not been matched by economic advances. Unemployment stands at about 15 percent, up from 12 percent in 2010, due to weak growth and low investment.



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Tunisia's Ennahda claims victory in landmark local poll
Tunisian president accuses Ennahda party of personally threatening him

[High stakes in gas standoff between Cyprus, Turkey](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-07-21 22:46

NICOSIA: Longtime adversaries Cyprus and Turkey are locked in a tense “game of chicken” over the prospect of a multibillion-dollar Mediterranean gas bonanza with neither side willing to capitulate, analysts say.

Turkey vowed to escalate its activities in waters around the island after the EU on Monday agreed on measures to punish Ankara for pursuing “illegal” drilling in Cyprus’s exclusive economic zone.

“This is a tit-for-tat game where nobody is ready to back down, with Turkey

willing to go one step further," Hubert Faustmann, professor of history and political science at the University of Nicosia, told AFP.

Turkey "will continue to drill, they may even decide to drill in blocks licensed by the Cypriot government ... it's a game of chicken," he added.

The discovery of huge gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean has stoked long-standing tensions between EU member Cyprus and Turkey.

The island is divided between the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus and a breakaway state set up after a Turkish invasion launched on July 20, 1974 in response to a coup sponsored by the military junta then ruling Greece.

Turkey, the only country to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, has sent three ships to carry out drilling off the Cypriot coast despite EU condemnation and strong words from Washington.

In response EU foreign ministers agreed measures including cutting €145.8 million (\$164 million) in pre-accession funds to Turkey allocated for 2020.

Turkey, which does not recognize Cyprus as a sovereign or EU member state, says its actions abide by international law and that it is drilling inside its continental shelf.

While negotiations to reunify the island remain on hold, Cyprus has moved to start gas and oil exploration by issuing licenses to international companies.

That has angered Ankara which argues that such exploration deprives the Turkish Cypriot minority of benefiting from the island's natural wealth.

"Turkey won't step down and EU sanctions are mild, the sanctions are not painful, and Turkey knows there is no determination for a confrontation," said Faustmann.

He argued that Cyprus needs to find more gas to make it commercially viable to extract.

"Unless there's a big find, it might be a lot of noise over nothing, there isn't enough extractable gas at the moment."

Experts also argue that if the escalation continues it will be difficult for energy companies to explore off Cyprus due to the risk.

"Interest in operations is there, however tensions with Turkey are not helping. If tensions subside then there will be a lot of interest because there is support from the markets and the EU too," said energy analyst Cyril Widdershoven, founder of the consultancy firm Verocy.

Cyprus on Tuesday rejected as "unacceptable" a Turkish Cypriot proposal on energy revenue sharing to help de-escalate tensions.

Nicosia argues that jointly managing the island's untapped energy resources

can only be workable once an elusive peace settlement has been agreed, while assuring Turkish Cypriots will get their equal share.

Atlantic Council senior associate Charles Ellinas said the rising tensions will make the waters choppier for energy companies when they resume drilling in blocks licensed by the Cyprus government, especially in areas disputed by Turkey.

"Turkey will not back off unless the EU and the US apply serious sanctions that hurt its economy. But I do not see that happening... NATO, trade and refugees are important to them," he told AFP.

"Turkey will maintain aggression until Cyprus agrees to put hydrocarbons on the negotiating table."

The waters off Cyprus have attracted international giants such as ExxonMobil of the United States, France's Total and Italy's Eni.

Sizeable natural gas deposits have been discovered in three areas but have yet to be extracted.

Last month Cyprus said it expected to earn \$9.3 billion over 18 years from exploiting a gas field in the Aphrodite block under a renegotiated contract with Royal Dutch Shell, US-based Noble and Israel's Delek.

In February US energy giant ExxonMobil announced the discovery of a huge natural gas reserve off the island's coast which Cyprus hailed as one of the biggest worldwide in recent years.

Ellinas estimates Cyprus's discovered reserves so far are around 10 trillion cubic feet and "there is probably as much still to be discovered and possibly more."

He estimates total gas revenue could be about \$160 billion, which could generate profits of \$30 billion over 20 years, but finding buyers may be tough in a competitive international market.

"Cyprus's share could be \$17 billion. But first, sales need to be secured, and there lies the challenge, in a market inexorably moving toward renewables and clean energy. The longer it takes the more difficult it becomes."



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Turkish steps up drilling activities around Cyprus
EU agrees sanctions against Turkey for drilling off Cyprus

[White House's Kushner to finalize Palestinian economic plan on Middle East tour -official](#)

Sun, 2019-07-21 21:53

WASHINGTON: White House senior adviser Jared Kushner will lead a US delegation on a tour of the Middle East to finalize details of his proposed \$50 billion economic development plan for the Palestinians, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, an administration official said on Sunday. Kushner, Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt, State Department official Brian Hook and Kushner aide Avi Berkowitz are expected to make stops in

Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, the official said.

They leave late this month and return to Washington in early August.

The official said the purpose of the trip is to “continue on the momentum that was created at the workshop in Bahrain and finalize the economic portion of the plan.”

They will also discuss the possibility of locating the development fund in Bahrain, the official said.

Kushner, US President Donald Trump’s son-in-law and the plan’s main architect, sought to build support for his ambitious economic proposals for the Palestinian territories at an international meeting in Bahrain in June. Palestinians poured scorn on the Trump administration’s \$50 billion investment plan to help achieve Middle East peace, but US Gulf Arab allies said the economic initiative had promise if a political settlement is reached.

Kushner and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin last week discussed creation of the fund with World Bank President David Malpass, the official said. The World Bank has a role in managing the fund.

The delegation was not expected to discuss Trump’s long-awaited political plan for the Middle East, and when it will be released remains unclear.



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Kushner: Door still open to Palestinians despite Bahrain boycott
Kushner's Peace to Prosperity plan met with guarded enthusiasm