

# [US accuses Iranian oil tankers of turning off maritime transponders](#)

Wed, 2018-11-07 22:57

LONDON: The United States accused Iranian oil tankers of turning off their maritime transponders to try and hide their movements after Washington imposed a wave of sanctions on Tehran this week.

US Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook said on Wednesday that the move created a safety concern.

Speaking about the new sanctions, which target the energy, banking and shipping sectors, Hook said the US had been very careful and successful in applying maximum pressure on Iran through sanctions without allowing a spike in the oil price, Reuters reported. Wednesday.

He said an expected increase in oil supply in 2019 will help the United States to ask countries to further reduce their imports of Iranian oil.



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[Brian Hook](#)

Facing new sanctions, Iranians vent anger at rich and powerfulIranians fear more hardships as US sanctions begin to bite

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## [Frenchman accused of smuggling guns from Gaza to West Bank 'tricked'](#)

Wed, 2018-11-07 22:25

BEERSHEBA, Israel: A Frenchman formerly employed by his country's Jerusalem consulate and accused by Israel of smuggling guns between the Palestinian territories will argue he was "tricked," his lawyer said Wednesday. Romain Franck, who worked as a driver for the consulate, is standing trial for exploiting reduced security checks for diplomats to transport 70 pistols and two automatic rifles from the Gaza Strip to the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The Shin Bet internal security agency said Franck, who was arrested in February, was motivated by money in the five instances he smuggled guns for a network involving several Palestinians.

Speaking after a hearing at the district court in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba, Franck's lawyer Kenneth Mann stressed that his client's actions were not those of an ideologue seeking to empower Palestinian militants in their battle with Israel.

Mann said his client had been "tricked" by his alleged Palestinian accomplices.

"He was scared, he is young and inexperienced," Mann told reporters.

"He has no ideological or political involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The Shin Bet said Franck had been paid a total of around \$5,500 for his efforts.

Israeli officials have stressed he acted on his own without the consulate's knowledge, adding that diplomatic relations with France were not affected. The Wednesday hearing was limited to procedural discussions. Franck attended but said nothing.



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## [International powers quietly shelve December plan for Libya election](#)

Wed, 2018-11-07 21:47

TUNIS, CAIRO: The UN and Western powers have given up hope that Libya will hold elections in the immediate future, focusing on reconciliation first among rival factions locked in a cycle of conflict, diplomats and other sources said.

In May, France had persuaded major players in the North African country to verbally agree to elections on Dec. 10 as a way of ending repeated rounds of bloodshed between competing factions that emerged after a 2011 NATO-backed

uprising.

But weeks of fighting between rival militias in the capital Tripoli and deadlock between rump parliaments in Tripoli and the east has made that goal unrealistic, Western officials argue.

Shelving the plans for presidential and parliamentary elections is the latest setback for Western powers that helped topple Muammar Qaddafi seven years ago before stepping back and seeing hopes for a democratic transition crumble.

Instead of pushing for a vote as a short-term goal, UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame will focus in a briefing to the UN Security Council on Thursday on staging a national conference next year and fixing the economy, diplomats said.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

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**In May, France had persuaded major players to verbally agree to elections on Dec. 10**

**UN's focus is on organizing a national conference next year and fixing the economy.**

The conference would aim to forge consensus in a country divided between hundreds of armed groups controlling mostly minimal territory, towns, tribes and regions.

Libya has two governments, a UN-backed administration in the capital and a largely powerless eastern version aligned with influential veteran commander Khalifa Haftar, whose forces control much of the east. Salame will also push again for economic reforms to end a system benefiting armed groups that have access to cheap dollars due to their power over banks.

There was no immediate comment from the Tripoli-based government or the eastern-based Parliament. Diplomats say delayed reforms introduced in Tripoli in September, including a fee on purchases of foreign currency, can only partially ease Libya's economic woes as long as the central bank remains divided and predatory factions retain their positions.

The reforms have so far done little to improve conditions for ordinary Libyans hit by steep inflation and a cash crisis linked to the fall of the dinar on the black market.

For the militias, the sources said Salame would outline a new "security arrangement" for Tripoli aimed at depriving them of control of key sites and integrating their members into regular forces – something that has proved elusive in the past.

Salame is the sixth UN special envoy for Libya since 2011.

Talks to unify rival camps launched in September 2017, shortly after Salame took up his post, ground to a halt after one month with Haftar's role a key sticking point. Many in western Libya oppose him, fearing he could use the position to seize power.

Haftar's Libyan National Army says it is committed to the election process, in which Haftar himself is a possible candidate.

UN efforts to stabilize Libya have long been undercut by the divergent agendas of foreign powers.

The international community formally backs the transitional government in Tripoli, but Egypt and the UAE have lent Haftar support and European states including France courted the commander as his power grew.

France led the push for elections, believing it could benefit from helping fix the Libya conflict, before realizing the country was not ready for a vote, diplomats say.

"We have to accelerate the process, which is what Salame will say and push on with going to the ballot box," a French official said. "The calendar on elections will slip, but that's not a problem."

France has vied for influence with Italy, which has sought to protect its oil and gas interests and stem the flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean by building ties in Tripoli, where it is the only Western country to fully reopen an embassy.

Italy is hosting a conference in Palermo next week, where Salame's roadmap will be discussed.

In recent weeks, Western powers and the UN have quietly stopped talking about the election in December, without formally declaring it dead.

"The idea is now that Salame will talk about a national conference and economic reforms so people hope the Dec. 10 date will quietly pass away," said one source familiar with UN plans.

Elections remain the goal, but progress on the ground toward better governance and security were needed in place of "extended additional thinking sessions," said a senior US administration official.

"I think pinning everything on a single date for an election has not proved a successful strategy," the official said.

"We are personally less vested in a date than the quality of the election, and I do think we have some work to do."



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## [Daesh suffers heavy losses in Syria despite Kurd pause](#)

Author:

Wed, 2018-11-07 21:33

At least 45 Daesh fighters have been killed around their last enclave in Syria despite a pause in a two-month Kurdish-led assault, a monitor said on Wednesday.

A Kurdish-led alliance backed by Washington announced the pause in its offensive in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor last week in protest against Turkish shelling of Kurdish areas along the northern border.

But waves of US-led airstrikes since Monday have killed 28 militants, including during an abortive Daesh assault on Tuesday on an oilfield north of the enclave, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) killed another 17 Daesh fighters while defending their base in the village of Al-Bahra just outside Daesh-held territory on Monday, the Britain-based monitoring group said.

Alliance spokesman Kino Gabriel had stressed that the pause in offensive operations did not mean SDF fighters would not defend themselves. The SDF launched its offensive against the Daesh enclave around the Euphrates Valley town of Hajin on Sept. 10.

But after making slow progress, they suffered a major setback last month when Daesh took advantage of sandstorms to launch a series of counter-attacks.

By the end of the month, they were back at square one with all of the territories they had won recaptured by the militants.

The Hajin enclave is the last significant remnant of the “caliphate” Daesh proclaimed in 2014 across a vast swathe of Syria and neighboring Iraq.

The rest has all been lost to offensives by multiple alliances on both sides of the border.

Outside the Hajin enclave, the group’s operations are confined to sleeper cells and to hideouts in unpopulated desert and mountain areas.



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## Syrian regime wants Palestinian refugees back in Yarmouk

Author:

Wed, 2018-11-07 21:27

BEIRUT: The Syrian regime has created a plan for the return of Palestinians to the war-ravaged Yarmouk refugee camp in southern Damascus, the deputy foreign minister said Tuesday.

In an interview with Beirut-based broadcaster Al-Mayadeen, Faisal Al-Meqdad said there was a "plan for the return of all refugees to the camp," home to some 160,000 Palestinians before Syria's war broke out in 2011.

He did not specify how or when people would start returning.

The Syrian regime and allied forces retook the neighborhood in May from Daesh, pushing the militants out of their only bastion in the capital.

"Efforts are being made to clear (the camp) of mines left by... Daesh," said Meqdad.

Founded in 1957 with tents for Palestinians who fled or were ousted from their homes with the establishment of Israel, Yarmouk grew into a bustling neighborhood.

In 2012, around 140,000 residents fled as clashes raged.

Those who stayed faced severe shortages of food and medicine under a withering years-long regime siege.

Daesh terrorists entered the area in 2015, bringing further suffering to remaining residents until being forced out in May.

Five months on, only a few residents have managed to return.

Meqdad said Damascus wanted to dispel any "rumors" that Palestinians had been displaced.

The once-busy district is now a ghost town piled with rubble and mangled steel rods.

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, has said its 23 premises in the camp including 16 schools are damaged, but that it would not fix any unless the government officially allowed residents to return.

UN and Palestinian officials have criticized Damascus for not giving the go-ahead for reconstruction plans or officially allowing residents to return.

On Monday, Meqdad said the Syrian regime would not object to a “role for the Palestinian Authority or UNRWA in rebuilding the camp.”

More than 360,000 people have been killed since Syria’s multi-faceted war erupted in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-regime protests.



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