

Tunisia toils to find final resting place for drowned migrants

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Mon, 2019-07-22 14:29

GABES: A putrid odour lingers outside a morgue in Tunisia's coastal city of Gabes as dozens of bodies of would-be migrants to Europe pulled out of the sea await burial.

A string of deadly shipwrecks since May have left the North African country overwhelmed with bodies and struggling to find them a final resting place. More than 80 drowned migrants have been retrieved from Tunisian waters – most of them victims of a deadly July 1 shipwreck that left only three survivors. Fished out of the sea between the port city of Zarzis and the tourist island of Djerba in the south, their bodies were brought to Gabes hospital – the only facility in the region capable of taking DNA samples.

Under pressure from civil society groups, Tunisian authorities have stepped up efforts to systematically collect the DNA of each unidentified drowned migrant, hospital director Hechmi Lakhrech told AFP.

The samples could well be the only hope of informing the victims' families of their fate, he added.

In the basement morgue, staff use surgical masks or simple scarves to fend off the stench of bodies stacked one top of the other on the floor.

Since July 6, the numbers have "overwhelmed" the morgue's 30-body capacity, said Lakhrech.

With just two forensic doctors and two assistants, not to mention a lack of equipment, the facility is struggling to keep them properly stored, he added. After forensic tests, the bodies are kept at the morgue until a burial site is found, which in Tunisia is complicated, according to Gabes governor Mongi Thameur.

Many municipalities have refused to allow the drowned migrants to be buried in their cemeteries.

"Some fear the bodies carry cholera, and others refuse to bury people in Muslim cemeteries if their religion is unknown," he told AFP.

It comes down to "a problem of mentality and also of humanity in some cases," he said, adding that many people needed to be "sensitised."

At the Bouchama cemetery, the only one in Gabes to have so far accepted migrant bodies, 16 graves dug off to the side lie empty.

"My parents are resting here, I don't want non-Muslims to be buried by their side," said one local resident.

In front of the hospital, the stifling midday heat beats down as 14 white bags are carefully loaded onto the back of a garbage truck.

Once loaded, it will make the two-hour journey to Zarzis, where an improvised cemetery flooded with the bodies of migrants for several years is now full, and a new one has just been opened.

Each grave is marked with a simple plaque bearing the victim's DNA file

number and burial date.

“On July 12, we collected 45 bodies in one day!” said Zarzis deputy mayor Faouzi Khenissi, calling it a “phenomenal problem.”

The city has taken in the bodies “because we have this culture, we can’t just leave the remains unburied,” he said.

Zarzis is a hotspot for illegal departures to Europe and Khenissi says some of the city’s own youth have also been victims of the wrecks.

Municipal workers and officials take shifts volunteering after work to conduct the burials.

After three hours of prep under the blazing sun, 14 bodies are buried alongside the 47 others already laid to rest at the new site, just outside a shelter for rescued migrants.

Mongi Slim of the country’s Red Crescent called for “international mobilization” to address the issue which “does not concern Tunisia alone.”

“The country is already struggling to take care of rescued migrants, but even more so for those who’ve died.”



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Turkey to expel Syrians living illegally in Istanbul

Author:

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Mon, 2019-07-22 13:52

ISTANBUL: Syrians living illegally in Istanbul have until August 20 to leave the city or face expulsion, authorities warned Monday, as hostility mounts toward the millions of refugees in Turkey.

Turkey has 3.5 million Syrian refugees – more than any other country – but they are only under “temporary protection” because the government does not offer them formal refugee status.

Under the system, they must stay in the province to which they are assigned, and can only visit other cities with short-term passes.

In a statement published in Turkish and Arabic, the Istanbul governor’s office said it would no longer tolerate Syrians who are assigned to other provinces.

“Foreigners of Syrian nationality who are not registered under the system of temporary protection or who do not have a residency permit will be expelled to their designated provinces by the Ministry of the Interior,” it said.

Those without any registration papers at all would be sent back to Syria, it added.

But Mahdi Daoud, who heads a coalition of Syrian NGOs in Istanbul, said more than 600 people were already sent back to Syria last week – even though most had protection cards issued for other Turkish provinces.

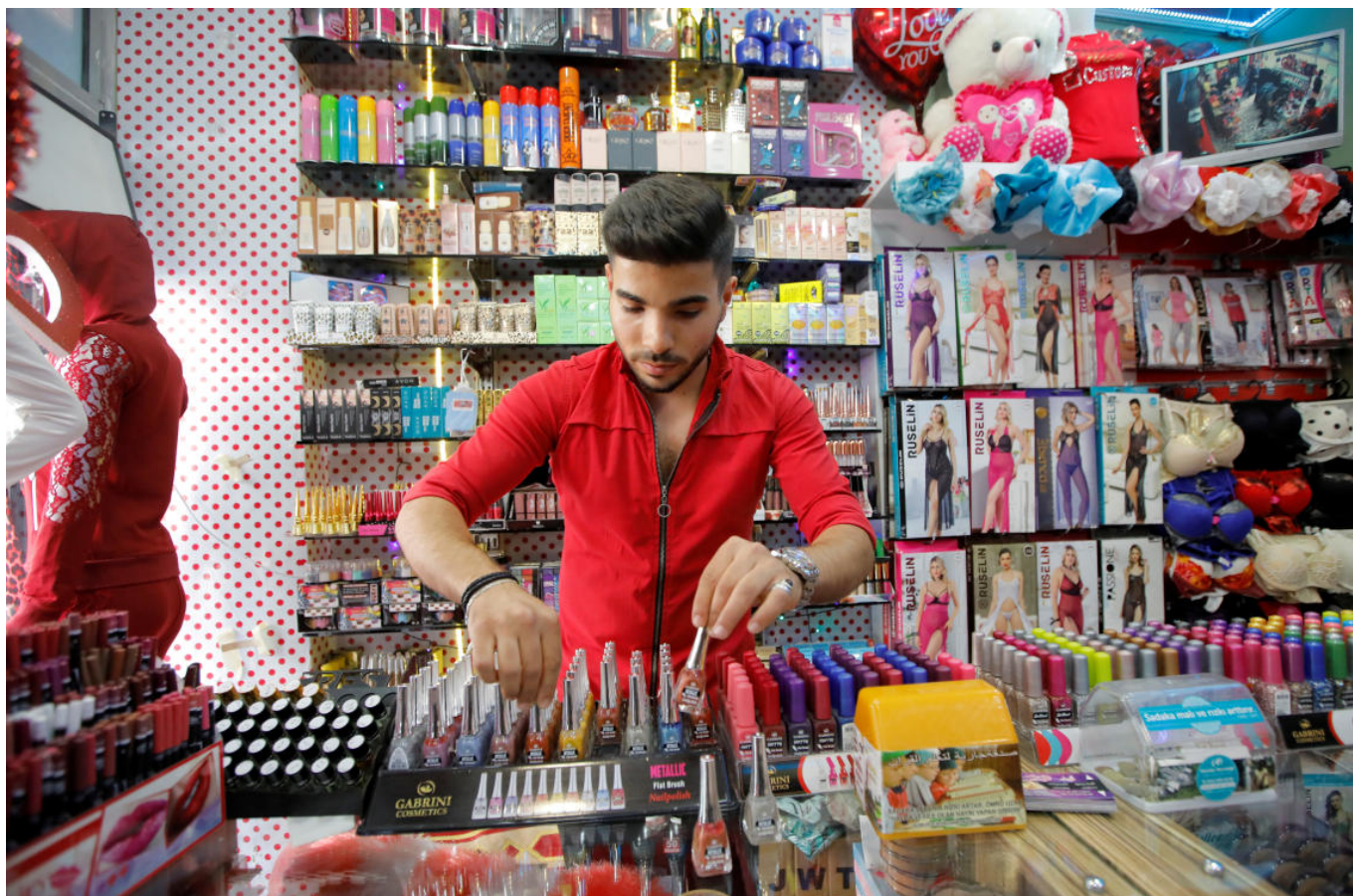
“They were forced to sign documents saying they returned voluntarily to Syria,” he told AFP.

He said his coalition, the Forum for Syrian Associations, had complained to the Turkish authorities and there had not been any new cases since Saturday. Security forces have stepped up identity checks in recent days in Istanbul – at metro and railway stations and in areas with large numbers of Syrians. There are currently 547,000 Syrians living in the city, according to the governor’s office, which said no new registrations were being accepted for refugees.

Daoud said nearly 26,000 Syrians live in Istanbul without a protection card. He was not sure how many had cards from other provinces.

A survey published this month by Kadir Has University in Istanbul showed growing hostility toward Syrian refugees in the city, rising from 54.5 percent of respondents in 2017 to 67.7 percent in 2019.

#SyriansOut became part of the discourse during municipal elections this year – with many complaining about the number of Arabic signs appearing on shops in Istanbul and elsewhere.



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Turkey will retaliate if US imposes sanctions over S-400s

[Iran had 'no right' to board British tanker, says UK's Jeremy Hunt](#)

Mon, 2019-07-22 19:05

LONDON: UK's foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt told Britain's parliament on Monday that under international law, Iran had "no right" to board the British tanker Stena Impero last week.

Hunt also said on Monday said Britain wanted to establish a European-led maritime protection force in the Gulf but emphasized that London was not seeking a confrontation with Iran.

"We will now seek to put together a European-led maritime protection mission to support the safe passage of both crew and cargo in this vital

region,” Hunt told parliament after Iranian authorities seized a British-flagged tanker in the Gulf on Friday.

“We will seek to establish this mission as quickly as possible,” he said, adding: “It will not be part of the US maximum pressure policy on Iran.

“Under international law Iran had no right to obstruct the ship’s passage – let alone board her,” Hunt said. He also described Friday’s incident as an act of “state piracy.”

A British warship in the region, HMS Montrose, attempted to warn off Iranian forces and raced to the scene but arrived too late to be able to assist.

READ MORE: [Iran seeking US-UK rift, releases image of crew on board Stena Impero](#)

Hunt said a second British warship, HMS Duncan, that is being dispatched to the region, would arrive by July 29.

Hunt said all British-flagged ships would be asked to give the British authorities notice when they plan to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, where Friday’s incident happened, “to enable us to offer the best protection we can.”

But he added: “It is, of course, not possible for the Royal Navy to provide escorts for every single ship or indeed eliminate all risks of piracy.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday accused the US National Security Adviser John Bolton of trying to enlist British support for the US campaign against Iran. “Having failed to lure Donald Trump into the War of the Century, he is turning his venom against the UK in hopes of dragging it into a quagmire,” Zarif said.

However, Hunt refuted the claims. “When it comes to freedom of navigation, there can be no compromise,” he said, adding that while the US no longer supports the nuclear deal which Britain still backs, they still co-operated on most issues.

“That is why the solution that we are proposing to the House (of Commons) this afternoon is one that brings in a much broader alliance of countries, including other countries like us that have a different approach to the Iran nuclear deal.”



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British intelligence fears Gulf crisis could lead to attacks on UK by Iranian terror cells
Iran seeking US-UK rift, releases footage of crew on board Stena Impero

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

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Mon, 2019-07-22 13:28

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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Mon, 2019-07-22 17:32

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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