

Ennahda's Ghannouchi to stand for national elections in Tunisia

Author:

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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

Citizen journalist among 11 civilians killed in northwest Syria

Author:

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KHAN SHEIKHUN: A young citizen journalist was among 11 civilians killed in air raids on Syria's Idlib region Sunday, rescue workers and a monitor said, as he filmed the Russia-backed regime bombardment of the battered enclave. Anas Al-Dyab, a photographer and videographer in his early 20s, was a member of the White Helmets who also contributed to AFP.

He was killed in Russian air strikes in the town of Khan Sheikhun, rescuers and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The White Helmets, rescue workers in rebel areas named after their distinctive hard hats, said the group "mourns the fall of a hero Anas Al-Dyab, a volunteer and media activist with the Syrian Civil Defense Center in Idlib," in a Twitter post.

An AFP journalist saw White Helmet members gather to bid farewell to their friend, whose body was laid on a thick red blanket.

The Damascus regime and its Russian ally have stepped up their deadly bombardment of the jihadist-run region of Idlib since late April, despite a September buffer zone deal to protect the region of some three million people from a massive military assault.

Khan Sheikhun, a town in the south of Idlib, has been particularly hit, forcing thousands to flee their homes there, according to the United Nations. But Dyab "chose to remain with his fellow volunteers in Khan Sheikhun till today," the White Helmets said.

Raed Al-Saleh, the head of the White Helmets, said Dyab was killed while "trying to show the world what's going on in Syria."

"It's a great loss," he said.

Dyab, who was single, leaves behind his parents and three brothers, one of whom is held by the Damascus regime, Saleh said.

The Observatory said Dyab was hiding in the cellar of a three-story building with two members of the Jaish Al-Ezza rebel group when the strike happened. Also on Sunday, regime air strikes killed 10 other civilians including three children in other parts of the bastion, said the Britain-based monitor, which relies on sources inside Syria for its information.

Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in January took full administrative control of the Idlib region, although other jihadists and rebels are also present.

The Idlib region is supposed to be protected by a September 2018 deal between Russia and rebel backer Turkey, but a buffer zone planned under that accord was never fully implemented.

The White Helmets, who are backed by the West, were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016.

But Moscow and Damascus accuse the group of backing rebels and jihadists. Syria's war has killed a total of more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests.



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End Syria hospital attacks, Russia told at UN

Egypt expresses dismay to UK envoy over British Airways flight suspension

Author:

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Sun, 2019-07-21 15:46

CAIRO: Egypt's aviation minister on Sunday expressed his dismay over British Airways' decision to suspend flights to the Egyptian capital to the UK's ambassador to Cairo.

International Airlines Group's British Airways suspended flights to Cairo on Saturday for seven days "as a security precaution" as it reviews security at the city's airport.

Later on Saturday, Germany's Lufthansa said it had canceled services from Munich and Frankfurt to Cairo but it resumed flights on Sunday.

Air France, Emirates and Etihad Airways continued to operate flights to Cairo.

Younis Al-Masry "expressed his displeasure at British Airways taking a decision unilaterally concerning the security of Egyptian airports without referring to the competent Egyptian authorities," the aviation ministry said in a statement released after a meeting between the Egyptian aviation minister and British Ambassador Geoffrey Adams.

The statement went on to say that Adams had apologized for not informing Egyptian authorities before the decision was made and cited him as saying the flight suspension was not related to the security measures at Egyptian airports.

The British embassy in Cairo could not immediately be reached for comment.

A spokesman for Air France, in a statement sent to Reuters, said the airline had decided to maintain its service to Cairo after liaising with French and Egyptian authorities.

An Emirates spokeswoman said its flights were operating to schedule.

"We are closely assessing the situation and are in contact with the relevant aviation authorities with regards to our flight operations to Egypt," the spokeswoman said.

The website for Abu Dhabi's Etihad showed its services were also operating and a spokesman said the airline was monitoring the security situation in Cairo.

Tourism, a key source of foreign revenue for Egypt, has been recovering after visitor numbers dropped in the wake of a 2011 uprising and the 2015 bombing of a Russian jet, which killed all 224 people on board shortly after takeoff. That attack, which was claimed by Islamic State, prompted Russia to halt all flights to Egypt for several years and a number of countries including Britain to cease flights to the Red Sea resort of Sharm el Sheikh, which have yet to resume.



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British Airways, Lufthansa suspend Cairo flights on security grounds
British Airways resumes flights to Pakistan after more than a decade