

Two Iraq ministers risk sack over Saddam-era posts

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Thu, 2018-11-08 15:30

BAGHDAD: Two ministers approved by Iraq's parliament may lose their jobs before the rest of cabinet is agreed, officials said Thursday, after a commission found they were members of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The Accountability and Justice Commission is responsible for the policy of "de-Baathification," or ensuring no Saddam-era officials or senior members of his Baath party play a role in Iraq's government.

Commission spokesman Fares Abdul Sattar said that the body had sent a letter to parliament over two nominees to the 22-minister government – a third of which has yet to be confirmed by parliament.

"Two names will be subject to procedures by the Accountability and Justice Commission," Abdul Sattar said, without specifying who.

A parliamentary source said that the endangered officials were Minister of Youth and Sports Ahmad Al-Obeidi and Minister of Communications Naim Al-Rubaye, who were only approved by lawmakers last month.

If sacked, it would be the first time the policy of "de-Baathification" unseats a minister confirmed by parliament since the 2003 ouster of Saddam by a US-led invasion.

Rubaye was reportedly a member of the intelligence services and a mid-level Baath party official, said a security source, but it was unclear what role Obeidi had.

Both received parliament's vote of confidence on October 25 along with 12 other ministers, including those in charge of finance, foreign affairs, and oil.

Due to deep divisions, the remaining eight portfolios, including the interior and defense ministers, have not been put to a vote.

Parliament has met twice since then, but a confirmation vote did not feature on either session's agenda and it has not set a new date to approve the remaining ministers.

Government formation has dragged on since Adel Abdel Mahdi, 76, was appointed prime minister in early October.

He had launched a website to allow Iraqis to apply for a ministerial position online and more than 15,000 sent in bids, but most of the names that were approved on October 25 were well-known political figures.



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Iraq parliament holds off vote on key ministers Iraq gets US sanctions break to keep the lights on

[Egypt convicts 65 on terror charges, allegiance to Daesh](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-08 (All day)

CAIRO: An Egyptian court on Thursday sentenced 65 suspected Daesh extremists to between five years and life in prison for setting up a "terrorist cell", a court official said.

The alleged cell had members in various parts of impoverished upper Egypt and

was led by an “emir” Mostafa Ahmed Abdelaal.

The militants, charged in 2017, had “set up a terrorist cell in Upper Egypt which declared allegiance to (IS leader) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”, the court official said.

The court sentenced 18 of the defendants to life terms (25 years) and another 41 to 15-year prison terms.

It also handed six minors five years each in jail and acquitted two suspects. The sentences can be appealed.

Since Egypt’s military toppled president Mohamed Morsi in 2014, the government and security forces have cracked down hard on secular opposition and extremism.

The Egyptian branch of Daesh has led an insurgency in North Sinai and carried out attacks across the country.

Egypt’s army launched a major offensive in February dubbed “Sinai 2018” to dislodge the insurgents from the peninsula.

More than 450 suspected extremists and around 30 Egyptian soldiers have been killed since the offensive began, the army said in October.

Jihadist attacks in recent years have killed hundreds of police, soldiers and civilians.

Daesh claimed responsibility for an attack last week against Egyptian Christians in Minya province, which killed six Copts and one Anglican.

Egyptian courts have convicted many suspected extremists in mass trials which have been criticised by human rights groups.

An Egyptian military court on Wednesday sentenced eight Daesh members to death for a deadly attack against the army in 2016, officials said.



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Syria army frees 19 Druze hostages from Daesh Full horror of Daesh mass graves uncovered in Iraq

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

[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.

HIGHLIGHTS

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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Phase two development of Libya's Bahr Essalam gas field to finish by end 2018: NOCLibya strongman Haftar in Rome ahead of crisis talks