

Iran linked to rocket attack on US oil targets in southern Iraq

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BAGHDAD, Iraq: Iran was accused of sowing further chaos on Wednesday when a rocket hit a site near Basra in southern Iraq used by US and other oil companies.

The attack came hours after three rockets landed in the Rumailah oil field in Basra, near a camp used by the US oil services company Baker Hughes.

It was the fourth oil-related terrorist attack since Tehran threatened to halt exports from the Arabian Gulf in response to US sanctions aimed at reducing Iran's oil sales to zero.

Three people were injured in Wednesday's incident, when a short-range Katyusha rocket hit a drilling site in the Burjesiya area near Basra, an operational area for oil companies including Royal Dutch Shell, Eni of Italy and the US giant ExxonMobil.

The finger of blame was immediately pointed at Iran-backed armed groups in the area, particularly Kata'ib Hezbollah. "They are equipped with this type of rocket, which is ubiquitous among the Iranian-supported militias," security analyst Dr. Theodore Karasik told Arab News.

TIMELINE OF TERROR

- July 21, 2018 Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei says if Iran's oil sales are impeded by sanctions, 'no other country in the region will export oil either.'
- April 21, 2019 US says it will end sanctions exemptions allowing some countries to buy Iranian oil, with the aim of reducing its exports to zero.
- May 12 Four tankers – two Saudi, one Emirati and one Norwegian – are sabotaged with explosive mines off the coast of Fujairah in the UAE. ● May 14 Drone attacks on two oil pumping stations temporarily shut down pipeline from eastern Saudi Arabia to Yanbu port on the Red Sea.
- June 13 Two tankers, one Japanese and one Norwegian, are attacked in the Gulf of Oman, leaving one ablaze and both adrift.
- June 19 Rocket attack targets foreign oil installations near Basra in southern Iraq, where Iran-backed militias are active.

"The Islamic Republican Guard Corps has created a supply network for local militias that helped to build up a weapons stock around Basra. It is easily

fed by new supplies from Iran because of the porous nature of the border between the two, both on land and at sea,” said Karasik, senior adviser at Gulf State Analytics in Washington, DC.

An Iraqi security source also blamed Iran-backed militias. “The team that launched the rocket is made up of more than one group and were well trained in missile launching,” he said.

The rocket was fired from farmland about 4 km away and landed 100 meters from part of the site used as a residence and operations center by Exxon. Company staff were flown to Dubai.

Abbas Maher, mayor of the nearby town of Zubair, said he believed Iran-backed groups had specifically targeted Exxon to “send a message” to the US.

“We cannot separate this from regional developments, meaning the US-Iranian conflict,” he said. “These incidents have political objectives.”

Meanwhile US investigators presented more evidence that Iran was behind last week’s tanker attacks in the Gulf of Oman.

“The limpet mine used in the attack ... bears a striking resemblance to Iranian mines already publicly displayed in Iranian military parades,” said US Navy Commander Sean Kido.



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US intelligence proves 'without question' Iran behind tanker attacks
Rocket hits site of foreign oil firms in Iraq's Basra

[Russia invites Lebanon to Astana summit](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-06-20 00:20

BEIRUT: The Russian president's special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, has invited Lebanon to participate in the Astana conference as an observer.

"Lebanon has decided to send a delegate to participate in this conference at the end of July and the beginning of ... August," Lavrentiev said after meeting Lebanese officials. "The participation of Lebanon and Iraq is necessary when discussing the Syrian crisis."

Lavrentiev spoke to Lebanese President Michel Aoun about Moscow's efforts to achieve stability in the Middle East, and said Russia "will do more to address the situation in Syria" in coordination with the UN secretary-general's special envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen.

"We need to create the right conditions for the return of (Syrian) refugees," said Lavrentiev. "It is necessary that refugees return under appropriate conditions and not to destroyed areas."

Aoun told Lavrentiev: "Lebanon is interested in participating in the Astana conference because it facilitates efforts to find a political solution that will contribute to the return of refugees to their country."

Aoun said: "Participation in the Astana conference does not negate Lebanon's right to discuss with the Syrian state arrangements for the return of refugees to their homeland. We consider Russian support for this return an important factor awaiting the participants in the Astana negotiating process to reach a final solution to the Syrian crisis."

Lavrentiev said after meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri: "Eight years since the start of the Syrian crisis, it is time to allow for a political solution to this crisis, and we agreed with the Lebanese side to further coordinate with partners, especially European countries, in order to convince them to keep up with the return of refugees."

There have been systematic campaigns in Lebanon, including by the Labor Ministry and municipalities, against employing Syrian workers. In addition, dozens of shops operated by Syrians without permits are closed every day.

Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil said two weeks ago: “We will not accept that the Lebanese remain without work while Syrian refugees work illegally.”

He added: “Municipalities should not allow Syrians to work except in the sectors of agriculture, cleaning and construction, and prevent overcrowding.”

Bassil said: “Mayors must revoke licenses and prevent the opening of shops that are not legally entitled to Syrian workers.”

The Interior Ministry “is not entitled to intervene against a mayor who is enforcing the law,” he added. “Syria is a vast country and Lebanon cannot handle this number of refugees.”

After a meeting between Lavrentiev and Bassil, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry said the discussion focused on “the need to form a tripartite Russian-Lebanese-Syrian committee that facilitates the return of the refugees.”



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Idlib bombing raises doubts over future of Astana agreement Syria 'stalemate' due to Astana process, says Washington

For Gulf economies, Chinese outbound tourism holds passport to riches

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DUBAI: "One learns more from traveling 10,000 miles than from reading 10,000 scrolls." For China's fast-growing middle class, there has never been a better time to be guided by the ancient Chinese proverb as 150 million people travel every year from the Asian country to destinations around the world. Given the vast numbers involved and the fact that only eight out of 100 Chinese hold a passport, the mind boggles at the possibilities that could be in store for the global consumer market.

If the Gulf can capture even a fraction of the total Chinese outbound travel market, the economic bonanza for the region will be huge, according to consulting firms and experts.

Experts at the Arab Luxury World conference in Dubai last week advised regional brands on strategies to engage with the luxury market's largest and fastest-growing consumer group.

"Because the Gulf had so much organic business, it wasn't the first necessity to hunt for more opportunities," said Jonathan Siboni, founder and CEO of Luxurysight. "But now the market is repositioning itself. Chinese consumers are a new thing for the region."

A report by management consultants McKinsey in November 2018 said: "More than 70 percent of Chinese tourists travel with family and friends. As a result, these groups are the world's highest spenders per single trip. We expect annual growth of 6.1 percent for the next couple of years."

Siboni said: "There are 3.5 million millionaires in China. No matter what the preferred focus of niche brands, be it adventure, nature or shopping, Gulf companies will be well positioned if they prepare and target well." He uses the example of France, a country of 67 million people that receives 90 million tourists every year. Almost 2 million of the visitors are Chinese. More importantly, they account for 25 percent of France's duty-free sales. "If you have a very smart strategy, you can definitely generate results," Siboni told Arab News on the sidelines of the Arab Luxury World conference. "Look at the results from France's 2 million Chinese tourists. I would be tempted to say the same for Dubai. If you really target well and manage to learn how to talk to them and provide something unique, then the contribution to the image and the economy can be tremendous."

The number of Chinese tourists traveling to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is forecast to jump 81 percent between 2018 and 2022 – from 1.6 million to 2.9 million, according to a study by Colliers International in partnership with the Arabian Travel Market. The data show that GCC countries are visited by a mere 1 percent of China's tourists, but that share is

expected to grow.

Local communication agencies can play a big role in the GCC tourism and consumer market's transformation, Siboni said. Luxurysight is not operating in Saudi Arabia, but he expects it to begin operations at some point as the Kingdom takes steps to reinvent itself as a major tourist destination. For international travel agencies, hotels, retailers and other allied industries, the good news is not only that Chinese outbound tourism is exploding, but also that Chinese tourists are widening their horizons. As Maissa Zard, Luxurysight's head of marketing and sales, points out, Chinese tourists have become a lot savvier when it comes to choosing digital products and brands. "Before they shop, they know exactly where to shop and what to buy," she told Arab News. "There is a rise in cross-border e-commerce, so if brands in the region become loyal to tourists from the start, they would be building not only brand loyalty but also local store loyalty."

Brands should stop viewing Chinese tourists as "something extra," she said, adding that "they need to develop a loyal relationship with the Chinese consumer. According to the latest data, Chinese consumers represent 33 percent of the global luxury industry – a figure that will rise to 50 percent in a couple of years. As much as 75 percent of their purchases are made outside China, with the Middle East one of their top shopping destinations for 2020. Zard believes the Middle East has an important edge over Europe. "The region is very strong in terms of service and quality because it has a demanding local clientele," she said. "They need to leverage that advantage. Brands must understand that Chinese tourists could well become their best clients. The local clientele isn't sustainable because the world is becoming more globalized."

A big question for regional brands is how to cater to Chinese consumers and approach them in the right manner. "It's about vision and strategy," Siboni said. "Providing them with a unique experience will be key. In Paris, it's about luxury and culture. Dubai, for instance, has to define its best strategy."

According to a report issued by Dubai's Department of Economic Development, the emirate currently hosts almost 19,000 Chinese investors, who hold close to 6,000 active business licenses. "It is true that you have to deal with partners you are not used to, but it's a market that is extremely structured," Siboni said. "You have a few players who own the game, so once you know how it works, then you're in it."

The McKinsey report detailed eight distinct segments of Chinese tourists, ranging from value-seeking sightseers and sophisticates to backpackers and shoppers. Whatever the segment, engaging with Chinese consumers will involve the use of popular technologies and communication tools, such as WeChat and Little Red Book for payment processes.

"It means you have to integrate a payment system that is digitalized," Siboni said. "Alipay and WeChat Pay are tools that are non-negotiable. You need to integrate them with your business processes no matter what because, if you don't, then even if customers come to you, they won't be able to pay."

Siboni urges a 360-degree vision to ensure that content offered by brands in the Gulf region resonates with Chinese tourists. However, more work needs to be done regionally to keep pace with international consumer trends.

"Elsewhere in the region, attracting Chinese consumers is still not the top priority," Siboni said. "But Dubai has already understood that it has to

diversify, which is why you see increasing numbers of Chinese tourists.”
If people do learn more from traveling than from just reading, as the proverb suggests, then Chinese tourists have yet another incentive to make the Gulf region one of their favored destinations.





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Ministers discuss ways to boost Gulf tourism
Tourism officials carry out 700 inspections in run-up to Taif Season

[Bouteflika-era tycoon jailed for six months in Algeria](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-06-18 21:15

ALGIERS: Algeria's top businessman Ali Haddad, a key supporter of ousted president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, was jailed for six months on Monday for holding two passports, in the first conviction in a string of corruption probes.

The business tycoon was arrested in late March on the border with Tunisia in possession of two passports and undeclared currency, days before Bouteflika resigned in the face of mass protests.

Haddad, who owns Algeria's largest private construction company, is the first

high-profile figure with ties to Bouteflika to be jailed since the president stepped down on April 2 after two decades in power. He was found guilty of the “unjustified procurement of administrative documents” and also fined 50,000 dinars (\$420), state television reported.

Described by Forbes as one of Algeria’s wealthiest entrepreneurs, Haddad is widely perceived to have used his links to Bouteflika to build his business empire.

The businessman, a key election campaign funder for Bouteflika, had denied breaking the law and said he obtained his second passport legally after seeking an interview with then-Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal.

The ex-premier and Haddad are among many businessmen and former politicians caught up in a separate anti-corruption investigation launched since the president stepped down.

Earlier this month Haddad’s lawyer, Khaled Bourayou, decried a “political trial” and told journalists the passport case had no legal basis.

The sentence is significantly lower than the 18 months term and fine of 100,000 dinars requested by the prosecutor.

Hassane Boualem, then-director of titles and secure documents at the Interior Ministry, was given a two-month suspended sentence and fined 20,000 dinars for issuing Haddad’s second passport in 2016.

He told the court he was following the orders of his superiors – Interior Ministry head Hocine Mazouz, Sellal and Algeria’s current premier, Nouredine Bedoui – who were not investigated over the affair.

Last week, a judge placed in detention two former prime ministers, Sellal as well as Ahmed Ouyahia, who served four terms as premier.

An investigating magistrate on Sunday conditionally released former Finance Minister Karim Djoudi as part of the corruption probes. Karim Djoudi, finance minister between 2007 and 2014, appeared before the supreme court’s magistrate in connection with the disappearance of public funds and abuse of office.

The supreme court is the only judicial body with jurisdiction over offenses committed in public office by government members, local officials and high magistrates.

Former Transport Minister Amar Tou was also conditionally released after appearing before the investigating magistrate.

Djoudi and Tou are among 12 former Algerian officials subject to preliminary probes for alleged criminal offenses.

Former Trade Minister Amara Benyounes has been detained in El Harrach prison, in an eastern suburb of Algiers, and former Public Works Minister Abdelghani Zaalane has been conditionally released.

Army chief General Gaid Salah, the key powerbroker in post-Bouteflika Algeria, vowed Monday that no one would be spared from the corruption probes.

The judiciary must “bring to justice all the corrupt regardless of their function or their social rank,” he said. “The fight against corruption knows no limit and no exception will be made to anyone... it’s time to settle accounts,” Salah said, adding it was “time to clean up our country.”

The graft probes have also seen a dozen Bouteflika-linked businessmen placed in preventative detention.

Demonstrations have continued since the ailing head of state stepped down, as protesters demand the fall of regime insiders and the establishment of independent institutions.



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Algeria conditionally releases ex-finance chief in graft probe
Algerians rally even after ex-premiers detained

Sudan protesters urge night rallies amid standoff with army

Author:

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KHARTOUM: Sudan's protest leaders on Monday called for nighttime demonstrations and marches in the capital, Khartoum, and elsewhere in the country, amid a tense standoff with the ruling military over who should lead the transition after the ouster of Omar Al-Bashir.

The protest leaders said they've begun a "revolutionary escalation" to pressure the country's generals to hand over power to civilians and to condemn the military's violent dispersal of their sit-in camp in Khartoum earlier this month.

At least 128 people have died since the security force's crackdown on June 3, according to the protest organizers. The military-backed authorities, however, say 61 people died, including three members of the security forces.

The group representing the protesters – known as the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change – said the night rallies will begin on Tuesday and marches on Thursday.

The calls came a day after the deputy head of Sudan's ruling military council, Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, pushed back against demands from protest leaders concerning the composition of a transitional legislative body, seen by protest leaders as their "most important victory" in talks with the military.

Negotiations stalled

Dura Gambo, an activist with the Sudanese Professionals Association which has spearheaded the protest movement since December, said the protest leaders chose to return to the streets after they realized that the military "started to pull out of the previous deals."

"There is a total impasse. The negotiations have been suspended, internet services remain blocked, and the Ethiopian mediations apparently did not make progress," she said.

Negotiations between the military and protesters were called off after the deadly sit-in dispersal on June 3. The FDFC announced a package of conditions to be met before resuming talks, which included the formation of an international commission to investigate the killings of protesters, restoring internet services, and adherence to any deals struck before the breakdown in talks.

The military council rejected the idea of an international investigation, but the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry had said the council had agreed to adhere to the previous deals.

FASTFACT

The group representing the protesters – known as the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change – said the night rallies will begin on Tuesday and marches on Thursday.

Both Ethiopia and the US, which has sent a special envoy to Sudan, have made efforts to revive the talks and find a peaceful solution.

The EU on Monday called for military and protest leaders to refrain from unilateral moves, and resume negotiations “immediately,” based on agreements reached so far.

The statement, issued by an EU council representing its member states, urged the military to take confidence-building measures, including lifting restrictions on freedom of assembly, freedom of the media, civic space and access to the internet, and for the FDFC to respond accordingly.

Gambo warned that the protesters were still facing repression as long as the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and other security units were left on the streets in Khartoum and other cities.

“Street demonstrations are risky. It means more crackdown and deaths,” she said.

In a press conference in Khartoum on Monday, prominent activist Mohammed Naji Al-Asam reiterated the demand for an internationally-backed investigation into the protesters’ deaths, before resuming talks with the military.

“We are ready for any scenario. It seems that the military council intends to cling to power to rule Sudan alone,” he said.

“This will not happen,” he added.

He says 12 alleged rape cases were documented in the crackdown. He did not elaborate.

Last week, Pramila Patten, a UN special representative on sexual violence in conflict zones, expressed “grave concern” over reports of the rapes of protesters and female medical personnel by security forces and militias in Sudan.

Over the weekend, the hashtag #blueforSudan began to trend locally and internationally on social media, as a sign of solidarity with Sudan’s embattled protest movement.

Gambo, the activist, said the hashtag was created in memory of a protester, Mohammed Hashim Matter, a young engineer who was killed in the sit-in dispersal earlier this month.

“Mohammed had written on his social media: ‘I have painted the sky blue,’” she

said, referring to hopes for change in Sudan aroused by the protesters. “After his death, his friends launched a social media campaign and changed their profile pictures to blue, Mohammed’s favorite.”



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Sudan’s Bashir charged on corruption in first public appearance since removal
Sudan military acknowledges violations in sit-in dispersal