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Iraq begins legal proceedings against 14 French Daesh fighters

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Iraq has begun court proceedings against 14 suspected French members of the Daesh jihadist group captured by US-backed forces and transferred to Iraq from Syria last month, two legal sources said, *Reuters* reports.

The men appeared before an investigative judge of Baghdad's anti-terrorism court on March 6 in a procedural step towards putting them on trial, according to a court-appointed lawyer who attended the session and a member of the judicial council.

All 14 signed confessions saying they had been in Mosul when it was under Daesh rule from 2014 to 2017, according to the two legal sources, speaking on condition of anonymity.

If they are tried in Iraq and found guilty of having committed crimes against Iraq and the Iraqi people, they could face the death penalty, said the judicial council member.

“The course of investigations and indictment are leaning towards handing them the death sentence eventually,” said the court-appointed lawyer.

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Iraqi President Barham Salih said this month that convicted foreign fighters could be sentenced to death in Iraq.

Daesh redrew the map of the Middle East in 2014 when it declared an ultra-radical Sunni Islamist “caliphate” spanning parts of Syria and Iraq and established a rule known for mass killings, sexual enslavement and punishments like crucifixion.

Security sources said the 14 stand accused by the Iraqi National Intelligence Service of carrying out “terrorist acts” in Mosul and running some of Daesh’s financial affairs.

The French Foreign Ministry declined to comment, saying it was entirely an Iraqi legal matter.

The 14 were among 280 Iraqi and foreign detainees handed over to Iraq by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, who are now close to capturing the last small patch of Daesh-held territory in Baghouz near the border with Iraq.

Iraqi officials have said they will either help repatriate non-Iraqi Daesh detainees to their home countries or prosecute those suspected of having committed crimes against Iraqis.

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The written confession of one of the suspected militants, made available to Reuters by a lawyer, indicated he was a French national of Tunisian origin and had served as a soldier in the French army from 2000 to 2010, including a tour in Afghanistan in 2009.

He decided to join Islamist militants in Syria after watching many videos produced by the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front group, according to the written confession, which added that he participated in the battle for Mosul, without elaborating.

Another confession, of a Frenchman of Algerian origin, said he left France for Turkey and then Syria in 2013 after being watching jihadist videos online, and then joined Daesh in Mosul.

Baghdad-based security analyst Hisham al-Hashimi, who advises the government on Daesh, said that the 14 Frenchmen were unlikely to have held senior positions in Daesh.