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Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, November 16, 2018

Arms Trafficker Found Guilty of Conspiring to Supply and Use Anti-Aircraft Missiles after Pleading Guilty to other Arms Offenses

LOS ANGELES – A federal jury has convicted a black-market arms dealer of conspiring to acquire, transfer and use missiles designed to shoot down aircraft.

Rami Najm Asad-Ghanem, 52, who was commonly known as Rami Ghanem, a naturalized United States citizen who was living in Egypt at the time of the offenses, was found guilty of the missile conspiracy charge late Thursday afternoon in United States District Court. The jury returned the verdict at the conclusion of a nine-day trial.

The evidence at trial showed that Ghanem conspired to transfer a wide array of different surface-to-air missile systems to customers around the world, including clients in Libya, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and other countries. During the trial, prosecutors presented evidence – which included Ghanem's electronic communications, his recorded statements, and the corroborating testimony of co-conspirators taken abroad – that demonstrated he conspired to use Russian-made Igla and Strela surface-to-air missile systems by brokering the services of mercenary missile operators to a militant faction in Libya in 2015. Among other actions, Ghanem negotiated the salaries and terms of service of the mercenary missile operators, coordinated their payment, facilitated their travel to Libya, and offered them a \$50,000 bonus if they were successful in their mission of shooting down airplanes flown by the internationally recognized government of Libya.

"With the wide range of weapons being offered for sale, this case demonstrates the dangers of underground arms trafficking to the international community and to the security of U.S. forces operating abroad," said United States Attorney Nick Hanna. "This complicated case was successfully prosecuted as a result of the diligent efforts of federal law enforcement authorities conducting international operations, obtaining evidence from foreign nations and piecing together illicit arms deals in several nations. The successful conclusion of this case is a clear message to arms dealers that there will be severe consequences for providing weapons of war through the black market."

"Safeguarding our military equipment and technology is vital to our nation's defense, the protection of our war fighters and a top enforcement priority for HSI," said Joseph Macias, Special Agent in Charge for Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Los Angeles. "The successful outcome of this case is a direct result

of the steadfast efforts of our domestic and international law enforcement partners to keep dangerous weapons out of the hands of transnational criminal organizations and foreign enemies that would do us harm. HSI will continue to aggressively target individuals who seek to illegally procure and sell items aimed at causing serious harm to the security of our nation.”

On October 29, Ghanem pleaded guilty to six other federal crimes arising from a variety of arms-trafficking activities, including the unlicensed export of weapons and ammunition, smuggling, money laundering and unlicensed arms brokering.

The investigation into Ghanem started in mid-2014, when a Los Angeles-based supplier of military supplies alerted the U.S. government that it had been solicited to provide equipment to Ghanem. During an undercover operation, an HSI agent developed a relationship with Ghanem, who was seeking to procure a number of armaments – including sniper rifles and night-vision optics – but Ghanem affirmed that the transactions had to be “under the table.” During subsequent meetings with the undercover operative in Athens, Ghanem expressed an interest in purchasing helicopters and fighter jets on behalf of Iranian clients, and Ghanem said he had relationships with Hezbollah in Iraq.

Over the course of several months in 2015, Ghanem discussed his interest in purchasing numerous weapons, and in August 2015 placed an order for \$220,000 worth of sniper rifles, pistols, silencers, laser sights, ammunition, night-vision goggles and other items that were to be shipped to Libya. After making two down payments, Ghanem was arrested on December 8, 2015, in Athens. He was extradited to the United States in April 2016 to face prosecution in this case and has remained in custody without bond since the time of his arrest.

After his arrests, authorities seized numerous digital devices that Ghanem had in his possession. Searches of those devices revealed evidence of other large-scale arms brokering activities, including millions of rounds of ammunition, anti-tank missiles, and the scheme to transfer and use anti-aircraft missiles.

“The guilty verdict in the trial of Ghanem demonstrates the Defense Criminal Investigative Service’s unwavering commitment to protect our country from those who seek to inflict harm on it,” said Chris Hendrickson, Special Agent in Charge, DCIS Western Field Office. “DCIS, along with our federal law enforcement partners, will relentlessly pursue those who put our military and our foreign military partners at risk by illegally obtaining and exporting protected U.S. military assets for use against our military and our foreign military partners.”

“This guilty verdict is the result of outstanding collaborative investigative work by the Office of Export Enforcement and its law enforcement partners to combat the illegal shipment of sophisticated technology. We will continue to aggressively pursue violators wherever they may be,” said Richard Weir, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, Office of Export Enforcement, Los Angeles Field Office.

United States District Judge S. James Otero, who presided over Ghanem’s trial, has scheduled a sentencing hearing for March 4, 2019.

As a result of Thursday’s guilty verdict on the missile-trafficking charge, Ghanem will face a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years in federal prison and a statutory maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

Last month, Ghanem pleaded guilty to attempted exportation of defense articles without a license, smuggling, two counts of money laundering, conspiracy to illegally broker a wide range of weapons and illegal arms brokering. In relation to the charges to which he pleaded guilty, Ghanem faces a statutory maximum sentence of 20 years for each of the weapons exportation, arms brokering and money laundering

counts. On the smuggling count, Ghanem faces a statutory maximum sentence of 10 years in prison. On the conspiracy count, he faces a statutory maximum sentence of 5 years in prison.

The investigation in this case was conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations; the Department of Defense's Criminal Investigative Service; and the Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, Office of Export Enforcement.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Melissa Mills and George E. Pence IV of the United States Attorney's Office's Terrorism and Export Crimes Section, and by Trial Attorney Christian E. Ford of the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section of the Department of Justice's National Security Division.

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Press Release Number:

18-187

Updated November 19, 2018