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Department of Justice

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Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Arms Trafficker Convicted in Anti-Aircraft Missiles Scheme and of Other Arms Offenses Sentenced to 30 Years in Federal Prison

LOS ANGELES – A black-market arms dealer with a long history of brokering machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and anti-tank armaments – and who was found guilty last year in a scheme to sell and use surface-to-air missiles – has been sentenced to 30 years in federal prison.

Rami Najm Asad-Ghanem, 53, who was commonly known as Rami Ghanem, a naturalized United States citizen who was living in Egypt at the time of the offenses, was sentenced Monday by United States District Judge S. James Otero.

During Monday's sentencing hearing, Judge Otero said, "The breadth, scope and gravity [of Ghanem's offenses] is really breathtaking and, in many ways, frightening."

Following a nine-day trial last November, a federal jury found Ghanem guilty of conspiring to use and to transfer missile systems designed to destroy aircraft. The day before his trial started, Ghanem pleaded guilty to six other federal crimes stemming from his arms-trafficking activities, including the unlicensed export of weapons and ammunition, smuggling, money laundering, and unlicensed arms brokering.

The evidence presented at last year's trial showed that Ghanem conspired to transfer a wide array of surface-to-air missile systems to customers around the world, including clients in Libya, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and the leadership of Hezbollah, a designated foreign terrorist organization. During the trial, prosecutors showed that 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, confirmed their arrival and performance of duties, 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. In addition to numerous documents that demonstrated Ghanem's role in the conspiracy, the jury viewed videos of sworn deposition testimony of two missile operators and Ghanem's fellow arms broker who assisted in procuring their services for this transaction.

"This defendant brokered a wide array of military-grade weapons, which endangered civilians around the world and put at risk America's national security interests, including members of our armed services," said United States Attorney Nick Hanna. "Mr. Ghanem was literally a merchant of death who was ready, willing and able to sell weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, to any paying customer, with zero concern for the death and destruction these weapons might cause. As a result of his conduct, the sentence imposed in this case is appropriate and richly deserved."

"This lengthy sentence is well deserved and, unfortunately, demonstrates the sheer breadth of criminal activity engaged in by those who oppose us," said Joseph Macias, Special Agent in Charge for Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Los Angeles. "Counter-proliferation investigations are the highest priority for HSI – and we remain steadfastly committed to working with our domestic and international law enforcement partners to pursue transnational criminal networks intent on committing acts of terrorism against the United States."

HSI's Los Angeles Counter-Proliferation Investigations Center began the investigation into Ghanem in mid-2014, when a Los Angeles-based company alerted HSI that it had been solicited to provide military 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. During discussions with the undercover agent, Ghanem affirmed that the transactions were being conducted "illegally" and had to be "under the table." During subsequent meetings with the undercover operative in Greece, 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 arrest, 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.

In documents filed in relation to the sentencing hearing, prosecutors offered evidence of a contract documenting Ghanem's agreement to sell \$250 million worth of weapons and ammunition to a militant faction in Libya; a contract between Ghanem and the Egyptian Ministry of Defense dealing with hundreds of rocket-propelled grenade launchers; attempts to buy and sell

combat jets and helicopter gunships; and his apparent role in the trafficking of counterfeit currency, looted antiquities and black-market diamonds.

“Protecting America’s warfighters and preserving our national security interests by ensuring that Department of Defense assets and technologies do not end up in the hands of those that seek to do harm to our country or our foreign allies is a critical component of the Defense Criminal Investigative Service’s mission,” said Bryan D. Denny, the Special Agent in Charge of the DCIS Western Field Office. “Ghanem’s sentencing reflects the seriousness of the crimes he committed against the United States, and serves as a cautionary tale to others considering or engaging in similar illegal activities. Without question, the exceptional collaboration between the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Homeland Security Investigations, the Office of Export Enforcement, and DCIS led to Ghanem’s successful prosecution and sentencing, despite the inherent complexities in detecting, investigating, and prosecuting illegal international arms-trafficking matters.”

“This sentence 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.

The investigation in this case was led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland Security Investigations, which received substantial assistance from the Department of Defense’s Criminal Investigative Service; the Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, Office of Export Enforcement; and the Hellenic National Police; the Hellenic Financial and Economic Crimes Unit; and U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

This case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Melissa J. Mills and George E. Pence IV of the Terrorism and Export Crimes Section in the United States Attorney’s Office, 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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