

Israel tried to wiretap Hamas in botched mission, group says

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Sat, 2019-01-12 (All day)

GAZA CITY: Gaza's ruling Hamas said Saturday that Israeli undercover forces had attempted to install equipment to monitor the group's landline communications network during a botched mission in November.

The findings of a lengthy investigation were announced by the Hamas military wing, known as the Qassam Brigades, in a pre-recorded TV statement.

Hamas presented surveillance footage, as well as photos of drills, chain saws and two pistols with silencers, to back up its claims.

Hamas thwarted an attempt to "plant spying devices in the Gaza Strip," a Qassam spokesman, identified only as Abu Obeida, said in the statement.

Israel's military has not released details about the operation which went awry Nov. 11, leading to the heaviest round of cross-border fire, including Hamas rockets and Israeli airstrikes, since a 2014 war between the two sides. The Hamas statement described an Israeli mission that allegedly spanned close to a year.

Abu Obeida said Israel brought equipment and vehicles into Gaza through a commercial crossing point between January and October. Fifteen members of the unit entered Gaza on a foggy night through the perimeter fence a few days before Nov. 11, the spokesman said.

A woman working with the Israeli unit entered Gaza several times, disguised as an employee of a humanitarian organization, the spokesman said. Members of the unit used forged IDs of local Gazans and the documents of a charity group, he added.

On Nov. 11, the unit was detected by Hamas fighters as it drove near the town of Abassan in southern Gaza. The discovery sparked a firefight, in which a member of the undercover unit and two Hamas gunmen, including a local commander, were killed. Five other militants were killed in airstrikes as Israeli aircrafts provided cover to airlift the force, including the dead officer.

In the televised statement, Hamas showed low-resolution surveillance camera footage purportedly showing two vehicles being used by the undercover squad. The footage showed some faces of the occupants of the vehicles and what Hamas said was the moment its gunmen searched the van.

According to the investigation, which confirmed previous reports, the firefight began when a local Hamas commander, Nour Baraka, ordered the detention of the occupants of the van who then shot him with silencer pistols. In the exchange of fire, a member of the Israeli force and another Hamas gunman were also killed before the van sped away.

Hamas said the slain Israeli commander of the group was an Arab with the rank of lieutenant colonel.



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Hamis says Egypt to close Gaza crossing to Palestinians leaving the territory
Fatah says Hamis arrests members in Gaza ahead of rally

[Key powers stick with Bashir despite mounting protests in Sudan](#)

Sat, 2019-01-12 21:37

KHARTOUM /CAIRO: The death toll from protests in Sudan that began last month has risen to 24, the head of the Sudanese government fact-finding committee Amer Ibrahim said on Saturday.

But key powers were standing by the ruling regime to ensure stability in a strife-torn region even as angry protests piled pressure on Sudanese President Omar Bashir to step down, analysts say.

Demonstrations that erupted in the provinces last month after the government

tripled the price of bread have escalated into nationwide protests that analysts say pose the biggest challenge to Bashir since he took power in 1989.

Amnesty International has estimated that at least 40 people have died in the protests.

Despite the bloodshed, outside players including major powers China, Russia and the US all see an interest in the 75-year-old staying at the helm.

"All camps in the region are at each other's throat, but somehow they agree on Bashir," said Abdelwahab Al-Affendi, author and an academic at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

"They seem to favor continuity. They believe that any other alternative might not be favorable to them and to the region."

Egypt, which has deep historical ties with Sudan, has called repeatedly for stability in its southern neighbor, with its commanding position on the Nile on whose waters they both depend.

"Egypt fully supports the security and stability of Sudan, which is integral to Egypt's national security," President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi told a top Bashir aide who visited Cairo last week.

Days earlier, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed confidence that Sudan would "overcome the present situation."

Relations between Cairo and Khartoum had deteriorated sharply in 2017 over territorial disputes, but in recent months the two governments have ironed out their differences, with Sudan even lifting a 17-month ban on Egyptian agricultural produce.

Arab governments have scrambled to provide support, anxious to avoid any repetition of the upheavals that rocked the region in 2011.

"There has been evidence of tangible support to Bashir... be it from Egypt, Saudi or Qatar," said Affendi.

"These allies are against any kind of successful uprising. They feel that if it happens, then they will be next," he said, adding that the Arab Spring has not been forgotten.

Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, called Bashir just days after the protests erupted to offer his support.

During his long years in power, Bashir has built up relations with all of the region's bickering diplomatic players, through a string of sometimes spectacular foreign policy twists.

Just days before the protests erupted, he traveled to meet Syrian President Bashar Assad in the first visit to Damascus by any Arab leader since the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011.

“His foreign policy is in all directions driven by economic pressures,” said a European diplomat on condition of anonymity. The regime hosted Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, and then developed ties with Iran before severing them in 2016.

In October 2017, increased cooperation with Washington helped Khartoum get a decades-old US trade embargo lifted.

Washington has still kept Sudan on its blacklist of “state sponsors of terrorism” along with Iran, North Korea and Syria.

And although the US and the EU do not openly back Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges including genocide in Darfur, they work with Khartoum to ensure that “Sudan remains stable,” the diplomat said.

Any kind of instability in Sudan could trigger a new wave of Sudanese migrants headed toward Europe, he added.

Sudan’s strategic location in the Horn of Africa is a blessing for Bashir, said Amal El-Taweel of the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

“I think the international and regional powers will not allow Sudan to fall,” she told AFP.

“But a lot depends on how the balance of power shifts on the streets,” she added.

Bashir surprised the West when he dumped Tehran for Riyadh in 2016. The Sudanese leader also sent hundreds of troops to join the Arab coalition battling Iran-linked Houthi militants in Yemen.

“The world also doesn’t want to see another new bastion of hard-liners that might be created if something like this happens.”

The shift was not just diplomatic. The Sudanese leader also sent hundreds of troops to join the Arab coalition battling Iran-linked Houthi militants in Yemen, in what he called an “ideological” decision.

By doing so, Bashir signaled to Gulf Arab monarchies that he was an asset in their struggle against Shiite Iran.

“In return Saudi and the United Arab Emirates have given Bashir just about enough to stay afloat, although no announcements have been made,” said Affendi, referring to financial aid to Khartoum.

For international powers like China, which has reportedly invested billions of dollars in Sudan, the country offers a gateway to the rest of the continent.

“For countries like China and Russia, Sudan is an entry gate to Africa,” the foreign diplomat said.

“Be it them or the West, nobody wants Sudan to crumble.”

(With AFP)



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police use tear gas as protests kill three

[Egyptian security forces kill 6 militants in desert raid](#)

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Sat, 2019-01-12 (All day)

CAIRO: Egypt's interior Ministry says security forces have killed six Islamic militants in a raid on their desert hideout south of the capital Cairo.

It said the militants killed in the early Saturday raid were hiding in an area between the southern provinces of Sohag and Assiut. The militants were killed in a firefight initiated by the militants, it added.

Egypt has been battling Islamic militants for years. An all-out military campaign to quash their insurgency in the north of the Sinai Peninsula began nearly a year ago with the government throwing into battle tens of thousands of troops, jet-fighters, tanks and helicopter gunships.

The campaign brought to a halt high-profile attacks blamed on the militants, like one last year in which they killed more than 300 worshippers in a Sinai mosque.



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[Pompeo: US relationship with Saudi Arabia essential for Middle East stability](#)

Sat, 2019-01-12 15:15

LONDON: The United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia is essential to the Middle East's stability and security, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Saturday.

The US secretary of state told Al Arabiya that America wants an Arab coalition and force that is capable of facing the different challenges in the region. He added that the US will not be leaving the Middle East, and that destroying Daesh is a priority.

Pompeo is on a whistlestop regional tour aimed at reassuring US allies after President Donald Trump's shock decision to withdraw all US troops from Syria. He was in Abu Dhabi on Saturday after a visit to Bahrain on Friday.

He told Al Arabiya that the US withdrawal from Syria does not contradict its strategy towards Iran, and nor does it mean a retreat with regards to fighting terrorism.

The Iranian people should know that interfering in the affairs of other states is "unacceptable," and the US wants to hear the voice of the Iranian people, Pompeo said.

The US top diplomat has also visited Cairo, Amman, Baghdad, and the Iraqi Kurdish regional capital of Irbil.

The United States plans to jointly host a global summit focused on the Middle East, particularly Iran, next month in Poland, the US State Department said on Friday. The gathering will take place in Warsaw from Feb. 13 to Feb. 14, it said in a statement.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News in an interview on Friday that the meeting would "focus on Middle East stability and peace and freedom and security here in this region, and that includes an important element of making sure that Iran is not a destabilizing influence."

Pompeo said that a number of matters would be discussed at the summit, the most important of which would be Iran.







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Pompeo in Bahrain on first leg of tour of Gulf allies
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[Palestinians mourn woman killed by Israeli fire at protest](#)

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Sat, 2019-01-12 (All day)

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip: Hundreds of Palestinians have gathered for the funeral of a woman killed by Israeli forces at a protest near the perimeter fence, this year's first fatality from the weekly mass demonstrations. Amal Al-Taramsi, a 43-year-old activist who had regularly attended the protests, was buried Saturday after being shot the day before.

Of the 186 Palestinians killed since the protests were launched last spring, only three were women. A 21-year-old medic and a 14-year-old girl were killed last year.

Gaza's Hamas rulers have orchestrated the protests, in part to call for the lifting of a crippling decade-long Israeli and Egyptian blockade.

The demonstrations draw Palestinians of all ages, but it is usually young men who approach the fence, often hurling rocks and firebombs at Israeli forces on the other side.



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