

Italy summons Egypt ambassador over Regeni killing

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CAIRO: Italy's foreign ministry formally summoned on Friday the Egyptian ambassador to Rome to prompt Egyptian authorities to "act rapidly" in investigating the torture and killing of an Italian researcher nearly three years ago.

The decision by Italian Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi comes after a recent meeting between Egyptian and Italian prosecutors. His office said in a statement that that caused "worry" to ripple through Rome over the prolonged investigation.

Giulio Regeni, a 28-year-old Cambridge University graduate student who was researching trade unions in Egypt, disappeared in Cairo on January 25, 2016 – the fifth anniversary of Egypt's popular uprising when thousands of police deployed across Cairo to pre-empt any attempt to mark the occasion.

His body was found several days later by the side of a highway near Cairo with torture marks that activists and rights groups say resembled the results of widespread torture practices in Egyptian detention facilities.

In the statement, Moavero relayed Italy's concerns and the need to see "concrete" developments in the protracted investigation. Meanwhile, Egypt's ambassador to Rome offered assurances of his country's willingness to continue cooperation between Egyptian and Italian prosecutors, it also said. However, nobody has been arrested or charged over the killing.

Egyptian and Italian prosecutors met earlier this week to discuss the state of the investigation, but judicial sources in Rome said the Cairo team failed to deliver a promised breakthrough.

That statement said that the two sides had agreed that "investigations are going well" and that they would "do everything in their power to find the perpetrators."

Later, Moavero was quoted by Italian news agency ANSA as saying that the government will be discussing whether it would bar Italian companies from attending next week's arms expo in Cairo, upon the return of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte from the G20 summit in Argentina.

Italy has been pressing Cairo for years to identify and prosecute those responsible for the torture and killing of Regeni. Its latest move comes a day after its Chamber of Deputies announced the suspension of relations with the Egyptian parliament.

Egypt's parliament said it regrets the decision of Italy's lower house to break parliamentary ties over the lack of progress in the investigations. In a Friday statement, Parliament said it was "surprised" by the Italian chamber's "unilateral" decision and called for the non-politicization of legal issues.

Italy has been pressing Cairo for years to identify and prosecute those

responsible for the 2016 killing of Giulio Regeni. Researching labor unions in Egypt at the time, Regeni's body was found bearing marks of torture. Italian media says prosecutors in Rome are set to launch an investigation into seven Egyptian secret service members they suspect were involved in Regeni's abduction and murder. Egypt has long denied its authorities were involved.

Egypt has recently acknowledged that Regeni was being watched by police while in Cairo because of the nature of his research.



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[Syria 'stalemate' due to Astana process, says Washington](#)

Fri, 2018-11-30 22:06

WASHINGTON: The Astana process by Russia, Iran and Turkey to end the Syrian conflict has only led to a "stalemate" in efforts to establish a constitutional committee crucial to a political settlement, the US said on Thursday.

Establishment and convening of the committee by year's end "is vital to a lasting de-escalation and a political solution to the conflict," State

Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a statement.

Her comments came after the outgoing UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, regretted that there was “no tangible progress” on the composition of the constitutional committee at two days of talks, which ended Thursday in the Kazakh capital Astana.

Moscow and Tehran, allies of the Damascus regime, began the Astana process in January 2017 along with rebel-backer Turkey.

SPEEDREAD

The Astana process has gradually eclipsed the earlier UN-sponsored negotiations framework known as the Geneva process, which had put more emphasis on political transition.

The Astana process followed a Russian military intervention which tipped the military balance in favor of Bashar Assad’s authoritarian regime. “Russia and Iran continue to use the process to mask the Assad regime’s refusal to engage in the political process” under UN auspices, Nauert said.

She added that “success is not possible without the international community holding Damascus fully accountable for the lack of progress in resolving the conflict.”

The Astana process has gradually eclipsed the earlier UN-sponsored negotiations framework known as the Geneva process, which had put more emphasis on political transition but failed to curb violence that has killed more than 360,000 people and displaced millions.

Syria’s war began in March 2011 as an uprising against Assad but morphed into a complex conflict with myriad armed groups.



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Fri, 2018-11-30 21:58

ON THE ISRAEL BORDER: On a moonlit night, some two dozen Israeli soldiers in full battle gear march near a Lebanese border village with a bomb-sniffing dog, searching for explosives and infiltrators.

Suddenly the force stops. Through night vision goggles, two suspicious men appear over the ridge, holding what looks like binoculars. Could they be undercover Hezbollah militants? Lebanese soldiers on a night patrol? Or perhaps UN peacekeepers?

The men appear unarmed and since they are on the other side of the internationally recognized "blue line" that separates the two countries,

Israeli troops move on, completing another routine foot patrol along a scenic frontier that has remained quiet but tense since the bloody battles of a 2006 summer war.

Even with attention currently focused on Gaza militants along the southern front, Israel's main security concerns lie to the north, along the border with Lebanon.

Israeli officials have long warned the threat posed by Gaza's Hamas rulers pales in comparison to that of Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group – a heavily armed mini-army with an arsenal of some 150,000 rockets that can reach nearly every part of Israel. It is along this northern front that Israeli soldiers come face-to-face with Hezbollah militants and where any skirmish could spark an all-out war.

"The rules of the game are very clear. They know I'm here and I know they're there," said Lt. Col. Aviv, a regional battalion commander. "But if they break that equation, they are going to get hit."

From his base along the border near the Israeli farming community of Avivim, he can see the hilltop Lebanese village of Maroun Al-Ras, a UN observer outpost and a new square house inside an agricultural field, assumed to be a Hezbollah lookout.

Under the UN-brokered cease-fire that ended the 2006 war, Hezbollah militants are prohibited from approaching the border. But Israeli intelligence says Hezbollah men operate freely, generally unarmed and in civilian clothes. Sometimes they come within just a few meters of the Israeli troops, it says.

When Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu recently decided against a full-scale offensive in Gaza, he cited the current "security-sensitive period" in what was widely assumed to be a reference to the northern front.

Israel has generally refrained from engaging in Syria's civil war, where Hezbollah has fought alongside Bashar Assad's men, though it has carried out scores of airstrikes against what Israel says were Iranian shipments of advanced weapons bound for Hezbollah.

Israel flew its jets through Syrian skies with impunity. But that was severely restricted after a Russian plane was downed in September by Syrian forces responding to an Israeli airstrike, a friendly fire incident that stoked Russian anger toward Israel and hastened the delivery of sophisticated S-300 air defense systems to Syria.

With Syria's civil war winding down, an empowered Hezbollah is now free to re-establish itself back home in Lebanon and refocus on Israel, said Eyal Ben-Reuven, a lawmaker and retired general who commanded Israeli ground troops in the 2006 war. Armed with more exact rockets and munitions, Hezbollah now poses a far more dangerous threat, he said.

"A terror organization, unlike a country, doesn't stockpile weapons for deterrence but in order to use them one day," he said. "I suspect they will now try to goad Israel. ... The war the Israeli military has to prepare for is

the one against Hezbollah.”

Neither side appears interested quite yet in another full-fledged confrontation like the monthlong 2006 war, which ended in stalemate and in which more than 1,200 Lebanese and 160 Israelis were killed.

With a lagging economy and a paralyzed government, Lebanon appears unlikely to have the stomach for another war. Though emboldened politically from the Syria war and having surged in power in Lebanese parliamentary elections earlier this year, Hezbollah is going through a financial crunch. It also is recovering after having hundreds of fighters killed or wounded in Syria.

Still, Israel accuses it of ratcheting up tensions.

The military says it recently uncovered militant surveillance outposts along the border, set up under the guise of a tree-planting campaign by an environmental advocacy group, “Green Without Borders.” The group acknowledges its affiliation with Hezbollah but says its work is purely environmental.

Netanyahu also accused Hezbollah of setting up secret rocket launching sites near Beirut’s international airport. The military says Hezbollah is establishing new launching sites among civilians – a trap that could make it difficult for Israel to respond forcefully.

But the military says its major concern is Iranian-backed efforts to convert some of Hezbollah’s unguided rockets into precision munitions that could wreak far more devastation on Israeli targets.

Hezbollah declined to respond to the accusations. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said recently the group is “more confident than ever” and ready for war at any time.

Due to the uneven terrain, Israel’s sophisticated northern fence does not run precisely along the border, creating enclaves of Israeli territory that are inside the blue line but beyond the fence.

Israel is now stepping up its presence, fortifying fences and clearing away brush to improve observation.

It is also sending a signal that violations won’t be tolerated – even on a night patrol, Israeli troops do not hide their presence.

“I have an interest that they see I’m here,” said Lt. Col. Aviv, a bullet loaded in the chamber of his modified M-16 rifle. “There are no surprises.”



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[How Iran spreads disinformation around the world](#)

Author:

Fri, 2018-11-30 21:50

LONDON, WASHINGTON: Nile Net Online website promises Egyptians “true news” from its offices in the heart of Cairo’s Tahrir Square, “to expand the scope of freedom of expression in the Arab world.”

Its views on America do not chime with those of Egypt’s state media, which celebrate Donald Trump’s warm relations with Cairo. In one recent article, Nile Net Online derided the American president as a “low-level theater actor” who “turned America into a laughing stock” after he attacked Iran in a speech at the UN.

Until recently, Nile Net Online had more than 115,000 page-followers across

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. But its contact telephone numbers, including one listed as 0123456789, don't work. A Facebook map showing its location dropped a pin onto the middle of the street, rather than any building. And regulars at the square, including a newspaper stallholder and a policeman, say they have never heard of the website.

The reason: Nile Net Online is part of an influence operation based in Tehran.

It's one of more than 70 websites found by Reuters which push Iranian propaganda to 15 countries, in an operation that cybersecurity experts, social media firms and journalists are only starting to uncover. The sites found by Reuters are visited by more than half-a-million people a month, and have been promoted by social media accounts with more than a million followers.

The sites underline how political actors worldwide are increasingly circulating distorted or false information online to influence public opinion. The discoveries follow allegations that Russian disinformation campaigns have swayed voters in the US and Europe. Moscow has denied the charges.

Former CIA Director John Brennan told Reuters that "countries around the globe" are now using such information warfare tactics.

"The Iranians are sophisticated cyber players," he said of the Iranian campaign. "There are elements of the Iranian intelligence services that are rather capable in terms of operating (online)."

Traced by building on research from cybersecurity firms FireEye and ClearSky, the sites in the campaign have been active at different times since 2012. They look like normal news and media outlets, but only a couple disclose any Iranian ties.

Reuters could not determine whether the Iranian government is behind the sites; Iranian officials in Tehran and London did not reply to questions.

But all the sites are linked to Iran in one of two ways. Some carry stories, video and cartoons supplied by an online agency called the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), which says on its website it is headquartered in Tehran. Some have shared online registration details with IUVM, such as addresses and phone numbers. Twenty-one of the websites do both.

Emails sent to IUVM bounced back and telephone numbers the agency gave in web registration records did not work. Documents available on the main IUVM website say its objectives include "confronting with remarkable arrogance, Western governments and Zionism front activities."

Nile Net Online did not respond to questions sent to the email address on its website. Its operators, as well as those of the other websites identified by Reuters, could not be located. Previous owners identified in historical registration records could not be reached. The Egyptian government did not respond to requests for comment.

'Unspoken truth'

Some of the sites in the Iranian operation were first exposed in August by companies including Facebook, Twitter and Google's parent, Alphabet, after FireEye found them.

The social media companies have closed hundreds of accounts that promoted the sites or pushed Iranian messaging.

Facebook said last month it had taken down 82 pages, groups and accounts linked to the Iranian campaign; these had gathered more than 1 million followers in the US and Britain.

But the sites uncovered by Reuters have a much wider scope. They have published in 16 different languages, from Azerbaijani to Urdu, targeting internet users in less-developed countries.

That they reached readers in tightly controlled societies such as Egypt, which has blocked hundreds of news websites since 2017, highlights the campaign's reach.

The news on the sites is not all fake. Authentic stories sit alongside pirated cartoons, as well as speeches from Iran's Ali Khamenei. The sites clearly support Iran's government and amplify antagonism to countries opposed to Tehran – particularly Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US. Nile Net's "laughing stock" piece was copied from an Iranian state TV network article published earlier the same day.

Some of the sites are slapdash. The self-styled, misspelled "Yemen Press Agecny" carries a running update developments in Yemen targeting Saudi Arabia. Emails sent to the agency's listed contact, Arafat Shoroh, bounced back. The agency's address and phone number led to a hotel in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, whose staff said they had never heard of Shoroh.

The identity or location of the past owners of some of the websites is visible in historical internet registration records: 17 of 71 sites have in the past listed their locations as Iran or Tehran, or given an Iranian telephone or fax number. But who owns them now is often hidden, and none of the Iranian-linked operators could be reached.

More than 50 of the sites use American web service providers Cloudflare and OnlineNIC – firms that provide website owners with tools to shield themselves from spam and hackers. Frequently, such services also effectively conceal who owns the sites or where they are hosted. The companies declined to tell Reuters who operates the sites.

Under US law, hosting and web services companies are not generally liable for the content of sites they serve, said Eric Goldman, co-director of the High Tech Law Institute at Santa Clara University.

Still, since 2014, US sanctions on Iran have banned "the exportation or re-exportation, directly or indirectly, of web-hosting services that are for commercial endeavors or of domain name registration services."

Douglas Kramer, general counsel for Cloudflare, said the services it provides do not include web-hosting services. "We've looked at those various sanctions regimes, we are comfortable that we are not in violation," he told Reuters.

A spokesman for OnlineNIC said none of the sites declared a connection to Iran in their registration details, and the company was in full compliance with US sanctions and trade embargoes.

The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) declined to comment on whether it planned an investigation.

Another Western dawn

The Kremlin is widely seen as the superpower in modern information warfare. From what is known so far, Russia's influence operation – which Moscow denies – dwarfs Iran's. According to Twitter, nearly 4,000 accounts connected to the Russian campaign posted over 9 million tweets between 2013 and 2018, against over 1 million tweets from fewer than 1,000 accounts believed to originate in Iran.

Even though the Iranian operation is smaller, it has had impact on volatile topics. AWDnews – the site with the focus on "unspoken truth" – ran a false story in 2016 which prompted Pakistan's defense minister to warn on Twitter he had the weapons to nuke Israel. He only found out that the hoax was part of an Iranian operation when contacted by Reuters.

"It was a learning experience," said the deceived politician, 69-year-old Khawaja Asif, who left Pakistan's government earlier this year. "But one can understand that these sorts of things happen, because fake news has become something huge. It's something which anyone is capable of now, which is very dangerous."

Israeli officials did not respond to a request for comment.

AWDnews publishes in English, French, Spanish and German and, according to data from web analytics company SimilarWeb, receives around 12,000 unique visitors a month. Among others who shared stories from AWDnews and the other websites identified by Reuters were politicians in Britain, Jordan, India, and the Netherlands; human-rights activists; an Indian music composer and a Japanese rap star.

In August 2015, an official account for a European department of the World Health Organization (WHO) tweeted an AWDnews story. Annalisa Buoro, secretary for the WHO's European Office for Investment for Health and Development, said the person running the department's Twitter account at the time did not know the website was part of an Iranian campaign.

She said the tweet had gone out when the account had a relatively small following, limiting the damage, but "on the other hand, I am very concerned ... because as a UN agency we have a huge responsibility."

Jobs for women

FireEye, a US cybersecurity firm, originally named six websites as part of the Iranian influence operation. Reuters examined those sites, and their content led to the Tehran-based International Union of Virtual Media.

IUVM is an array of 11 websites with names such as iuvmpress, iuvmapp and iuvmpixel. Together, they form a library of digital material, including mobile phone apps, items from Iranian state media and pictures, video clips and stories from elsewhere on the web, which support Tehran's policies.

Tracking usage of IUVM content across the Internet led to sites which have used its material, registration details, or both. For instance, 22 of the sites have shared the same phone number, which does not work and has also been listed for IUVM. At least seven have used the same address, which belongs to a youth hostel in Berlin. Staff at the hostel told Reuters they had never heard of the sites in question. The site operators could not be reached to explain their links with IUVM.

Two sites even posted job advertisements for IUVM, inviting applications from women with "ability to work effectively and knowledge in dealing with social networks and (the) Internet."

Demolished home

One of IUVM's most popular users is a site called Sudan Today, which SimilarWeb data shows receives almost 150,000 unique visitors each month. On Facebook, it tells its 57,000 followers that it operates without political bias. Its 18,000 followers on Twitter have included the Italian Embassy in Sudan, and its work has been cited in a report by the Egyptian Electricity Ministry.

The office address registered for Sudan Today in 2016 covers a whole city district in north Khartoum, according to archived website registration details provided by WhoisAPI Inc. and DomainTools LLC. The phone number listed in those records does not work.

Reuters could not trace staff members named on Sudan Today's Facebook page. The five-star Corinthia hotel in central Khartoum, where the site says it hosted an anniversary party last year, told Reuters no such event took place. And an address listed on one of its social media accounts is a demolished home.

Sudan used to be an Iranian ally but has changed sides to align itself with Saudi Arabia, costing Tehran a foothold in the Horn of Africa just as it becomes more isolated by the West. In that environment, Iran sees itself as competing with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US for international support, and is taking the fight online, said Ariane Tabatabai, a senior associate and Iran expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Headlines on Sudan Today's homepage include a daily round-up of stories from local newspapers and Ugandan soccer results. It also features reports on bread prices – which doubled in January after Khartoum eliminated subsidies,

triggering demonstrations.

Ohad Zaidenberg, senior researcher at Israeli cybersecurity firm ClearSky, said this mixture of content provides the cover for narratives geared at influencing a target audience's attitudes and perceptions.

The site also draws attention to Saudi Arabia's military actions in Yemen. Since Sudanese President Omar Bashir ended his allegiance with Iran he has sent troops and jets to join Arab forces in the Yemeni conflict.

One cartoon from IUVM published by Sudan Today in August shows Trump astride a military jet with an overflowing bag of dollar bills tucked under one arm. The jet is draped with traditional Saudi dress and shown dropping bombs on a bloodstained map of Yemen. The map is littered with children's toys and shoes.

Turkish cartoonist Mikail Ciftci drew the original. He told Reuters he did not give Sudan Today permission to use it.

Alnagi Albashra, a 28-year-old software developer in Khartoum, said he likes to read articles on Sudan Today in the evenings when waiting for his baby to fall asleep. But he and three other Sudan Today readers reached by Reuters had no idea who was behind the site.

"This is a big problem," he said. "You can't see that they are not in Sudan."

Government officials in Khartoum, the White House, the Italian Embassy and the Egyptian Electricity Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Backbone

It is unclear who globally is tasked with responding to online disinformation campaigns like Iran's, or what if any action they should take, said David Conrad, chief technology officer at ICANN, a non-profit which helps manage global web addresses.

Social media accounts can be deleted in bulk by the firms that provide the platforms. But the Iranian campaign's backbone of websites makes it harder to dismantle than social media, because taking down a website often requires the cooperation of law enforcement, Internet service providers and web infrastructure companies.

Efforts by social media companies in the United States and Europe to tackle the campaign have had mixed results.

Shortly after being contacted by Reuters, Twitter suspended the accounts for Nile Net Online and Sudan Today. "Clear attribution is very difficult," a spokeswoman said, but added that the company would continue to update a public database of tweets and accounts linked to state-backed information operations when it had new information.

Google did not respond directly to questions about the websites found by Reuters. The company has said it identified and closed 99 accounts which it

says are linked to Iranian state media. “We’ve invested in robust systems to identify influence operations launched by foreign governments,” a spokeswoman said.

Facebook said it was aware of the websites found by Reuters and had removed five more Facebook pages. But a spokesman said that based on Facebook user data, the company was not yet able to link all the websites’ accounts to the Iranian activity found earlier. “In the past several months, we have removed hundreds of Pages, Groups, and accounts linked to Iranian actors engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior. We continue to remove accounts across our services and in all relevant languages,” he said.

Accounts linked to the Iranian sites remain active online, especially in languages other than English. On Nov. 30, 16 of the Iranian sites were still posting daily updates on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube – including Sudan Today and Nile Net Online. Between them, the social media accounts had more than 700,000 followers.



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Why Turkey ranks first in the world in exposure to fake news
FAKE NEWS WATCH:
Doctor gets to heart of matter amid false reports

Iran quake injures more than 700, Rouhani orders relief effort

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DUBAI: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said no effort should be spared to help victims of a 6.3 magnitude earthquake on Iran's western border with Iraq that injured more than 700 people, most suffering minor wounds, state television reported on Monday.

The Sunday night earthquake was felt in at least seven provinces of Iran, but most strongly in Kermanshah, where last year more than 600 people were killed and thousands injured in the country's deadliest earthquake in more than a decade.

"Rouhani has ordered officials to do whatever is necessary to provide help for the victims of the earthquake," TV reported.

The head of Iran's Red Crescent Society, Mahmoud Mohammadi Nasab, told TV that there were no fatalities.

TV aired footage of damaged houses in the town of Sarpol-e Zahab in Kermanshah where some people remain homeless following last year's 7.3 magnitude quake.

"We have had 729 injured, 700 of them have been treated and released ... some 18 people have been hospitalized," Houshang Bazvand, governor of the western province of Kermanshah, told state TV.

Iran's state news agency IRNA said another two earthquakes measuring 5.2 and 4.6 on the Richter scale had jolted Sarpol-e Zahab on Monday morning following Sunday's earthquake and 161 aftershocks.

Fears of aftershocks forced many people to spend the night out on the streets in cold weather. The quake triggered landslides in some areas, but Iranian authorities said rescue teams had access to all towns and villages.

Iran sits astride major fault lines and is prone to frequent tremors. In 2003, a 6.6 magnitude quake in Kerman province killed 31,000 people and flattened the historic city of Bam.

Sunday's tremor was also felt in Kuwait and the Iraqi capital Baghdad as well as in Irbil in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and other Iraqi provinces, but no damage was reported.



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Iranian media: 79 injured in earthquake in southern Iran
Rouhani: New US sanctions have no effect on Iran economy