

Jailed academic rejects offer to spy for Iran

Author:

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LONDON: An academic currently imprisoned in Iran on charges of espionage has reportedly refused an offer to become a spy for Tehran in return for her freedom.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a UK-Australian dual national, made the revelation in a series of letters handed to The Times that were smuggled out of Evin prison, located in the north of the capital, where she is serving 10 years.

In the letters, addressed separately to a Mr. Vasiri, believed to be a deputy prosecutor in the Iranian judiciary, and a Mr. Ghaderi and Mr. Hosseini, who are thought to be officers in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Moore-Gilbert stated in basic Farsi that she had “never been a spy, and I have no intention to work for a spying organization in any country.”

She added: “Please accept this letter as an official and definitive rejection of your offer to me to work with the intelligence branch of the IRGC.”

Moore-Gilbert, a lecturer in Islamic studies at the University of Melbourne in Australia, was arrested in 2018 after attending a conference in Tehran.

She was tried and convicted in secret, and her letters implied that she had been kept in solitary confinement in a wing of Evin prison under the IRGC’s control.

It is reportedly the same wing being used to detain UK-Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, also incarcerated for espionage, and away from the all-female cellblock that Moore-Gilbert was meant to have been housed in.

The letters catalog a series of other mistreatments and inhumane conditions, suggesting she had been permitted no contact with her family, and that, having been denied access to vital medication, her health was deteriorating.

She also suggested that she had been subjected to sleep deprivation methods, with lights in her cell kept on 24 hours per day, and that she was often blindfolded when transported.

“It is clear that IRGC Intelligence is playing an awful game with me. I am an innocent victim,” she wrote.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne met with her Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif in India last week, where the case was discussed.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry later issued a statement claiming that the country would not “submit to political games and propaganda” over the issue.

This comes at a time when international pressure has ratcheted up on the regime in Tehran following the downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane over the capital on Jan. 8.

Mass demonstrations nationwide followed the news that the plane had been shot down by Iranian forces.

Olympian defects to Germany

Meanwhile, Iran's only female Olympic medalist, Kimia Alizadeh, announced that she would not return to the country, citing her refusal to continue to be used as a "propaganda tool."

She wrote of her decision on Instagram: "I wore whatever they told me and repeated whatever they ordered. Every sentence they ordered I repeated. None of us matter for them, we are just tools."

It was revealed on Jan. 20 that the taekwondo martial artist, who had been living and training in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, had elected to move to Hamburg in Germany, for whom she will now compete.

Alizadeh's defection is just one in a series of high-profile acts of defiance by Iranians outraged by the actions of the regime.

At least two journalists working for Iranian state-owned TV channels are known to have resigned their positions in protest.

One, news anchor Gelare Jabbari, posted on Instagram: "It was very hard for me to believe that our people have been killed. Forgive me that I got to know this late. And forgive me for the 13 years I told you lies."



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[Pressure on Hezbollah mounts at home, abroad](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-01-21 22:05

LONDON: Friday's move by the British Treasury to freeze all Hezbollah assets puts more pressure on the Iran-backed Lebanese group, which is being squeezed at home and overseas.

Following the March 2019 assertion by the British government that it was "no longer able to distinguish between their already banned military wing and the political party," this latest move means anyone conducting financial transactions with Hezbollah could face prosecution.

Prior to Friday's announcement, only the military wing of Hezbollah – not its

political arm – had been subject to asset freezing by the British government.

The announcement by the British Treasury was quickly followed by a call from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for “all nations” to follow the British and clamp down on Hezbollah.

The UK joins the US, Japan, Canada and other countries in blacklisting the entire organization.

On Monday, Honduras, Colombia and Guatemala followed suit, adding Hezbollah to their lists of officially designated terrorist organizations.

The British announcement comes amid an upsurge of anti-government protests in Lebanon. Alongside the civil unrest, the country is facing a deepening economic crisis, with experts fearing a collapse of the Lebanese economy.

Matthew Levitt, director of the Counterterrorism Program at the Washington Institute, said the Treasury’s move has the potential to make a real impact on Hezbollah’s operations.

“The move empowers British intelligence and law enforcement to open investigations any time they gather information that an individual or entity is raising funds for Hezbollah, period,” he told Arab News.

“This is a group that engages in covert and overt activity. You now no longer need to prove the money is going to the covert side of the organization.”

The move comes at a time when the world is becoming more aware of the terrorist and criminal activities that Hezbollah is engaged in, Levitt said.

He pointed to its 2015 stockpiling of 3 tons of ammonium nitrate in north London, the imprisonment on terrorism charges of Ali Kourani, a New York-based Hezbollah “sleeper” agent, and major money-laundering activities as the types of criminal enterprise that this approach by the Treasury could help prevent.

However, the impact on Hezbollah depends on the way the asset freeze is implemented. If it is done effectively, Levitt said, it will dissuade Hezbollah from using the UK as a base to support its criminal activity.

The move also comes at a time when the group is under increasing financial stress, both in Lebanon and in the money it receives from Iran, which is facing its own deteriorating economic situation.

Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, expects European powers to face increasing pressure to follow the UK and clamp down on Hezbollah’s financing in their own countries.

He called the original distinction between Hezbollah’s military and political arms a “very convenient ruse,” and said the Treasury was always going to make this move, pointing to the deteriorating relations between the UK and Iran.

“There was obviously going to come a time when we were going to freeze their

assets and make it illegal to do financial business dealings with Hezbollah,” Doyle told Arab News.

The move, he said, comes in the wake of six months of increased tensions between Britain and Iran, including the dramatic seizure of a British tanker over the summer.



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[Amnesty International slams new Qatari law restricting freedom of expression](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-01-21 21:08

LONDON: Amnesty International on Monday expressed concern over a vague new law that threatens to “significantly restrict freedom of expression in Qatar.”

The law, issued by Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, authorizes the imprisonment of “anyone who broadcasts, publishes, or republishes false or biased rumors, statements, or news, or inflammatory propaganda, domestically or abroad, with the intent to harm national interests, stir up public opinion, or infringe on the social system or the public system of the state.”

The law comes just two years after Qatar acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a UN agreement that guarantees individuals the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.

Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International’s research director for the Middle East, said: “Qatar already has a host of repressive laws, but this new legislation deals another bitter blow to freedom of expression in the country and is a blatant breach of international human rights law.”

She called it “deeply troubling that the Qatari Emir is passing legislation that can be used to silence peaceful critics,” adding: “Qatar’s authorities should be repealing such laws, not adding more of them.”

Under the new law, “biased” broadcasting or publishing can be punished with a fine of over \$25,000 or up to five years in prison.

The new legislation joins laws introduced in 1979 and 2014 that Amnesty International says arbitrarily restrict freedom of expression.



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[Russian air strikes in Syria kill 15 civilians: monitor](#)

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Bachir el Khoury with Aaref Watad in Kfar Taal | AFP

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Tue, 2020-01-21 15:44

BEIRUT: Russian air strikes killed at least 15 civilians Tuesday in northwestern Syria, as renewed violence tightened the noose around the country's last major rebel-held bastion and deepened an already dire humanitarian crisis.

Retaliatory rocket attacks blamed on rebels and jihadists killed three more civilians in the government-held city of Aleppo in northern Syria, state news agency SANA said.

The spike in violence in the neighboring provinces of Aleppo and Idlib follow so far unsuccessful diplomatic attempts to reduce hostilities in the flashpoint region, with the latest truce in theory going into effect less than two weeks ago.

Most of Idlib and parts of Aleppo province are still controlled by factions opposed to President Bashar Assad's regime, including a group that includes onetime members of Al-Qaeda's former Syria franchise.

The Damascus regime, which controls around 70 percent of the country after nearly nine years of war, has repeatedly vowed to recapture the region.

On Tuesday, air strikes by regime-ally Russia on a rebel-held region in Aleppo's western countryside killed eight members of the same family sheltering in a house, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Six children were among those killed in the raid on Kfar Taal village, where three girls already died a day earlier in strikes, according to the Britain-based monitor.

Another seven civilians were killed in Russian air strikes on western Aleppo and a southern region of Idlib.

"Over the past three days, the bombardment on Idlib and its surroundings, including in western Aleppo, has been exclusively Russian," said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman.

"They want to push rebels and jihadists away from the city of Aleppo and from the motorway linking Aleppo to Damascus," Abdel Rahman said.

SANA said rebel rocket fire on Tuesday also killed two women and a child in

Aleppo city.

The surge in violence comes despite a cease-fire announced by Russia earlier this month that never really took hold.

Last Thursday, Russia denied launching any combat operations in the region since the start of the cease-fire earlier this month.

Russia has thousands of forces deployed across Syria in support of the army, while a contingent of Russian private security personnel also operates on the ground.

Moscow's military intervention in 2015, four years into the Syrian conflict, helped keep Assad in power and marked a long, bloody reconquest of territory lost to rebels in early stages of the war.

Abdul Rahman said the latest spate in air strikes could be a prelude to a land offensive in western Aleppo, as the regime and its allies continue their drive to shrink the last opposition-held pocket.

"The regime has massed reinforcements on the outskirts of the city of Aleppo," Abdel Rahman said.

The violence in northern Syria is escalating an already dire humanitarian situation, with aid groups warning of displacement on an unprecedented scale. Idlib province alone is home to at least three million people, many of whom are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

According to the UN humanitarian coordination agency OCHA, almost 350,000 people have fled their homes since December 1, mainly northwards from southern Idlib, which has borne the brunt of the air strikes.

The International Rescue Committee has warned another 650,000 people, mostly children and women, could be forced from their homes if the violence continues.





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Libya peace still elusive despite 'small step' in Berlin

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BERLIN: A peaceful solution to Libya's protracted conflict remains uncertain despite an international agreement struck in Germany, analysts say, as a fragile cease-fire between warring factions brought only a temporary truce. On Sunday in Berlin, world leaders committed to ending all foreign meddling in Libya and to uphold a weapons embargo as part of a broader plan to end the country's conflict.

But overnight Sunday to Monday heavy bombardment again echoed south of Tripoli – the capital of a country that has been in turmoil since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that killed dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Since April last year the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli has fought back against an offensive launched by fighters loyal to eastern commander Khalifa Haftar.

GNA leader Fayez Al-Sarraj and Haftar attended the Berlin summit but they refused to meet and the conference failed to get the two rivals to commit to a permanent truce.

The host, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, tried hard to get Sarraj and Haftar to engage in a serious dialogue.

But after the hours-long talks, she had to put on a brave face and admit she had no illusions concerning a peaceful outcome in Libya anytime soon.

"Ensuring that a cease-fire is immediately respected is simply not easy to guarantee," Merkel said.

Echoing Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who took part in the talks, she said the Libyan parties had taken "a small step forward."

Khaled Al-Montassar, a Libyan university professor of international relations, agreed that much still needs to be done.

"Theoretically, the Berlin summit was successful and touched upon all the details and the causes of the Libyan crisis," he said.

"But the mechanisms of implementing the summit's conclusions are still not clear."

The summit was attended by the presidents of Russia, Turkey, France and Egypt, as well as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and UN chief Antonio Guterres.

The main points they agreed to will be put forward as a UN Security Council resolution.

They include a commitment to end foreign interference in Libya, respect for a

UN arms embargo, a permanent cease-fire and steps to dismantle numerous militias and armed groups.

European states must now convince Italy to resume naval operations suspended since March 2019 aimed at enforcing the embargo.

Other points agreed in Berlin were a return to a political process under the auspices of the UN, respect for human rights and guarantees to ensure the security of Libya's lucrative oil infrastructure.

The United Nations walked away from the summit satisfied at least with one key development.

The summit saw the formation of a military commission comprising five GNA loyalists and five Haftar delegates who will seek to define ways of consolidating the cease-fire.

The UN mission in Libya had for weeks urged the rival camps to submit names of delegates to such a commission, and its wish was finally answered on Sunday.

The military commission is expected to meet in the coming days, according to the UN, tasked with turning the fragile cease-fire into a permanent truce as requested by the international leaders in Berlin.

The cease-fire was co-sponsored by Russia and Turkey and has broadly held since it went into effect on January 12.

The main goal of the Berlin summit was to end the international divisions concerning Libya.

Although the GNA is recognized by the UN as Libya's legitimate government, the world body's member states do not agree when it comes to the oil-rich North African country.

Haftar, who insists his military campaign is aimed at battling Islamists, has the support of several countries, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and France, with some providing him with military and logistical backing.

The GNA is backed by Qatar and Turkey, which has recently sent some troops to shore up Sarraj's embattled government.

Moscow is also suspected of backing Haftar but denies funding Russian mercenaries on the ground.

As a follow-up to the Berlin summit, the two rival administrations must now choose representatives to attend talks in order to revive the moribund political process, UN envoy to Libya Ghassan Salame said.

Algeria, which attended the conference and shares a border with Libya, on Monday offered to hold inter-Libyan talks on its soil. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will travel to Algiers on Tuesday, his ministry said Monday, to discuss the situation in Libya, among other topics.

Future Libya talks are certain to face huge challenges, particularly after pro-Haftar forces blocked oil exports from Libya's main ports last week.

Meanwhile, Libyans on social media remained skeptical, the deep divisions reflected in comments such as "who won, Haftar or Sarraj?"

Tripoli resident Abdul Rahman Milud said a "another summit isn't necessary." Establishing "a consensus among Libyans themselves" is much more important, he told AFP.



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Berlin talks important step in resolving Libya crisis: Egypt FM Libya strongman Haftar in Athens for talks ahead of Berlin peace conference