

UK summons Iran envoy as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe faces return to jail

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LONDON: Britain on Friday warned Iran against throwing detained woman Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe back in jail, after hauling in Tehran's envoy for a dressing-down over her emotive case.

The Foreign Office summoned Ambassador Hamid Baeidinejad on Thursday to hear renewed demands from a senior official for an end to the British-Iranian captive's "arbitrary detention."

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab told BBC radio Zaghari-Ratcliffe was in a "horrific position," after her husband said Iran has ordered her to report to court for a new trial on Monday and then back to jail.

Britain has made it clear to Iran "that is entirely unjustified and totally unacceptable and must not happen," Raab said.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who will turn 42 on Boxing Day, has been on temporary release from Tehran's Evin prison and under house arrest since earlier this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

She has spent more than four years in jail, or under house arrest, since being detained in the Iranian capital in April 2016 while visiting relatives with her young daughter.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who worked for the Thomson Reuters Foundation – the media organization's philanthropic arm – denied charges of sedition but was convicted and jailed for five years.



Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has spent more than four years in jail, or under house arrest, since being detained in the Iranian capital in April 2016.

(AFP)

Her husband Richard Ratcliffe said this week that the Foreign Office's handling of the case "seems disastrous," and that "the UK is dancing to Iran's tune."

Raab told the BBC: "We've made it very clear we want to try to put the relationship between the UK and Iran on a better footing.

"If Nazanin is returned to prison, that will of course put our discussions and the basis of those discussions in a totally different place. It is entirely unacceptable."

Richard Ratcliffe linked the latest development to the postponement of a hearing that was due to take place on Tuesday in London to address Iran's longstanding demand for the repayment by Britain of hundreds of millions from an old military equipment order.

"As Nazanin's husband, I do think that if she's not home for Christmas, there's every chance this could run for years," he said, accusing Iran of "hostage diplomacy."



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UK-Iranian 'hostage' Zaghari-Ratcliffe due back in Tehran jail
Zaghari-Ratcliffe devastated after court case postponed

[Iranians awaiting US election results with bated breath](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-10-30 02:14

DUBAI: Top officials in Iran say the upcoming US election doesn't matter, but nearly everyone else there seems to be holding their breath.

The race for the White House could mean another four years of President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign. Or it could bring Joe Biden, who has raised the possibility of the US returning to Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

In the upper levels of Iran's Islamic republic, overseen by 81-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, anti-Americanism is as deeply entrenched as at any time since the 1979 Islamic revolution, with presidents from both parties seen as equally repugnant.

"America has a deep-rooted enmity against the Iranian nation and whether Trump is elected or Biden, it will not have any impact on the US main policy to strike the Iranian nation," parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf said in September, according to the semiofficial Fars news agency.

But noticeably, Khamenei himself hasn't commented on the election, even as public interest has soared. State-run radio rebroadcast a BBC Farsi-language service simulcast of the presidential debates live – even as Iran continues to target journalists for the British broadcaster.

That interest allegedly includes Iran's security apparatus as well. US officials accuse the Islamic republic of sending emails to voters seeking to intimidate them into voting for Trump. It may have been an attempt to link the president to apparent election interference in order to sow chaos, like Russia's interference in America's 2016 election. Tehran denies being involved.

The Iranian public is paying attention. The state-owned polling center ISPA said this month that 55 percent of people believe the outcome of the election will affect Iran "a lot." Over half expected Trump would win, while a fifth said Biden. ISPA said it surveyed over 1,600 people by telephone, and did not provide a margin of error.

Trump's reelection would mean the extension of his pressure campaign, including sanctions on Khamenei and other senior officials. Some of the sanctions are largely symbolic – Khamenei has only once traveled to America and does not hold any US bank accounts – but others have devastated the economy and sent the local currency into freefall. As a hedge, Iranians have poured money into foreign currency, real estate, precious metals and the stock market – which hit a record high in August.

Trump on the campaign trail has hit on that and his decision to launch a drone strike that killed a top Iranian general in January – a move that led Tehran to launch a retaliatory ballistic missile strike, wounding dozens of American troops.

To cheers, Trump has described the general, Qassem Soleimani, as "the world's No. 1 terrorist," likely due to him being blamed for the improvised explosive devices that maimed US troops in Iraq and for supporting Syria's Bashar Assad. Many Iranians revered Soleimani for fighting against Daesh and in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and millions flooded the streets for his funeral processions.

"The first call I get when we win will be from the head of Iran, let's make a deal. Their economy is crashing," Trump told a campaign rally in Allentown, Pennsylvania, on Monday. "They will call and I want them to do well, but they cannot have a nuclear weapon."

Biden has left open the possibility of returning to the nuclear deal, in which Tehran agreed to limit its uranium enrichment in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. The other signatories – Britain, France,

Germany, Russia and China – have remained committed to the agreement and allowed a UN arms embargo to expire as part of the deal, despite a White House push to keep it in place.

After Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018 and restored crippling sanctions, Iran began publicly abandoning the agreement's limits on enrichment. It now has at least 2.32 tons of low-enriched uranium, according to a September report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Experts typically say 1.15 tons of low-enriched uranium is enough material to be re-enriched for one nuclear weapon.

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful and still allows IAEA inspectors to monitor its atomic sites. But experts say the "breakout time" needed for Iran to build one nuclear weapon if it chooses to do so has dropped from one year under the deal to as little as three months.

Iran in the past also has threatened to abandon a nuclear nonproliferation treaty or expel international inspectors. It recently began construction at an underground nuclear site, likely building a new centrifuge assembly plant after a reported sabotage attack there earlier this year.

"'America First' has made America alone," Biden said at a televised ABC town hall this month, playing on a longtime Trump slogan. "You have Iran closer to having enough nuclear material to build a bomb."

What a return to the deal means, however, is in question. Biden's campaign website says he would use "hard-nosed diplomacy and support from our allies to strengthen and extend it." One criticism of the accord was its narrow focus on the nuclear program, despite concerns by the US, Israel and its Gulf Arab allies over Iran's ballistic missile program and its presence in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

Iran maintains that its ballistic missile program is vital for deterring potential attacks and non-negotiable. It is also unlikely to cease its military activities in Syria and Iraq, where it spent considerable blood and treasure in the war against Daesh.

But ensuring the survival of the Islamic republic, particularly amid the coronavirus pandemic, may require the same flexibility that saw Iran agree to negotiations with the US in the first place. Iran will hold a presidential election in June, but any decision to re-engage with Washington would have to be made by the supreme leader.

"Khamenei's revolutionary path actually leads to America – that is, by seeking a stable, safe, and meticulously measured relationship with the United States, he believes he can guarantee the survival of both the regime and its revolutionary content and orientation," wrote Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian who is an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"Tehran's objective is therefore a scandalous paradox: Deal with America to remain anti-American."



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US seizes Iranian missiles, slaps Iran-related sanctions on 11 entities

[Algeria to vote on a constitution dismissed by protest movement](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-10-30 02:10

ALGIERS: Algerians are set to vote on Sunday in a constitutional referendum the government touts as heralding a “new republic,” but a long-running protest movement rejects the exercise as window-dressing.

Observers see the constitution as the centerpiece of now-hospitalized President Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s strategy to neutralize the Hirak movement, which staged vast demonstrations last year and forced his predecessor from office.

Despite Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s fall from power, the Hirak has failed to achieve its goal of a full overhaul of Algeria’s sclerotic political system, in place since independence from France in 1962.

In a key setback for the protest movement, Tebboune, widely seen as the army’s preferred candidate, was elected in a December 2019 presidential poll, despite the Hirak urging root-and-branch reform ahead of any elections. Then it was forced to suspend its protests in March as the coronavirus

pandemic struck.

But Tebboune, who took power after a poll marred by record low turnout, has sought legitimacy by ostensibly reaching out to the Hirak.

He has promised a new constitutional settlement he presents as meeting the movement's demands.

But the lack of radical change in the document, which strengthens the president and the army, has left many skeptical.

"The referendum will have no impact in terms of offering a political alternative or a change in how the country is governed," said Louisa Dris-Ait Hamadouche, a political science professor at the University of Algiers.

Algeria, with a population of 44 million on the doorstep of Europe, has escaped the violence and severe repression triggered by most of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

But with its oil-reliant economy in crisis and its young people desperate for work, the government is under pressure, also exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Tebboune himself was transferred from hospital in Algiers to Germany on Wednesday, officials said, days after the 74-year-old went into self-isolation following reports of suspected Covid-19 cases among his staff. Politically, Tebboune was already "in a delicate situation," said Algeria expert Hasni Abidi, pointing to the army's resurgent political role since Bouteflika's departure after two decades in power.

"Even if (Tebboune) is tempted to gain more legitimacy via the ballot box, he is far from having full room to maneuver," Abidi said.

The proposed constitutional changes refer to a string of rights and freedoms, including guaranteeing the right to form parties and unions, while even praising the Hirak in a preamble.

But Zaid Al-Ali, an expert on constitutions in the Arab world, has warned that the document "lengthens the list of rights while at the same time making sure that most of those rights are devoid of meaning."

And counter to the Hirak movement's goals, the constitution would further enshrine a presidential system and bolster the army's powers.

Since taking power, Tebboune has vowed to push through a revision that would rein in his own powers.

But despite limiting the president to two five-year terms, the revised constitution would still mandate the head of state to appoint an array of key officials including the prime minister, regional governors, judges and security service chiefs.

A vaguely worded article extending the role of the military has also rung alarm bells.

"It's a genuine invitation for the army to get involved in politics, but also a poke in the eye for the Hirak, which has demanded a civilian rather than military state," said constitutional law expert Massensen Cherbi.

The document has been carefully marketed by the government, which has led a campaign to "explain" the constitutional reform and how it lays the foundations of a "new republic."

Few, if any, voices from the "No" camp have been heard in state media outlets.

The date of the vote is highly symbolic: November 1 was when Algeria's eight-year war for independence from France began.

"November 1954: Liberation. November 2020: Change," runs the slogan of the

official “Yes” campaign.

If it passes, the constitution will be another serious blow for the Hirak, which has faced a slew of arrests and trials in recent months.

Activists and journalists have been handed heavy prison sentences, all in a context where the coronavirus pandemic has made it very difficult to maintain pressure against the authorities.

Amnesty International has welcomed the constitution’s inclusion of stronger language on women’s rights and economic and social rights.

But, the rights group warned in June: “The Algerian authorities’ relentless campaign of mass arbitrary arrests and a crackdown on activists and protesters risk undermining the credibility of Algeria’s constitutional reform process.”



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Algeria’s president transferred to Germany for treatment
Algeria to inaugurate Bouteflika-era mega mosque

[‘Made-in-Gaza’ device fights coronavirus spread](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-10-30 02:06

GAZA CITY: Entering a Gaza City restaurant, customers are welcomed by a

multi-tasking disinfection machine designed by a Palestinian businesswoman to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the crisis-hit enclave.

Spraying hand sanitizer while taking the person's temperature, the 2-meter-high device offers an all-in-one disinfection experience.

If the body temperature is too high, a red signal will light up. Otherwise the restaurant door opens automatically to allow the customer in.

"In Gaza, we have basic devices imported from abroad to measure temperatures, and others to disinfect, but our devices combine multiple technologies in one," creator Heba Al-Hindi told AFP.

The densely populated Palestinian coastal enclave, under an Israeli-enforced blockade since 2007, was initially largely spared by Covid-19 when the pandemic broke out.

But dire economic conditions, a poor health care system and chronic electricity shortages, partly caused by the blockade, made Gaza especially vulnerable to the virus.

Confirmed infections in the enclave have topped 5,440 with 31 deaths.

"When Covid-19 reached the Gaza Strip, I told myself I had to find a way to fight its spread," said Hindi.

"Then came the idea of creating a sanitiser and I designed these smart machines."

The 37-year-old mathematics graduate heads Innovation Makers, a company that has created eight anti-Covid products, including a blue and yellow robot-like machine to appeal to children.

She said the project makes money but that "our focus is not on the profit."

HIGHLIGHT

Spraying hand sanitizer while taking the person's temperature, the 2-meter-high device offers an all-in-one disinfection experience.

"We're focusing on a Palestinian product and a Palestinian invention from within the siege in the Gaza Strip, to show this invention to the world." Innovation Makers has sold dozens of machines to supermarkets, bakeries and restaurants, for between \$550 and \$1,500 depending on the technology used. The products have been patented by the Ramallah-based Palestinian Economy Ministry, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The company finds spare parts for the devices on the local market but is barred by Israel from exporting the "Made in Gaza" creations, slowing down Hindi's ambitions.

Management at the Taboun restaurant is delighted with the disinfecting machines they bought.

"The device is remarkable," said Matar Matar, hospitality manager at the Gaza eatery, adding that he found out about it on social media.

Customers are happy to see that "something new is being developed in Gaza," he said.

Computer engineer Mohammad Natat, 23, said he was proud to be part of the team that created the machine.

"I had the opportunity to take part in this work and be creative in my field," he said. "It was a huge chance to have some work."

Around half of Gaza's population is out of work, two-thirds of them young people, according to the World Bank, and more than two thirds of residents depend on humanitarian aid.



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Israel warplanes strike Gaza following rocket fire
In crowded Gaza, public embraces mask-wearing to fight COVID-19

[A Lebanese nonprofit helps refugees develop confidence through the creative arts](#)

Thu, 2020-10-29 23:49

BEIRUT: Lebanese theatrical nonprofit Seenaryo teaches drama, dance and song

to marginalized communities, building confidence and self-esteem through the creative arts, while its teacher-support app has brought imaginative new learning techniques to hundreds of classrooms across Jordan and Lebanon.

Founded in 2015 by British expat duo Victoria Lupton and Oscar Wood, Seenaryo's five-day intensive theater workshops are still operating despite the coronavirus pandemic, with the group's most recent – socially distanced – project staged at Beirut's Dar Al-Aytam Al-Islamiya orphanage in September.

Up to 30 boys and girls, or even a group of adults, participate in each workshop where, through improvisation exercises, they brainstorm ideas to create a musical play, write a script and song lyrics, and master dance routines. Each play includes five original songs set to professionally made backing tracks. The group then performs its play to a local audience.



Up to 30 boys and girls, or even adults, participate in each workshop where, through improvisation exercises, they brainstorm ideas to create a musical play, write a script and song lyrics, and master dance routines. (Supplied)

“What we’re trying to do is support our participants to feel a sense of agency and ownership over their own lives, to feel that they can contribute to their communities and have an impact on their own lives and those around them,” Lupton said. “Play-based learning and theater does that by building life skills – that might be communication skills and empathy or building confidence and a sense of self-worth.”

Initially, Seenaryo worked solely with Syrian and Palestinian refugees. “Very quickly, within a year, we realized it was neither particularly helpful in terms of existing tensions between communities nor reaching the neediest beneficiaries if we just focused on refugees, so we widened the focus to work with all marginalized people regardless of nationality,” Lupton said.

“Theater has the power to bring a community together and feel like a family.”

In 2019 alone, Seenaryo staged 15 original theater productions in Jordan and Lebanon. Aside from the co-founders, most staff are from the local community. The non-profit also runs several choirs for children and women singing music from around the world as well as original songs written by participants in two-part harmony.

The influx of refugee children has strained the education systems of Lebanon and Jordan, with low quality teaching causing children to drop out of school, while stressed teachers often quit. In response, Seenaryo created a teacher training book that this year launched as an app, Playkit, to support educators teaching children aged three to eight.

“We fit into the national strategies of dealing with this new population by helping to increase teaching quality, Lupton said. “The Playkit is a shortcut to 21st century learning techniques. Just this small intervention can have a transformative impact on classrooms and helps keep children in school.”

On the app, there are hundreds of play-based activities available including games, songs, interactive stories and tools to help classroom management. These take the form of how-to videos, flashcards, music tracks and step-by-step teaching instructions. Among the subjects covered are languages, mathematics, health, the natural and human worlds, and social and emotional learning. The app is available in Arabic, English and French.



Caption

As of early September, 113 schools were using the app along with 1,075

teachers and 28,875 children.

Usually, teachers would first undertake a three-day training course before incorporating the app into their classroom activities, but the coronavirus pandemic has halted in-person instruction as schools shut. So, Seenaryo created short, instructive three-minute videos that it sends to parents and caregivers via WhatsApp to help them home school children.

This distance-learning program, "I Learn from Home," dispatches three new videos each week to around 2,500 families. "These lesson plans needed to be accessible to even people who are illiterate or have low educational attainment, which is why we went for video," said Lupton. "These are a very engaging set of instructions as to how to teach that day's lesson, whether it's on health or maths or whatever was in the curriculum that day."

Seenaryo is funded through various government and non-government agencies, while the organization hopes subscriptions to Playkit will enable it to provide the app to schools. Now, with Lebanon facing new hardships and traumas, Seenaryo's community-building projects are needed more than ever and Lupton's team is ready and determined to help.

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