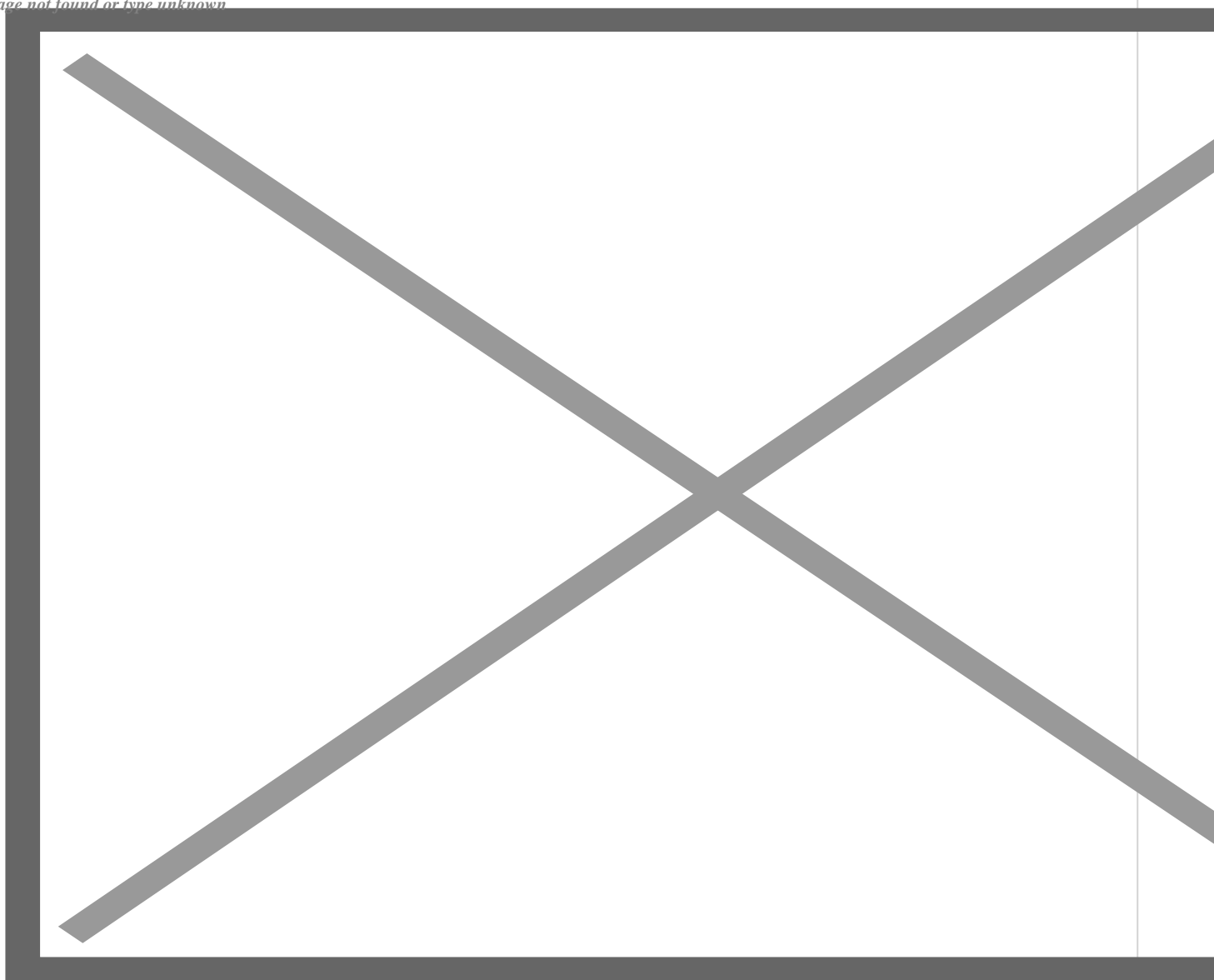


Observers say U.S. seizure of Iran-linked websites shortsighted

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An Iranian woman shows on her mobile phone a statement declaring the website of Iran's English-language television station Press TV 'has been seized by the United Government' [AFP]

Tehran, June 24 (RHC)-- Just like its abandonment of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, another unilateral move by the United States once more promises to affect life in Iran for the worse, this time in terms of internet freedom, analysts say.

In a surprise move on Wednesday, the U.S. Justice Department seized 36 websites with links to the Iranian state for engaging in what they are calling "disinformation campaigns and malign influence operations."

The move initially arose suspicions of a hack since a disclaimer that said "this website has been seized" accompanied an Arabic text instead of Farsi, and State Department spokesman Ned Price refused to comment, indicating that U.S. officials working on Iran were likely not in the loop.

The seizures come as Iran and world powers -- including the United States -- are soon expected to start a seventh and perhaps final round of negotiations in Vienna to restore the 2015 nuclear deal that the U.S. abandoned in 2018. The sanctions that the U.S. has since imposed have been the harshest Iran has ever faced, and have led to rampant inflation and unemployment amid the deadliest COVID-19 pandemic of the Middle East.

The Justice Department eventually said three of the seized domains belonged to Iraqi group Kataeb Hezbollah, while the rest, including Yemeni, Palestinian, and Bahraini outlets in English and Arabic, were held by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union, reportedly run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' foreign-looking Quds Force.

The seized websites belonged to outlets of the so-called "resistance axis" that Iran supports across the region to counter the influence of the U.S. and regional rivals like Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. blacklisted them with designations related to "terrorism" and said American companies are not allowed to provide them with .com and .net domains without special authorisation from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

The move drew swift criticism from Iranian officials and restricted outlets, chief among them Press TV, the Iranian state-run television's main English broadcasting channel. Iran's foreign ministry called the seizure an example of a "systematic effort to distort freedom of speech on a global level and silence independent voices in media", adding that Iran will pursue the issue through legal channels.

While the U.S. may have given itself the ability to exert influence over vast sections of the internet, its actions could have far-reaching ramifications beyond its control. Observers fear the seizures will only strengthen arguments in favour of the so-called National Information Network (NIN), a massive internet nationalisation initiative in Iran.

There is precedent for it, after all. In January 2020, when the news was still dominated by the consequences of the U.S. drone assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, and the IRGC firing of missiles at the US bases and its shooting down of a passenger plane, the hardline Fars News Agency's .com domain was blocked.

Shortly after, the Donald Trump administration also seized the website of the IRAN daily newspaper and several other affiliated outlets. This was followed months later by the seizure of two websites utilised by Kataeb Hezbollah, and 92 domain names "unlawfully used by Iran's IRGC to engage in a global disinformation campaign."

Those incidents gave credence to arguments of U.S. interference and censoring used by Iranian officials to convince the public and push ahead with the NIN, which has been in the works for more than 10 years.

Sadjad Bonabi, an infrastructure development official with the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, said in January 2020 that the infrastructures provided by the NIN have “alleviated many of the concerns from cruel sanctions.”

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/261840-observers-say-us-seizure-of-iran-linked-websites-shortsighted>



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