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US seizes PressTV.com and 32 other Iranian media website domains

The Biden administration's Department of Justice (DoJ) confirmed on Tuesday that the US had seized 33 websites affiliated with the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and three others operated by Kata'ib Hizballah (Hezbollah Brigades), an Iraqi Shia group supported by Iran.

In a press statement, the DoJ stated that the website domains—including the English and French language PressTV.com based in Teheran—were “in violation of US sanctions.” The statement said that the US Office of Foreign Assets and Control (OFAC) had “designated IRTVU as a Specially Designated National (SDN)” during the Trump administration in October 2020 for “being owned or controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC).”

The DoJ also said that organizations labeled as SDNs are “prohibited from obtaining services, including website and domain services, in the United States without an OFAC license” and that IRTVU “and others like it” are not news organizations but are used to launch “disinformation campaigns and malign influence operations.” It also claimed that the 33 website addresses were owned in the US by IRTVU which “did not obtain a license from OFAC prior to utilizing the domain names.”



Notification on PressTV website that it has been seized by the US government

In the case of Kata'ib Hizballah (KH), the DoJ says that it was both designated an SDN by OFAC and as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the Department of State in July 2009. It claims that KH has “committed, directed, supported or posed a significant risk of committing acts of violence against Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces” and also did not obtain an OFAC license prior to acquiring the domain names.

Whatever the public justifications provided for its aggressive act, the transparent political purpose of the Biden administration’s website seizures is the effort to ratchet up pressure on Iran amid ongoing negotiations in Vienna over the 2015 nuclear agreement and following the June 18 selection of the hardline conservative Ebrahim Raisi as the next Iranian president.

Iran’s foreign ministry on Wednesday called the seizure an example of a “systematic effort to distort freedom of speech on a global level and silence independent voices in media.”

One of the seized sites, Al-Masirah, is not owned by Iran, but by Ansarullah, the movement of the Houthis in Yemen, a faction the US has claimed to be “proxies” of Iran. The news outlet is headquartered in Beirut, Lebanon.

In a statement reported by RT, Al Masirah said it was “not surprised” by the seizure, as it “comes from those that have supervised the most heinous crimes against our people.” The website shutdown, “reveals, once again, the falsehood of the slogans of freedom of

expression and all the other headlines promoted by the United States of America, including its inability to confront the truth,” the statement said.

Indicating the broader political aims of the website seizures, the Associated Press (AP) reported that the US took over the domain name of the news website Palestine Today, which publishes the views of Gaza-based Islamic militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, redirecting the site to the same takedown notice.

Visits to the seized websites bring up a graphic with the headline, “This website has been seized” and a message that says the domain has been taken offline due to a “seizure warrant” issued under the authority of US code involving civil and criminal forfeiture and special powers given to the president during “unusual and extraordinary threat; declaration of national emergency.”

Some of the websites have been operating for many years, such as PressTV.com which was launched in 2007. The Wikipedia entry for the Iranian news and documentary network says that the annual budget of PressTV was \$8.3 million and it had 400 employees worldwide as of 2009.

AP reported that most of the seized domains are .net, .com and .tv domains. The .net and .com domains are considered generic “top level domains” (TLDs) and they are controlled by the global provider of the domain name registry, Verisign, based in Reston, Virginia. The contract with Verisign is managed jointly by the US-based non-profit Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the US Department of Commerce.

The domain .tv is “owned by the Pacific Island nation of Tuvalu but administered by the US company Verisign,” according to AP. Other news and media domains which are owned by Iran, such as the website PressTV.ir which also publishes in English, have not been affected by the seizures.

A similar action was taken by the DoJ under the Trump administration in November 2020, when the FBI seized 27 domain names it claimed were used by Iran’s IRGC to spread a “global covert influence campaign.” Coming from the number one worldwide purveyor of “influence campaigns” involving money, murder and military occupation, the

unsubstantiated accusations against the Iran-based media outlets must be completely rejected as part of the preparations for further wars of aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Meanwhile, the use by Biden of designations made by both the Obama and Trump administrations makes clear the fundamental agreement over foreign policy between the two parties of Wall Street and the US military-intelligence apparatus regardless of whether it is the Democrats or Republicans that control the executive or legislative branches of government.

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