

Strange Phone Calls Alarm Syrians

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(01-Dec-08)

Syrians continue to wonder who was behind a recent barrage of recorded phone messages asking people for information about missing Israeli soldiers in exchange for a ten million US dollar reward.

“If you have any reliable information about the fate of missing Israeli soldiers, we guarantee you a cash reward of ten million dollars,” the caller says in Arabic. “Your information will remain confidential and we will guarantee your safety.”

The message concludes by urging recipients with relevant information to dial two numbers, both of which start with a British area code.

Some think the messages come from the Israeli intelligence services and are designed to recruit agents, while others believe the Syrian authorities may have orchestrated the calls in order to fuel antagonism between the two countries, or else to justify imposing greater restrictions on telecommunications.

A local telecoms worker who wished to remain anonymous said the message was received by thousands of landline subscribers on October 28 and 29, and was sent through technology that allows the caller to automatically re-dial numbers.

He said it was unclear whether the selection of phone numbers was random or targeted.

Communications and Technology Minister Emad Sabouni denied a “security infiltration” of Syrian communication networks had taken place.

“These messages reach random Syrian citizens through prepaid phone cards,” he said at an October 28 press conference. “The company producing these cards has been identified, and it is being contacted regarding this matter.”

Sabouni did not name the company concerned. A local telecoms worker who wished to remain anonymous said the government may not know who is responsible and offered a vague response so as to avoid embarrassment.

Syrian politicians and security officials have suggested the messages were designed to recruit agents to work for Israeli intelligence.

Others are not so sure.

“I thought the phone call was a trick by Syrian security officials to entrap us,” said Bilal Ali, a car mechanic in Damascus. “I could never imagine hearing something about helping the Israelis from my own landline

telephone.”

Ali and others worried that the phone calls would provide an excuse for imposing tighter controls on the telecommunications network.

“I am afraid the Syrian security structures will take advantage of this opportunity to spy on people more, under the pretext that Israeli infiltration is taking place,” said a former political prisoner on condition of anonymity. “What I care about is not to feel afraid when I pick up the phone.”

The spate of calls received by Syrians follow a similar case in Lebanon. In July, Lebanese telecommunications minister Jibril Bassil accused the Israelis of bombarding people in his country with recorded phone messages, a day after a controversial prisoner swap between Israel and Hezbollah.

Israeli officials declined to comment on those allegations.

Syria and Israel recently held four rounds of indirect talks, mediated by Turkey. But the negotiations made no significant headway, and a fifth round was postponed when Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert stepped down as leader of the ruling Kadima party and elections were called.

Phone users in Syria suffered more problems on November 16-17, when lines in and around Damascus were blocked for several days. This time the problem was technical – while the government spoke merely of a glitch in the network, sources say someone stole a length of phone line, knocking the system out.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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