

The Wall Street Journal - Georgia Says It Froze Iranians' Accounts

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The Wall Street Journal publishes article under the headline: Georgia says it froze Iranians' Accounts". "The Georgian government froze approximately 150 bank accounts tied to Iranian businesses and individuals in order to comply with United Nations sanctions aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear program, officials in Tbilisi said. Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani announced the freezing of the Iranian bank accounts at a Friday news conference, in response to questions about a front-page article in The Wall Street Journal on Thursday that documented a sharp increase of investment by Iranians in Georgia over the past two years. Georgian government officials said the accounts

were frozen before Thursday.

U.S. and European officials have voiced growing concerns that Iran is seeking to use Georgia and its financial system to evade mounting international sanctions that are aimed at denying Tehran the ability to produce atomic weapons. Iran says its program is strictly for peaceful purposes.

Sanctioned Iranian energy companies and firms tied to Iran's elite military unit, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, are among the firms that have sought to do business in Georgia, according to Iranian and Georgian officials.

Ms. Tsulukiani said her government is studying the evidence reported in the Journal article and stressed that Tbilisi is committed to closely cooperating with the U.N. and U.S. to enforce the sanctions on Iran. She said U.N. authorities have responded positively to previous enforcement efforts.

Georgian officials also said Friday that the government in Tbilisi is considering altering its policy on visa requirements for Iranian nationals.

Since 2011, Georgia has waived the visa requirement for Iranian nationals, fueling a boom of Iranian tourists and businessmen coming into the nation. Only two other countries in Europe and the broader Middle East, Turkey and Armenia, currently allow Iranians such easy access.

Georgian officials said a change, if any, would be part of a broader reshuffling of its visa policy. "There will be changes for visa regulations for several countries," which will likely include Iran, said a Georgian official.

Sara Ghazi, editor of Tbilisi's main Persian-language newspaper, Aryana, said changes were already being felt on the ground. In the past two days, she said, Iranian visitors seeking to enter Georgia over its border with Armenia were denied access if they didn't have a prior hotel booking. Such refusals are new, she said.

In addition, she said that Georgian banks were tightening regulations for opening bank accounts for Iranian citizens. She warned that such measures could end up hurting the Iranian government's opponents, rather than its supporters. "The majority of Iranians [in Georgia] are against the regime and many can't return there," she said.

Georgian and European officials based in Tbilisi also said customs officials in the former Soviet republic recently seized engineering valves that were en route to Iran and suspected of being usable in the country's uranium-enrichment facilities.

Georgian customs officials refused to allow passages of the engineering valves this spring, suspecting they could be used in developing the centrifuges for enriching uranium, said Georgian and European officials.

"After assuming there was a risk of dual-use, our agencies refused transit through Georgia," a Georgian official said, and shipped the equipment back to its country of origin.

The issue of Iranian investments in Georgia has emerged as a prickly issue for Washington and Tbilisi, close allies

since the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union.

The U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi, in response to the Journal's article, issued a statement Friday confirming its concerns about Iran seeking to use Georgia to evade sanctions.

The American mission stressed that it believed U.S. relations with Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili remain strong.

"We see undiminished interest on the part of Georgia's government in strong relations with the U.S., and a continued strong desire for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration," the U.S. Embassy statement said".

