

Defection of a Terror Suspect: Window into Iranian State Terrorism?

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Brief Analysis

An Iranian asylum seeker in Turkey claims to be Ahmad Beladi-Behbahani, a high-ranking intelligence official in Iran. If true, this is quite a coup, because Behbahani is one of the most important figures in the Iranian terror apparatus, and his revelations could re-ignite debate about a U.S. response to Iran-backed terror against U.S. targets.

Who Is Ahmad Behbahani? During the Rafsanjani presidency (1989-1997), Behbahani served as head of the Intelligence Section in the President's Office, according to a 1996 ninety-three-page report from the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group. A coordinating body established by Rafsanjani, the Intelligence Section designates targets and delegates operational responsibility for assassinations and terrorist attacks. The British report identified Behbahani as a relative of then-President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (Behbahani would not be the first Rafsanjani relative directly implicated in terrorism. Zaynulabadin Sarhadi, a grand-nephew of the former president, played a supporting role in the August 1991 assassination of former Iranian prime minister Shahpour Bakhtiar). Additionally, Behbahani reportedly served as a vice commander of the Quds (Jerusalem) Force, perhaps the most elite unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with a membership of 1,000 agents charged with exporting the revolution. The Quds Force runs a number of military training camps in Iran, Lebanon, and Sudan. In short, Behbahani is a central figure in Iran's terror apparatus.

Iran's Trail of Terror. The man claiming to be Behbahani asserted responsibility for a series of prominent attacks that have killed scores of Americans, Europeans, and Iranians. He told "60 Minutes" off-camera (his identity has yet to be confirmed) that he designed the 1988 bombing of Pan American flight #103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in retaliation for the July 3, 1988, downing of an Iran Air passenger jet by the U.S.S. Vincennes in the Persian Gulf. According to "60 Minutes," the asylum seeker said he got the radical Palestinian terrorist group PFLP-GC (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, headed by Ahmed Jibril) to make the bomb, and he recruited the Libyan intelligence operatives to carry out the attack. In addition, he said that they spent three months training in Iran; given that they were top officials in Libyan intelligence, it is difficult to see how they could have spent that amount of time in Iran without the knowledge of the Libyan government. So this story would implicate the Libyan as well as the Iranian government in the Lockerbie affair. Behbahani reportedly told former Iranian president Abulhasan Bani Sadr that Iran likewise masterminded the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires which killed ninety people, again with the assistance of Jibril and Libyan agents (such coordination also indicates that international terror networks involving agents from many nations, groups, and individual interests are not a new phenomena).

According to "60 Minutes," the interviewed man also claimed to have personally assassinated Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party—Iran as well as two of Ghassemlou's colleagues on July 13, 1989, during secret negotiations in Vienna. Ghassemlou had gone to Vienna to meet with Iranian officials, who killed him at the meeting, and then fled to the Iranian embassy. The Austrian government allowed the assassins to flee the

country, fearing Iranian retaliation if it did not.

The asylum seeker also claims, according to "60 Minutes," that he had evidence of Iranian responsibility for the June 25, 1996, bombing of the U.S. military barracks in Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia that killed nineteen American servicemen. The U.S. government has long suspected an Iranian hand in that bombing but has been reluctant to push the matter, lacking specific and convincing evidence. In 1999, U.S. officials decided that they had good reason to suspect the involvement of Iranian agents. At a October 5, 1999 briefing, State Department spokesman James Rubin commented that some of the suspects traveled to Iran after the bombing and an ongoing investigation into the involvement of Iranian government officials. On the basis of this information, President Bill Clinton earlier wrote to Iranian President Muhammad Khatami asking for his assistance in the investigation of that bombing. If the asylum seeker provides convincing information about Iranian involvement, then there may be pressure on the U.S. government to act. According to early accounts, the report of the National Commission on Terrorism issued today is said to argue that the United States must do more to find and punish those responsible for the Khobar bombings.

Could the Asylum Seeker Be Behbahani? Turkey's National Intelligence Organization issued a statement reported in the Turkish daily Milliyet on June 5, that the asylum seeker is a 32-year-old Iranian who arrived in Turkey on March 7. His story will have to be checked carefully against the information U.S. intelligence has about Iran's terror activities. An asylum seeker has a powerful incentive to make himself appear important and valuable to his hosts. Predictably, the Islamic Republic News Agency released a statement on June 5 saying that the man is a provocateur.

Why Might an Important Terrorist Like Behbahani Defect? The answer is found in the turmoil within the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS). MOIS has come under increasingly open criticism in the Iranian press. Relying on information from former intelligence agents, journalist Akbar Ganji wrote a book, *The Dungeon of Ghosts*, describing MOIS procedures for identifying assassination targets. The criticism of the MOIS has led to some of its agents being brought to justice for allegedly rogue operations. After a storm of criticism for the 1998 assassination of five dissident intellectuals and writers, Sa'id Emami, one of MOIS's four deputy ministers, was arrested. In June 1999, Emami allegedly committed suicide by drinking hair removal cream in prison (how he received the cream remains unexplained). Many Iranian journalists speculate that MOIS officials killed Emami to prevent him from implicating others. Behbahani may fear that the same fate awaits him. After all, it would be tempting for the hardliners to offer up more sacrificial lambs in order to keep their terror system intact.

There is reason to think that the reformers may be gaining more control over the MOIS, historically a center of hardline power. Killings of dissidents no longer disappear down the memory hole. The March 12, 2000, assassination attempt of newspaper publisher Sa'id Hajjarian, one of Khatami's closest advisors, was quickly followed by arrest of two suspects, Sa'id Asgar and Muhsin Majidi. They were hastily convicted and sent to prison in a trial that opponents claimed was meant to put an early end to investigations that could implicate higher IRGC or MOIS officials. Again, Behbahani could fear that such may be his fate.

U.S. Policy Implications. The U.S. government appears to be moving quickly to check the asylum seeker's story. That would be a welcome change from past practice with Iraqi defectors who have encountered many obstacles in getting U.S. officials to take them seriously.

If the asylum seeker can provide valuable information about the MOIS terror network, the U.S. government should act vigorously. To do anything else would call into question the U.S. commitment to fighting terrorism sponsored by powerful states, not just against weak countries like Libya, Afghanistan, and Sudan.

On this matter, U.S. interest goes hand in hand with that of the Khatami government. High on Khatami's agenda is the curtailment of the same MOIS that is killing liberals in Iran and engaging in terror abroad. Khatami's hand is strengthened when he can point to how MOIS's activities isolate Iran. It would be a serious error for the United States

to downplay evidence of MOIS terror out of misplaced concern that exposing terrorists undercuts Khatami and the reform movement.

Michael Rubin is a 2000 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

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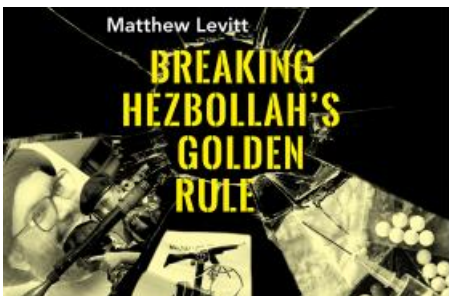
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