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The source

How hacked emails and a yacht in Monaco ended my career
at *The Wall Street Journal*

The News Corp building. (Photo: Michael Tapp/flickr)

Off the coast of Monaco in the summers of 2014 and 2015, I discovered what I thought was a sort of journalistic nirvana for my job as *The Wall Street Journal* foreign affairs correspondent, in the form of a yacht, the *Conquistador*. It was owned by an Iranian-American businessman and aviation magnate named Farhad Azima, who'd grown wealthy over the decades by servicing secretive

Pentagon defense contracts and growing a fleet of private aircraft. The scene on the boat mixed James Bond and *Fantasy Island*, all crystal blue waters, champagne cocktails, and breezy meals on the upper deck.

But for me as a journalist, time on the *Conquistador* was about much more than just the good life, though there was some of that on the eight days I stayed there. Mixed in with Azima, his family, and friends were Iranian oilmen, former US and European intelligence agents, and relatives of famous Arab arms merchants. At the core of many of our discussions was Iran, its nuclear program, and the West's frantic efforts to combat it. Time on the *Conquistador* bred a wealth of knowledge and stories, as well as some good holidays. At times it all seemed too good to fathom, and apparently it was. This became starkly clear a couple years later.

ICYMI: A reporter asked for 20 years of lottery winner data. After analyzing the records, he noticed something unusual.

(<https://www.cjr.org/watchdog/lottery-winners-foia-reporting.php>)

THE EXACT DATE my sourcing relationship with Farhad Azima entered the public realm is hard to say. Sometime in August 2016, a year after my last visit to the yacht, hundreds of email communications and texts between us appeared on the dark Web. The hackers heralded their data trove: "Fraud Between Farhad Azima and Jay Solomon," read the title of a torrent file posted online on September 13. Other files were also uploaded onto the Web around that same time, suggesting a coordinated information operation targeting us. (I would come to suspect the Iranian government or its proxies.)

The businessman's legal and political opponents, unbeknownst to me, were simultaneously ramping up a wider campaign targeting Azima and, it seemed, me. They had started shopping the stolen data to international media, after conducting months of surveillance on my communications with him. Lawyers representing an Azima opponent stated in court filings that I was conspiring with the businessman against a ruling Arab family with close financial and political ties to the Iranian government. This included allegedly pursuing international arms deals together and an effort to settle scores against Azima's enemies.

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ICYMI: “She identified herself as a reporter. He then walked behind her and punched her in the side of the head”

(https://www.cjr.org/special_report/covering-protests-threats-press-freedom-tracker.php)

None of the allegations was true. But the hack of Azima’s data set off a chain of events that eventually cost me my job as the *Journal*’s chief foreign affairs correspondent last June. It was a position I held for nearly a decade, and loved. I’d worked for the *Journal*’s parent company, Dow Jones, almost since graduating college, including overseas postings in Jakarta, South Korea, and India.

The point of writing this story isn’t to absolve myself of any journalistic wrongdoing or criticize my former employer. I remain a huge fan of the *Journal* and the reporters there. Some of my writing partners and editors were trying to help me survive these attacks.

Rather, having now thought about this for months, I think I understand that I made serious mistakes in managing my source relationship with Azima during my pursuit of the Iran story. I also blundered my initial conversations with the *Journal*, when the paper first started to grill me about my relationship with the businessman. I was scared and defensive, and lost my job as a result. The paper, from my perspective, was never straightforward in explaining who was targeting me, nor did it seem to want to help me defend myself. My hope is that walking through these errors will help other journalists avoid making the same mistakes.



Jay Solomon during his tenure at The Wall Street Journal. (Photo courtesy Jay Solomon)

First, I want to be absolutely clear: I've never been in business with Azima or sought to aid or profit from his financial dealings or benefited financially from my relationship with him. I'm also confident that every article I published on Iran over the past five years—a highly contentious, politicized time in Washington—was as accurate and fair as any journalist could make it. None of my stories have been challenged or corrected in any significant ways by the *Journal* or anyone else, despite ranking senior officials in the US, Iran, and the Middle East. (That fact was finally acknowledged, below, in the statement from the *Journal*.)

Hackers—likely state-sponsored—went after me, I believe, to hurt one of my sources and throw me off the Iran story, which dominated my career for nearly a decade. My mistakes gave those hackers and their employers the ammunition they needed to end my career at the *Journal*. In an age when every communication you have with a source, every conversation, and every text can be hacked, scrutinized, and used to discredit you and your work, it is more important than ever not just to be ethical, but to make sure that you take steps to ensure that you will appear to be even when your messages are stolen and misused by hostile powers.

TRENDING: GQ gave a freelancer 2 days to produce a 4-page section as an edit test. The mag's response was a letdown, to say the least.

(https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/edit-tests.php)

It's not just the end product of your journalism that has to be coated in Teflon, but every stage of your reporting. Process, as much as content, has to be beyond repute. If you err, as I did, it can cost you both your reputation and your career.

(Asked to comment on this piece, the *Journal* released the following statement to CJR: *The Wall Street Journal* dismissed Jay Solomon, a veteran national security reporter, because he violated our standards and forfeited our trust. A thorough review revealed instances in which Mr. Solomon's conduct was unacceptable, including repeatedly misleading editors and engaging in impermissible interactions with sources. While Mr. Solomon's poor judgment crossed ethical boundaries, our review found that the *Journal's* coverage, safeguarded by our strict editorial processes, was not affected.")

IN MID-2012, I was tipped off by diplomatic and intelligence sources that Iran appeared to be using a complex web of front companies to circumvent Western sanctions that were imposed to deny Tehran the ability to develop nuclear weapons and support international terrorist groups. According to my sources, Tehran's elite and profiteering military unit, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was seeking to use the former Soviet republic of Georgia to move sensitive goods and equipment and evade prying Western eyes during the height of Washington's financial war on Iran.

In particular, I was told by my contacts that the Revolutionary Guard had sent three Iranian businessmen based overseas to buy a string of assets, including an airline, port, and bank, to allow Tehran to develop an independent procurement channel to import supplies into Iran. On my beat, this was a serious scoop.

ICYMI: The story BuzzFeed, Daily Beast, *New York Times* and more didn't want to publish (https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/the-media-today-kim-masterss-story-should-worry-everyone.php)

I've never been one to discuss my sources publicly. They're tricky relationships, often intimate, given the high stakes of many of these stories. But in this case, with Azima's and my communications stolen and strewn all over the internet, there doesn't seem much to protect.

When I met first him in 2012, Azima was the key middlemen in the transactions the Revolutionary Guard needed to finalize in order to circumvent Western sanctions. Some of these businesses the three Iranians were meant to acquire were owned by another important player in the Middle East and friend of Azima's: A sheikh in the UAE named Saud bin Saqr al Qasimi. He ruled one of the more obscure of the emirates in his country, called Ras al-Khaima. It jutted directly into the oil-rich Strait of Hormuz and was situated just 100 miles from the Iranian coast. The emirate, while lacking energy assets, became one of the world's largest exporters of high-end ceramics.

I was a bit confused about why Azima was involved in the transaction, which could potentially violate US law. American officials told me in private that he'd proven helpful in providing information on the businesses and travels of the three Iranians, and mapping out their direct ties to the Iranian regime. These officials never suggested at the time that Azima was the target of the US investigation, despite his obviously questionable associations. When I first contacted Azima by phone, he told me he had soured on his role in the deal after learning that the three Iranians were tied to the Revolutionary Guard, which he said wasn't initially clear. His explanation sounded credible, given Azima's prior role working with US governments and intelligence services, though I couldn't be 100 percent certain. But the information he provided proved invaluable in finishing the story. American officials corroborated all of it.

It's not just the end product of your journalism that has to be coated in Teflon, but every stage of your reporting.

Months of reporting from Azima and others, resulted in a front-page story in *The Wall Street Journal* in June 2013 on Iran's efforts to subvert sanctions through Georgia. Further giving credibility to the story, the US Treasury Department formally placed economic sanctions on the three Iranian businessmen profiled in our story, but not Azima, a few months later.

At the time, I didn't understand all the reasons Azima cooperated on my story. Every good journalist struggles at times with the motivations of their sources. But the key is whether the information is accurate and above board. And in this case, it all was. Our reporting, *Politico* would write, helped uncover among the largest money-laundering operations established by Iran during the sanctions years. This was something of which I was very proud.

ICYMI: Politico embarrasses WSJ (<https://www.cjr.org/criticism/politico-wsj-trump-transcript.php>)

The best sources in journalism, I've concluded, are often the most unconventional ones. And even as we journalists try to entice them into giving us information, we need to remain mindful that they are always operating in their own self-interest.

Over the next year, the Iran story shifted significantly, as Washington and Tehran engaged in direct talks to try and end their standoff over Iran's nuclear program. I was the first reporter to break the news that a secret diplomatic channel had been established between the Obama administration and Tehran using another Arab monarch, the Sultan of Oman. The narrative of the Iran story was quickly shifting toward peace after years of war talk.

Azima and I maintained communication after that initial Georgia story and we would meet in Washington or Europe when our paths crossed. Many of the nuclear negotiations took place in Europe's tonier cities—Geneva, Lausanne, and Vienna. We'd meet up for meals when there were breaks in the talks and swap tales. He had great access to exiled Iranians in Europe, many of whom kept close ties to officials back in Tehran. We'd split the tab, whether for a Persian kebab in London or a schnitzel in Austria. I once took him as my guest to the White House Correspondents Dinner, so our connection wasn't exactly a secret.

I have to admit: I liked Azima, and found him entertaining. I'd heard stories that he had been involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, though I'd never found hard proof and he denied it. But he freely admitted he had helped successive US administrations move arms and supplies to American allies in the Middle East and Central Asia. He considered himself an aviation man and logistician rather than an arms dealer. But that may have been mincing words. He was also a hearty funder of the Clinton Foundation and proudly touted his friendship with the former US president. He regularly attended the Foundation's annual gathering in New York, and was cited as one of its biggest donors.

Azima was the consummate gray man—with soft blue eyes, whitish hair and a face easily placed in five or six countries. If I didn't know him, I would have thought he was Israeli. But his tortured English could have equally made him Russian or central European. He hated being called portly, but I never came up with a better word.

ICYMI: In an editorial meeting, *Texas Monthly* staffers sat in “stunned silence” (https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/texas-monthly-bumble.php)

Azima was abuzz with ideas. He wanted to help spring an American journalist, *The Washington Post* Tehran correspondent Jason Rezaian, who had been imprisoned in Iran's Evin Prison. (The reporter was released in January 2016.) He spoke of business deals he was conducting in Europe and the former Soviet Union to build up civil aviation infrastructure. He had reached out to the Iranian government, including politicians close to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. I found all this fascinating, though I couldn't tell whether he was serious, or whether they were legitimate enterprises. He was an entrée to a world I'd rarely seen.

A friendship, of sorts, developed between the two of us in early 2014. It was then that he invited me to visit him on his yacht in the south of France, where he said there would be a number of useful contacts transiting through. This was the first time since I'd met him that I paused. I now know I probably should not have gone, or at least I should have told the *Journal* beforehand.

My defense, in my own mind, was that I paid my own way to France on two occasions. (A third stop was just for a day and purely for *Journal* business.) These four-day trips took place during my holiday breaks, and I wasn't writing about Azima

or his businesses directly. For those reasons, I didn't see any problems or conflicts. But after the chaos that enveloped me in the summer of 2017, these trips now seem too personal, too much the act of a friend, and not the act of a skeptical reporter. I was a recipient of his largesse while on his ship, enjoying free room and board. That fact, among others, would later be used by the *Journal* in their decision to let me go.

At the time, I wasn't disappointed by the trips. A stream of Iranian businessman and retired intelligence officers visited the yacht, as well as some former CIA operatives. I was up front that I was a journalist, but this didn't cause people to clam up. There were conversations about the internal situation in the Revolutionary Guard, and the status of Tehran's nuclear program. I learned more from a few days on and off that boat than I did sitting around Washington in those interminable State Department briefings, and Iran was largely off limits because of travel restrictions. The trips seemed more than worthwhile.

One of the dilemmas of being a foreign correspondent, or of covering international diplomacy, is that you often drop into the world of the rich, a world in which you don't really belong. You need to make yourself fit into the scene to engage with your contacts. You're an actor in many ways with a cover, not unlike an intelligence operative. But at the end of the day, you know you'll be boarding an economy seat home. Your contacts, meanwhile, will often be departing on their private jets. It's similar for reporters who cover other glamorous beats, from Wall Street to Hollywood, with the extra *frisson* of international intrigue thrown into the mix.

In this context, I sat in on conversations and meetings that I shouldn't have, where Azima and his colleagues talked about projects they wanted to start, some of which they thought could involve me. Rather than leaving to protect myself and my reputation, I was glued to the exotic surroundings and the guests I'd meet through Azima over the years. This contributed to the toxic misunderstandings that led to the end of my tenure at the *Journal*. Maybe Azima and his cohort believed I was interested in their business dealings because I was so ingrained in their scene. I was never committed to them, but I was also wary of drawing a definitive line, lest I scare them away. Plus, on a boat, you literally can't walk away.

While I knew that throughout this period I remained on the right side of journalistic ethical lines, I had a gnawing fear as 2014 turned into 2015 that I might be getting ensnared in the Iran story, and the shadowy spy world that gripped it. Key sources of mine said they believed they were under both American and foreign surveillance. My colleague at the *Journal*, Adam Entous, who's now at *The New Yorker*, would write a front-page story about Israeli spying on the US negotiating team at the nuclear talks. Then he wrote that the Americans were spying on the Israelis, and those inside the US with whom they talked. I increasingly believed I was being watched by one or more of these spy services.

ICYMI: A portrait of Trump's mental state by photojournalists

(https://www.cjr.org/covering_trump/trump-mentally-sound-photos.php)

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me, Azima's battle with his erstwhile friends—the royal family of Ras al-Khaima—was intensifying, and would drag me in. The family's efforts to sell its Georgian assets to the three Iranians I'd profiled had collapsed—largely, I assumed, because of Azima's cooperation with the US government and the front-page story in the *Journal*. The Revolutionary Guard, presumably, was not happy.

Still, Sheikh Saud, the ruler of Ras al-Khaima, for reasons I still don't fully understand, had tasked Azima with reclaiming more than \$1 billion of the emirate's funds, which the monarch alleged were pilfered by a former employee with whom Azima was friends. Much of this money had been parked in Sheikh Saud's investment fund, called the Ras al-Khaima Investment Authority, or RAKIA.

I don't pretend to know who was right in this dispute, and never attempted to write about it. I knew, at this stage, that this would present a major conflict of interest given my relationship with Azima. Plus, I hoped to maintain him as a confidante and a source. Sorting out this mess, which really wasn't my story, risked the relationship on the Iran story I was covering. It's a dilemma faced by many reporters covering complex beats—a source may want you to cover a story that matters to him, but doesn't to you.

A vicious legal battle broke out between Azima and RAKIA. The latter accused him in a London court in August 2016 of acting in bad faith as a mediator and absconding with millions of dollars of their funds, a charge he denied. Much of the

lawsuit was based on the data stolen from Azima's email and cell phone. The same data that those torrent files linked to on the internet.

Azima quickly countersued RAKIA in a US federal court for allegedly stealing his data, a charge RAKIA denied. Tech experts I'd talked to said the operation was so sophisticated they believed a state actor had to have been involved in the initial hack, though no definitive proof ever emerged. Azima's lawyers believed the hackers not only stole his data, but had inserted spyware into his computer. Azima and everyone he'd been communicating with, as a result, had essentially been under regular surveillance for months. (The cases are ongoing. In Washington, a judge is deciding whether the court has jurisdiction to rule on an international hacking case.)

RAKIA brought in a team to go after Azima, and, ultimately, me, I would learn. The investment fund hired a high-end British law firm, Dechert LLP, to represent it in the lawsuits. RAKIA also tasked the UK public relations firm Bell Pottinger to promote its narrative. Bell Pottinger was believed at the time (and later proven) to use dirty tricks to impugn the reputations of its clients' opponents. The company went into bankruptcy in the fall of 2017 after being expelled by the trade association that regulates Britain's communications industry. Bell Pottinger was accused of inciting racial tensions in South Africa and seeking to discredit journalists there.

In August 2016, Bell Pottinger set up a war room in London to run the RAKIA account, according to reporters in contact with the firm. It began releasing a string of press releases attacking Azima and his business partner, Khater Massaad, as well as circulating the stolen emails to a number of international media outlets, I was told. At the time, I was oblivious to the gathering storm. The torrent accounts were impossible to access without assistance from those who established them, and I had yet to learn about the competing lawsuits. Azima's and my communication had tapered off after the Iran story came to a sort of conclusion with the nuclear deal. Regardless, RAKIA's lawyers made it clear during the court proceedings in Washington that I was a pawn in the trial and argued that I was working with Azima.

"Mr. Azima stated that if settlement terms with Dr. Massaad could not be agreed, then Dr. Massaad would attack his Highness Sheikh Saud in the press and in other means," a Dechert attorney named Linda Goldstein wrote in an email included in

Washington court filings in October 2016. “In doing so, Mr. Azima specifically mentioned his connections with Jay Solomon and *The Wall Street Journal*.”

The attorney continued: “Accordingly, our client engaged experts to monitor press articles and other information on RAK and certain individuals and entities associated with Dr. Massaad and Mr. Azima.”

The Wall Street Journal received the stolen data around this time, I learned.

IN DECEMBER 2016, I received word from my bosses at the *Journal* in New York that they wanted to talk. At first, I thought it was about a story they wanted me to pursue. It had never been intimated that I was in hot water, and the paper had been pushing me to complete a series on the secret cash payments the Obama administration made to Iran earlier that year. At the time, the stories were the talk of Washington.

Walking into the meeting room, I immediately realized something was seriously amiss. Only a corporate lawyer and the Washington bureau chief were present. I was surprised and somewhat confused. The lawyer started presenting me with some of the emails that had been stolen from Azima’s account. Other than ones addressed directly to me, I hadn’t seen any of them, or even known they were out there.

My first reaction was to ask who supplied the information. He said only that it came “over the transom.” I had no idea what that meant. I would later believe Dechert or Bell Pottinger were the sources, as they had been pressing the line to the courts or other media that Azima and I were in business.

My concern about the source of the emails only grew months later when I learned that Goldstein, the Dechert attorney involved in the lawsuit against Azima on behalf of RAKIA, also represented the Fox News Channel at the same time that some of the network’s top stars were facing sexual harassment charges. The *Journal*’s owner, Rupert Murdoch, also controls Fox News.

The emails presented by the Dow Jones lawyer certainly looked bad. One was a document sent nearly two years earlier that had a list of a proposed company’s owners, which included my name. The other was an email Azima sent years earlier asking me to pass on a business proposal to the UAE’s ambassador to Washington.

I blended in, and perhaps my presence was seen as consent or a willingness.

I hadn't joined any Azima company, or passed on any documents. There are public corporate documents, easily findable, proving that. Azima and a former CIA operative set up the company referenced in the email, Denx LLC, but I had nothing to do with it and certainly had no intention of joining. But the emails placed me in the bad position of having to prove a negative.

The truth is that Azima and his cohort talked a lot about projects and ambitions when I was around, including this company Denx, though it was impossible to tell if any of those discussions were serious. I certainly didn't cast myself as some international arms dealer, and didn't believe any of them saw me as one either. There were a few times Azima and his friends suggested I was destined for their business. But I just sloughed it off, because I didn't take the idea seriously and didn't think they did either. They knew how much I loved my job, and at no point was I ever asked about selling arms or instigating coups. But I blended in, and perhaps my presence was seen as consent or a willingness. My plan was to humor them if I needed to, letting them rattle on about potential deals and plans, if it meant keeping me in the flow of important and critical information about this shadowy world.

I should have acted much more forcefully in 2015 when Azima sent me the corporate document about his company, Denx. This was the time he also sent me an email suggesting I pass on the business plan to the UAE's Washington ambassador, which I never did. In retrospect, I should have immediately responded by sending him an email making it clear that journalistic standards forbade me from engaging in business with him. I should have also sent an email to the *Journal's* human resources department outlining what I'd been sent and making it clear that I had denied the advance.

Why didn't I? It's a question I've been struggling with for months. The overture appeared so outlandish that I didn't take it seriously. And in the heat of pursuing stories, reporters don't always think about managing perceptions. But I was also concerned about losing Azima as a source and access to the world he offered. I walked a fine line and probably talked in ways that gave false impressions. Because I never signed onto any business, nor did anything close to engaging in one, I figured the emails were irrelevant. As the years passed, I put those communications out of my mind, which proved to be extremely unwise.

Initially, the *Journal's* lawyer seemed to accept my response. I explained that I knew the emails looked bad, but that nothing actually happened. Indeed, I published two more Page One stories on Iran before 2016 ended.

Still, a trust had been broken between myself and my long-term employer. I was irritated that the company's legal department didn't tell me who sent them the emails, and that they didn't take seriously that one of their reporters was likely a target of an elaborate hacking operation. As time went on, it became increasingly clear to me—and my sources in the US government indicated—that I was being targeted by an international espionage operation, likely involving Iran and/or its allies. I didn't think it was a coincidence that the stolen data began appearing just weeks after my first story broke in August 2016 about the Obama's administration's secret cash shipments to Iran.

ICYMI: Brendan Fraser made groping allegation after story was done, GQ staff writer says (https://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/brendan-fraser-gq.php)

The *Journal's* stance throughout has been that the provenance of the emails, or the backstory between Azima and RAKIA, wasn't relevant to them. Their focus was on two things: first, that I had accepted the gift of the time on the yacht, and second, that I hadn't been forthcoming enough about all of my contacts with Azima, which was probably true. Thinking now about this, I should have pressed the lawyer harder during that December 2016 meeting and brought in my editors to go through a fuller explanation of my sourcing relationship with Azima and why this email leak was far more sinister than just a random dump of stolen documents on the dark Web. I believe it's the paper's moral and ethical responsibility to protect its reporters, especially those who take great risks in the field.

As I feared, the issue didn't die. The Ras al-Khaima government and its hired legal and PR help, Dechert and Bell Pottinger, continued to shop the information around as the legal battle between RAKIA and Azima intensified, I was told. The Associated Press eventually bit.

IN JUNE 2017, a reporter called me and asked about my business relationship with Farhad Azima. I knew it wasn't good. I referred the journalist to the *Journal's* PR team, which was the normal course of action with press inquiries. But in cases like this, I learned, one's own interests and the company's may well diverge. I wish I'd talked in depth to the reporter myself, though the outcome might not have been any different if I had.

The phone call set off a brutal 48 hours in which I eventually lost my job. I was called to New York to meet with top editors and the company's lawyers, and to try come up with a response to the story. Though things were initially calm, the distrust I felt building between myself and the company, beginning with that December meeting, quickly became palpable.

Colleagues have asked me whether the paper had a formal editing process for managing complex reporting assignments. And the answer was really, no. I felt I thrived in the loose environment the *Journal* afforded me. But when the music stopped in the Azima story, neither I nor the paper seemed to have a good sense where the other stood. I was certain the paper's news editors didn't know there had been nearly a yearlong information campaign targeting me, something I was only starting to learn myself. I also didn't know whether the legal department had told to the news side who initially fed them Azima's emails.

The paper, meanwhile, made it clear they didn't care about these issues. They accused me of not being forthcoming about my relationship with Azima. They said I never told them about the time I'd spent on his yacht. That was true, and this really brought home the importance of being more transparent and communicating with editors about the details of a complex source relationship. I had not thought that it was important—in fact, I thought how I managed the very tricky business of a sensitive source was my business. But it very quickly became obvious that was misguided.

Trying to answer all of the paper's questions under the gun of an impending AP story proved to be impossible. The *Journal* wanted all of my email communication with Azima going back four years, something that wasn't possible given the number of emails and the time constraints. Nothing in there would show any positive response by me to his half-baked business idea. Proving that wrong—that I was not, in fact, an arms dealer wannabee—takes careful thought and time, which I didn't have.

The AP, meanwhile, was forwarding other texts and emails from the hack that appeared to back the idea I was in business with Azima. One text came from October 2014, six months before Azima emailed me a corporate document concerning Denx. "Our business opportunities are so promising," the message read. I literally didn't know what it was referencing, as it was so out of context. And the reporters skipped past the corporate documents that showed I never joined any Azima company.

On the second day, the *Journal's* Washington bureau chief, Paul Beckett, called and told me I was being terminated immediately and wouldn't receive severance. I was banned from going to the office to reclaim my belongings and notebooks. The AP then called and said I had less than five minutes to give a comment before it pulled the trigger on its story about my sacking.

The information operation had been incredibly effective. I was out of daily journalism. And, of course, my coverage of Iran came to an abrupt halt.

THE DAYS FOLLOWING my firing were, without a doubt, the worst of my life.

I couldn't tell when the inquiries from other journalists chasing the story would end, though I knew reporters wouldn't find anything of substance. Indeed, after the first round of stories, there were virtually no follow-ups. Part of this was probably due to the hectic Washington news cycle. But there was nothing else to report. The story simply was one about a reporter cultivating and maintaining shadowy sources in today's world, not some nefarious arms deal. Journalists seeking to find my Swiss bank accounts, or secret arms packages, would be quickly disappointed. Those closest to me laughed at the idea. "If only you had a secret cash stash," they said.

Still, I felt I was being hunted as I got word that even old colleagues were looking into my life and calling up my sources and contacts. I didn't want to leave my house or reach out to people I'd worked with for decades. I felt shamed and cloistered myself in my house. Sleeping was nearly impossible.

In the days that followed, a Newsweek reporter texted me, saying he was working on a piece about my alleged businesses dealings with Michael Flynn, President Trump's disgraced former national security advisor. I'd never even met Flynn. Gizmodo contacted a friend and said they had photos of me on vacation, while Al Jazeera ran a television piece in which they aired pictures of me and friends at a dinner party. I still have no idea where they got them.

The description of me in the press also started to take on a distinctly political flavor. The Daily Beast ran a story quoting an anonymous "friend"—some friend—describing me as "ideological" and "tilting toward the neoconservative view of the world." *The Washington Post's* story was even more overtly political. The article said I had been criticized by "some colleagues and government officials who perceived [my] work to show bias against the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran." As proof it cited a line in a book I published on Iran in 2016, which read the nuclear deal, "rather than calming the world's most combustible region, risks inflaming it." Not exactly an over-the-top attack on the agreement, and it was only one page in a 300-page book sharply critical of George W. Bush's strategy to contain Iran and the Iraq war.

To pour salt on the wounds, I got word that our stories about the US cash payments to Iran had been chosen for the National Press Club award for diplomatic reporting. But the *Journal* declined the honor.

Still, the damage had been done. I've tried to be honest in laying out areas where I made mistakes, particularly in managing sources in an incredibly murky story like Iran. A reporter clearly can't give any ammunition to critics or enemies who want to challenge his or her credibility. And I did so.

That said, we live in a radically changed media environment where digital technologies both aid and hurt the ability of reporters to do their jobs transparently and ethically. Leaks and hacks of emails and correspondences can blow up intricate reporting and derail months, if not years, of work. Information can be quickly

weaponized to target journalists and their sources who are seeking to expose important truths. Iran, Russia, China, and other governments regularly use the internet to target and undermine the journalists reporting on them.

I took great risks in reporting stories on Iran that virtually everyone agreed were groundbreaking. Even if the paper decided I should have been reprimanded, its first obligation, I feel, was to warn me of the complexity of the information campaign being waged against me when the company's lawyers first started getting information. This would have better served both myself and the readers of *The Wall Street Journal*.

It's critical, now, for reporters and media outlets to be much more deeply engaged in assessing sources and the direction of investigations, particularly when they involve complicated national security issues. In recent years, I became too untethered from the mother ship at the *Journal* in reporting a story that was incredibly complex, even for a seasoned journalist. Having more regular conversations with editors about my travels and sources may have saved me from making some of my mistakes.

ICYMI: The cost of reporting while female

(https://www.cjr.org/special_report/reporting-female-harassment-journalism.php)

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*(https://ssl.palmcoastd.com/18801/apps/MEMBER1?ikey=5**M02).*

Jay Solomon was a correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* from 1998–2017. He was the chief correspondent in Washington covering the negotiations between the Obama administration and Iran that culminated in the 2015 nuclear agreement. His book, *The Iran Wars*, documents US-Iranian relations since 9/11.

