

Targetting Tehran: the case of the missing Iranian General

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Very little of the detail appearing in the media about the recent unexplained disappearance of a top Iranian general, Brigadier General Ali Reza Asgari, including his age, can be taken at face value. But all the accounts point to the involvement of the US, Israeli and/or other Western intelligence agencies in the defection or abduction of Asgari, a former deputy defence minister, who is currently being interrogated or tortured to obtain Iranian defence secrets.

Amid the growing speculation about the case, one glaring fact is not commented upon: that the CIA and other US spy agencies, with the assistance of other intelligence services, particularly Mossad, are aggressively targetting Iran. Senior Bush administration officials have repeatedly declared that the US has no plans for war against Iran. The most obvious purpose in interrogating a figure like Asgari, however, is to extract information about Iran's military capabilities or details that could bolster Washington's belligerent propaganda against Tehran.

Most of the facts surrounding Asgari's disappearance are contested. All the media accounts rely heavily on unnamed sources in the various countries involved—that is, on intelligence and security officials for whom misinformation, fabrication and lies are simply tools of the trade.

The *Washington Post* last Thursday published one version of events. Its source—"a senior US official" told the newspaper that Asgari had defected and was "willingly cooperating" with "Western intelligence agencies" at an undisclosed location. While providing no specifics, the source said "the information Asgari is offering is fully available to US intelligence". A second American official denied an Israeli newspaper report that Asgari was in the US and also suggested that "the Israelis" had "orchestrated" the operation. An Israeli spokesman officially denied any involvement.

Last weekend's British-based *Sunday Times* took the story a step further. Relying on uncharacteristically forthcoming "Iranian sources," its correspondent based in Tel Aviv declared that Asgari had been providing Western intelligence agencies with information since 2003. The general was recruited with large bribes during an overseas trip, one Iranian source explained, adding: "Ali Reza was a wealthy man even before 2003. Since 2003 he has become a very wealthy man." The article explained that Asgari was "understood to be undergoing debriefing at a NATO base in Germany" over the weekend.

The *Sunday Times* gave a racy account of Asgari's daring escape from Iran, meticulously planned to ensure that 10 members of his family also left the country. "On February 7, four

days after arriving in Damascus and having ensured his family was safe, Asgari boarded a flight to Istanbul. He was given a new passport and left Turkey by car—to disappear into the shadows,” it stated. Asgari had become unpopular, the article explained, after investigating cases of embezzlement in the Republican Guard and was “pushed aside after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in 2006”. One cannot help but wonder about an article, purporting to have accurate inside knowledge, making such an elementary factual error—Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005, not 2006.

Other articles in the European and US press appeared to confirm at least some of the *Sunday Times* account. Asgari arrived in Istanbul on February 7, did not check in to the Ceylan Intercontinental Hotel where there was a reservation for him. Iranian authorities raised the alarm about a possible kidnapping by the CIA or Mossad and notified Interpol. An Iranian delegation has since flown to Turkey. According to Turkish police, there is nothing to indicate the general has died or been hospitalised, or that he has left the country.

On Monday, the semi-official Fars news agency carried news and a photograph of members of Asgari’s close family members—including his wife Ziba Ahmadi, daughters, son and brother—in Iran, not exile. They had visited the Turkish embassy in Tehran and given a press conference, challenging the accounts in the Western media. Ziba Ahmadi declared that her husband “has never defected and would never do so. When someone wants to defect, he will first take his family with him”. Asgari’s wife also explained that he had been missing since December 9, not February 7.

An unnamed Iranian official told Fars that Asgari had been abducted in Turkey and was being physically and mentally tortured. “After the abduction, he was transferred to the US Incerlik airbase in Turkey and then to a CIA secret base... The primary objective behind this scenario was to have an excuse for renewed psychological warfare against Iran and to cover the West’s failures in Iraq and Lebanon,” he said.

As with every other account of the missing general, much is left unexplained. It is hard to image that Asgari, even though now retired, was simply engaged in private business as an oil and olive trader in Syria and Turkey—as asserted by his wife. Or that the Iranian authorities would allow a deputy defence minister to wander around the Middle East without adequate protection. And while providing specifics of Asgari’s kidnapping, the anonymous Iranian official, like his unnamed Western counterparts, has provided no evidence to back his assertions.

What conclusions can be drawn amid all this deception and counter-deception?

Firstly, it cannot be ruled out the CIA, with the assistance of other intelligence agencies, tracked and abducted Asgari, and is currently torturing him at a secret base. The Bush administration and the CIA have been compelled to acknowledge the use of “renditions” in the bogus “war on terrorism”. An undisclosed number of individuals have been detained illegally and flown to countries which act as contract torturers for the US. In one well-publicised instance, Italian authorities are demanding the handing over of the CIA agents involved in the 2003 kidnapping of Egyptian cleric Abu Omar on the streets of Milan. Abu Omar was flown via US airbases at Aviano in Italy and Ramstein in Germany to Egypt and tortured.

Secondly, whether Asgari was abducted or induced to defect, this was a sophisticated

operation involving substantial resources, including, in all probability, contacts inside Syria and Iran, as well as Turkey. The case demonstrates that US intelligence agencies, with all their considerable expertise in the dirty work of espionage and subversion, are making Iran a central focus of their activities. Bush officials have continued to declare that “all options are on the table” in relation to Iran amid the US military buildup in the Persian Gulf. Covert CIA and military operations inside Iran are an obvious corollary in these preparations for war.

Thirdly, while the facts of Asgari’s disappearance remain hazy, the media coverage in the US, Europe and Israel makes abundantly clear how Washington wants to exploit its catch for propaganda purposes. Article after article claims that Asgari played a central role in the expansion of the Shiite militia Hezbollah in the 1980s and 1990s and can shed light on its “terrorist” crimes, including the 1983 attacks on the US embassy and the US Marine barracks in Beirut. Others speculate on the information the general may be able to provide about the current arms and tactics of Hezbollah. Doubt has been cast over the assertions by the general’s wife, who not only denied ever living in Lebanon, but claimed that her husband was 46, not 63 as reported in the Western media—putting him in his twenties when he supposedly became the “father of Hezbollah”.

The speculation about Asgari’s activities does not stop there. According to the British-based *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, the general defected with documents about the links between the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards and various organisations, not only in Lebanon, but also Iraq. Over the past two months, one of the chief accusations of the Bush administration against Iran is that it is arming and supporting Shiite militias inside Iraq and aiding insurgents in attacks on US troops. To date, the US military has failed to provide any evidence that the regime in Tehran is directly involved. Asgari may, very conveniently, provide a link.

Debkafile, an Israeli web site with intelligence connections, pointed to another ploy. Its article on March 2 claimed that Asgari was “believed to have been linked to—or participated in—the armed group which stormed the US-Iraqi command centre in Karbala south of Baghdad on January 20 and snatched five American officers. They were shot outside the Shiite city.” The US military has rather bizarrely claimed that specially trained Iranian agents—educated in the US and schooled in American military idiom—were able to trick their way into the compound and abduct the troops.

Other articles have variously claimed that Asgari may be able to provide information and documents about Iran’s ballistic missile program, its alleged efforts to build a nuclear weapon, or its military plans in the event of a US attack. The general resigned as deputy defence minister in 2005, and, according to one unnamed Iranian official, has been “out of the loop for four or five years”. That will not of course stop the Bush administration from exploiting Asgari, as it did prominent Iraqi exiles in the lead up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, to provide lurid “proof” of the allegations being fabricated to justify a confrontation with Iran.

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