

Pan Am 103: Iranian defector alleges Tehran linked to Lockerbie bombing

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On June 4, the CBS programme "60 Minutes" aired claims that Iranian intelligence services organised the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in December 1988.

The broadcast contained an interview with "60 Minutes" associate producer Roya Hakakian, who related her discussion with Iranian defector Ahmad Behbahani in which he claimed the bombing, over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, was in retaliation for the shooting down of an IranAir airbus five months previously by the US.

Two Libyans, Abdel Basset al-Megrahi and Al-Amin Khalifa Fahima, are currently on trial at Camp Zeist in the Netherlands for the bombing.

The CIA, FBI and the Iranian intelligence service have since disputed Behbahani's identity and claims.

Last month, the oppositionist National Council of Resistance of Iran circulated a report that an Ahmad Beladi-Behbahani, one-time deputy minister for counterintelligence, had entered Turkey and called for his arrest. Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Iran's first prime minister after the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, told the Associated Press that Behbahani had left Iran two months ago, along with a Mr. Akbari, once a top aide to former Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian.

In order to speak to Behbahani, Hakakian had to smuggle herself into the Turkish refugee camp in which the heavily guarded man was being held. Behbahani, who would not be interviewed on camera, said that for more than a decade he had coordinated all terrorist actions outside Iran on behalf of the Iranian government. He said that the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing had been commissioned by Iran, who contracted its execution to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC), led by Ahmed Jibril, and a group of Libyans.

Behbahani also told "60 Minutes" that he had

evidence linking Iran to the attack on the Khobar Towers US base in Saudi Arabia and an attack on a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994. He claimed to have also overseen the assassination of Iranian and Kurdish writers and intellectuals who were opponents of the Tehran government. Behbahani said he had been politically close to former Iranian President Rafsanjani, acting as his head of security. He had fled in fear of his life during the recent factional struggles within Iran and expected to be killed if sent back to Tehran.

The programme included an interview with ex-CIA agent Chris Baer, who had been involved in the original investigation into the Lockerbie bombing. Baer commented that Behbahani was the first person to link both the Iranian and Libyan governments to the bombing. He noted that the CIA had initially assumed that the bombing had been in retaliation for the US *Vincennes*' destruction of the IranAir plane.

The Iranian government quickly dismissed Behbahani's claims and challenged his identity. The present Iranian Intelligence Minister, Ali Yunesi, denied that anyone called Ahmad Behbahani had even worked for Iranian intelligence.

Several days later, on June 8, the Intelligence Ministry identified the defector as Shahram Beladi Behbahani, born in 1968. The ministry said he was an escaped convict, imprisoned for armed robbery in 1991, who had worked with the Iranian opposition Mujahedeen Khalq until 1998. This in turn drew a denial from the Mujahedeen Khalq, who said Behbahani had never been one of their members.

Speaking on behalf of the PFLP-GC, who oppose Yasser Arafat and the PLO's peace terms with Israel, Ahmed Jibril said that Behbahani's claims were fabricated: "This charge against the PFLP-GC is not

new. Whenever they need to pressure the Palestinian opposition they revive this claim.”

Significantly, the US State Department did not immediately dismiss Behbahani's allegations and identity out of hand, as the CIA and FBI had done. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on CNN's "Late Edition" that the "60 Minutes" report was interesting and would be monitored by the State Department.

It is possible that Behbahani's version of the bombing, as reported, jointly implicating the Libyan government, might account for Albright's mild response. The Clinton administration has faced domestic criticism from the far right for accepting that the Libyan government could not be indicted for the bombing.

Whatever his true identity, the allegations made by Behbahani are not new. Some commentators on the Lockerbie bombing have long assumed that Iran and the PFLP-GC were involved to some degree. The two Libyan defendants currently on trial for the bombing have launched a special defence of incrimination, naming members of the PFLP-GC, among others, as responsible.



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