

Why did the CIA abduct an Egyptian cleric from the streets of Milan?

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An article in last Sunday's edition of the *Chicago Tribune* has raised new questions about the CIA kidnapping of Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, also known as Abu Omar, on the streets of Milan on February 17, 2003. Nasr was shipped back to Egypt, where he was held without charge and tortured. His case hit the headlines after an Italian magistrate issued arrest warrants for 13 CIA agents, provoking sharp tensions between Washington and Rome and a new crisis for Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

The Italian government, already facing widespread opposition at home over its commitment of troops to the US occupation of Iraq and an election next year, has adamantly denied that it gave prior consent to Nasr's kidnapping. The Nasr case comes on top of the killing of top Italian agent Nicola Calipari, who was shot dead by US troops in Iraq in March after facilitating the release of hostage Giuliana Sgrena.

Last Friday, Berlusconi summoned US ambassador Mel Sembler and, according to a short official statement, "demanded full respect for Italian sovereignty from the United States". Italian opposition leader Luciano Violante quickly declared that Berlusconi's meeting with Sembler "clarified nothing". Opposition politician Pietro Folena described the meeting as "a farce". The Americans, he said, "hide the truth about Calipari, kidnap presumed terrorists and then give no explanations".

Until now, Nasr has been described as a radical Egyptian Islamic cleric. While the Bush administration and the CIA have refused to admit any involvement, unnamed American officials have defended the operation and denounced Nasr as a dangerous terrorist. One senior US official told the media: "The world is a better place with this guy off the streets." No evidence has been provided by US, Italian or Egyptian authorities to substantiate these charges.

The *Chicago Tribune* cast matters in a different light, however. Based on detailed information provided by former senior Albanian intelligence agents, the article entitled "Abducted imam aided CIA ally" established that Nasr had been a valued informant for the CIA in 1995 when he was an exile living in Albania. Picked up by agents of Albanian National Intelligence Service ShIK, Nasr admitted to being a member of the Egyptian-based Jamaat-al-Islamiya and over the

following weeks provided information about the organisation's operations not only in Albania, but the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy—including Milan.

The newspaper named the two former ShIK agents—Astrit Nasufi, who was second-in-charge of a special anti-terrorist squad set up by the CIA, and Flamur Gjymisha, the chief of the ShIK's First Intelligence Directorate. The CIA trained the unit's agents, including at its headquarters in Virginia, and effectively ran the unit's operations. Nasr and about a dozen other Egyptian exiles were rounded up in August 1995, prior to a visit by the Egyptian foreign minister to Albania, using a list supplied by a CIA officer based at the US embassy in Tirana.

For the ShIK agents, Nasr, whose information proved to be credible, was something of a coup. "It was the first case that we provided the Americans with totally independent information. We became a main player for the first time. We weren't just tools. We gave them a clear idea of who was monitoring the US embassy for [Jamaat-al-Islamiya], who was coming in and out of the country," Nasufi told the *Chicago Tribune*.

After cooperating with the ShIK for several weeks, Nasr and his family abruptly left Albania where he had lived since 1991. The Albanian agents had no inkling of his departure: to them he had appeared willing to cooperate and grateful for their help in ironing out legal difficulties. It was only later that the CIA informed them that Nasr was now living in Germany. He moved to Italy and settled, without his family, in Milan where, as he had told the ShIK agents, Jamaat-al-Islamiya had close ties to an Islamic institute.

As the *Chicago Tribune* correspondents felt compelled to acknowledge, one question stands out as the most perplexing: "Why would the US government go to elaborate lengths to seize a 39-year-old Egyptian, who, according to former Albanian intelligence officials, was once the CIA's most productive source of information within the tightly knit group of Islamic fundamentalists living in Albania?"

One possible answer was that the abduction was a failed attempt to reestablish Nasr as a CIA informant. Some details of what happened to Nasr have emerged in documents supplied to the Italian courts by prosecutors taking action against his CIA abductors. He was flown from the joint US-Italian airbase at Aviano to the US airbase at Ramstein, Germany then to

Egypt. One document speculated that Nasr “would have been set free and accompanied back to Italy,” if he had agreed to cooperate with the Egyptian intelligence service.

If that was the CIA’s purpose, it clearly failed. Nasr was tortured and held for more than a year before being released briefly in April 2004 under a form of house arrest. He contacted his wife and rang an Egyptian cleric in Milan to explain what had taken place, then promptly disappeared again. *Chicago Tribune* correspondents in Egypt confirmed that he was being held without charge at the Damanhour prison outside of Alexandria and found family members too terrified to talk.

The CIA’s motives for wanting to extract information from Nasr may relate directly to the timing of his abduction: just one month before the US-led invasion of Iraq and two weeks after US Secretary of State Colin Powell had addressed the UN with a package of lies to justify the illegal war of aggression. One of Powell’s flimsiest claims was that there existed “a sinister nexus” between the secular Baathist regime in Baghdad and the Islamic fundamentalists. His only evidence was the existence of an Islamist group—Ansar-al-Islam—in Iraq allegedly linked to Al Qaeda and protected by Saddam Hussein.

Even on the available evidence, the claim was absurd. Ansar-al-Islam had a record of anti-Hussein activities and was based in the Kurdish north of the country—the “no-fly zone” patrolled by US and British warplanes that lay outside of Baghdad’s control. Moreover, the group’s exiled leader Mullah Krekar issued a public statement denying any links to Al Qaeda and to its operative Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. Powell’s claim that Ansar-al-Islam was operating a “poisons’ factory” quickly fell apart when the group opened the facility to Western journalists.

In its efforts to bully, bribe and cajole members of the UN Security Council into backing the Iraq invasion, there was nothing that the Bush administration was not prepared to do. As a June 29 article in the *Newsweek* magazine pointed out, much of the case that was amassed by Italian intelligence agents against Nasr before he was abducted by the CIA related to his alleged connections to Ansar-al-Islam. It is more than possible that the CIA wanted Nasr to provide them with incriminating evidence against Ansar-al-Islam or even to agree to become a star witness to buttress the non-existent case against the organisation.

As *Newsweek* tentatively explained: “Although much about the alleged CIA operation remains shrouded in secrecy, the Italian court records and the timing of the alleged snatch suggest that it may have been driven by the agency’s interest in quickly getting new information about what Abu Omar [Nasr] knew about Ansar al-Islam, either to bolster the administration’s argument in support of the invasion or to disrupt a terrorist network inside Iraq that would be fighting US forces once the evasion began, according to some former CIA officials.”

There remains another distinct possibility: that Nasr remained a CIA informant after he left Albania and was acting in Milan

on its behalf inside an Islamic institute in Milan that was known for its fundamentalist ties. At this stage, the evidence is circumstantial: the CIA clearly followed Nasr’s movement to Germany and Italy, but the agency may also have been directly involved in his sudden relocation. Based on phone conversations intercepted by Italian authorities, the *Chicago Tribune* article suggests that, far from being a fiery firebrand, Nasr was “something of a force for moderation”.

One more aspect of Nasr’s history is significant: 1995 was not the first time he collaborated with the CIA. He was one of many Islamic radicals who went to Pakistan in the late 1980s to participate in the CIA-sponsored “holy war” against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. The CIA worked closely with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda [the Base] to funnel armed extremists into the war. The *Chicago Tribune* noted one account that “he [Nasr] was trained by the US to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan”. Whether he participated in any fighting is unclear, but Nasr remained in the region until 1991 when he moved to Albania to work for an Islamic charity.

At present the exact relationship between Nasr and the CIA is a matter of speculation. But if he was a CIA informant in Milan then why was he suddenly abducted? Why cut across the Italian investigation into his links to Ansar-al-Islam? What did Nasr know? The revelation that Nasr cooperated with the CIA in Albania adds further weight to the questions asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* in its article of June 27:

“What are the Bush administration and the American intelligence agencies afraid of? Are they following the old adage that dead men—or ‘disappeared’ men—tell no tales? Are they deliberately aborting trials that might reveal links between the American state and terrorist groups and individuals, including those connected to the attacks of September 11, 2001?”

At the very least, the Nasr case provides a revealing glimpse into the CIA’s criminal activities and its shady relations with thousands of Islamic extremists and terrorists, many of whom it financed, armed and trained in the 1980s in its massive operation in Afghanistan.



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