

Missing US citizen in Iran identified as CIA spy

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A former FBI agent missing in Iran since 2007 has been identified as a covert CIA spy, exposing as lies US claims that he went to the country on private business.

The Associated Press revealed that it had held the story about the CIA connections of Robert Levinson three times at the US government's requests. ABC News, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and other news media also indicated that they had known that Levinson was working for the CIA as early as 2007, but had kept the story secret at the government's request.

Levinson, who retired from the FBI in 1998 to run a security firm, disappeared on March 9, 2007, during a visit to Iran's Kish Island in the Persian Gulf. According to reports that surfaced at the time, he was last seen meeting with Dawud Salahuddin, an African-American convert to Islam who is wanted for murder in connection with the 1980 killing in Maryland of a representative of the Shah's regime, which had been overthrown the previous year. Salahuddin, who fled to Iran, had reportedly participated in back-channel discussions with US intelligence and was close to the so-called Green movement.

The story was put out variously that Levinson had been working on a documentary film, was doing a private investigation into cigarette smuggling or was working on a book on the Russian mafia when he went missing. As the AP account establishes, however, the trip to Iran was only the latest in a series of intelligence operations that the ex-FBI agent had conducted. These included collecting intelligence on the Colombian guerrilla movement FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Venezuelan government of the late Hugo Chavez.

He arrived in Iran under conditions of heightened

tensions between Washington and Tehran. In the two months preceding Levinson's disappearance, US troops had abducted at least six Iranian diplomatic personnel in Iraq, claiming that they were responsible for providing arms to Iraqi Shiite militias resisting the US occupation. Ali-Roza Asgari, an Iranian general and former deputy defense minister, was abducted by Western intelligence agencies in Turkey and reportedly transferred to Israel for interrogation. There were terrorist bombings in Iran that Tehran charged were instigated by the CIA. And contingency plans were reported for a massive US bombing campaign aimed at destroying not only Iran's nuclear program, but its vital military and government infrastructure as well.

According to the AP, Levinson functioned as a contractor for the CIA, providing his intelligence to a group of analysts at the agency headed by Anne Jablonski, a CIA analyst whom he had met while working for the FBI.

While the CIA paid Levinson for information as well as covered his expenses—his last payment from the agency before his disappearance was for \$80,000—after he went missing in Iran, questions were raised within the agency about the propriety of the arrangements worked out by Jablonski, which involved him directing all communications and information to her home and personal phone and e-mail address. Also, there was no notification given to CIA stations of Levinson's presence in the countries that he visited.

It appears that the agency had no problem with the arrangement made with Levinson until it blew up in its face. As the AP story puts it, "Levinson's production got noticed" and "the CIA was raving about information Levinson had recently sent about Venezuela and Colombian rebels."

After information proving that Levinson had worked

for the CIA was brought to the attention of the Senate Intelligence Committee by a former federal prosecutor who had worked with him when he was in the FBI, the CIA launched an inquiry as a means of damage control. Agency investigators found that the way Levinson was employed violated the CIA's separation of functions between its analytical and operational divisions. The conclusion, according to the AP report, was that the analysts "had been running their own amateur spy operation, with disastrous results."

Jablonski and another senior analyst were forced out of the agency, given the option of resigning or being fired, and their boss was forced into retirement. Several other CIA employees were disciplined. The analysts insisted that there were no questions raised about Levinson's contract until his disappearance, and that the agency was looking for scapegoats.

While the government publicly denied any connection to Levinson, the CIA sought to keep his family from bringing a lawsuit that would have exposed the operation by paying them \$120,000—what he would have gotten for the contract to go to Iran—as well as a \$2.5 million annuity paying tax-free income.

With the CIA, the State Department, the White House and at least leading figures in the US Congress well aware that Levinson went to Iran to gather intelligence for the CIA, the US government continued to insist that he was there on private business.

"At the time of his disappearance Mr. Levinson was not working for the United States government," the State Department said in May 2007.

While US officials have repeatedly called upon Iranian authorities to assist with Levinson's return to the US, Iran's government has consistently denied that it is holding him or has any knowledge of his whereabouts.

Given its public statements on the detention of others Tehran has charged with spying for Washington—Iranian-American academics and businessmen as well as three US hikers who crossed into Iran from Iraqi Kurdistan—it is not clear why it would remain silent on capturing someone sent by the CIA.

E-mails sent to the families with videos of Levinson in captivity in late 2010 and early 2011 were traced back to Pakistan and Afghanistan. There have been no communications since, and, according to the AP, some

intelligence officials think that Levinson, who would be 65 and suffering from diabetes and heart problems, may be dead.

The White House press secretary, Jay Carney, denounced the AP story as "highly irresponsible," while National Security Council spokesperson Caitlin Hayden noted that the Obama administration had "urged the AP not to run this story out of concern for Mr. Levinson's life," while refusing to comment "on any purported affiliation between Mr. Levinson and the US government."

In a statement, the AP defended its action: "This story reveals serious mistakes and improper actions inside the US government's most important intelligence agency. Those actions, the investigation and consequences have all been kept secret from the public."

Secretary of State John Kerry, asked about the matter at Tel Aviv press conference Friday, said, "I don't have any comment whatsoever on the condition with respect to employment or any other issue." The CIA also refused to comment on ties to its contractor.

A lawyer for Levinson's family denounced the government's reaction. "The CIA sent Bob Levinson to Iran to do an investigation on its behalf," said the attorney, David McGee. "And rather than acknowledge what they had done and try to save Bob's life, they denied him."

The revelation comes in the midst of Washington's pivot toward a rapprochement with Tehran, with a tentative agreement reached on Iran's nuclear program. Opponents of the deal within the US, both Republicans and Democrats close to Israel, have denounced it for failing to include concessions on the situation of Americans held in Iran—most prominently that of an Iranian-born US citizen, Saeed Abedini, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for Christian proselytizing. Levinson's fate is likely to figure in efforts to scuttle the agreement with further sanctions and provocations.



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