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# BLOGS & STORIES

## Inside Iran's Intimidation Campaign

by Gary Sick

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READ THIS SKIP THAT

The Ahmadinejad regime just hit an Iranian-American scholar with a 15-year prison sentence. The Daily Beast's Gary Sick on his role in the case—and why it's proof of Tehran's moral bankruptcy.

Last week, an Iranian-American colleague of mine, Kian Tajbakhsh, was sentenced in Tehran to 15 years in prison. The indictment included the charges that (1) he was in contact with me; (2) that he was part of the Gulf/2000 network that I manage; and (3) that I am an agent of the CIA.

Normally, I simply ignore silly accusations such as this. They are nothing new. On one hand, it has been intimated that I must be under the influence of Iranian intelligence (by prominent neoconservatives who believe that my views on Iran's political development and especially its nuclear program are not sufficiently alarmist). I have also been accused (by such worthies as Hossein Shariatmadari, the ultra-radical editor of Iran's Kayhan newspaper, who is also a representative of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei) of being a CIA agent. I regard these insinuations as badges of honor, since they merely confirm that I do not subscribe to the ideological extremes of either of these groups. I have always felt that my reputation could speak for itself and required no public defense.



Kian Tajbakhsh defends himself during the trial of dozens of opposition activists and protesters in Tehran's Revolutionary Court, Iran, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2009. (ILNA, Houshang Hadi / AP Photo)

The charges are false, deliberately false. They consist of a series of political fabrications devoid of even the flimsiest effort to verify the truth.

However, this time the accusations are really not about me but about a friend and colleague. Moreover, they are not just newspaper hyperbole by people who have an ax to grind and whose desire to make a political point exceeds their respect for the truth. These assertions are a matter of law—an official indictment by the judicial authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

It is often said that it is impossible to prove a negative. How do I prove that I am NOT an agent of the CIA? How do I prove that the Gulf/2000 Internet project is NOT engaged in overthrowing governments? How do I prove that Kian—a friend and a colleague—was NOT trying to lead a "velvet revolution" against the Islamic Republic of Iran?

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Let me simply reverse the questions. I spent 24 years in the U.S. Navy—my only connection with the U.S. government. The Navy sponsored my education at the University of Kansas. It took me to the Persian Gulf for my first exposure to the region that has become my professional specialization. It sponsored my graduate work for a Ph.D. degree at Columbia University. And it paid my salary while I was on the National Security Council staff at the time of the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis. I never received a paycheck from any other agency of the U.S. government. Do the prosecutors in Iran have evidence to the contrary? If so, please let me know.

There are a number of commentators on Iran, such as Reuel Gerech, Graham Fuller, and Bruce Riedel, who indeed worked for the CIA. Although their political views disagree sharply, they always identify themselves as former CIA employees. I do not identify myself that way for the very simple reason that I never worked for the CIA.

The prosecutors charge that Kian was in touch with me. Right. We were both academics in New York, and we saw each other from time to time. However, I have gone back over the past 20 years with that in mind, and I am struck by something quite different. Over that period of time, I have known every Iranian ambassador to the United Nations and many members of the staff of the Iranian U.N. mission. I have spent much more time with them than with Kian.

More important, I have been in meetings with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on four different occasions over the past three years. I have spent at least nine hours with him, much more than I ever spent with Kian. In my last meeting with Mr. Ahmadinejad, I told him that if he were simply a lowly academic, instead of the president of Iran, he would be subject to arrest upon his return to Iran for meeting with the roomful of U.S. academics and think tank representatives that he had assembled at his hotel. He scoffed at the idea. Now one of my colleagues, a lowly Iranian-American professor who was about to take up a position at my university, is being condemned to 15 years in prison because, among other things, he had contact with me.

Iranian security officials are notably lacking in any sense of irony or humor. But I do wonder whether President Ahmadinejad is being considered for indictment because of his extensive contacts with me over the past four years.

The Gulf/2000 network is an Internet project that began 16 years ago to facilitate communication and information sharing among individuals who have a professional association with issues involving the Persian Gulf. It includes individuals of widely differing backgrounds and opinions, including both private citizens and government officials from

countries around the world, including Iran. If any Iranian government official wishes to know about G2K, as we call it, he need only consult his colleagues who are members. G2K is routinely cited in international conferences in Tehran and elsewhere as a reliable source of informed commentary and factual information about issues involving the Persian Gulf. It is limited to specialists, but it is not a secret. It includes individuals of every possible political persuasion. And it is not engaged in overthrowing governments.

The indictment against Kian is in fact an indictment of the legal and security structure of the Iranian government. The charges are false, deliberately false. They consist of a series of political fabrications devoid of even the flimsiest effort to verify the truth.

These accusations cast shame on any institution that professes respect for justice and law. They substantiate the words of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, one the founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, that this government is no longer either Islamic or a republic but merely the latest in the shabby succession of Middle Eastern military regimes. These charges remind us of the excesses of the Stalinist show trials and the abominations of the Chinese Red Guards—examples of revolutions that betrayed their own ideals.

This is not about Kian, and it is certainly not about me. It is about the abject failure of a ruling clique that has lost the confidence and support of its own people and must contrive scapegoats to excuse its own deficiencies.

*Gary Sick served on the National Security Council staff under Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan. He was the principal White House aide for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis and is the author of two books on U.S.-Iranian relations. Mr. Sick is a captain (ret.) in the U.S. Navy, with service in the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and the Mediterranean.*

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