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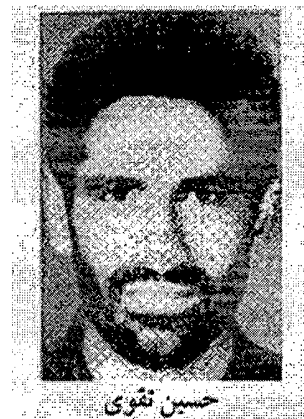
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## **Profile of a Master Terrorist: Mohammad-Reza Iravani (a.k.a. Amir- Hossein Taghavi)**

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*Iran's sophisticated intelligence operations abroad are led by a shadowy figure at the helm of VEVAK\**

By Nader Shakiba



Berlin, May 27 (Iran Terror Website) - Hojjatol-Islam Ali Younessi, the Shiite cleric who runs Iran's dreaded secret police, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (known more commonly by its Persian acronym, VEVAK), did not try to conceal his anger and minced no words. Appearing on Iran's state-run television on the evening of March 25, he warned Iran's main opposition group, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK) with severe consequences for their continuing "mischief-making".

"I have instructed my deputy today to lose no time in informing international organizations of the crimes of the [MeK], so that it would be documented that they have committed grave crimes," the mid-ranking mullah said.

Younesi's comments came on a night when Tehran and other major cities across the country were in turmoil as throngs of young people heeded opposition calls to turn the traditional Persian fire festival into a night of anti-government protests. The VEVAK chief did not name his deputy and very few people outside the cloisters of power in Tehran are even aware of the identity of this shadowy man. But the Minister of Intelligence and Security was referring to Mohammad-Reza Iravani, the deputy chief of VEVAK.

Assassin, diplomat, agent-runner, senior bureaucrat, serial killer; these are just a handful of the many roles that Mohammad Reza Iravani has played in his twenty-six years of service in the security services of Iran's clerical regime. Known inside Iran's officialdom by his pseudonym, Amir-Hossein Taghavi, he has a track record that makes him a cross between a Cold War spy master and a Mafia godfather. In one of the many grisly murders he has ordered or committed, he and his fellow VEVAK officers stabbed to death Darioush Forouhar, an Iranian dissident, and his wife Parvaneh in their home in Tehran in November 1998. Forouhar, 72, received 11 knife blows; his wife's body took 24 stabs.

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Acting on Younesi's instructions, Iravani has been coordinating a new disinformation campaign, targeting the MeK. He scored a propaganda coup on May 18, when Human Rights Watch put out a 28-page report on alleged human rights violations by the MeK. Of the 12 "witnesses" Human Rights Watch cited in the report, every single one was familiar to Iravani. All were VEVAK agents operating in the Netherlands and Germany. The latest disinformation coup, much like Iravani's earlier successes in assassinations and infiltration of dissident groups, is sure to smooth his path to higher positions in the theocratic state.

Iravani has shown his political skills in high-level negotiations with French and German officials, in talks with representatives of the Irish Republican Army on joint operations, in sensitive discussions on Iraq with senior British officials, and in hammering out security deals with neighboring Arab officials. But his steady and rapid rise to the highest echelons of power in clergy-ruled Iran has been marked with untold violence and bloodshed every step of the way.

When Sir Jeremy Greenstock, a senior British diplomat, visited Tehran in January 2004 to talk to Iranian officials on the situation in neighboring Iraq, he did not know that the bearded man who led the Iranian team in the talks was a top assassin and terrorist of VEVAK. Iravani's talks with Greenstock focused on the issued of some 4,000 members of the opposition MeK based in Iraq.

#### **From hitman to VEVAK's top gun**

But there is more to Iravani than negotiating skills. Before he rose to senior positions in VEVAK, and even afterwards, Iravani did the dirty work of Iranian intelligence. He was one of the first to be recruited into the new Ministry of Intelligence and Security after it was founded in 1984 under the direction of Ayatollah\* Mohammad Mohammadi Rayshahri. Up until that time, the mullahs who ascended to power in 1979 relied on a motley mixture of two dozen autonomous intelligence and security agencies to hunt down their political opponents at home and conduct espionage abroad.

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security soon became a mammoth organization with a huge budget and thousands of full-time staff and tens of thousands of paid informers and agents.

In his first years in VEVAK, Iravani was a member of "special hit squads". These teams were made up of professional assassins, highly proficient in the use of weapons and martial arts, who were assigned to capture or kill intended targets of VEVAK. Often, the targets were political activists, members of opposition groups, and dissidents.

Iravani soon distinguished himself among the VEVAK hitmen as a sanguinary killer and effective interrogator. Few political prisoners could withstand the particularly brutal torture methods that Iravani used.

Iravani was actively involved in the 1988 massacre of thousands of political prisoners. In July 1988, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, ordering the execution of all

political prisoners who would not "repent" and be willing "to die for Islam". The text of the chilling fatwa was revealed years later in the Memoirs of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's anointed successor at the time of the massacre, who later fell from grace.

No one knows exactly how many prisoners were sent to firing squads in the summer and autumn of 1988, but the killings left a deep scar on the national psyche of Iranians. In the words of Professor Maurice Copithorne, the last United Nations human rights rapporteur for Iran, the massacre constituted "one of the darkest chapters in the history of the Islamic Republic".

### **VEVAK's murder machine**

By 1990, Irvani had risen high enough in the VEVAK hierarchy to become a director. He headed the General Directorate for Europe in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security for some time, before taking over as the chief of the General Directorate of Special Operations (GDSO).

At the time of Irvani's promotion to the GDSO in the fall of 1992, GDSO was VEVAK's most prestigious directorate. It had an unlimited budget and was given priority over all other departments and directorates for personnel and facilities. Its director was in constant contact with the Minister of Intelligence and his deputy. The President himself, Hashemi Rafsanjani, was personally informed of GDSO's activities.

By that time, Ali Fallahian, a village mullah from the southwestern province of Khuzistan before the 1979 revolution, had become VEVAK chief. Some VEVAK officials killed out of necessity, knowing that the clerical regime would not survive without an iron grip on society. Fallahian was different. He enjoyed killing and took immense joy at torturing others. An indescribably brutal man even by the standards of VEVAK, Fallahian tortured and killed thousands of political activists, intellectuals, and even ordinary citizens during his fourteen years as the chief or deputy chief of VEVAK.

His motivations for these killings were often as much political as economic or even personal. He ordered the murder of businessmen who refused to bribe him. A crude womanizer, he murdered some of the women with whom he had an affair to leave no witness behind. One of these victims was Fatemeh Qaem-Maqami, an air hostess in Aseman Airways. Fallahian met her on a flight to Mashad and forced the married woman to have an affair with him. According to the confessions of a former VEVAK official that was published in Iran, a few months later, Fallahian decided that Qaem-Maqami knew too much. He ordered his deputy, Saeed Emami, to "liquidate" her. Emami arranged a meeting with the hapless woman and sent a VEVAK assassin, Saeed Haqqani, to kill her by shooting three bullets into her head and chest.

On the surface, Saeed Emami and Ali Fallahian were a world apart. While Fallahian was a rugged, rustic mullah with a diabolical taste for inflicting pain and suffering on others and an uncontrolled libido that claimed the lives of many women, Emami was an urbane, soft-spoken man who had spent much time abroad and, unlike his master, was well-

versed in diplomatic niceties. With their protégé, Iravani, this odd duo formed a dreaded triumvirate that ran VEVAK for much of the 1990s. Protected by then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani, this murderous clique left behind a long trail of murder, assassination, torture and corruption.

Those years are remembered by Iranians as the time of the worst excesses of the clerical regime. Inside the country, VEVAK agents led directly by Emami and Iravani murdered more than 120 dissidents in what became known as “the serial killings”. The killings were carried out in a brutal manner – victims were often mutilated - to shock and subdue a restless society that often seemed to be on verge of revolt against the ruling theocracy.

### **Assassination and Disinformation**

But it was in the chain of assassinations abroad that GDSO came into its own. With the considerable resources of the Iranian government in Europe at their disposal, GDSO hitmen struck repeatedly in Geneva, Vienna, Istanbul, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Stockholm, and Nicosia, gunning down Iranian dissidents in cold blood. A Berlin court ruled in April 1997, after a three-year trial, that the assassinations were carried out on orders issued by a secret committee made up of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani, then-Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Velayati, and then-VEVAK chief Fallahian.

VEVAK’s brief in the 1990s was to decimate the Iranian opposition in exile, focusing particularly on the MeK and the political coalition to which it belonged, the National Council of Resistance of Iran. Assassination of opposition figures was part of the strategy, but a larger component of this strategy was a vast disinformation campaign that began after the first Gulf War in 1991.

The plan, approved by the Supreme National Security Council and given to VEVAK to implement, was a sophisticated campaign to recruit former members of the MeK and accuse the group of a range of abuses and criminal activities. These included human rights violations, complicity with Saddam Hussein’s regime in the suppression of Kurds and Shiites, and concealment of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction in MeK camps.

The clerical leaders’ hope was that by discrediting the principal Iranian opposition group through such a disinformation strategy, they would enhance their regime’s political stability and convince the outside world that there was no alternative to clerical rule in Iran. The strategists in Tehran thought that once the MeK lost its legitimacy in the eyes of its supporters, it would lose its stature and become more vulnerable to VEVAK attacks.

GDSO was given operational responsibility for the plan. Working closely with his boss, Saeed Emami, Iravani spent months in Europe in the early 1990s to recruit former MeK members for the new plan. By the mid-1990s, VEVAK had used many threats and incentives to recruit a dozen former MeK members and supporters living in Europe. Hundreds more refused to cooperate with VEVAK.

The new recruits’ handlers were mainly VEVAK officers working under diplomatic cover in the Iranian embassies in Bonn and the Hague. But Emami and Iravani kept a

close tab on everything from Tehran. They would often arrange to meet new recruits in the southeast Asia – Singapore and Kuala Lumpur being VEVAK's favorite venues – to evade detection by Iranian exiles or Western security services.

One VEVAK defector, Jamshid Tafrishi, later revealed how Iranian intelligence conducted its recruitment and running of agents in Europe and North America. VEVAK officers paid for his return trips to Singapore, where he would meet and be indoctrinated by Emami and Iravani, who used pseudonyms to disguise their identities.

According to defectors, VEVAK's top officials used their trips abroad, particularly to Southeast Asia, to indulge in sexual exploits. Ironically, the same officials often framed political dissidents in Iran for such "crimes" as possession of pornographic materials to put them in jail.

Emami and Iravani would guide the ex-MeK recruits to give interviews and lectures on a range of allegations against the MeK. Tafrishi was once asked to deliver a speech to a meeting in Cologne and he was given a paper prepared by VEVAK to read out. The paper alleged that Saddam Hussein concealed his secret weapons of mass destruction in MeK facilities in Iraq and accused the MeK of being a stooge of his regime. Once Tafrishi delivered the speech prepared for him by VEVAK, Iranian intelligence instructed the state-run media to give wide coverage to the report, which then filtered back through to the West.

Iravani's top recruit in those years was Karim Haqi, a former MeK member who had been brought to Europe by the group after he decided to leave the MeK. Haqi became a key agent of VEVAK in Europe and his handler reported directly to Iravani.

#### **Extreme measures**

By 1994, the Supreme National Security Council was putting pressure on VEVAK to step up its anti-MeK activities. Maryam Rajavi, a prominent exile, had been leading a successful political campaign against Tehran after her nomination as provisional president by the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran.

To tarnish Rajavi's image and remove her threat, DGSO resorted to some extreme measures. On the military side, VEVAK and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps worked jointly on a "super mortar" project that could lob 400 pounds of high explosives at a target several miles away. After successful tests, a 320mm super mortar and its missile were camouflaged as food cargo and placed on board an Iranian cargo ship bound for Hamburg. A DGSO crack assassination team had been trained to receive the cargo in Hamburg, transfer it to France, and use the mortar to devastate Maryam Rajavi's villa north of Paris. ✓

The elaborate plan hit a snag when Belgian police uncovered the super mortar and the explosives during an inspection as the ship anchored in the port of Antwerp on its way to Hamburg. The blow was a serious setback for VEVAK.

In May 1995, Iravani made a hasty trip to Bonn to talk to German officials after VEVAK learnt that Maryam Rajavi was to speak at a public rally of Iranian exiles in Dortmund, scheduled for June 16.

Under Fallahian's instruction, Iravani's real mission was to organize an attempt on Rajavi's life during her visit to Germany. He used VEVAK's European headquarters on the third floor of the Iranian embassy in Bonn to coordinate the attack. Unknown to him, German counter-intelligence had a mole in the embassy and discovered the plot to assassinate Maryam Rajavi. She was barred from attending the rally and Bonn quietly expelled two VEVAK officers working under diplomatic cover. The story was leaked to the New York Times.

### **French deal frees assassins**

In December 1993, Iravani was part of a high-level delegation that made an unscheduled visit to Paris. Mohammad Hejazi, a cleric who runs Khamenei's Special Office for Security, and Alireza Moayyeri, a former Revolutionary Guards commander who was later appointed as ambassador to France and then became Rafsanjani's political advisor, were other members of the delegation. They conducted urgent negotiations with French officials over the fate of two VEVAK officers who had been arrested in France. The clerical regime's leaders had instructed the delegation to have the two men returned to Iran at whatever cost. Both men were members of the DGSO team that assassinated NCRI official Kazem Rajavi in Geneva in 1990. The French government ignored urgent extradition requests from the Swiss government and returned the two men to Iran, after striking a deal with Tehran's envoys. Had the two men been handed over to Bern and put on trial, the Iranian regime would have suffered a blow no less than the one it received in the Berlin trial of assassins of four Iranian Kurds.

Once the crisis over VEVAK's arrested officers was over, Iravani used his visit to Paris to meet secretly with representatives of the Irish Republican Army. He offered to provide them with advanced communications equipment, Semtex plastic explosives, eight Stinger missiles, 400 handguns, 100 Uzi submachineguns, a large quantity of ammunition, and a large sum of money if they would assassinate three Iranian opposition figures in Europe. The two sides did not reach an agreement and the deal fell through.

### **VEVAK's Special Ops inside Iran**

Throughout those years, DGSO's domestic branch was as active as the directorate's external arm. In June 1994, Tehran blamed the MeK for a bomb blast in the shrine of Imam Reza that killed and wounded several pilgrims. Despite strong denials by the MeK, the Iranian regime made extensive efforts to have the MeK condemned by other governments for the bomb attack. Years later, former VEVAK officials revealed that the bombing had been stage-managed by DGSO as part of the campaign to push Western governments to take action against the MeK.

Another spectacular operation by DGSO in Iran was the murder of two Anglican bishops and a priest. An elaborate plan was used to pretend that the MeK had murdered the church leaders. VEVAK forced three girls, all MeK supporters who had been in prison

for some time, to confess before television cameras that they carried out the murders. But independent investigations, including one by the UN rapporteur on religious freedom, found the charges to be unsubstantiated. Years later, former VEVAK officials again unveiled the killings as the gruesome work of VEVAK carried out by DGSO under the direction of Emami and Iravani.

Iravani's work as director of DGSO was not limited to anti-MeK disinformation or assassinations, although this took much of his time. His DGSO played a central role in the grisly murder of dozens of dissidents in Iran during those years. VEVAK defector Jamshid Tafrihi has described how Iravani and his men murdered Hamid Hajizadeh, a poet and teacher, at his home in the southern city of Kerman. Hajizadeh was stabbed 38 times. The VEVAK team also stabbed his 10-year-old son to death before they left. The crime was so horrendous that the local police inspector, who arrived at the scene of the crime after VEVAK assassins had left, burst into tears.