

Panama Arrests Ex-CIA Chief of Station Wanted by INTERPOL for Abduction of Muslim Cleric

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A retired 21-year veteran of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, who is wanted by INTERPOL for participating in the abduction of a Muslim cleric in Italy, has been detained by police in Panama. [Robert Seldon Lady](#) was the CIA's station chief in Milan in 2003, when a team of 23 Americans, most of them CIA officers, abducted Mustafa Osama Nasr. The CIA suspected the Egyptian-born Nasr, known also as Abu Omar, of working as a recruiter for a host of radical Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda.

On February 17, 2003, Nasr was seized in dramatic fashion by a group of CIA operatives in broad daylight in Milan. He was stuffed into an unmarked white van and eventually ended up in Egypt, where he was tortured before being released. Nasr's case helped raise awareness of the US government's extraordinary rendition program. Under the controversial program, suspected terrorist operatives were secretly taken to third-party countries where they were subjected to aggressive interrogation techniques. Italian authorities were irritated by Nasr's kidnapping, which they claimed took place without the consent of the Italian government. There are also reports that the Italian intelligence services were monitoring Nasr at the time and were trying to recruit him as a source, which might explain why they were incensed when the Egyptian was snatched by the CIA without their authorization.

Lady and several other CIA operatives involved in Nasr's abduction were subsequently identified in a judicial investigation by Italian authorities, which also exposed the American team's careless spy tradecraft. The latter included unsecured cell phone calls to each other in the days before the abduction, and extravagant bills incurred while staying in luxury Italian hotels. The US government refused to acknowledge that most of the 23 identified Americans were CIA operatives and pressured the Italian authorities to drop all charges. But Washington's efforts failed and the Americans were [convicted](#) in absentia in 2005.

[According](#) to the Italian media, Lady was arrested by police near Panama's border with Costa Rica on Wednesday, soon after he entered the country. There is no mention in the Italian press of the reasons why Lady, who is wanted by INTERPOL in pursuance of a formal request issued by Rome, was traveling outside the United States. It is also unclear whether the Panamanian authorities were acting at the behest of the Italian government. Italy now has two months to file a formal extradition request for Lady, who has been convicted to nine years in prison for his role in Nasr's kidnapping. The CIA has declined to comment on Lady's reported arrest and possible extradition.

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