

Who leaked the details of a CIA-Mossad plot against Iran?

By [Yossi Melman](#)

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The Bush administration is prolonging the hunting season against journalists. The latest victim is James Risen, The New York Times reporter for national security and intelligence affairs. About three months ago, a federal grand jury issued a subpoena against him, ordering Risen to give evidence in court. A heavy blackout has been imposed on the affair, with the only hint being that it has to do with sensitive matters of “national security.”

But conversations with several sources who are familiar with the affair indicate that Risen has been asked to testify as part of an investigation aimed at revealing who leaked apparently confidential information about the planning of secret Central Intelligence Agency and Mossad missions concerning Iran’s nuclear program.

Risen included this information in his book, “State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration,” which was published in 2006. In the book, he discusses a number of ideas which he says were thought up jointly by CIA and Mossad operatives to sabotage Iran’s nuclear capabilities.

One of these ideas was to build electromagnetic devices, smuggling them inside Iran to sabotage electricity lines leading to the country’s central nuclear sites. According to the plan, the operation was supposed to cause a series of chain reactions which would damage extremely powerful short circuits in the electrical supply that would have led to failures of the super computers of Iran’s nuclear sites.

According to the book, the Mossad planners proposed that they would be responsible for getting the electromagnetic facilities into Iran with the aid of their agents in Iran. However, a series of technical problems prevented the plan’s execution.

Another of the book’s important revelations, which made the administration’s blood boil about James Risen, appeared in a chapter describing what was known as Operation Merlin, the code name for another CIA operation supposed to penetrate the heart of Iran’s nuclear activity, collect information about it and eventually disrupt it.

Operation Merlin

The CIA counter proliferation department hired a Soviet nuclear engineer who had previously, in the 1990s, defected to the United States and revealed secrets from the Soviet Union’s nuclear program. His speciality was in the field of what is called weaponization, the final stage of assembling a nuclear bomb.

The scientist was equipped with blueprints for assembling a nuclear bomb in which, without

his knowledge, false drawings and information blueprints were planted about a nuclear warhead that was supposedly manufactured in the Soviet Union. The plan's details had been fabricated by CIA experts, and so while they appeared authentic, they had no engineering or technological value.

The intention was to fool the scientist and send him to make contact with the Iranians to whom he would offer his services and blueprints. The American plot was aimed at getting the Iranians to invest a great deal of effort in studying the plans and to attempt to assemble a faulty warhead. But when the time came, they would not have a nuclear bomb but rather a dud.

However, Operation Merlin, which was so creative and original, failed because of CIA bungled planning. The false information inserted into the blueprints were too obvious and too easily detected and the Russian engineer discovered them. As planned, he made contact with the Iranian delegation to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna and handed over to them, also as planned, the blueprints.

But contrary to the CIA's intention, he added a letter to the blueprints in which he pointed out the mistakes. He did not do this with ill intent or out of a desire to disrupt the operation and harm his operators. On the contrary, he did so out of a deep sense of mission and in order to satisfy his American operators. He hoped that in this way he would simply increase the Iranians' trust in him and encourage them to make contact with him for the good, of course, of his American operators.

The result was disastrous. Not only did the CIA fail to prevent the Iranians in their efforts to enhance their nuclear program, this operation may also have made it possible for them to get their hands on a plan for assembling a nuclear warhead.

Freedom of the press

In Israel, military censorship would have prevented the publication of details such as these. But in the U.S., where the principle of freedom of the press is sacred and anchored in the constitution, there is no compulsory and binding censorship. There is, however, an expectation there that the press will show responsibility. This expectation has increased in recent years, particularly with the conservative Bush administration and in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Risen is not the first journalist to have been subpoenaed to give evidence before a grand jury and reveal his sources. According to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, some 65 journalists have been summoned for such investigations since 2001. Some agreed, cooperated and testified. Most refused, so that they would not have to reveal their sources. In this way, they exposed themselves to being charged with contempt of court.

There were some who even preferred to be jailed so long as they were not forced to reveal their source. The best-known case was that of Judith Miller, another New York Times writer. The background to her 85-day imprisonment was her refusal to reveal who had leaked the name of Valerie Plame, a CIA agent, to the media. (The man responsible for the leak was Lewis "Scooter" Libby, a senior aide to Vice President Dick Cheney. Libby was sentenced to 30 months imprisonment but was pardoned by President Bush.)

"It is true that there is tension between the Bush administration and the media," says Steve

Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy on behalf of the Federation of American Scientists, an independent body which aims at analyzing the activities of government with a critical eye, “but I would not go so far as to say that the administration is waging war against the media.”

In Aftergood’s assessment, the danger to the freedom of the press comes rather from private citizens and organizations, those who feel themselves harmed by journalistic publications and commentators and who would therefore like to limit the press’ freedom. The most conspicuous of these is Gabriel Schoenfeld, a senior editor at Commentary, who believes that liberal newspapers like The New York Times are not sufficiently patriotic. In his articles and in testimony before a Senate committee that discussed the issue, Schoenfeld claimed that

The New York Times reporters had revealed confidential material that weakened America’s struggle against Al-Qaida. He calls for relinquishing the soft approach which he says the administration has taken against journalists in whose publications, in his opinion, America’s security is harmed.

There are many others who take the opposite approach and believe that the right of journalists to keep their sources secret should be anchored in law. Two Congressmen, the Republican Mike Pence, and Rick Boucher, a Democrat, have proposed legislation to this effect – a law for the free flow of information. The House of Representatives has already approved their proposal but the legislation is being held up in the Senate, to the displeasure of the American Civil Liberties Union.

On the face of it, this is a sensitive issue that is intended to draw the lines between the freedom of information, freedom of the media, and the public’s right to know, against the right of a democracy to defend itself against enemies that are not democratic. But James Risen has no doubt that the correct and just moral act on his part has to be to defend his sources, even if this means he will lose his freedom.

The next test case in the U.S. concerning the freedom of the press could be of even greater interest to Israel. It is connected to next month’s trial of two former senior American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) employees, Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman, who have been charged with crimes based on an old First World War anti-espionage law, which has hardly ever been put into practice since.

The indictment states that they obtained confidential information from officials at the Pentagon and transferred it, inter alia, to Israeli diplomats and journalists. A number of American journalists have already been investigated by the CIA in connection to this, and it is possible that they will be called to give evidence incriminating the two senior AIPAC officials.

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Articles by: **Yossi Melman**

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