

How the CIA failed Iranian spies in its secret war with Tehran

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The spy was minutes from leaving Iran when he was nabbed.

Gholamreza Hosseini was at Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran in late 2010, preparing for a flight to Bangkok. There, the Iranian industrial engineer would meet his Central Intelligence Agency handlers. But before he could pay his exit tax to leave the country, the airport ATM machine rejected his card as invalid. Moments later, a security officer asked to see Hosseini's passport before escorting him away.

Hosseini said he was brought to an empty VIP lounge and told to sit on a couch that had been turned to face a wall. Left alone for a dizzying few moments and not seeing any security cameras, Hosseini thrust his hand into his trouser pocket, fishing out a memory card full of state secrets that could now get him hanged. He shoved the card into his mouth, chewed it to pieces and swallowed.

Not long after, Ministry of Intelligence agents entered the room and the interrogation began, punctuated by beatings, Hosseini recounted. His denials and the destruction of the data were worthless; they seemed to know everything already. But how?

"These are things I never told anyone in the world," Hosseini told Reuters. As his mind raced, Hosseini even wondered whether the CIA itself had sold him out.



Iranian engineer Gholamreza Hosseini spent nearly a decade in a Tehran prison following his conviction for spying for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He said the agency abandoned him following his 2010 arrest. Handout via REUTERS

Rather than betrayal, Hosseini was the victim of CIA negligence, a year-long Reuters investigation into the agency's handling of its informants found. A faulty CIA covert communications system made it easy for Iranian intelligence to identify and capture him. Jailed for nearly a decade and speaking out for the first time, Hosseini said he never heard from the agency again, even after he was released in 2019.

The CIA declined to comment on Hosseini's account.

Hosseini's experience of sloppy handling and abandonment was not unique. In interviews with six Iranian former CIA informants, Reuters found that the agency was careless in other ways amid its intense drive to gather intelligence in Iran, putting in peril those risking their

lives to help the United States.

One informant said the CIA instructed him to make his information drops in Turkey at a location the agency knew was under surveillance by Iran. Another man, a former government worker who traveled to Abu Dhabi to seek a U.S. visa, claims a CIA officer there tried unsuccessfully to push him into spying for the United States, leading to his arrest when he returned to Iran.

Such aggressive steps by the CIA sometimes put average Iranians in danger with little prospect of gaining critical intelligence. When these men were caught, the agency provided no assistance to the informants or their families, even years later, the six Iranians said.

James Olson, former chief of CIA counterintelligence, said he was unaware of these specific cases. But he said any unnecessary compromise of sources by the agency would represent both a professional and ethical failure.

“If we’re careless, if we’re reckless and we’ve been penetrated, then shame on us,” Olson said. “If people paid the price of trusting us enough to share information and they paid a penalty, then we have failed morally.”

The men were jailed as part of an aggressive counterintelligence purge by Iran that began in 2009, a campaign partly enabled by a series of CIA blunders, according to news reports and three former U.S. national security officials. Tehran has claimed in state media reports that its mole hunt ultimately netted dozens of CIA informants.

To tell this story, Reuters conducted dozens of hours of interviews with the six Iranians who were convicted of espionage by their government between 2009 and 2015.

To vet their accounts, Reuters interviewed 10 former U.S. intelligence officials with knowledge of Iran operations; reviewed Iranian government records and news reports; and interviewed people who knew the spies.

None of the former or current U.S. officials who spoke with Reuters confirmed or disclosed the identities of any CIA sources.

The CIA declined to comment specifically on Reuters’ findings or on the intelligence agency’s operations in Iran. A spokeswoman said the CIA does its utmost to safeguard people who work with the agency.

Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Mission to the United Nations in New York did not respond to requests for comment.

Hosseini was the only one of the six men Reuters interviewed who said he was assigned the vulnerable messaging tool. But an analysis by two independent cybersecurity specialists found that the now-defunct covert online communication system that Hosseini used – located

by Reuters in an internet archive – may have exposed at least 20 other Iranian spies and potentially hundreds of other informants operating in other countries around the world.

This messaging platform, which operated until 2013, was hidden within rudimentary news and hobby websites where spies could go to connect with the CIA. Reuters confirmed its existence with four former U.S. officials.

These failures continue to haunt the agency years later. In a series of internal cables last year, CIA leadership warned that it had lost most of its network of spies in Iran and that sloppy tradecraft continues to endanger the agency's mission worldwide, the New York Times reported.

“This is a very serious, very serious intelligence goal to penetrate Iran's nuclear weapons program. You don't get a much higher priority than that.”

The CIA considers Iran one of its most difficult targets. Ever since Iranian students seized the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, the United States has had no diplomatic presence in the country. CIA officers are instead forced to recruit potential agents outside Iran or through online connections. The thin local presence leaves U.S. intelligence at a disadvantage amid events such as the protests now sweeping Iran over the death of a woman arrested for violating the country's religious dress code.

Four former intelligence officers interviewed by Reuters said the agency is willing to take bigger risks with sources when it comes to spying on Iran. Curbing the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions has long been a priority in Washington. Tehran insists its nuclear efforts are solely for energy needs.

“This is a very serious, very serious intelligence goal to penetrate Iran's nuclear weapons program. You don't get a much higher priority than that,” said James Lawler, a former CIA officer whose focus included weapons of mass destruction and Iran. “So when they do the risk-versus-gain analysis, you've got to consider the incredible amount of gain.”

Much has been written about the decades-long shadow war between Iran and Washington, in which both sides have avoided a full military confrontation but have carried out sabotage, assassinations and cyberattacks. But the six informants, interviewed by Reuters for the first time, gave an unprecedented firsthand account of the deadly spy game from the perspective of Iranians who served as CIA foot soldiers.

The six Iranians served prison terms ranging from five to 10 years. Four of them, including Hosseini, stayed in Iran after their release and remain vulnerable to rearrest. Two fled the country and have become stateless refugees.

The six men acknowledged that their CIA handlers never made firm promises to help if they were caught. Still, all had believed that U.S. assistance would one day come.

The espionage busts could pose a challenge to the CIA's credibility as it seeks to rebuild its spy network in Iran. The country's state media publicized some of these cases, portraying the agency as feckless and inept.

"It's a stain on the U.S. government," Hosseini told Reuters.

CIA spokeswoman Tammy Kupperman Thorp declined to comment on Hosseini, the cases of other captured Iranians or any aspect of how the agency conducts operations. But she said the CIA would never be careless with the lives of those who help the agency.

"CIA takes its obligations to protect the people that work with us very seriously and we know that many do so bravely at great personal risk," Thorpe said. "The notion that CIA would not work as hard as possible to safeguard them is false."



The CIA says it does its utmost to safeguard people who assist the agency. A Reuters investigation found that the CIA was often careless in protecting lower-level sources in Iran.

REUTERS/Larry Downing

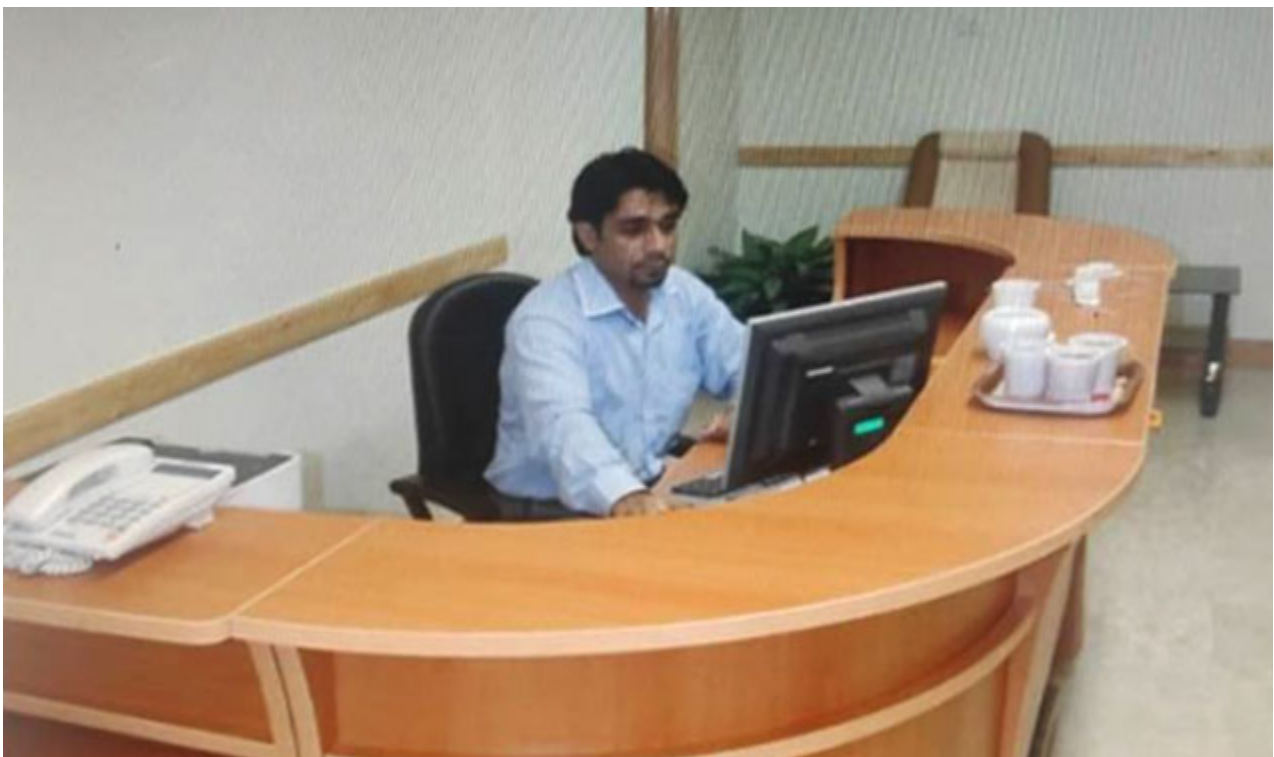
An angry volunteer

Hosseini's leap to espionage came after he had climbed a steep path to a lucrative career. The son of a tailor, he grew up in Tehran and learned lathing and auto mechanics, he said, showing Reuters his trade-school diploma.

Along the way, teachers spotted Hosseini's intelligence and pushed him to study industrial engineering at the prestigious Amirkabir University of Technology, he said. Hosseini said a professor there put him in touch with a former student with ties to the Iranian government who eventually became his business partner.

Founded in 2001, their engineering company provided services to help businesses optimize energy consumption. The firm at first worked mainly with food and steel factories, Hosseini said, over time scoring contracts with Iran's energy and defense industries. Hosseini's account of his professional background is confirmed in corporate records, Iranian media accounts and interviews with six associates.

Hosseini said the company's success made his family affluent, allowing him to buy a large house, drive imported cars and go on foreign vacations. But in the years after the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who served from 2005 to 2013, his business teetered.



Gholamreza Hosseini in 2005 at the University of Tehran Science and Technology Park. The engineer said he later supplied information about two important Iranian nuclear sites to the CIA. Handout via REUTERS

Under Ahmadinejad, a hardliner aligned with the country's theocratic ruler, Iran's security forces were encouraged to enter the industrial sector, increasing the military's control over lucrative commercial projects. Established companies often found themselves relegated to

the role of subcontractors for these newcomers, Iranian democracy activists said, shrinking their slice of the pie.

Before long, Hosseini said, all of his new contracts had to be routed through some of these firms, forcing him to lay off workers as earnings tumbled.

“They didn’t know how to do the work, but they took the lion’s share of the profits,” said Hosseini, his voice rising as he recounted the events a decade later. “It was as if you were the head of the company, doing everything from 0 to 100, and seeing your salary being given to the most junior employees. I felt raped.”

At the same time, U.S. rhetoric was ramping up against Ahmadinejad. Washington viewed Iran’s president as a dangerous provocateur set on building nuclear weapons. Hosseini began to feel that his life was being destroyed by a corrupt system, and that the government was too erratic to be allowed to obtain nukes. His anger grew.

One day in 2007, he said he opened the CIA public website and clicked the link to contact the agency: “I’m an engineer who has worked at the nuclear site Natanz and I have information,” he wrote in Persian.

Located 200 miles south of Tehran, Natanz is a major facility for uranium enrichment. Archived web records from Hosseini’s engineering firm from 2007 say the company worked on civilian electrical power projects. Reuters could not independently confirm Hosseini’s work at Natanz.

A month later, to his surprise, Hosseini said he received an email back from the CIA.

Part of the team?

Three months after that contact, Hosseini said he flew to Dubai. At the fashionable shopping market Souk Madinat Jumeirah, he looked for a blonde woman holding a black book. He was standing outside the restaurant where they had agreed to meet, when she arrived accompanied by a man.

The restaurant manager guided them to a table secluded in a corner. The woman introduced herself only as Chris, speaking in English while her colleague translated in Persian. As she sipped a glass of champagne, Chris told him they were the people Hosseini had been exchanging messages with over the past few months in Google’s chat platform. She asked Hosseini about his work.

Hosseini said he explained that his company had several years earlier worked on contracts to optimize the flow of electricity at the Natanz site, a complex balancing act to keep centrifuges spinning at precisely the speed needed to enrich uranium. Located in central

Iran, Natanz was the heart of Tehran's nuclear program, which the government said was to produce civilian electricity. But Washington saw Natanz as the core of Iran's push to acquire nuclear weapons.

Hosseini told Chris his firm was a subcontractor of Kalaye Electric, a company sanctioned in 2007 by the U.S. government over its alleged role in Iran's nuclear development program. He added that he was seeking additional contracts at other sensitive nuclear and military sites.

Kalaye Electric did not respond to requests for comment.

The next day the three met again, this time at Hosseini's hotel room overlooking the Gulf. Hosseini unfurled a maze-like map across the desk showing the electricity connected to the Natanz nuclear facility. As he did, Chris's mouth dropped open wide, Hosseini recalled.

While several years old, Hosseini explained, the map's notations of the amount of power flowing into the facility provided Washington a baseline to estimate the number of centrifuges currently active. That evidence, he believed, could be used to assess progress toward processing the highly enriched uranium needed for a nuclear weapon.

Hosseini said he didn't know it at the time, but Natanz was already in the crosshairs of U.S. authorities. That same year, Washington and Israel launched a cyberweapon that would sabotage those very centrifuges, infecting them with a virus that would cripple uranium enrichment at Natanz for years to come, security analysts concluded. Reuters could not determine whether the information provided by Hosseini assisted in that cyber sabotage or other operations.



Iran's then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on a 2008 visit to the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility in central Iran. REUTERS/Presidential official website/Handout (IRAN) In subsequent meetings, Hosseini said, the CIA asked him to turn his attention to a broader U.S. goal: identifying possible critical points in Iran's national electric grid that would cause long and paralyzing blackouts if struck by a missile or saboteurs.

Hosseini said he continued to meet with the CIA in Thailand and Malaysia, in a total of seven meetings over three years. To show evidence of his travels, Hosseini provided photographs of entry stamps in his passport for all but his first two trips, for which he said he had used an older, now discarded, passport.

As the relationship progressed, Hosseini said, Chris was replaced with a male handler who was accompanied by officials described as more senior in the CIA's Iran operations, as well as technical experts able to keep up with his engineering jargon.

The new role motivated Hosseini, injecting his work with a sense of urgency and purpose. He scrambled to win business that would give him greater access to the intelligence the CIA sought. He said his company secured a contract with a unit of Setad, the sprawling business conglomerate controlled by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to assess the electrical needs of a giant shopping and commercial building project in the north of Tehran.



Iranians walk on a promenade in northern Tehran late last year. The United States and Iran severed diplomatic ties more than 40 years ago. Relations between the two nations remain strained. Majid Asgaripour/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS

Representing the supreme leader's commercial organization, Hosseini pushed the state power company Tavanir for the electricity the sprawling development required, Hosseini said. When Tavanir said it didn't have enough electricity to meet the project's giant demands, Hosseini asked the company to provide in-depth analyses of the national grid. This allowed him access to maps showing how electricity flowed to nuclear and military sites and how critical points of the network could be sabotaged.

Setad and Tavanir did not respond to requests for comment.

In August 2008, a year after becoming a spy, Hosseini said he met with an older, broad-shouldered CIA officer and others at a hotel in Dubai.



Gholamreza Hosseini says a CIA officer purchased this stuffed bear for his daughter as a birthday gift.

"We need to expand the commitment," Hosseini recounted the officer saying. The officer handed Hosseini a piece of paper and asked him to write a promise that he would not provide the information he was sharing to another government, a CIA practice intended to deepen a feeling of commitment from an informant, two former CIA officials said.

Another CIA officer in the meeting then showed Hosseini a covert communications system he could use to reach his handlers: a rudimentary Persian-language soccer news website called Iraniangoals.com. Entering a password into the search bar caused a secret messaging window to pop up, allowing Hosseini to send information and receive instructions from the CIA.

When Hosseini lamented missing his daughter's third birthday during one of the trips, he said a CIA officer bought him a teddy bear to give to the child. "I felt that I had joined the team," Hosseini told Reuters.

Secret system breakdown

What Hosseini didn't know was that the world's most powerful intelligence agency had given him a tool that likely led to his capture. In 2018, [Yahoo News reported](#) that a flawed web-based covert communications system had led to the arrest and execution of dozens of CIA informants in Iran and China.

Reuters located the secret CIA communications site identified by Hosseini, Iraniangoals.com, in an internet archive where it remains publicly available. Reuters then asked two independent cyber analysts – Bill Marczak of University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, and Zach Edwards of Victory Medium – to probe how Iran may have used weaknesses in the CIA's own technology to unmask Hosseini and other CIA informants. The two are experts on privacy and cybersecurity, with experience analyzing electronic intelligence operations. The effort represents the first independent technical analysis of the intelligence failure.

Marczak and Edwards quickly discovered that the secret messaging window hidden inside Iraniangoals.com could be spotted by simply right-clicking on the page to bring up the website's coding. This code contained descriptions of secret functions, including the words "message" and "compose" – easily found clues that a messaging capability had been built into the site. The coding for the search bar that triggered the secret messaging software was labeled "password."

Far from being customized, high-end spycraft, Iraniangoals.com was one of hundreds of websites mass-produced by the CIA to give to its sources, the independent analysts concluded. These rudimentary sites were devoted to topics such as beauty, fitness and entertainment, among them a Star Wars fan page and another for the late American talk show host Johnny Carson.

Each fake website was assigned to only one spy in order to limit exposure of the entire network in case any single agent was captured, two former CIA officials told Reuters.

But the CIA made identifying those sites easy, the independent analysts said. Marczak located more than 350 websites containing the same secret messaging system, all of which have been offline for at least nine years and archived. Edwards confirmed his findings and

methodology. Online records they analyzed reveal the hosting space for these front websites was often purchased in bulk by the dozen, often from the same internet providers, on the same server space. The result was that numerical identifiers, or IP addresses, for many of these websites were sequential, much like houses on the same street.

“The CIA really failed with this,” said Marczak, the Citizen Lab researcher. The covert messaging system, he said, “stuck out like a sore thumb.”

In addition, some sites bore strikingly similar names. For example, while Hosseini was communicating with the CIA through Iraniangoals.com, a site named Iraniangoalkicks.com was built for another informant. At least two dozen of the 350-plus sites produced by the CIA appeared to be messaging platforms for Iranian operatives, the analysts found.

All told, these features meant the discovery of a single spy using one of these websites would have allowed Iranian intelligence to uncover additional pages used by other CIA informants. Once those sites were identified, nabbing the operatives using them would have been simple: The Iranians just had to wait and see who showed up. In essence, the CIA used the same row of bushes for its informants worldwide. Any attentive espionage rival would have been able to spot them all, the analysts said.

This vulnerability went far beyond Iran. Written in various languages, the websites appeared to be a conduit for CIA communications with operatives in at least 20 countries, among them China, Brazil, Russia, Thailand and Ghana, the analysts found.

CIA spokeswoman Thorp declined to comment on the system.

Reuters confirmed the nature of the intelligence failure of the CIA’s cookie-cutter websites with three former national security officials.

The agency wasn’t fully aware that this system had been compromised until 2013, after many of its agents began to go missing, according to the former U.S. officials.

Still, the CIA had never considered the network safe enough for its most prized sources. Top-tier informants receive custom-made covert communications tools, built from scratch at agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to seamlessly blend into the life of a spy without drawing attention, three former CIA officers said.

The mass-produced sites, they said, were for sources who were either not considered fully vetted or had limited, albeit potentially valuable, access to state secrets.

“This is for a person viewed as not worth the investment of advanced tradecraft,” one of the former CIA officials said.

The CIA declined to comment on the covert communications system and the intelligence failure.

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واشنطن، 13 يوليو - يجتمع قادة الدول الصناعية السبع الكبرى نهاية هذا الأسبوع في سان بطرسبرج بروسيا، وعلى أجندتهم قضايا أمن الطاقة، والوضع الحساس الذي يواجه محادثات التجارة العالمية، والأمراض المعدية، والتعليم، وغيرها من القضايا الحيوية الخاصة بالانقصاد العالمي.

مصر: الصحفيون يتخذون قانون الصحافة الجديد

القاهرة، 13 يوليو - يعارض الكثير من الصحفيين وزعماء المعارضة قانونا جديدا أقره البرلمان هذا الأسبوع؛ حيث يقولون إن القانون لا يحمي رؤساء التحرير والصحفيين من السجن.

بسبب ما يُسمى بانتهاكات الصحافة.

سياسة - الشرق الأوسط: بوش يواجه خيارا مهما وسط التصعيد

12 يوليو 2008

عمل

تكنولوجيا

الرياضة

أخبار

أخبار

الشرق الأوسط والبحر المتوسط

جريدة السفير - الصفحة الأولى

جريدة النهار - الصفحة الرئيسية

الصفحة الرئيسية

مفكرة الإسلام: سياسة

الرياضة

أخبار الرياضة

تكنولوجيا

أخبار ICT در استنا



النسخة الإلكترونية من الجريدة التي

تصدرها مؤسسة الجزيرة السعودية

اطلاعات روزنامه قديمي عصر تهران

جام جم روزنامه وابسته به صدا و

سيما

الأيام

صحيفة يومية عربية تصدر في



NEWS: **FITNESS** **BODYBUILDING** **WEIGHT LOSS**

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HealthClubDirectory.com
Health clubs, fitness centers, gyms, for personal training, yoga and Pilates, and aerobics in North America.

Fitnezz.com
Links for fitness, sports, medicine, and health.

Canadian Wellness Internet Directory
Listing businesses across Canada related to fitness, wellness, training, and health.

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Find information on fitness, exercise, weight loss, diets, bodybuilding, workouts, diets, meditation, personal trainers, nutrition, and more.

Fitness Forums

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In the Bodybuilding.net Forum, you can share your bodybuilding tips and advice or ask questions and get answers from other members of the forum.



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AthleticRunner is a great website to get all the information and support a runner could ever need.

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<p>Бои без правил</p>		<p>Федор Емельяненко</p> 	
	<p>Последние новости Смешанные боевые искусства</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства - Федор Емельяненко открыл страницу в Twitter Легенда MMA россиянин Федор Емельяненко открыл собственный микроблог в Twitter.</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства - Андрей Арловский в роли спартанского царя (видео) Белорус Андрей Арловский сыронизировал на тему своей схожести с актером, исполнившим роль царя Леонида в фильме «300 спартанцев».</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства - Россияне увидят бой Федора Емельяненко в прямом эфире Президент M-1 Global Вадим Финкельштейн заявил, что россияне смогут посмотреть бой легенды MMA Федора Емельяненко в прямом эфире.</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства - Обидчик Емельяненко встретится с Оверимом Президент организации Strikeforce Скотт Кокер рассказал, что следующие бои четвертьфинала турнира Strikeforce в тяжелом весе пройдут девятого апреля.</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства - Букмекеры отдадут предпочтение Федору Емельяненко 12 февраля в США состоится долгожданный поединок бывшего чемпиона PRIDE в тяжелом весе, одного из лучших бойцов за всю историю смешанных единоборств Федора Емельяненко против известного бразильского бойца Антонио Сильвы.</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства - Емельяненко призвал Карвина в Старый Оскол Федор Емельяненко, ведущий подготовку к следующему бою, намерен пригласить в качестве спарринг-партнера Шейна Карвина.</p>	 <p>МЕТРОКОМ</p> <p>История смешанных боевых искусств</p> <p>Панкратион является старым стилем рукопашной борьбы. Древние Греки вводили эту дисциплину в Олимпийские Игры в 648 году до н. э. Некоторые общественные показы боев имели место в конце 19-го столетия.</p> <p>Они представляли различные стили борьбы, включая дзюдо, борьбу, и других на турнирах и вызовах в целой Европе. После Первой мировой войны, борьба была рождена снова в двух главных потоках.</p>	
<p>Новости</p> <p>Федор Емельяненко</p> <p>Российский боец смешанных единоборств. Чемпион мира в тяжёлом весе по смешанным единоборствам по версии Pride, чемпион Pride Grand Prix</p> <p>Александр Емельяненко</p> <p>Российский боец смешанных единоборств. Трёхкратный чемпион мира по боевому самбо, многократный победитель турниров по смешанным единоборствам (боям без правил)</p> <p>Смешанные боевые искусства</p>			

The CIA produced hundreds of websites embedded with a secret messaging tool for communicating with operatives. Screenshots of some of these archived sites, all defunct since at least 2013, show they were created in a variety of languages, including English, Russian, Chinese and Arabic.

Caste system for spies

“We will go to hell and back to protect our sources,” said Lawler, the former CIA officer.

It’s a common refrain from agency veterans. But it sometimes comes with an asterisk.

Some former intelligence officers privately acknowledge that the CIA protects its informants on a sliding scale based on the perceived worth of the spy, an ever-shifting assessment almost never fully explained to the source.

At the top of the pyramid are what the CIA calls “fully recruited, highly vetted assets.” These are people such as high-level government officials or nuclear scientists who have direct, continued access to critical secrets. CIA officers sometimes spend years trying to lure these key operatives into becoming agents.

If the officer succeeds in the recruitment – and gets the blessing of headquarters – the newly minted agent is put on CIA books with a regular CIA paycheck. Such spies are sometimes issued the kinds of ingenious gadgets and training that are the stuff of Hollywood legend. If a highly vetted asset is captured, the loss reverberates at the top levels of the CIA. The CIA will sometimes track down the child or spouse of an executed agent years afterward to offer million-dollar compensation and a discreetly marked agency medal to commemorate the sacrifice, former officers said.

But a lot of the intelligence the CIA gathers comes from low-level informants who never become “full-fledged members of the roster of spies,” said Paul Pillar, a 28-year veteran of the U.S. intelligence community, mainly at the CIA, where he worked as a senior analyst on the Middle East.

Such informants - sometimes disgruntled ex-officials or spurned lovers - may have just fragments of a bigger secret the agency seeks to uncover.

“You take what you can get,” Pillar said.

These sources often receive less protection than a high-level asset, no regular payments and usually no commitment of CIA help if they get caught, former CIA officers said.

Inside Iran, the CIA placed low-level informants at dire risk, interviews with six of the former spies revealed. The spies knew they were jeopardizing their lives when they gave information to the United States and said the agency didn’t make any promises about their security. In interviews with Reuters, however, the men repeatedly stated their belief that the CIA would do its best to protect them.

One of these men, Mohammad Aghaei, said he mulled going to the CIA for years before he acted.

Aghaei is a former longtime member of the Basij, a religious paramilitary organization that violently suppressed student pro-democracy demonstrations in the late 1990s and 2000s. He said he became disaffected by how Khamenei used religious ideology to preserve power. Aghaei wanted to support the Iranian dissidents he had seen attacked in the streets, he said, and thought America might help.



Mohammad Aghaei in 2018 in Turkey, where he lived for a time as a refugee. He fled Iran after serving nearly six years in prison for espionage after providing information to the CIA. Handout via REUTERS

Years later, Aghaei came up with a plan to ask the CIA for financial support for a well-known Iranian dissident, the son of a prominent cleric, whom he knew. In 2011, he flew to Istanbul, took a taxi to the consulate, and told the security guard he wanted to talk to the CIA.

Aghaei's description of his initial vetting at the consulate closely matches what former U.S. officials told Reuters was standard procedure for handling such a "walk-in" looking to connect with the CIA.

He said he was first strip-searched by uniformed guards, then brought to another room. There Aghaei was questioned for several hours about his background and motives by a diplomatic security official who frequently left the room only to return with further questions.

The Iranian said he did ultimately meet with a CIA officer that day. But she wasn't interested in supporting the dissident. Instead, she was more drawn to Aghaei's family ties to Iranian security forces. Aghaei had disclosed that he had relatives working in the Intelligence Ministry as well as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an elite branch of the military. The CIA officer offered to reimburse him for his trip, then proposed a small mission for him to prove himself.

Aghaei said she asked him to use his family connections to gather information on the Quds Force, an arm of the Revolutionary Guards that operates abroad, including names, phone numbers and addresses of senior commanders. He was provided no training in how to avoid detection, nor given a covert way of contacting the CIA officer, he said.

He was told simply to show up again at the Istanbul consulate once he'd completed his task, and given \$2,000 to cover his travel costs. Aghaei said he returned to Turkey a few months later to share the information he'd gathered. The same CIA officer prepped him for another mission. But after returning to Iran in December 2011, he was soon captured.

"We know you have had meetings at the consulate," an Intelligence Ministry interrogator said following the arrest, Aghaei recounted to Reuters.

He knew he was taking a risk – but not the full extent of it. The CIA had learned a year earlier from phone intercepts that Iranian operatives were surveilling the consulate, hunting for turncoats such as Aghaei, according to a former U.S official with direct knowledge of the situation.

Why, then, bring Aghaei back to the consulate when the CIA was aware it was being monitored? A veteran senior CIA intelligence officer said such a scenario is born from the reality that most volunteers ultimately fail to produce valuable intelligence and are often double agents. Prior to a meeting with a source outside the station, a CIA officer may spend hours walking around a city to evade any tails, the former officer explained. Sometimes that's considered too much hassle and risk to take for a new volunteer, he said.

Aghaei spent almost six years in Tehran's Evin prison on espionage charges, according to judicial records, fellow prisoners and Iranian media accounts.

The CIA declined to comment on whether it knew that the Iranians allegedly were surveilling the U.S. consulate, nor would it say whether it had met with Aghaei. Reuters could not independently confirm Aghaei's account of the meetings.

He spoke to Reuters from refugee centers where he fled following his release, first in Turkey, then in Switzerland.





Mohammad Aghaei in western Turkey in March 2020 near the border crossing with Greece. He said the CIA never contacted him again following his espionage arrest. He's now a refugee in Switzerland. Handout via REUTERS

Visa ploy

Not all informants are volunteers. The CIA at times pressures, even deceives, Iranians hoping to secure U.S. visas into providing intelligence when they apply at consulates in the United Arab Emirates or Turkey, according to five former U.S. national security officials.

After an Iranian drops off an application, diplomatic officers are instructed to examine whether their employment history or family ties could make them valuable. A few days later, a promising applicant might receive a phone call asking them to return to the consulate to answer more detailed questions.

As CIA officers, posing as consular officers, reel the applicant into increasingly probing meetings, they hold out the possibility that the visa application will be approved, according to the national security officials, all of whom were directly involved in such practices. By the time the Iranian realizes he has given information to an intelligence officer, the unwitting informant has often made disclosures that could land him in jail.

Such was the case with one of the Iranians who spoke to Reuters. A retired Iranian official, he had recently started a travel agency when he flew to Abu Dhabi with his wife in 2011 in order to visit the U.S. embassy there. The travel agent had just won the U.S. green card lottery and believed this huge stroke of luck would allow him to expand his tourism business.

The entrepreneur was at first excited to be invited to a series of interviews over the course of several trips to Abu Dhabi. He said he met inside and outside the embassy with a U.S. consular officer who said his name was Steve. Beyond offering to help complete the immigration screening process, the American official said he could help smooth the way for the man's Iranian customers to receive visas to the United States.

But over time, their conversations pivoted from the travel agent's future in the United States to requests by Steve for sensitive information about Iran's aviation and defense sectors, the Iranian said.

Recognizing the potential danger he was now in if Iranian authorities found out, he said he cut his contact with Steve, likely a pseudonym, and gave up on his dream to reside in the United States. But he was arrested in 2015 in Iran by the intelligence officials who somehow had learned of the liaison. Would he work for Tehran as a double agent, his Iranian interrogators asked, to learn more about how the CIA recruits spies?

He declined the offer and was sentenced to 10 years in prison, serving seven years before obtaining early release in 2022. "We feel as if we had been played with by both sides," his wife told Reuters.

The man never recovered his travel business and has struggled to find work in Iran since his release in 2021. Even ridesharing apps rejected his applications to become a driver, likely because of his conviction, the former travel agent said.

Reuters could not independently confirm the Iranian's interactions with the CIA. The man provided travel records and correspondence with the embassy to support his story. Reuters independently contacted another former prisoner who said he had met the travel agent while both were in the same jail. He said the entrepreneur at the time had given him an identical account of the CIA's recruitment attempt.

The CIA declined to comment on the travel agent case. The five former U.S. national security officials, however, confirmed details of how the visa ploy is used to gather Iranian intelligence.

Left in the cold

When Hosseini, the engineer, next met with the CIA in 2009, he readied for the most momentous meeting yet. He had spent months gathering secret data on vulnerable points in Iran's national power grid. He said he had ridden his motorcycle through the desert gathering

photos and GPS coordinates of main electric poles and stations he believed could be targeted by missiles or saboteurs to cause massive blackouts.

But when he arrived in Malaysia, he was met by a sole CIA agent.

“Things have changed,” the officer said.

The CIA was no longer interested in the information he collected on electrical grid vulnerabilities, Hosseini said the officer told him.

Hosseini was floored. He had taken such risks to deliver for his handlers. “But now they just weren’t interested,” he said.

Going forward, he said, the officer wanted him to dig deeper into plans at the Fordow nuclear facility, where Hosseini said his company had recently won a contract.

That plant, located inside a mountain near the holy city of Qom, had remained hidden from United Nations nuclear inspectors until Iran confirmed its existence in 2009. At the time, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama used revelations of the site’s existence to try to win leverage as it began diplomatic talks aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Hosseini said the CIA requested more granular information on Fordow, which he believed Washington wanted to help it with its negotiations. Hosseini interpreted his handlers’ pivot as reflecting the new Obama administration’s desire to move towards a diplomatic solution with Iran.

Former CIA officers say shifts in intelligence priorities are common when a new president takes power. Still, they said, the redirecting of informants is almost always done for more mundane, tactical reasons, never fully explained to the spy.

Hosseini said he continued to provide information to the CIA for another year. At one point his CIA handler raised the idea of meeting his family, an offer Hosseini hoped would presage the possibility of eventual resettlement in the United States.

Resettlement, however, is a rare reward. Washington allots the CIA only around 100 visas a year to offer as a carrot to its spies throughout the world, three former intelligence officers said.

“This involves enormous resources and operational planning and will be reserved for the star of the star sources,” said Pillar, the former CIA intelligence analyst.

Hosseini spent almost 10 years at Evin prison in Tehran, a lockup known for housing political prisoners and accused spies. Many face torture and execution, according to former detainees and human rights groups.

Almost a decade there took its toll, Hosseini said. Years of confinement and extended torture – beatings, electrical shocks and isolation in rooms lighted around the clock – damaged his ability to communicate, even with family, he said

“When they ask me a question, I feel like I’m back in the interrogation room,” he said.

Iran’s government did not respond to requests for comment on the treatment of detainees.

Out of prison for three years now, Hosseini, now 47, has lost his affluent lifestyle and many of his friends, whom he fears cooperated with Iranian security forces in his prosecution.

Of the six former spies interviewed by Reuters, four remained in Iran after being released from jail, and two others are living as refugees, one in Turkey, the other in Switzerland. All say they have been unable to obtain assistance from the United States as they struggle to rebuild their lives.

Most haven’t been able to find a way to ask.

“At the end of the day, we have to hope that they and their family are thrilled to be alive.”

Hosseini said the CIA did provide him two ways to reach out for help if he got into trouble. One method was to dial a secret U.S.-based number from somewhere outside of Iran, giving a passcode to an operator. The second was to contact a regional security officer at a consulate anywhere in the world and ask for help. Reuters confirmed these are two methods the CIA offers to informants to reach out for assistance.

By the time Hosseini left prison in 2019, he no longer remembered the secret number. And he feared repercussions if Iranian intelligence discovered him walking into a U.S. consulate to reinitiate contact following his espionage conviction.

All six former spies interviewed by Reuters said that, given their sacrifices, they had hoped the U.S. government would find a way to contact them and offer help building new lives in America or another country. Years after release, they are still waiting.



A view of the main entrance of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Sloppy tradecraft has endangered the agency's mission, as dozens of agents in countries including Iran, China and Russia have been exposed in recent years. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque
But from the CIA's perspective, there's often enormous risk and little upside in reconnecting with a captured spy in Iran, former U.S. intelligence officials said. Detainees lucky enough to escape execution, they said, could emerge from prison as double agents. Those that aren't would likely be monitored closely by Iranian authorities for any potential missteps.

"We have to ask, what is the best way to keep this guy alive, and sometimes the best answer is to leave them alone," said a former senior intelligence officer who was involved in the CIA's response to the compromise of its spies in Iran. "At the end of the day, we have to hope that they and their family are thrilled to be alive."

Hosseini feels differently. He now supports his family on less than \$250 a month, one-tenth his old earnings, cobbled together from part-time information technology support work. Some engineering firms initially hired Hosseini, he said, only to fire him days later, upon completion of his background screening.

Once fiercely opinionated, he is now careful to censor his views around friends, fearful that he will be reported. Many mornings he wakes up gripped with anxiety at the prospect of rearrest.

"I can't imagine any future," he said.

America's Throwaway Spies

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