

# The Tabatabai murder: how the Justice Dept obstructed justice

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On July 22, 1980, Ali Akbar Tabatabai, the director of the anti-Khomeini Iran Freedom Foundation, was assassinated at his home in Bethesda, Maryland. The killer, an American black Muslim named David Belfield (a.k.a. Daoud Salahuddin), employed at the time as a security guard at the Iranian Interest Section at the Algerian embassy in Washington, D.C., escaped via Montreal, Paris, and Geneva to Teheran. The mastermind of the assassination, Bahram Nahidian, the Washington-area station chief of Khomeini's secret police, the Savama, who also employed Belfield as a personal bodyguard, was never charged in the case. To this day, he resides and works in the Washington area.

The Department of Justice and FBI are not merely responsible for a six-and-a-half-year coverup of the most significant political assassination in the United States in over a decade. The FBI, as well as top DOJ officials, including some currently employed by the Department, were *complicit* in the Tabatabai assassination. A broad trail of documents exists, proving beyond a doubt that ranking Justice Department and FBI executives, including Carter-era Attorney-General Benjamin Civiletti and current FBI Executive Assistant Director Oliver "Buck" Revell, knew in advance of the threat to Tabatabai's life, intervened to prevent local police from providing adequate security to the targeted anti-Khomeini activist during the days leading up to his assassination, and engaged in a continuing cover-up that included the withholding of FBI documents under bogus claims of "state secrets privilege," and the loss and likely destruction of taped telephone conversations between a former top Justice Department official, Stanley Pottinger, and Iranian gun-runner Cyrus Hashemi. Circumstantial evidence further suggests that the FBI has conducted a witchhunt against *EIR* in part because of this publication's continuing exposure of the FBI's criminal behavior in the Tabatabai-Nahidian-Hashemi affair.

## Preparations for a hit

Beginning on Christmas eve 1979, as part of *EIR*'s ongoing coverage of the role of the Carter administration in

installing Ayatollah Khomeini in power in Iran, this magazine unearthed an Iranian gun-running and terrorist network operating out of the D.C. Iranian embassy and the U.S. Office of Naval Research. As early as Nov. 4, 1979, *EIR* had identified David Belfield and Abdullah Nahidian, the son of rug merchant and Savama chief Bahram Nahidian, as terrorist cadre associated with the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the principal Muslim Brotherhood front organization in the United States. At that time, both were arrested during a siege at the Statue of Liberty. Background information on the participants and on the MSA was submitted by *EIR* to both the FBI and the office of Attorney-General Civiletti during the winter of 1979.

From May 23-27, 1980, despite a public Carter administration ban on all Iranian travel to the United States, two top officials of Khomeini's government entered the country to participate in an MSA conference held in Oxford, Ohio. According to participants in that event, orders were given by the Iranian "guests" to begin assassinating anti-Khomeini activists within the Iranian exile community in the United States. According to Immigration and Naturalization Service officials, the Justice Department blocked a probe into the illegal presence of the Iranian government representatives in the United States.

Within weeks of the MSA event, *EIR* began reporting that Iranian exile sources had discovered an influx of Khomeini's killers into the United States. By late June, an estimated 200 Iranian-linked terrorists were reportedly operating from the continental United States.

In December 1979, Mustafa Chafik, a nephew of the deposed Shah, had been assassinated in Paris by a Savama killer suspected of having traveled from the United States to France to carry out the hit. In June 1980, a similar Paris assassination attempt against former Iranian Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar was prevented when his personal bodyguards shot up an assault team of Khomeini's killers.

It was on the basis of this emerging pattern of Khomeini-directed terrorism that *EIR* investigators went to Washington, D.C. police officials in mid-July 1980 to express concern that the Savama cell controlled by Nahidian was about to launch an assassination spree and that Ali Tabatabai, then in process of organizing a major anti-Khomeini demonstration in the nation's capital, was a high-probability target. The police concurred that a round-the-clock surveillance of Nahidian and the D.C. Islamic House (Belfield's last known residence at the time of the Tabatabai assassination) was more than appropriate. Following the July 22 assassination of Tabatabai by Nahidian's personal bodyguard Belfield, D.C. police informed *EIR* that *they had been explicitly ordered off the Nahidian watch by the FBI*. Information which surfaced in the subsequent trial of two of Belfield's co-conspirators revealed that *EIR*'s reports had been 100% accurate. A hit-list of anti-Khomeini leaders in the United States had been cir-

culated at the Iranian Interest Section, where Belfield was employed as a security guard.

### Why the cover-up?

According to documents and testimony, on the morning of July 23, 1980, a meeting was held in the office of Attorney-General Civiletti, attended by representatives of the National Security Council and the CIA, at which it was decided to put a "national security clamp" on the Tabatabai assassination.

It seemed that the FBI blocking of the Nahidian surveillance was part of a top-down Carter administration scheme to use every available channel to have the 53 American hostages in Teheran freed before the Democratic presidential nominating convention, scheduled to begin Aug. 11.

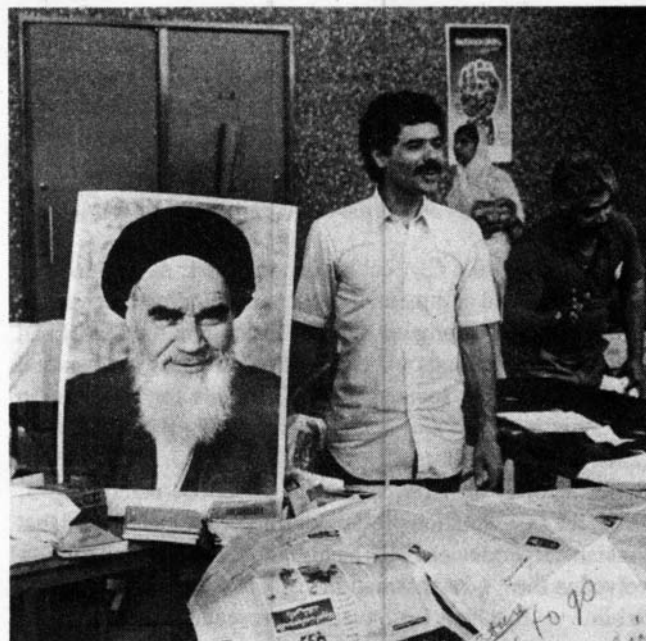
According to testimony given by Bahram Nahidian during a civil deposition in the case of *Hashemi v. Campaigner Publications, et al.* on March 24, 1983, at the very point that Nahidian was deploying assassins to kill Khomeini's exiled opposition, representatives of the Carter White House were practically beating down his door to draw him into the "back-channel" negotiations: "[They] offered to have me meet with someone at the White House. I said 'no.' An American official came to my shop, and asked me if I'd like to have lunch with a high official. . . . They also asked me if I would like to meet with President Carter."

As a sign of the Carter administration's "good faith," Nahidian received a license to kill on U.S. soil. Ali Akbar Tabatabai was the first—and not the last—victim of this foul policy. The hasty "national security clamp" constructed in Civiletti's office on July 23 marked the beginning of a cover-up that is still ongoing to the present day. At stake is the complicity of the Carter White House, NSC, and top Justice Department and FBI officials in the Tabatabai political assassination. Even more to the point, as *EIR* has repeatedly documented since 1980, the Carter national security apparatus created the arms-trafficking channel to Khomeini, assigning former Assistant Attorney-General Stanley Pottinger under the auspices of CIA Director Stansfield Turner, to direct arms merchant Cyrus Hashemi and to finance Hashemi's entry into the international black market arms bazaar.

### *EIR's* warnings ignored

On Aug. 1, 1980, two *EIR* journalists met with officials of the foreign counterintelligence staff of the New York field office of the FBI to provide detailed evidence of the Nahidian-Hashemi plot to kill Tabatabai and carry out other targeted terrorist actions. A 19-page dossier, prepared on July 26, 1980 and submitted simultaneously to the Senate Judiciary Committee then investigating the "Billygate affair," was handed to the FBI at that meeting. According to a transcript of that session, FBI agents acknowledged that Hashemi was a suspected Savama agent.

On Aug. 5, as a followup to the New York City meeting,



*The Muslim Students' Association's meeting in Oxford, Ohio in 1980. Khomeini's secret police agents gave the orders here to assassinate anti-Khomeini Iranian exiles living in the United States.*

Paul Goldstein, an *EIR* counterintelligence specialist, sent a three-page letter to FBI Director William Webster, reviewing a series of face-to-face meetings between *EIR* investigators and representatives of the FBI's Foreign Counterintelligence Section in December 1979 and January 1980. The letter complained of FBI "hostility" and "lack of cooperation" and other "outrageous actions" throughout the spring and summer of 1980, leading up to and beyond the Tabatabai assassination.

The Goldstein letter was answered in an Aug. 22, 1980 letter from FBI Assistant Director Oliver Revell, then head of the Criminal Investigations Division, which stated in part: "I can assure you that the murder of Ali Akbar Tabatabai is thoroughly investigated by the FBI and local law enforcement authorities."

Despite Revell's official response to *EIR*, Nahidian and Hashemi remained protected entities—even after the Carter administration left office. This continued DOJ-FBI protection centered around a 1982 federal grand jury in the Southern District of New York, which whitewashed Hashemi's illegal gun-running activities, and around the protection of Hashemi against discovery in the *Hashemi v. Campaigner* case.

On March 7, the same Oliver Revell submitted an affidavit in response to Campaigner discovery motions placing all documents regarding Hashemi's FBI and DOJ ties under "state secrets privilege." Even Revell's affidavit was sealed by the court and was never made available to the defense.

The invoking of "state secrecy" is reserved for military and foreign policy information of the highest national security classifications.

While DOJ and FBI were taking these extraordinary measures, the CIA released documents to Campaigner and *EIR* attorneys—over the objection of the Justice Department—showing that the Carter administration at the highest levels had foreknowledge of the Nahidian-Hashemi plot to assassinate Tabatabai.

According to a CIA cable No. 4504464, dated June 11, 1980, "The lead commented on a covert funding mechanism utilized by pro-Khomeini Iranians residing in the U. S. Lead told source that funds for clandestine purposes are handled by the Gulf Bank located in NYC. Funds for activities in Washington DC are passed by Gulf Bank through (FNU)Nahidian."

In a followup CIA cable No. 4632503, dated July 3, 1980, the assassination plot is identified: "He has learned that Persian carpet dealer FNU Nahidian . . . were probably involved in the . . . assassination. . . . Nahidian had admitted to him . . . that he is the Savama representative in the Washington area. Nahidian also reportedly claimed that if Iranians in the U.S. were going to be against Khomeini then they would be killed one by one if necessary. . . . Nahidian is also to have told . . . that he and some other pro-Khomeini Iranians will be filming the anti-Khomeini demonstration planned for 27 July 80 in Washington DC."

### **A footnote on Belfield**

Exactly 42 days after the submission of Revell's sealed affidavit to the court, on April 18, 1983, the DOJ-FBI cover-up of the Tabatabai assassination took another bizarre and ugly twist, when Iranian-backed terrorists blew up the U. S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, killing over 50 people, including Robert Ames, a senior CIA Middle East specialist, and his entire staff. According to highly reliable regional sources, when a team of six FBI agents arrived in Beirut days later to probe the bombing, to their horror, they discovered that David Belfield had been among the terrorists who carried out the attack. Wearing a stolen Marine uniform and using forged identification, Belfield had, according to the sources, entered the embassy compound and planted a suitcase of explosives in the basement, that went off at the same time as the car bomb.

It seems that after Belfield escaped by car to Montreal, with FBI complicity, he traveled to Geneva, where a Muslim Brotherhood financier, Said Ramadan, paid him \$100,000 for the Tabatabai hit. After spending several months in training in Teheran, Belfield was assigned on loan to Syrian intelligence in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Under joint Syrian-Iranian auspices, Belfield participated in the April 1983 embassy bombing. According to recently published sources, Belfield is now back in Teheran working at the North American Propaganda Section of the Iranian foreign ministry.

## **The 'comsymps' in the Justice Department**

"Stephen Trott, Meese's investigator, will try to dig a prosecutor's trap for the president. Trott will argue that his inquiry must be kept secret. . . . If he prevails, . . . Trott may succeed in saving his prosecutions at the cost of the presidency. If Mr. Reagan is wise, he will communicate everything discovered, early and often." So wrote John Ehrlichman, former aide to President Nixon, who was once prosecuted by Trott for the alleged break-in into the office of the psychiatrist of "Pentagon Papers" peacenik, Daniel Ellsberg. Ehrlichman's warning in the Dec. 8, 1986 issue of *Newsweek*, was borne out when "high-level Justice Department officials," widely reported to be Trott and his sidekick William Weld, head of the Criminal Division, leaked to the *Washington Post*, that Meese must be excluded from the investigation of Iran arms sales ordered by the President, because of conflict of interest within the Justice Department.

But statements by President Reagan and Attorney-General Edwin Meese that they support the appointment of an "independent counsel" to investigate illegalities in the Iran arms deals, sent would-be watergaters, such as Trott's collaborator Oliver "Buck" Revell, executive director of the FBI, scurrying to cover up their own conflict of interest. Revell announced on Dec. 4 his withdrawal from investigations of the arms deals, because of his past involvement in a National Security Council committee with Lt.-Col. Oliver North.

### **For a real investigation**

As editors of *EIR* warned in a Dec. 3 press conference in Washington, D. C., only an investigation totally independent of Trott and Revell's dirty Justice Department apparatus, could bring to light the U. S. traitors who helped Khomeini into power in Iran, and provided support for his arms supply and terrorist operations since 1979. *EIR*'s editors released to the press documents proving Revell's involvement in the Carter administration's protection of Iranian gun-runner Cyrus Hashemi.

The same team, led by Revell and Trott, that blocked investigation into the Iranian terrorist financiers, is also the heart of the Justice Department's "Get LaRouche" operation,