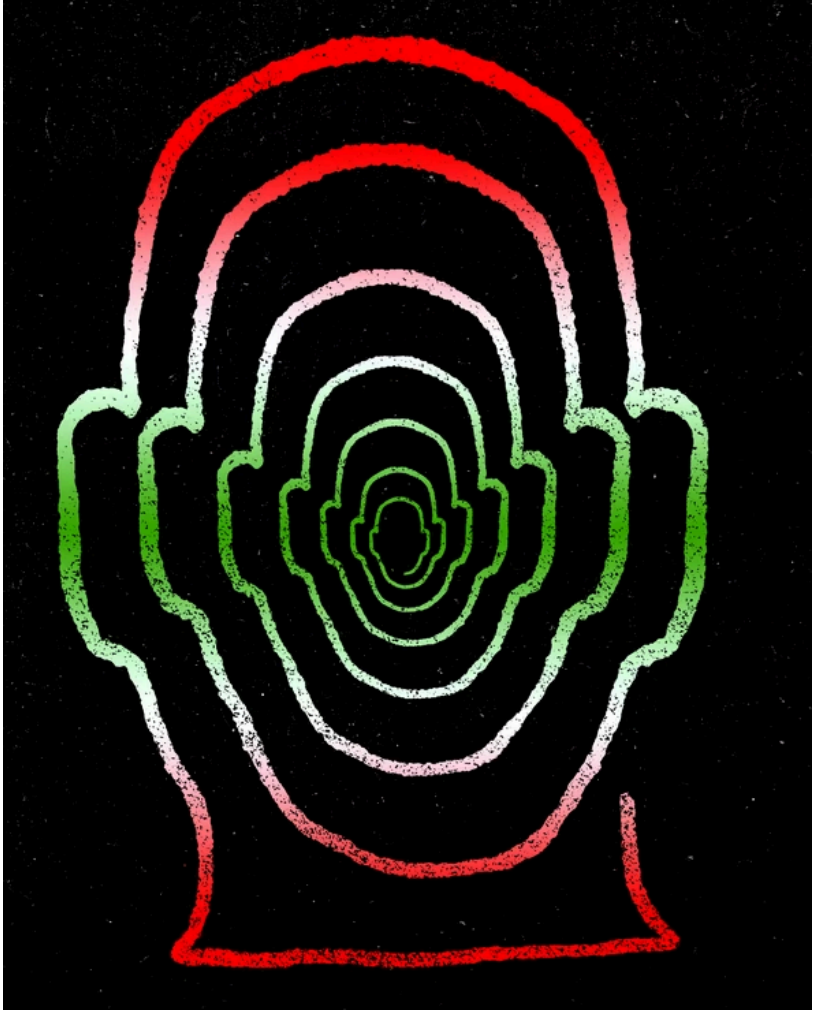
IDEAS

THEY KILLED MY SOURCE

A man claiming to be an Iranian intelligence officer promised me he would reveal his country's secrets. Then he disappeared.

By Shane Harris
Illustrations by Adam Maida



Adam Maida

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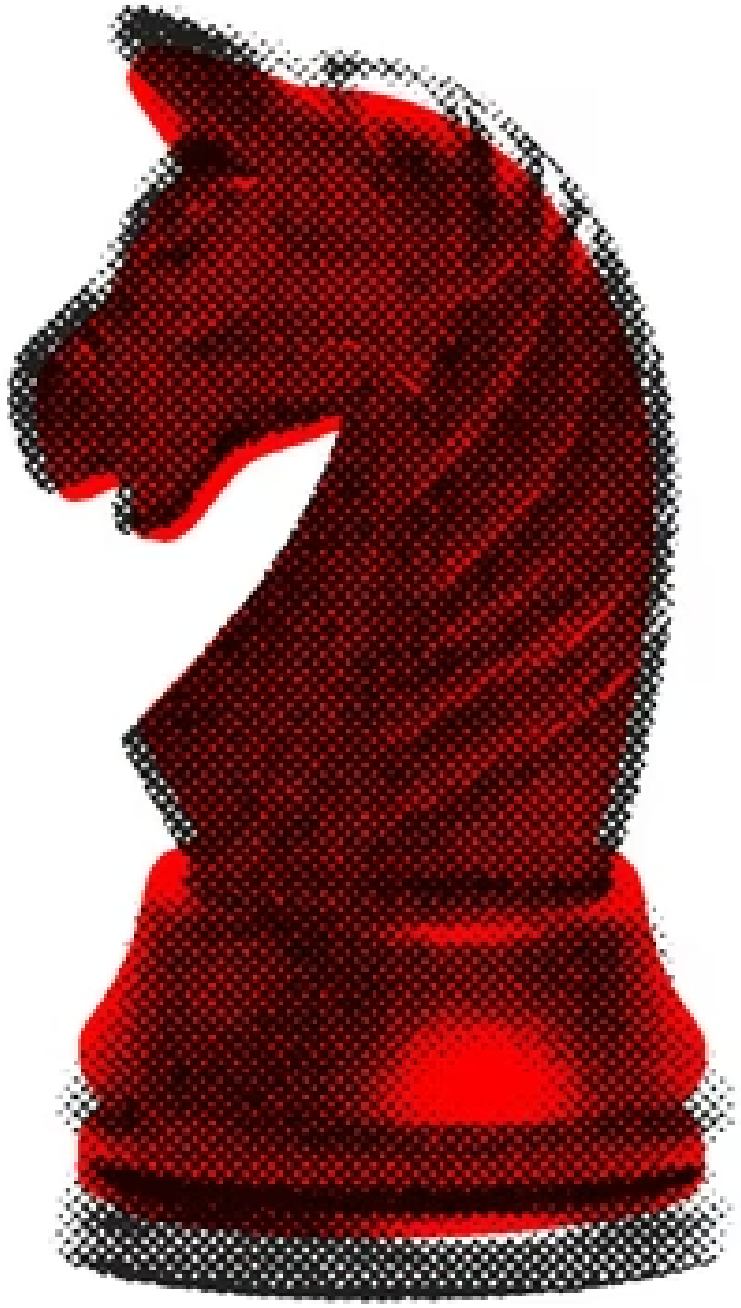

I. THE GAME

In December 2011, the CIA lost control of a stealth drone near the Iranian city of Kashmar, about 140 miles from the Afghanistan border, and it wound up in the regime's possession. On state television, the

Iranian hackers commandeered the aircraft, demonstrating the prowess of a growing cyberarmy that had already alarmed U.S. officials?

Just over four years later, in April 2016, a known Iranian hacker group named Parastoo—the Farsi word for "swallow," the small bird—posted its email address to a cybersecurity message board, inviting journalists to ask it about what had happened to the drone. In my experience covering national security, people who claim to have "the real story" are usually quacks or kooks. Still, I figured it was worth an email.

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"I understand you want to discuss the CIA's RQ-170 drone," I wrote to parastoo@unseen.is on April 12, 2016. "Want to talk?"

Thirty-six hours later, someone calling himself "P" responded, in clumsy but mostly legible English. "Yes, i want my identity protected and in series of either live interviews or chat-based conversations i would like to reveal all behind that story."

Reveal all. Sounded kooky.

P said he was part of Parastoo, which had once broken into a server of the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency and claimed to have hacked the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration. The group had also bragged that it could take over U.S. military drones, even once suggesting that it could send one to attack then–Vice President Joe Biden.

P asked me questions designed to confirm that I was the person he had corresponded with over email. Where did I work? (*The Daily Beast*, at the time.) Did I have a phone number tied to a specific location? He also asked me a series of biographical questions, such as where I went to college, that he could easily corroborate online. My answers, P said, "helped my investigations on you."

No source had ever interrogated me like this before. P didn't talk like a hacker. He was acting like a spy.

P said he was an officer in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, Iran's CIA. And not just any officer. He said he was in charge of an elite cyber-warfare unit—the kind of group that might have been tasked with taking down an American drone.

P described how his colleagues had captured the Sentinel. His unit obtained satellite and radio information about how the drone communicated with its base, as well as technical information about its stealth capabilities, which he claimed Iran had received from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Iran then located the drone mid-flight and prevented it from returning to Afghanistan. The drone wandered aimlessly until gravity took over.

"She ran outa gas and had to emergency landing by parachute," P typed.

By May 11, he trusted me enough to identify himself. "My name is Mohammad Hossein Tajik," he wrote. "I am 35 but very older like 999 years older in the heart and in the ass!" I didn't quite get the joke, but it seemed that life had taken a toll on him.

A "huge number" of Iranian cyber operations "had my signature on the paperwork or I designed it altogether," Mohammad claimed. At the time, Iran had been credibly linked to disruptions of the global financial system

The more we communicated, the less kooky he sounded. Mohammad didn't try to confuse me with technical jargon or wow me with heroics—which made him more credible. Then he said that he didn't actually want to talk about the drone. The Sentinel had been a lure to get my attention.

Mohammad said he wanted my help with a plan. Part one of it: revenge. He wanted to leak information about Iranian intelligence operations in order to hurt and humiliate Iran's leaders, who had profoundly upset him, though he didn't tell me how. In his plan, I would vet Mohammad's claims with my intelligence sources and publish the information if it checked out.

This idea suited me fine. An aggrieved government employee is often a journalist's best source.

Part two of Mohammad's plan was, frankly, insane. He told me he was once an asset for the CIA, and had worked on "big ops." He wanted to rekindle his relationship with the agency. He was hoping I would connect with his former CIA handler using my contacts within the agency, and convey that Mohammad was still a valuable asset, as evidenced by my eventual news articles sourced to him. If the CIA didn't welcome Mohammad back in from the cold, he would expose how the CIA operated inside Iran.

Arash Azizi and Graeme Wood: Anything could happen in Iran

"Using this model," he texted, "i can work with you and get what i want in return."

In blunt fashion, he was expressing how both our businesses work. Mine eschews deception, but journalists collect sources, then assess and second-guess them, just as spies do. A journalist and an intelligence officer are both trying to piece together a coherent story from confusing fragments of reality. And very few journalists, if any, could count a senior Iranian intelligence

happy to proceed with part one: leaking secrets to me.

"I'm in," I typed.

"Alright—let the game begin."

II. THE SOURCE

I HAD NEVER spoken with an Iranian intelligence officer before, so I had no baseline to assess whether Mohammad fit the profile. I pictured some version of Shaun Toub, the actor who had played an Iranian spy chief turned CIA asset in the third season of *Homeland*. Restrained. Unhurried. Elegant.

That was not Mohammad. His patience was short. He tried a little too hard to be funny. He was cocky but vulnerable, and sometimes goofy. I remember

"I got not much social life outside work," he said.

He loved Western culture, especially American movies. He quoted a scene from *The Shawshank Redemption* in which Morgan Freeman's character, released from prison into an unfriendly world, narrates: "No way I'm gonna make it on the outside." We discovered that we were both fans of *All the President's Men*. Perhaps Mohammad fancied himself as Deep Throat, meeting me in a virtual parking garage and hinting at greater revelations to come. Our weekly encrypted conversations—over Cryptocat, Skype, and Proton Mail—had a cinematic thrill. But unlike in *All the President's Men*, I was learning as much about the source himself as the regime he claimed to be undermining.

Mohammad told me he was born into a religious and politically active family. In 1979, his father joined fellow revolutionaries in storming the headquarters of the Shah's secret police force, and interrogating and torturing officers; then he helped found Iran's intelligence service. "I hate this whole SHIT immeasurably," Mohammad told me about the family business. But he was a math prodigy and computer whiz, and at age 18, he started working for the intelligence ministry. Within a decade, he said, he was playing a central role in Iran's aggressive expansion into cyber warfare.

From the December 2004 issue: Mark Bowden on the Iranian hostage-takers

Over several conversations, Mohammad gave me a detailed overview of Iran's cyber battlefield: the countries it was targeting in the Middle East, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the alliances it had formed with Russia and China. He explained how the intelligence ministry concealed its hand by hiring contractors—specifically tech companies run by young men who, like Mohammad, had graduated from computer-science and engineering programs at Iranian universities. Two of Mohammad's

If he was telling the truth, Mohammad was taking me deeper into the regime's cyberworld than any of my sources had ever done. He said he'd been involved in an audacious 2012 attack on Saudi Aramco, the kingdom's oil company, that wiped out information on three-quarters of its office computers. In 2015, Mohammad claimed, his team penetrated a commercial satellite network called iDirect to take control of U.S. drones. I've seen no evidence that Iran was able to use a drone in an attack, though Mohammad described to me how Iran could commandeer one. ("There is no record, evidence, or indication of any such incident" like what Mohammad described, an iDirect spokesperson told me, noting that the company doesn't own or operate drones, nor does it operate any satellite networks.)

Mohammad said his colleagues shared techniques with Russia's military-intelligence service, the GRU, and were behind the 2015 attacks on the electrical system in Turkey, a NATO member.

In his most astonishing claim, Mohammad told me that Iran was responsible for a major cyberattack on the central bank of Bangladesh, from which hackers stole $81 million in February 2016, sowing panic throughout the global financial system. The U.S. Justice Department indicted three hackers from North Korea. Mohammad said that Iran had played a secret role. It had given technical instructions to Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based militia, about how to manipulate a communications network known as SWIFT, which connects financial institutions. The group then traded the information, for missiles, to North Korea.

Mohammad said Iran gave permission for Hezbollah to attack. "Our assumption was they'd do the hack," he said. "But they did something smarter."

If it was revealed that Iran and North Korea were covertly collaborating, the United States' retaliation would presumably be severe. To test Mohammad's

My notebook was filling up with plausibilities. Was Mohammad giving me major scoops, or tall tales? If he was being honest, then he was putting his life at great risk. How badly had the regime wronged him that he would tell these secrets to a journalist? And, before that, to the CIA?

Mohammad said he had been an American intelligence asset for about five years, but indicated that the relationship had ended on bad terms. He told me that the CIA would now engage with him for only one reason: to exfiltrate him from Iran. All he had to do was get to a U.S. consulate or embassy in another country and say an agreed-upon passcode at the front desk. Then he would be protected and free. If that was true, why hadn't he accepted the offer?

III. THE EGO

THERE'S AN OLD SAW in the intelligence profession about what motivates someone to betray their country and spy for another: MICE.

Money: They need it, and will sell information for it.

Mohammad lightly checked the "I" box. Service to the Islamic Republic was Mohammad's "family legacy," he told me, but he'd begun to view the regime as corrupt, hypocritical, and out of touch. The intelligence ministry spied on Iranians with professional ties overseas and accused some of plotting revolution. Iran was cutting itself off from the rest of the world and dismantling recent reforms just as Mohammad was going online and imagining a life beyond the one he knew.

"Through the years specially after internet i get to read and see very much, previously hidden from me and i started to change," Mohammad told me in May 2016, adding: "Eventually i turned into a TRUE ENEMY of this whole shitty regime and all that relates to it from every aspect."

But what really motivated Mohammad was the "E" box: ego. He believed he was smarter than most people, including his contacts at the CIA. He relished playing two roles—trusted by Iran, engaged by the United States. But that took a toll.

Mohammad worked hard to keep up his outward persona of a fervent supporter of the regime and the Islamic Revolution. A member of "God's party/army in all aspects," as he put it. "I live a complicated double life, and it's hurting me as a human inside," he told me. At one point, he described his life as a CIA asset: "Being still a double—turning into a triple and later to a nothing/everything/ticking-bomb." I didn't understand what he meant, but I had the sense that I didn't know the real Mohammad.

As he rose in the intelligence ministry's ranks, he told me, he took several trips to Lebanon and grew close to top Hezbollah leaders, including Imad Mughniyeh, who'd plotted the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut. Mohammad's friendships with some of the world's most notorious terrorists—who had American blood on their hands—would have made him a prized CIA asset. He told me that he'd shared information

claimed direct credit for American operations—that was another sign of his credibility, in my book—but his time with the CIA coincides with other notable U.S.-intelligence successes in Iran. In September 2009, for example, Western leaders announced the discovery of Fordow, an underground uranium-enrichment plant (which the Trump administration would bomb in 2025). Given his position, Mohammad could have known about the site. If he had wanted to "hurt the regime," as he said, he was well placed to do so.

For two months in the late spring and early summer of 2016, Mohammad told me stories about his family, his cyber exploits, his work with the Americans, his plans to settle scores with the regime. I liked him. He made me laugh. I wouldn't call him a friend, but we were friendly.

Vetting Mohammad's more sensational claims took a back seat as I tried to keep pace with a furious news cycle. In one week during July 2016, I juggled stories about the FBI's decision not to recommend prosecution of Hillary Clinton for using a private email server, the Russian government's hacking of the Democratic National Committee's computer network, and the Republican National Convention in Cleveland.

When Mohammad and I spoke on July 2, 2016, he was anticipating a new round of cyberattacks, this time on Saudi Arabian banks. He told me more about how Hezbollah had assisted North Korea with cyber tactics, and I wanted to devote our next conversation to the subject. We agreed to speak three days later.

Mohammad didn't show up online at our designated time. He had never missed an appointment, though he was often preoccupied with work. A few days later, I got a text from a well-known journalist named Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian dissident living in exile in Paris. Mohammad had been sharing information with him, too, and had introduced us weeks earlier. Zam sounded panicked.

"Have you heard what happened?" he asked.

Mohammad was dead.

I felt sick—not just at the news, but out of fear that I might have done something to get Mohammad killed. Had Iranian counterintelligence officers

the day we were supposed to speak. His body had since been buried in Behesht-e Zahra, Tehran's main cemetery.

Using Google Translate, I made sense of Zam's subsequent messages. Amir, Mohammad's youngest brother, had found the body. There had been no autopsy. Zam alleged that Mohammad's father, who was known by the honorific Hajji Vali, had killed his own son in an act of loyalty to country over family.

Then, on July 18, I got a call from the FBI. An agent from the Washington field office said he needed to discuss something sensitive.

The agent came to my house two days later. We sat in the living room. He told me that he specialized in notifying victims of computer hacking. People —presumably unfriendly ones—were chattering about me overseas, and the FBI wasn't sure why. The agent asked: Had anyone sent me strange messages recently?

You don't know the half of it, I thought. "It's Iran, isn't it?" I asked.

The agent nodded. He asked why I thought so.

Without revealing Mohammad's name or that he'd claimed to work for the CIA, I told the agent that I had developed an Iranian source and that we had communicated over the previous two months.

The agent asked for his whereabouts.

He was killed two weeks ago, I said.

The agent sat in silence for a moment. He appeared to choose his next words carefully. A group of Iranians—he didn't say whom they worked for—was discussing me by name, and clearly wanted to know more about me. Now

The agent doubted that I was to blame for the killing. Mohammad had indeed been playing a game. And now I was left with a puzzle.

V. THE PIECES

FIRST, I WANTED to finally answer the big question: Was Mohammad really a spy for the CIA?

had made it possible for the United States to confidently and publicly blame Iran for the cyberattack on Saudi Aramco. Mohammad had told me that he participated in that operation; apparently, he also told the CIA about it.

Mohammad was indeed among the CIA's most well-placed assets, as he had claimed.

The other pieces of the puzzle—who had killed Mohammad, and what had led him to that fate—were harder to assemble.

When Mohammad and the CIA parted ways, in 2013, it was a bad time for spies. Iran had breached the CIA's internet-based system for covertly communicating with its agents in the field. Mohammad told me that he'd never trusted Langley's communications procedures. When he communicated with his handlers, he said, he used his own private network to connect with the Sony laptop the agency had given him.

The laptop prevented Mohammad from taking screenshots, so he used his personal phone to photograph his communications and made copies of information he gave the CIA. "For insurance," he told me. He had broken protocol because he thought he was smarter than the Americans. This was a profound mistake.

After Mohammad's death, I tracked down people who knew him, including friends and Iranian activists living abroad. I learned that he had been arrested by Iran a few months after the CIA cut ties with him, three years before he connected with me. Those phone photos easily could have tipped off the regime. In August 2013, he was taken to a detention center on the eastern outskirts of Tehran. A month later, Mohammad was transferred to Evin Prison, a notorious facility designed to isolate detainees and break them.

All the President's Men had been a touchstone for our relationship. But, with the revelation of his imprisonment, I thought about that other favorite movie of ours. Mohammad had ended up in *Shawshank*—a prisoner in the torture chambers at Evin, but also a lifelong captive of the regime itself.

After spending half a year in jail, Mohammad was released to await trial. This is highly unusual in Iran. But Mohammad was bailed out, according to his friend, by a powerful ally in the security establishment: his father, Hajji Vali.

Mohammad spent six months in a hospital recovering from his injuries. His dark beard turned white. For a year, he couldn't sit straight. Then, in January 2015, Mohammad sent an email to Zam, who had also been tortured in Evin, after he participated in the political protests in 2009. Mohammad told Zam that he had spied for the CIA and that he didn't trust his father. He couldn't talk to his brothers; two also worked for the intelligence service, and the other, Amir, was too young to comprehend the mess Mohammad had made. But he could talk to journalists and dissidents.

Zam told me that he and Mohammad spoke nearly every night for a year. Zam wanted political change. Mohammad wanted payback through political change. He became a valuable anonymous source within the regime for Zam's independent news organization, which had a following in the Iranian diaspora and among foreign journalists. If he ever did leave the country, Mohammad said, he wanted to be known as "Iran's Snowden": a former insider who became a symbol of resistance.

Ego, indeed. Mohammad was engaged in the very behavior for which he was awaiting trial. As if that wasn't crazy enough, he soon started talking to me.

VI. THE TRIPLE AGENT?

MOHAMMAD NEVER TOLD me about his time in prison, or that he had been charged with espionage. Now I understood why he wanted to hurt the regime: It had hurt him.

But I also questioned how truthful Mohammad had been with me. In 2011, *The Christian Science Monitor* had published some of the details of the Sentinel-drone takedown, though not nearly as precise as Mohammad's version. Perhaps he was just parroting that report back to me, with his own embellishments. Mohammad also had been in custody during some of the exploits that he'd claimed his team carried out. How did he know about them? And had he gone back to work for the regime after he was released and was awaiting trial? That seems implausible. More likely, I have concluded, is that Mohammad remained in touch with colleagues and was aware of what they were up to. In hindsight, he was more reckless than I knew.

urged Mohammad to leave Iran. Mohammad said he wasn't ready. He worried about leaving behind Amir.

Mohammad Tajik (*left*) and his youngest brother, Amir (*The Atlantic*)

And, of course, Mohammad had unfinished business with the regime. That's where I came in, as his desired broker with the CIA.

But here's what Mohammad probably never knew, or didn't want to admit: The CIA had cut ties because the risk of working with him became greater than the value of his information. My sources told me he didn't follow instructions. One day he'd be clearheaded; the next he'd be acting paranoid, imagining conspiracies. Some officers wondered if he was taking drugs that impaired his judgment. It's a handler's job to manage sources. And Mohammad, one U.S. official told me, had become "unmanageable."

Something else gave CIA officers pause. No one had ever met Mohammad in the flesh. He was a "walk-in": a volunteer spy rather than a recruit. Mohammad's handlers knew he was special—a senior intelligence officer

wanted to reestablish his relationship with the agency. Perhaps the Iranians had coerced him into working against the Americans, in exchange for his freedom.

I thought about the cryptic message he'd sent me about his life at that time: "Being still a double—turning into a triple and later to a nothing/everything/ticking-bomb."

When Mohammad was trying to reconnect with the Americans, was he actually working for Iran? And by asking for my help, had Mohammad been using me to entrap the CIA?

A nothing/everything/ticking-bomb. That's a man who had come to the end of his rope. Who thought he was dangerous, to others and maybe himself. Now I know that while he was talking with me, Mohammad was about to take the biggest—and final—risk of his life.

VII. THE PUZZLE

According to Zam, Mohammad's next leak was supposed to involve Iran's efforts to acquire a nuclear weapon from another country. I have only Zam's word on this. Mohammad never told me about any such operation; my other sources have never even suggested that Iran attempted to procure a nuke. I can't say if Zam was exaggerating, or if Mohammad had led him on.

Amir, who was perhaps the main reason his brother had stayed in Iran, saw the suitcase and asked where Mohammad was going.

To Turkey to meet a friend, Mohammad replied. You should come with me.

Amir refused. He left the house and told their father that Mohammad was leaving, according to information Zam pieced together from conversations with his own sources and text messages with Amir.

At 3 p.m. on July 5, the day Mohammad and I were supposed to next meet online, his father, Hajji Vali, and another official from the intelligence ministry came to his house, Zam told me. Amir returned home that evening and found his brother's body. A few days later, the home was raided. The authorities took Mohammad's possessions, including his computer.

Rumors have circulated for years in the diaspora about how Mohammad died. His burial certificate lists no cause of death. I've read claims on Iranian blogs that he had a heart attack, but friends told me he was in relatively good health, save for a reliance on painkillers (torture has a long tail).

The most widely shared story among regime critics in exile is that Hajji Vali killed him—if not with his own hands, then by his orders. Zam was certain of this, but he, too, had come from a prominent family that he left behind in Iran. Maybe Mohammad's father was merely a convenient villain for the story Zam was trying to tell.

his son." Avoiding a trial would also have saved the Iranian intelligence service and his father from significant embarrassment.

Could Hajji Vali have murdered his own son? In our many conversations, Mohammad neither excoriated nor extolled his father. He understood Hajji Vali as a product of revolutionary circumstances. Men like him probably wanted Mohammad dead. I can't speak for Hajji Vali, and I couldn't locate him for comment. (Iran's mission to the United Nations declined to comment.)

Iranian intelligence surely found my conversations with Mohammad in his computer hardware. I think what sent the FBI to my door was U.S. surveillance of Mohammad's colleagues as they discussed whether to hack me.

In 2021, five years after Mohammad died, I wanted to check in with Zam to compare notes, to finally start putting together the puzzle after years of professional distraction. I discovered that a year earlier, Zam had been lured to Iraq with the promise of interviewing a prominent cleric—and then apprehended, taken to Iran, and hanged.

You can find only traces of Mohammad today. Search his name online, and you'll see some court documents, a few blog posts about his death, and a short Wikipedia entry. Activist bloggers briefly celebrated Mohammad as a martyr, but he was not, in the end, "Iran's Snowden."

I won't pretend that I really knew Mohammad. Maybe I knew one version of him—the version in a selfie I obtained. With his thick black glasses and rumpled shirt, he looked like the intense nerd I'd always envisioned. I suspect he never told me about his prison time and torture because he considered them detours from his objectives.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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