

Iranian General Reportedly Defects (Ali Reza Asghari, thought to have MANY secrets)

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A former high-ranking Iranian government official, Brig. Gen. Alireza Asghari, 63, has defected to the United States, Iranian exiles and other sources told Newsmax today.

Asghari had access to highly-classified intelligence information and "defected to the Americans with lots of secrets," respected Iranian journalist Alireza Nourizadeh told Newsmax from London.

The disappearance of the former Revolutionary Guards General has created a panic in Tehran.

Gen. Asghari left Iran on an officially-sanctioned trip to Damascus, Syria, then went missing during a stop-over in Istanbul, Turkey on February 7, according to statements by Iranian government officials in Tehran.

Nourizadeh believes he had been sent to Damascus to supervise an arms deal between Iran and Syria that was signed last June during a trip to Tehran by Syria's defense minister.

"It is possible that former deputy defense minister Asghari was kidnapped by Western intelligence services because of his Defense Ministry background," the head of Iran's national police, Gen. Ismail Ahmadi-Moghaddam, said in Tehran yesterday.

But Newsmax has learned from Iranian sources that Gen. Asghari's family also managed to leave Iran just before he went missing, and that he sold his house in the Narmak area of Tehran in December.

Both are considered clear indications that he defected and had been planning his departure for some time.

As a senior member of the general staff of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, Gen. Asghari had access to highly-classified operational information, as well as strategic planning documents, said Shahriar Ahy, an Iranian political analyst based in Washington, D.C.

"It will take them months to know just what they've lost," Ahy told Newsmax today.

The damage control investigation could reach the very summit of the Iranian government because of Gen. Asghari's long-standing personal relationship to former Defense minister Admiral Ali Shakhani, Ahy said.

"The loss of Gen. Asghari will severely hamper the regime's operations outside the country, because he will pull back the cloth on what he knows," Ahy said. "Intelligence agents will be called back, and operations will be put into deep freeze" as the regime tries to figure out what secrets Asghari compromised.

Gen. Asghari is believed to have detailed knowledge of the Revolutionary Guards Qods Force units operating in Iraq.

He is also believed to have come out with extensive information on Iran's clandestine nuclear weapons program, which will make it harder for Russia and China to come to Iran's defense at the ongoing 6-power talks on Iran's nuclear program.

From 1989-1993, Gen. Asghari was stationed in Lebanon as Iran's liaison to Hezbollah. Israeli press accounts have identified him as the Iranian official who "knows the most" about what happened to Israeli navigator Ron Arad, who was reportedly "sold" to Iran after his plane was shot down over southern Lebanon in 1986.

The Iranian regime requires top official such as Gen. Asghari to obtain an authorization before they can travel abroad.

Gen. Asghari's 10-day trip to Syria was approved by the military judicial authorities, sources inside Iran told Newsmax. Two days after he arrived in Damascus, his family managed to leave Iran, the sources said.

The main impediment to defections by high-ranking Iranian officials is fear that any family members left behind will be arrested, tortured, and possibly killed.

The Persian-language website Baztab.com claims that Gen. Asghari's name was on a CIA "hit list" of twenty former

Revolutionary Guards officers. Baztab is owned by former Revolutionary Guards commander Gen. Mohsen Rezai, now a top aide to former president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani.

Alireza Nourizadeh, the Iranian journalist based in London, tells Newsmax that Gen. Asghari planned his defection carefully.

"While he was in Damascus, he sent a fax or an email to Tehran saying that one of his contacts, who was an arms dealer, was in Turkey and wanted to meet him," he told Newsmax. "So they gave him permission to go to Turkey, where he defected."

The Iranian military attaché in Istanbul had reserved a room for Gen. Asghari at the Continental hotel, Nourizadeh said, but Asghari complained that it was not safe. Instead, he booked three rooms at the Gilan Hotel, in the Taksim district which is popular among Iranians. "After calling a relative in Tehran, he left the hotel at 6:30 PM and disappeared," he said.

During the 1990s, Gen. Asghari was in charge of short and medium-range missile projects at the Defense Industries Organization. "He ran the Nazeat, Fajr, and Zelzal missile programs," Nourizadeh said.

From 1996-1997, he worked on secret nuclear procurement projects, and traveled frequently to Russia, China, North Korea, and Southeast Asia buying equipment and parts.

Nourizadeh believes Gen. Asghari defected because he had incurred the wrath of his superiors in the Defense ministry during a stint as the Defense Ministry's Inspector General.

"He discovered two gangs of corrupt officials who had embezzled the government for \$90 million and \$150 million," Nourizadeh said. "After he exposed them, he was arrested. He was Mr. Clean."

Eventually, Gen. Asghari was rehabilitated and put to work on the Iran-Syria arms deals signed last year, but he never forgave his superiors for orchestrating his fall from power.