

Former FAA Contractor Indicted for Illegally Acting as an Agent of the Iranian Government

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U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Columbia

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Defendant Agreed to Work on Behalf of the Iranian Government and Planned to Provide Sensitive Information to Iranian Intelligence

WASHINGTON – Former Federal Aviation Administration contractor Abouzar Rahmati, 42, a naturalized U.S. citizen and resident of Great Falls, Virginia, was indicted today for acting and conspiring to act as an illegal agent of the Iranian government in the United States.

The announcement was made by U.S. Attorney Matthew M. Graves, Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen, and FBI Assistant Director in Charge David Sundberg of the Washington Field Office.

According to the indictment, from at least December 2017 through June 2024, Rahmati conspired with Iranian government officials and intelligence operatives to act on their behalf in the United States, including by meeting with Iranian intelligence officers in Iran, communicating by email using a cover story to hide his conduct, obtaining open-source and private materials about the U.S. solar energy industry to provide to Iranian intelligence, obtaining employment with an FAA contractor with access to sensitive information, and exfiltrating sensitive FAA documents to provide to Iranian intelligence.

"This defendant is charged with infiltrating a U.S. agency with the intent of providing Iran with sensitive information vital to our national security," said U.S. Attorney Graves. "Thanks to the great work of the FBI and the FAA's investigators, this defendant was stopped in his tracks and a known adversary's plot was exposed."

“As alleged, the defendant conspired with Iranian officials and intelligence operatives, even lying to obtain employment as a U.S. government contractor only to then share sensitive government materials with Iran,” Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “When undisclosed agents of Iran or any other foreign government seek to infiltrate American companies or government agencies, the Justice Department will use every available tool to identify them and bring them to justice.”

“The FBI and U.S. Government have repeatedly warned of the global threat the Government of Iran poses to our national security on all fronts, including the targeting of our critical infrastructure,” said Sundberg, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI Washington Field Office. “Mr. Rahmati used his access to provide sensitive aviation materials to a hostile foreign intelligence service. The FBI will aggressively pursue any foreign actor or government that targets U.S. critical infrastructure in any attempt to disrupt or gain access to our aviation sector. We want to recognize and thank our partners at the FAA who worked alongside us in investigating this threat to our national security.”

According to the indictment, from June 2009 to May 2010, Rahmati served as a First Lieutenant in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—an Iranian military and counterintelligence organization under the authority of the Supreme Leader of Iran which has been designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States Government. After being discharged from the IRGC, Rahmati lied to the United States government regarding his military service with the IRGC in order to, among other things, gain employment as a U.S. government contractor.

In August 2017, Rahmati offered his services to the Iranian government through a senior Iranian government official who previously worked in Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security and with whom Rahmati had previously attended university. Four months later, in December 2017, Rahmati traveled to Iran, where he met with Iranian intelligence operatives and government officials and agreed to obtain information about the U.S. solar energy industry, to provide that information to Iranian officials, and to conduct future communications under a cover story based on purported discussions about research with fellow academics.

After Rahmati returned to the United States in December 2017, he obtained various private and open-source materials related to the U.S. solar energy industry and provided them to an Iranian government official. Rahmati also applied for multiple positions with private companies and U.S. government entities that would provide him with access to sensitive information, eventually obtaining a position with U.S. COMPANY 1 supporting the FAA on a contract related to the FAA’s National Airspace System (NAS).

After Rahmati obtained the position, he informed an Iranian intelligence officer that he was “in the process of moving to and joining a new company” and that they could “work more effectively if it is finalized.”

In response to tasking from Iranian officials, and in furtherance of his agency relationship with the Government of Iran, Rahmati exploited his employment with U.S. COMPANY 1 by downloading sensitive U.S. COMPANY 1 documents related to the FAA, storing them on removable media, and taking them to Iran, where he provided sensitive documents to the Government of Iran in April 2022. These included documents related to the NAS that would give a person unfamiliar with NAS facility engineering a reasonable understanding of how the NAS power and electrical architecture is configured.

After he returned to the United States in April 2022, in response to tasking from Iranian government officials, Rahmati sent additional information relating to solar energy, solar panels, the FAA, U.S. airports, and U.S. air traffic control towers to his brother, a co-conspirator, so that he would provide those files to Iranian intelligence on behalf of Rahmati.

This case is being investigated by the FBI’s Washington Field Office. Significant assistance was provided by the FAA’s Office of Investigations and Professional Responsibility.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Christopher Tortorice and Kimberly Paschall for the District of Columbia and Trial Attorneys Beau Barnes and Alexander Wharton of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section. Significant assistance was provided by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Virginia.

An indictment is merely an allegation and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.