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Subject: Just Another American Hit Man, Actor and Journalist Living in Iran

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Just Another American Hit Man, Actor and Journalist Living in Iran

By [Robert Mackey](#)



A still image from the 2006 documentary “[American Fugitive: The Truth About Hassan](#),” showing Hassan Abdulrahman (a/k/a David Theodore Belfield and Dawud Salahuddin), an American living in Iran.

For some time The Lede has been wondering what sort of person works at [the Web site of Press TV](#), Iran’s state-supported, English-language satellite channel. After all, to judge by what’s written on blogs and Twitter accounts by Web-savvy Iranians who speak English, that part of the country’s population seems to skew quite heavily against the current government, which owns Press TV and clearly exerts an influence over its reports.

Two weeks ago, [The Times of London discovered](#) that until recently, the man running Press TV’s Web site was an American who fled the United States in 1980 after carrying out a political assassination in the Washington suburbs on behalf of the Iranian government.

The man, who now uses the name Hassan Abdulrahman, was formerly known as known as Dawud Salahuddin — which is the name he took at the age of 18 when he converted to Islam and first got involved with Islamist radical movements in the United States. (Before that he was David Theodore Belfield, the son of a churchgoing Baptist family from Bay Shore, Long Island.)

Mr. Abdulrahman first worked on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Iran when it was little more than a year

old. In 1980, he was a security guard at an Iranian diplomatic office in Washington when he accepted an assignment from the revolutionary government of Iran to assassinate a former member of the Shah's regime living in exile in Bethesda, Md.

At first, [Mr. Abdulrahman told The New Yorker](#) in 2002, he tried to convince the Iranians to let him kill a more prominent American target. He suggested either Henry Kissinger or Kermit Roosevelt — a grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt who had [orchestrated the 1953 plot](#) to depose Iran's prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and return the Shah to power. But his Iranian handlers were less concerned with striking a symbolic blow than with eliminating Ali Akbar Tabatabai, the exile who was holding meetings of a counter-revolutionary group at his home in Bethesda at the time.

Disguised as a mailman, Mr. Abdulrahman showed up at Mr. Tabatabai's front door on July 22, 1980, shot and killed him and then fled to Iran by way of Canada and Switzerland. In the three decades since, he has compiled an extraordinary resume in Iran, working by turns as an English teacher, a war correspondent and a Web editor. He also found time to fight alongside the Afghan mujahedeen in their war against the Soviets in the 1980s and act in a film by one of Iran's leading directors in 2000. Two years ago, when Robert Levinson, a former F.B.I. agent investigating cigarette smuggling in Iran, disappeared in mysterious circumstances, [it emerged](#) that he had been meeting with Mr. Abdulrahman just before he went missing.

This month, Mr. Abdulrahman told the Times of London that he had been Press TV's chief online editor for three years, but had resigned from the government-backed Web site two months ago. He was also surprisingly frank about Press TV's approach to the news, saying:

No, I don't think Press TV is about [real journalism]. By its nature, state journalism is not journalism. They have some programs on there that might be, but generally it's not.

While Mr. Abdulrahman's work for Press TV, apparently since it was founded in 2007, during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first term, might seem like a tacit endorsement of the current government, his resignation and frank remarks could indicate that he is not happy with what the Islamic Republic he killed to defend has become. Indeed Mr. Abdulrahman, who is married to an Iranian woman and lives in Karaj, outside Tehran, told The Times of London: "I'm living in a situation right now that's a little bit difficult."

Mr. Abdulrahman also seems to have ties to some of Iran's leading reformists. In 2006, the director of a Canadian documentary about his life in Iran, "American Fugitive: The Truth About Hassan," explained in [an interview with Maclean's](#) that Mr. Abdulrahman "was close to Vice President Mme. [Massoumeh] Ebtekar," who was a member of reformist president Mohammad Khatami's cabinet. Ms. Ebtekar was Iran's first female vice president and has been outspoken in her dismay at the disputed presidential election on [her English-language blog](#). According to [a report in The Tehran Times](#), she had planned to run for president herself this year, but decided to support Mir Hussein Moussavi to avoid splitting the reformist vote.

As a reminder that Iran's leading reformists are far from the Western lackeys their conservative opponents suggest, when Mr. Abdulrahman was acting as an assassin in Washington on behalf of the nascent Islamic Republic, Ms. Ebtekar was a spokeswoman for the hostage-takers at the United States Embassy in Tehran.

Mr. Abdulrahman has also been involved with another prominent reformist with a revolutionary past. In 2001, when Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film about Afghanistan, "[Kandahar](#)," was released [to great acclaim](#) in the United States, a relative of the man Mr. Abdulrahman killed in 1980 recognized him as one of the actors in it. In the film, Mr. Abdulrahman played the part of an African-American convert to Islam working as a doctor in Afghanistan.



A still frame from the Iranian film “Kandahar,” in which the American fugitive played a doctor working in Afghanistan.

After Mr. Abdulrahman was recognized, an article in Time magazine headlined, “[A Killer in ‘Kandahar?’](#)” was featured in an Iranian newspaper. In response, Mr. Makhmalbaf wrote [an essay for The Guardian](#) in which he said that he had no idea of Mr. Abdulrahman’s past when he cast him in his film, but argued that the assassination had to be understood in context. Mr. Makhmalbaf wrote in January 2002:

He is accused of having killed a prominent member of the Shah’s secret police — the Savak — in the US at the time of the Iranian revolution, and then of seeking asylum in Iran. This was at a time when the entire Iranian nation was searching for members of Savak in order to destroy them for having been chiefly responsible for their misery, in much the same way as Americans are hunting members of Al Qaeda now. [...]

In 1974, when I was 17, and was arrested and hospitalized for 14 days because of a gunshot, the Shah’s secret police so brutally tortured me that I had to spend another 100 days in the police hospital. I had to be operated on three times. Now, 27 years later, I still have four huge scars from the torture, covering about 20 square centimeters of my body. One of the people who tortured me lives in Los Angeles, I have heard, and two others live in Washington DC and have received political asylum from the U.S. [...]

I am told that the 70 or 80-year-old brother of Belfield’s victim Tabatabai is now in the last season of his life, after revenge, and that some 20 years after the event he has come to search for the killer of his brother. He does not understand that Belfield is also a victim — a victim of the ideal he believed in. His humanity, when he opened fire against his ideological enemy, was martyred by his idealism.

Mr. Makhmalbaf was himself a teenage revolutionary but has recently been serving as an unofficial spokesman for Iran’s opposition movement. As The Lede mentioned last week, his daughter Hana just completed a film about the disputed election called “Green Days.”

While Mr. Abdulrahman told The New Yorker that he had killed but not murdered Mr. Tabatabai — “It was an act of war,” he said in 2002 — his remarks about the assassination this month to The Times of London suggest that Mr. Makhmalbaf may have been right when he said that the act had killed something in him as well. Mr. Abdulrahman told the British newspaper that there was nothing “great,” in what he’d done, saying: “What’s great work about killing a man? It’s pretty easy in the modern age. You think it’s great that the Americans have killed a million people in Iraq? Or that they are getting killed every day and killing hundreds of people in Afghanistan?” What, he asked with an expletive, “is great about that?”

Islamic Republic cannot be reformed! Regime Change is the only option!

A regime that prefers Hamas and Hezbollah to its own citizens, rapes its daughters and sons, does not have legitimacy and must be thrown out and tried for its crimes!

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