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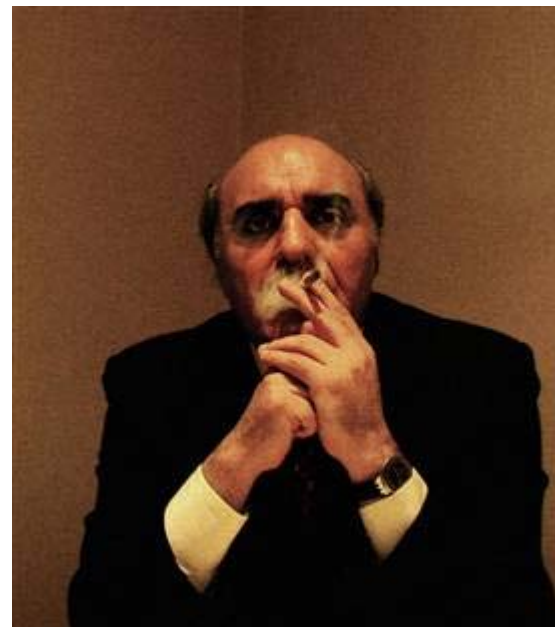


## Exclusive: Regime Change in Iran? One Man's Secret Plan.

By Mark Hosenball

Dec. 22 issue - What was international man of mystery Manucher Ghorbanifar up to when he met with top Pentagon experts on Iran? In a NEWSWEEK interview in Paris last month, Ghorbanifar, a former Iranian spy who helped launch the Iran-contra affair, says one of the things he discussed with Defense officials Harold Rhode and Larry Franklin at meetings in Rome in December 2001 (and in Paris last June with only Rhode) was regime change in Iran. Ghorbanifar says there are Iranians capable of organizing a peaceful revolution against the ruling theocracy. He says his contacts know where Saddam Hussein hid \$340 million in cash. With American help, he says, this money could be retrieved and half used to overthrow the ayatollahs. (The other half would be turned over to the United States.) Ghorbanifar says he told his U.S. interlocutors that ousting the mullahs would be a breakthrough in the war on terror because top Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, are in Iran. ("You won't be surprised if you find that Saddam Hussein is on one of the Iranian islands.") Among other intel Ghorbanifar says he and associates gave the Pentagon: a warning that terrorists in Iraq would attack hotels. He also says he had advance info about Iranian nukes and a terrorist plot in Canada. Financial gain was never his objective, he says: "We wanted to give them the money, not to take the money."

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Alex Majoli / Magnum Photos for Newsweek

Iran's Chalabi? Manucher Ghorbanifar says he talked secretly with Pentagon officials about plans for regime change in Iran

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The Pentagon cut off contact with Ghorbanifar, whom the CIA years ago labeled as a fabricator, after news about the talks broke last summer. But controversy about the Iranian still reverberates in Washington. Administration sources say that when White House officials OK'd what they believed was a Pentagon effort to gather info about Iranian terrorist activity in Afghanistan, they didn't know Ghorbanifar was involved. When senior officials learned in 2002 about Ghorbanifar—and that regime change was on his agenda—they decided further contacts were "not worth pursuing." But Ghorbanifar says he continued to communicate with Rhode, and sometimes Franklin, by phone and fax five or six times a week until shortly after the Paris meeting last summer. (The Pentagon says any such contacts were sporadic and not authorized by top officials.) In Congress, investigations into the Ghorbanifar story have sparked partisan tensions. Democrats want to know if the Ghorbanifar contacts are evidence of "rogue" espionage by a secretive Pentagon unit that allegedly dealt with controversial Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi; Republicans want to know whether the CIA refused to meet with potential informants merely because the middleman—Ghorbanifar—was someone the agency distrusted. A Defense official says any discussion that Ghorbanifar had with Pentagon experts about regime change was a "one-way conversation."

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