

## Robert Malley, key figure once behind U.S.-Cuba policy, under investigation

By Maria C. Werlau

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On June 29, 2023, President Biden’s Special Envoy to Iran and Senior Director at the National Security Council, Robert Malley, was placed on unpaid leave after his security clearance had been suspended (apparently weeks earlier) reportedly due to serious security concerns regarding “personal conduct,” “handling of protected information,” and “use of information technology.”<sup>1</sup> He is also under FBI investigation, which presumably suggests potential criminal conduct.<sup>2</sup>



Robert Malley, photo: Wikipedia.

Malley was the most senior official focused on the Middle East both in the Biden and Obama administrations. He was lead negotiator for international talks on the Syrian civil war and White House “point person during the later stage”<sup>3</sup> of the negotiations leading to the Iran nuclear deal of 2015 that offered Iran sanctions relief and tens of billions of dollars of freed frozen assets and oil revenues.<sup>4/5</sup> Ben Rhodes, Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor, told *The New York Times* that Malley was “a favored trouble-shooter” and also described the “echo chamber” created by the White House with academics and the media to validate Obama’s foreign policy and disarm critics of concessions to Iran. This was the same methodology used to advance Cuba policy, for which Malley had played “a leading role” during the Clinton administration.<sup>6</sup> Rhodes had led the secret negotiations with Raul Castro’s son that, skirting

Congressional input or review and public debate, had led to an unexpected announcement on December 17, 2015 of a normalization of U.S. relations with the Cuban dictatorship.

Malley has long been viewed as “dangerously conciliatory” toward the Iranian regime<sup>7</sup> and his stance for negotiating with the likes of Syria and Iran or finding “some kind of accommodation” with

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<sup>1</sup> Sadegh Fereydounabadi, “Exclusive: The letter that brought Rob Malley down,” Tehran, *Tehran Times*, Aug. 27, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Josh Rogin, “Inside the saga of the State Department’s missing Iran envoy,” *The Washington Post*, Sep. 6, 2023; Dominic Green, “Why are Ivy League schools rushing to shower Robert Malley with honours?,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, Aug. 24, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> David Samuels, “The aspiring novelist who became Obama’s foreign-policy guru - How Ben Rhodes rewrote the rules of diplomacy for the digital age,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement was with the “P5+1” group, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China—plus Germany) and the European Union.

<sup>5</sup> The Trump administration walked back the deal and Malley is said to have been working to revive it.

<sup>6</sup> “Robert Malley,” *Philanthropy Forum*, <https://philanthropyforum.org/people/robert-malley/> (Accessed in 2016, this link is no longer available.)

<sup>7</sup> Michael Crowley, “Biden’s Iran envoy is placed on leave amid security clearance review,” Washington, *The New York Times*, Jun. 29, 2023.

Hamas<sup>8</sup> is well known. Although Malley is not known to have influenced Cuba policy directly in the Obama and Biden administrations, the approach to normalize tyrannical governments has helped legitimize and solidify regimes such as Cuba's and Venezuela's and contributed to dismissing the real and growing threat they pose to U.S. and regional security.

Malley's background would have inclined him to view autocratic regimes including Cuba's in sympathetic terms. His parents openly worked to advance views and agendas aligned with the Cuban regime's and he has, at the very least, been influential in advancing similar objectives. According to a former Cuban intelligence official, he and his parents fit the profile of highly recruitable individuals and likely targets of Cuba's intelligence service, whether as agents of influence and/or clandestine agents/spies.<sup>9/10</sup> (There is no evidence or suggestion to that effect.)

### Malley's views

The only on-the-record remarks by Malley on Cuba policy that have been found are from May 2018, in his reported response to a question from Cuba's Prensa Latina news agency during a meeting with members of the Foreign Press Association in France when he was president of the International Crisis Group during the Trump Administration. Malley is quoted as stating: "The U.S. blockade on Cuba is now meaningless and out of date. ... Cuba is not a threat to the national security of the United States, so the sanctions, the blockade, all that, makes no sense. ... The blockade policy is truly a shameful page, and it did not succeed. ... Obama, using his executive powers and without Congressional consent, tried to ease the economic, commercial and financial siege of the Caribbean state."<sup>11</sup>

Malley was an informal advisor to the Obama presidential campaign when it severed ties with him on May 9, 2008, after the British *Times* reported of his discussions with Hamas, listed by the U.S. State Department as a terrorist organization since 1997. Also in 2008, the Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Hayat* reported that Hamas had been engaged in talks with presidential candidate Obama for months "through aides." At around that time, Senator Obama told an audience in Oregon that Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela did not pose a serious threat to the U.S.,<sup>12</sup> although the three regimes' shared hostility to the United States is well documented.

It is hard to imagine that Malley, who must have had high-level access to U.S. intelligence during the Clinton Administration, would have ignored Cuba's ties to Middle Eastern terrorist groups going back decades and with revolutionary Iran since 1979. There is ample evidence in open sources.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in 1999 Cubans were hired to travel to Iran to advise its regime on developing social assistance networks, or "zakat committees;" these have been utilized by Hamas, Hezbollah, and

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<sup>8</sup> Nathan Guttman, "Peace negotiator who advised Obama campaign strikes back at critics," *Forward*, Feb. 20, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Enrique García, former official of Cuba's Directorate of Intelligence who defected to the U.S. in Jan, 1989, interviewed by Maria C. Werlau, Miami, 2016 and 2023. (Mr. García is related to the author.)

<sup>10</sup> According to García, agents of influence may be working for or with an intelligence service knowingly or may just be collaborating and supporting a shared agenda; in either case, they conduct their contacts and activities openly. They become clandestine agents when they have been recruited to receive guidance and orders as well as pass information secretly. (E. García, op. cit.)

<sup>11</sup> Jorge Ruiz Miyares, "Former Obama advisor calls Trump's Cuba policy 'out of date'," Paris, *Radio Habana Cuba*, Mar. 6, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Kelly, "Obama Backs Off Another Campaign Pledge," *Real Clear Politics*, Jun. 10, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance: Juan Benemelis, *Las guerras secretas de Fidel Castro*, Miami: Grupo de Apoyo a la Disidencia, 2003, pp. 233-246; and Maria C. Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela: A Strategic Occupation with Global Implications*, Neo Club Press/Free Society Project, 2019.

other groups and proven very beneficial in helping establish legitimacy among their dependent populations.<sup>14</sup> Infamously, in May 2001, four months before the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, during a state visit by Fidel Castro to Iran, he and Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, agreed to defeat America hand-in-hand and rejoiced in the conviction that the U.S. was weak, very vulnerable, and fragile.<sup>15</sup> In June 2008, the U.S. Treasury Department designated for asset control two Hezbollah supporters bearing Venezuelan passports and the Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) declared: "It is extremely troubling to see the Government of Venezuela employing and providing safe harbor to Hezbollah facilitators and fundraisers."<sup>16</sup>

In 2008 Malley and the Obama campaign perhaps ignored what became increasingly evident during the Obama presidency: that the Cuban and Venezuelan regimes provide support and cover for Iran-supported Islamist terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah to carry out criminal activities in Latin America, raise funds, monitor Israeli and Western targets, and recruit members.<sup>17</sup> As Obama's point man on the Middle East --and perhaps extra-officially advised on Cuba policy--, Malley could not ignore the strengthening Iran-Cuba-Venezuela comprehensive alliance, a dangerous axis exacerbated with China and Russia's participation during his leading role in the Biden administration.

Malley reportedly once wrote that the Israeli treatment of Arabs was "shameful."<sup>18</sup> In his role as Director of Mideast Policy for the think tank International Crisis Group, Malley reportedly advocated for progressive foreign policies that were often completely opposite to the prevailing preferences of both Republicans and Democrats to isolate Syria after it destabilized Lebanon and advocating to reach out to Iran and conduct formal talks with Hamas.<sup>19</sup> He published articles in the *New York Review of Books* co-authored by Hussein Agha, a Palestinian academic member of Arafat's negotiating team, that reportedly blamed Israel and the U.S for the failure of the July 2000 Camp David summit and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that followed, arguing that America and Israel conspired to deprive the Palestinians of their human rights. Despite this being widely disputed by influential actors such as Ambassador Dennis Ross,<sup>20</sup> it "managed to become the official narrative of the pro-Palestinian camp in the US."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jon B. Perdue, *The war of all the people: the nexus of Latin American radicalism and Middle Eastern terrorism* (Virginia, Potomac Books, 2012), pp. 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> "Ayatollah Khamenei, Fidel Castro meet (9.5.2001)," Tehran, *IRNA*, May 9, 2001. (News reports from international agencies are apparently derived from Iran's news agency (INRA) and translated from Farsi, all have slightly different wording in English and Spanish to paraphrase Castro and Khamenei.)

<sup>16</sup> "Treasury targets Hizballah in Venezuela," Press Center, US Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., Jun. 18, 2008, [goo.gl/xZXDYa](http://goo.gl/xZXDYa).

<sup>17</sup> Emili J. Blasco, "Irán y Rusia enviarán barcos y aviones a Venezuela para disuadir a Trump," *ABC*, Dec. 11, 2018; Roger F. Noriega, "Hezbollah's strategic shift: A global terrorist threat," Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, Mar. 20, 2013; Frances Martel, "Report: Venezuela oil deal laundered 'hundreds of millions' into Iran," *Breitbart*, Dec. 12, 2016; Joseph M. Humire, "Iran, Russia, and China's central role in the Venezuela crisis," Gatestone Institute, International Policy Council, Feb. 14, 2018; Frances Martel, "Report: over 300 Hezbollah operatives secured Venezuelan passports after 2007," *Breitbart*, Apr. 22, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Isabel Vincent, "Ex-Iran envoy Robert Malley was critical of Israel, has family ties to PLO," *The New York Post*, Oct. 14, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Radosh, "Obama quietly adds Hamas apologist Robert Malley to ISIS policy team," *Hudson*, Dec. 4, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Hussein Aboubakr Mansour, "Robert Malley and the call from the Third World," *Middle East Forum/EMET* (Endowment for Middle East Truth), Jul. 20, 2023; Lee Smith, "The honest broker: Robert Malley, a former Clinton official, says Hamas must be engaged," *Tablet*, Apr. 14, 2010.

When President Obama appointed Malley as White House Special Advisor on ISIS, Ronald Radosh of the Hudson Institute noted that it coincided with the lifting of Iran sanctions despite a new IAEA report establishing that Iran's scientific work had indeed been linked to nuclear weapons development. Radosh qualified Malley's track record as "dissing Israel, smuggling up to Hamas, shielding Assad, and promoting the containment of a nuclear-armed Iran."<sup>22</sup> Malley's advocacy of policies of appeasement, he claimed, "focused on recognizing the legitimacy of Middle East dictators and dictatorial, theocratic regimes," which made him "the kind of new-age negotiator who thinks there is no tyrant too awful to shun --unless, of course, you are talking about Israel-- and is always eager to play up the "positive" aspects of genocidal terrorist regimes as the justification for allowing them right there in the tent, seated next to you."<sup>23</sup>

In 2008 Malley shared his views on the U.S.: "Too often, America has acted like an awkward giant—more awkward than giant, and with a destructive awkwardness to boot. It clumsily intervenes in local politics, anoints pre-selected leaders, misreads local dynamics, misinterprets local balances of power, misuses its might, misjudges the toxicity of its embrace, encourages confrontation, exports political models, and plays with the sectarian genie. Throughout, it has tended to overestimate the role of money or security assistance, neglecting the impact of conviction, loyalty, ideology and faith. It has banked on people's exhaustion with struggle, ignoring that exhaustion is least felt by those most eager to continue the fight. In the process, it has cut itself off from, and left itself with no leverage over, the region's more dynamic actors. Instead, it helped create local elites that dutifully parrot the West's discourse and depend on it for resources and support, yet are largely lacking in effective domestic constituencies. Worse, it helped create local elites weakened by the very support the US provides them. How much more and how much better it could have done with so much less."<sup>24</sup>

During Republican administrations, Malley has taken leadership positions in the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, including as CEO; the organization has been described as "a leftwing foreign policy think tank which was jump-started by George Soros' funds."<sup>25</sup>

## Malley's background

### Education

Robert Malley is a graduate of Yale University and of Harvard Law School.<sup>26</sup> He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, earning a Ph.D. in Political Philosophy. In 1997, he published a book (that might have also been the subject of his doctoral thesis) about Third Worldism and its decline titled *The call from Algeria: Third Worldism, revolution, and the turn to Islam*.<sup>27</sup>

He was a fellow student of Barak Obama at Harvard Law School and is said to have a longstanding relationship with Secretary of State Antony Blinken since they were boyhood classmates at the posh international school Ecole Jeannine Manuel of Paris.

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Radosh, "Obama quietly adds Hamas apologist Robert Malley to ISIS policy team," Hudson, Dec. 4, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Malley, 2008 lecture at Oxford University in memory of the Egyptian-Lebanese diplomat George Antonious, in "Father and his American diplomat son," *Jewish Currents*, Feb. 4, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> H. Aboubakr Mansour, op. cit. (George and Alexander Soros are part of the International Crisis Group's Board of Trustees. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/who-we-are/board-trustees>, accessed Oct. 2023.)

<sup>26</sup> "Robert Malley," <https://philanthropyforum.org/people/robert-malley/>

<sup>27</sup> Malley defines the notion of "Third Worldism" as "a combination of belief in the revolutionary aspirations of Third World masses, faith in the inevitability of their fulfillment, and trust in the role of strong, centralized states and non-state actors in this undertaking." (R. Malley, op. cit.)

During his school years and early career, Malley reportedly traveled to Third World countries and personally advised African Marxist military dictators in writing speeches denouncing neoliberal economics and its attacks on Third World's socialism.<sup>28</sup>

### Family

Malley met his wife Caroline Brown at Harvard law school. The couple has two sons and a daughter.

As a child, Malley is said to have taken many “revolutionary tourism trips” to Arab, African, and Asian countries with his parents. In a 2008 speech, Malley recalled childhood visits with world leaders and extensive details of his father’s work and world views. His father, Simon, was a friend and confidant of Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, and Robert reportedly grew up with Arafat “as his unofficial ‘godfather.’”<sup>29</sup> Ben Rhodes confirmed that Simon Malley “proudly provided a platform for Fidel Castro and Yasir Arafat, in the days when the leaders’ words might take weeks to travel from Cuba or Cairo to Paris.”<sup>30</sup>

Both of Robert Malley’s parents have been described as “fiercely anti-Western.”<sup>31</sup> He was born in 1963 to Barbara (née Silverstein) Malley, a New Yorker, and her husband, Simon Malley (1923–2006), who was born as Selim Ménache in Cairo into a Jewish-Syrian family of apparently modest circumstances. He later used the name Sélim Malek and eventually settled on Simon Malley.<sup>32</sup> According to his son Robert, the principal effect of Simon’s Judaism “seems to have been that it provided him added reason to be an Arab nationalist of the fiercely secular, anti-Zionist sort.”<sup>33</sup> This was particularly puzzling given the Arab states’ declaration of a permanent war on Israel and Nasser’s hostility toward Jews, that rendered Egypt’s 80,000 Jews stateless (Simon maintained his Egyptian passport but, later, his hostility to Sadat and Egypt’s peace with Israel led Sadat to deny it to him).<sup>34</sup> Simon “turned his back on his homeland as well, breaking his emotional ties with Egypt the moment Egypt had forged its political ties with Israel.”<sup>35</sup>

In his youth, Simon is said to have been a founder of Egypt’s Communist Party.<sup>36</sup> Despite only having a high school diploma, he was rewarded for supporting Gamal Abdul Nasser's socialist revolution in 1952 with an appointment as representative of the Egyptian daily newspaper A/ Goumbouria in New York City, covering the United Nations. The state-owned publication was a pro-Nasser propaganda vehicle. In New York, Simon met his wife, who worked for the U.N. delegation of the Algerian National Liberation Front. He took on her cause, and Algeria’s war for independence (1954-62) became the first major focus of his long career in revolutionary journalism dedicated to the anti-imperialist Third World national liberation movements.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> H. Aboubakr Mansour, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Isabel Vincent, “Ex-Iran envoy Robert Malley was critical of Israel, has family ties to PLO,” *The New York Post*, Oct. 14, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> D. Samuels, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> “A putrid pedigree: Robert Malley.” Useful stooges, <https://medium.com/@usefulstooges/a-putrid-pedigree-robert-malley-a40cb650f33d>

<sup>32</sup> R. Malley, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> H. Aboubakr Mansour, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> R. Malley, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. (Aboubakr Mansour cites a *The Washington Post* report of Aug. 7, 1980.)

<sup>37</sup> H. Aboubakr Mansour, op. cit.

In 1969, when Robert was 5 or 6 years old, the Malleys moved to France, where Simon founded the leftist magazine *Africasia* (later *Afrique Asia*), which was very close to Algerian leaders.<sup>38</sup> The Washington Post reported it had a circulation of nearly 120,000 mostly in Africa and Latin America and was said to have received Soviet financial backing.<sup>39</sup> It gave voice to liberation struggles worldwide and newly independent states such as Algeria and Egypt, while denouncing Israel and Western imperialism and policies all over the world. After his expulsion from France for radicalism, he created, *Le Nouvel Afrique Asie*.<sup>40</sup>

In 1977, Fidel Castro gave Simon a 20-hour interview in Cuba.<sup>41</sup> The Malleys likely knew Castro from much earlier. Piero Gleijeses, expert in Cuba's African interventions, has written: "It was in Algeria that Cuba's involvement in Africa began. Until the overthrow of President Ben Bella in 1965, Algeria was Cuba's closest friend on the continent. Cuba provided both military and civilian assistance not only to the Algerian republic but also, before their victory, to the rebels of the Algerian National Liberation Front. ...Algeria was Cuba's first love in Africa."<sup>42</sup> Highlighting the significance of this support, the Algerian National Liberation Front awarded only medal of honor, to Fidel Castro.

According to Robert, his father was charmed by and attracted to the "glorious struggles" and "the audacity, the insolence, the impetuosity of ... alone, Castro stood up to America and all its might; Algeria defied France; Nasser, not only a European coalition but also Israel and Arab reaction; Arafat, all of the above."<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, he "had no patience for the US either, whose foreign policy he denounced with relish and sometimes abandon."<sup>44</sup>

Simon's publications have been characterized as virulently anti-America, anti-French, anti-Israel, and pro-Soviet, and supportive of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, the Cuban intervention in Angola and Ethiopia, the seizure of American hostages in Iran, the Algerian-backed guerrilla war in southern Morocco, and the Arab opposition to Israel and the Camp David agreements.<sup>45</sup> Scholar Hussein Aboubakr Mansour posits that the anti-imperialist struggle that Simon so professed was one of Marxism's greatest propagandistic triumphs and was decisive in "Marxifying" the Third World and revolutionizing idealistic Western youth.<sup>46</sup> Cuba played a leading role in the anti-imperialist Non-Aligned Movement created in Yugoslavia in 1961 and hosted in Havana the 6th Summit on 3–9 September 1979, attended by 93 countries.<sup>47</sup> At Non-Aligned Movement meetings, while other journalists had press passes, Simon had a delegate's pass.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Francis Ghiles, "Has Robert Malley's life and career prepared him for his new job?" *The Arab Weekly*, Feb. 18, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Alex Safian, "The Iran nuclear deal and negotiator Robert Malley," *Camera* (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis), Mar. 23, 2022 (citing *The Washington Post*, Aug. 7, 1980.)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Castro grants interview to French weekly Afrique-Asie," Paris/Buenos Aires, *IPS* (in Spanish), May 6, 1977; "Entrevista concedida a Simon Malley, Director General de la revista "Afrique-Asie," el 23/04/1977 en Hotel Habana Libre, La Habana, Cuba, Versiones Taquigráficas - Consejo de Estado," Fidel Soldado de las Ideas, accessed Oct. 16, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Piero Gleijeses, "Cuba's first venture in Africa: Algeria, 1961-1965." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Feb., 1996), pp. 159-195.

<sup>43</sup> R. Malley, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> A. Safian, op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> "6th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement." *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/6th\\_Summit\\_of\\_the\\_Non-Aligned\\_Movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/6th_Summit_of_the_Non-Aligned_Movement)

<sup>48</sup> Victoria Brittain, "Simon Malley, Journalist with rare insight into Africa's anti-colonial struggles." Obituary, *The Guardian*, Sep. 27, 2006.

Simon acquired nine different citizenships—including Egyptian, American, Algerian, Tunisian, Angolan, Mozambican, French and an honorary Palestinian one.<sup>49</sup> Although his son Robert said he rejected hierarchical constraints and was not a Marxist,<sup>50</sup> he was accused of receiving Soviet money and in 1980, French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing expelled him from the country weeks after the French Interior Minister described some of his articles as “genuine appeals to murder foreign chiefs of state.”<sup>51</sup> He returned to France months later, after the socialist François Mitterrand was elected president.

His son Robert told the *Jewish Daily Forward* that, while he loved and respected his father, their views sometimes differed and it was “an odd guilt by association” fallacy to criticize him based on his father’s views.<sup>52</sup> In a 2008 lecture,<sup>53</sup> he clarified that his father was “not the only one who shaped me, my approach to the Middle East and my early encounter with the Arab world, of course.” Among the aspects he mentioned as a seeming source of critique were “a complacent and indiscriminating attitude toward political repression, so long as it emanated from the presumed virtuous side, and towards all forms of political violence, as long as it served the assumed rightful purpose.” He also referred to “the bankruptcy of the economic models, the relinquishment by central states of key social responsibilities, the endless narrowing of political systems till they resembled nothing more than the authoritarian systems they undertook to replace. The sad irony being that Third Worldism was a victim of those very conditions—inequality, poverty, repressive rule—out of which it originally had grown. And which, foolhardily, it had vowed to eradicate. ... The Arab world, with bountiful oil supply and lavish rhetoric to match it, yielded variants of militaristic or tyrannical rule, tribal and clan-based authoritarianisms, fratricidal violence.”

### Robert Malley’s professional life

#### Early career

- Law clerk to Justice Byron R. White of the U.S. Supreme Court, 1991 to 1992
- Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations

#### Clinton administration (1993-2001)

- National Security Council:
  - Director for Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, 1994–1996
  - Executive Assistant to National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, 1996–1998
  - Special Assistant for Arab-Israeli Affairs and Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs, 1998- Jan. 2001

#### Bush administration (2001-2009)

- Senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations
- International Crisis Group - Founder and Director of the Middle East and North Africa program

#### Obama administration (2009-2017)

- Informal advisor to Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign
- National Security Council, 2014-2017

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<sup>49</sup> R. Malley, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> A. Safian, op. cit. (citing UPI, Oct. 3, 1980).

<sup>52</sup> N. Guttman, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> R. Malley, op. cit.

- Senior Director for the Gulf region and Syria, 2014-2015
- Director of the Middle East Middle East, North Africa and Gulf region, 2015-2016
- Special ISIS advisor, Nov. 2015-Jan. 2021

#### Trump administration (2017-2021)

- International Crisis Group
  - Vice President of Policy, Jan. 2017- Jan. 2018
  - CEO and President, Jan. 2018- Jan. 2021

#### Biden administration (Jan. 28, 2021- Jun. 29, 2023) - On unpaid leave.

- National Security Council Senior Director
- State Department Special Envoy to Iran

#### Currently<sup>54</sup>

- Visiting Professor and Lecturer, Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs, Aug. 2023 - present
- Senior Fellow, Yale's Jackson School of Public Affairs, Aug. 2023 - present

#### **Malley's current leave and investigation**

Malley is under investigation —there is no conclusive or public evidence of his wrongdoing.

The State Department had apparently not informed Congress about his security clearance suspension and he had for some time continued to conduct some of his duties not requiring a security clearance. His leave was reported only after a Congressional committee inquired about his non-attendance at a hearing on Iran policy; the State Department at first neglected to also inform that his security clearance had been suspended.<sup>55</sup>

According to *The Washington Post* columnist Josh Rogin, “a steady trickle of leaks —many via Iranian media— has shown that the State Department has given both Congress and the public incomplete and often misleading information about the case. ... what has lawmakers riled is not only the alleged offense, but also the mounting evidence of a coverup. The timeline of events shows a pattern of obfuscation.”<sup>56</sup>

In late August 2023, the state-controlled *Tehran Times* leaked a State Department memo of April 21, 2023 to Malley from Erin Smart, Director of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Office of Personnel Security and Suitability, informing him that his security clearance, at a Top Secret level, was suspended pending an ongoing investigation after having determined that his “continued national security eligibility is not clearly consistent with the interests of national security.” It states that this determination was based on information received on him “that raises serious security concerns” and can be disqualifying under National Security Adjudicative Guidelines E (Personal Conduct), K (Handling of Protected Information) and M (Use of Information Technology).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ben Saab, “Jackson fellow Robert Malley under investigation for allegedly mishandling classified documents,” *Yale Daily News*, Aug. 31, 2023; Tom Durso, “Senior State Department Official to Join SPIA Faculty as Visiting Professor and Lecturer,” Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, Aug. 15 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> J. Rogin, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Sadeq Fereydounabadi, “Exclusive: The letter that brought Rob Malley down,” Tehran, *Tehran Times*, Aug. 27, 2023.



According to *Tablet*, Malley had “helped to fund, support, and direct an Iranian intelligence operation designed to influence the United States and allied governments.”<sup>58</sup> The basis for this assertion is in a trove of emails exchanged for several years by Iranian regime government officials and individuals in the U.S. linked to Malley involved in a pro-Iran influence project known as the “Iran Experts Initiative” (IEI). This was apparently a propaganda unit set up by Iranian Foreign Ministry in 2014 to influence U.S. policy toward Iran. A core group of 6-10 operatives drawn from Iranian diaspora communities in Europe and the U.S. affiliated to leading international think-tanks and academic institutions was recruited and tasked with promoting Iranian interests during the regime’s negotiations with the U.S. over its nuclear weapons program.

The correspondence, examined by *Semafior*,<sup>59</sup> reportedly reveals that IEI members pledged loyalty to the Iranian regime and received guidance from top Iranian officials, even attending conferences and hearings to meet them in foreign countries for that purpose. Malley, in his lead role at the International Crisis Group and subsequent position in the Biden administration, is said to have supported and advanced the efforts of three key members of the IEI operation: Ariane Tabatabai, Ali Vaez, and Dina Esfandiary, all of whom had willingly accepted Iranian guidance. He helped position Tabatabai into the State Department and, later, the Pentagon, where she is currently Chief of Staff for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-intensity Conflict, Christopher Maier. In September, senior U.S. lawmakers sent Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin a letter demanding answers on Tabatabai.<sup>60</sup> Maier has confirmed that the Pentagon is actively looking into the matter.<sup>61</sup> Malley had tried to bring Vaez into the State Department and, after he was denied a security clearance, remained in close operational contact with him regardless.

Several individuals named in the emails have portrayed themselves on social media as having engaged with the Iranian regime as academic experts or to promote better understanding between the U.S. and Iran. The International Crisis Group, which employed Esfandiary right before Malley left as CEO to join the Biden administration, confirmed her participation in the initiative but said it was an informal network of academics and researchers that wasn’t overseen by the Iranian Foreign Ministry.<sup>62</sup>

The Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Michael McCaul (R-Texas) and other members of Congress are calling for a full investigation of the Malley case and preparing to subpoena the State Department for documents and to compel testimony from Malley and Tabatabai, while requesting information about Tabatabai’s security clearance.<sup>63</sup> Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) has said: “These reports could not be more concerning, and they hint at what could be the worst State Department scandal since Alger Hiss.” Texas Senator Ted Cruz, said they are suggestive of “a vast Iranian influence operation that goes to the very top of the administration.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Lee Smith, “High-level Iranian spy ring busted in Washington,” *Tablet*, Oct. 1, 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Jay Solomon, “Inside Iran’s influence operation,” *Semafior*, Sep 29, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Mike Glenn, “Lawmakers seek answers after reports of links between top Pentagon official and Iran,” *The Washington Times*, Sep. 26, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>63</sup> “Wicker, colleagues demand accountability on Iran-linked DOD official: Armed Services leader: Ariane Tabatabai’s security clearance should be suspended,” Office of Roger Wicker, U.S. Senator for Mississippi, Sep. 29, 2023; “McCaul: latest reports on Malley saga ‘alarming,’” Press Release, Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C., Sep. 27, 2023; Josh Christenson, House Republicans to subpoena suspended Iran envoy Robert Malley, *The New York Post*, Oct. 16, 2023.

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Malley's role in U.S.-Iran policy is particularly questionable given *The Wall Street Journal's* report that, according to senior members of Iran-backed militant groups Hamas and Hezbollah, "Iranian security officials helped plan Hamas's Saturday surprise attack on Israel and gave the green light for the assault at a meeting in Beirut last Monday."<sup>65</sup> After the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack on Israel by Hamas, Gabriel Noronha, a former special adviser on Iran at the State Department, said that "Malley and others created an incredibly permissive environment for Hamas, for Iran, to do all these things" and with his negotiating team "purposefully funneled billions of dollars to [Iran] through lack of sanctions enforcement and provision of sanctions relief that has given them somewhere between \$50 [billion] and \$80 billion over the last two and a half years."<sup>66</sup> He also noted that the Biden administration had allowed for "an enormous deterrence failure" by undertaking just four operations against Iran-backed terror groups after allowing the regime and its proxies to carry out 83 attacks of their own against U.S. forces. Noronha had been warning about the Biden Administration's planned capitulation to Iran since March 2022, when he had published a piece in *Tablet* that, among other things, reported that U.S. diplomats, career staff and even Biden appointees, had resigned in protest or were expressing alarm over the direction of negotiations with Iran led by Robert Malley.<sup>67</sup>

Members of Congress should also question Malley's potential role --and intentions-- in appeasing and engaging the Cuban dictatorship and easing legally-mandated sanctions intended to pressure for a democratic change in Cuba. This is of critical interest given the profound economic crisis on the Island and mass migration currently underway aimed at the United States.

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