

# Dirty Moolah

**A rare Kerry fundraiser** from Iran who advocates renewed U.S. trade ties with the Tehran regime could prove to be an embarrassment for the Democrats.

**BY KENNETH R. TIMMERMAN**

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S. SUSAN AKBARPOUR came to the U.S. from Iran in 1997 as a penniless political refugee. In just seven years, she has started a newspaper, two consulting companies, and a glitzy magazine called *SiliconIran* that boasted some of Silicon Valley's top executives as its patrons during its brief existence. Last year, she married Silicon Valley entrepreneur Faraj Aalaei, the CEO of the NASDAQ-listed firm Centillum Communications. More than ten years her senior, Aalaei says he began dating Akbarpour in November 2000 and became a financial supporter of her various business and philanthropic endeavors. The enterprising Akbarpour repaid the favor, running a cover profile of his company in her magazine.

Now Akbarpour and her husband have become important fundraisers for presidential hopeful John Kerry, and are seeking to influence Kerry's policy toward their home country of Iran in ways that, should he win, would benefit the regime's rulers and their goal of demoralizing the wealthy Iranian-American community, traditional backers of pro-democratic opponents of the regime.

Earlier this year, Akbarpour and her husband were each credited by the Kerry presidential campaign with having raised between \$50,000 to \$100,000 for its candidate. Only one other Iranian-American has so distinguished himself on Kerry's behalf: New York investment banker Hassan Nemazee, a long-time friend of Aalaei. But 90 percent of the more than





San Francisco, June 2002: Senator John Kerry with Susan Akbarpour (and her brother, Cyrus Akbarpour)

\$500,000 Nemazei has raised for Kerry came from the financial community in New York, not from fellow Iranian-Americans, who are notoriously reluctant to donate to U.S. political campaigns. This makes Aalaei and Akbarpour's fundraising performance all the more impressive.

While the 36-year-old Akbarpour has become a player in the Kerry camp, she is a highly controversial figure within the Iranian-American community because of her outspoken support for the Islamic regime in Tehran. Akbarpour's advocacy on behalf of Tehran—odd enough for someone claiming political asylum from the regime—dances around the fringes of U.S. sanctions law and export control regulations.

In spring 2002, for instance, *SiliconIran* sponsored an investment conference in Dubai that Akbarpour marketed as a forum for connecting venture capital investors from America with Iranian high-tech businesses, even though it is illegal for U.S. citizens to invest in Iran. And Akbarpour active-

ly raises money for a host of charities in the United States that send money, computers, and software to Iran, at a time when the U.S. government has imposed a total ban on trade with Iran that includes strict controls on gifts of high-technology equipment. According to court papers, her husband allegedly has employed Iranian software engineers in Canada—which would be yet another violation of U.S. sanctions laws. Mr. Aalaei declined to respond to repeated requests to discuss these allegations, which his lawyers deny.

If Susan Akbarpour has yet to run afoul of U.S. authorities for these activities, other troubles may be in store. A series of anonymous e-mails, now the subject of a protracted legal dispute, accuse her of lying about her past as an employee of the Iranian government. In a lawsuit filed in San Jose, California, her husband alleges that the author of the e-mails was a former female employee of Centillium Communications who was motivated by jealousy. Akbarpour has also run afoul of pro-democracy sup-



porters within the Iranian-American community, who find her rapid rise to prominence suspicious. Meanwhile, federal officials are now questioning whether she came to this country and requested political asylum on false pretenses. If so, one official said, Akbarpour's permanent resident status—which she says she acquired just last year after marrying Aalaei—could be revoked and she could be deported.

**S**EN. JOHN KERRY'S ties to pro-regime Iranians run deep. Kerry has already announced that if elected he would seek to engage the Mullahs in Tehran. And in a series of public statements, he has bought onto virtually the entire pro-regime agenda that supporters such as Susan Akbarpour have encouraged him to adopt. These measures include ending the fingerprinting of Iranian visitors to the United States, expanding "family reunion" visas to allow extended family members of Iranians living in the U.S. to immigrate to this country legally and in large numbers, and offering a "dialogue" with the hard-line clerics in Tehran. On August 30, Kerry's running mate John Edwards told the *Washington Post* that, if elected, a Kerry administration would seek to make a "grand bargain" that would allow Iran to keep most of its disputed nuclear program, which the State Department believes is intended to conceal a crash effort to develop nuclear weapons. So the stakes are high.

On June 1, 2002, Kerry appeared at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in San Francisco to deliver the keynote speech to a conference hosted by the American-Iranian Council (AIC), an advocacy group that favors opening trade with Iran. Faraj Aalaei and his friend, New York banker Hassan Nemazee, were then on the AIC board and helped set up the event. Nemazee, with his deep ties to the Democratic Party (he had been a Clinton appointee, never confirmed, to become ambassador to Argentina), helped the group gain access to Kerry and other top Democrats such as Joseph Biden in the U.S. Senate.

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AIC's goal, Nemazee reminded the group, was to "attempt to establish the basis and the vehicle for a dialogue which will ultimately lead to a resumption of relations" between the United States and Islamic regime in Iran. That goal has angered pro-democracy supporters in the Iranian-

American community, who believe the U.S. must isolate the Tehran regime. They argue that 20 years of accommodation has only encouraged Tehran's leaders to confront the United States through terror—both directly, and through anti-U.S. proxy groups. In addition to the substantial funding it receives from major U.S. oil companies, AIC boasted that backing for the June 2002 conference was provided by the Open Society Institute of philanthropist George Soros.

Kerry's speech to the AIC began as something of a howler. "I'm married to a Republican. I want you to know," he said. "My wife, Teresa Heinz, is a Republican and she is proud of the fact that she's a Republican. But isn't it interesting that these registered Republicans think like Democrats?" Teresa Heinz Kerry did more than just think like a Democrat. Her family foundations had given more than \$4 million to the Tides Foundation, a "charity" that in turn finances everything from MoveOn.org to International Answer, the group that led anti-Iraq war protests during the GOP convention in New York.

More significant, however, were Kerry's attempts in his speech to curry favor with the pro-Tehran crowd. Kerry called for efforts to "engage" the Islamic Republic, help the Tehran regime to join the World Trade Organization, and remove visa restrictions on Iranians that were imposed post-September 11. He came out against any forms of terrorist profiling that would single out Middle Easterners.

Kerry repeated his intention to "engage" the Islamic Republic of Iran—rather than isolate the leadership—in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations on December 3, 2003. "As presi-



dent," he said. "I will be prepared early on to explore areas of mutual interest with Iran, just as I was prepared to normalize relations with Vietnam a decade ago."

The fundraiser at which Kerry posed for pictures with Akbarpour and Nemazee was officially separate from the AIC conference, although many of the same people attended. It brought in an estimated \$26,600 for Kerry's Senate campaign account, according to FEC records. This included a questionable \$1,000 from Akbarpour herself. U.S. election law requires that anyone contributing to a political campaign be a citizen or have permanent U.S. resident status. But Akbarpour acknowledged in a recent phone interview that she did not get her green card until after her marriage to Aalaei in 2003, some nine months after her initial contribution to Kerry.

So far Akbarpour has managed to weather the legal and public relations storm, and along with her husband, continues to host fundraising gatherings at their Silicon Valley home for the Kerry campaign and for the Iranian American Political Action Committee (IAPAC) they established with Nemazee. IAPAC claims to be a non-partisan group that support Democrats and Republican candidates who endorse their agenda, which includes most of the items favored by regime supporters in this country.

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SUSAN AKBARPOUR is no stranger to controversy. Less than two years after coming to America in 1997, she filed a labor complaint against her employer, a California-based Persian language newspaper known as *Andisheh*, claiming \$47,255 in back pay, overtime, expenses, commissions, and bonuses. After failing to show up for the California Labor Department hearing, Akbarpour filed a civil lawsuit against *Andisheh* owner Shayna Barghi, claiming that Barghi had defamed her reputation by alleging in a February

1999 article that Akbarpour came to the United States not to escape the regime, but as an agent of the Islamic Republic. To buttress those claims, Barghi published a Persian-language letter sent to Akbarpour by the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Education, "appointing her the Islamic government's liaison for the advertisement and sale of the Islamic government's literature in the U.S.," according to court papers. Akbarpour's lawyer claimed that the letter was a fake, and asserted that Akbarpour "had been granted asylum and had obtained a work permit, ironically, through the aid of an attorney introduced to plaintiff by Barghi." But in her declaration to the court, Barghi said the letter had been forwarded to her office fax machine from a relative of Akbarpour in Iran, apparently at Akbarpour's request. In the disclaimer she eventually agreed to publish, Barghi said she "regretted" that Akbarpour had not agreed with her decision to publish the letter. She did not, however, retract its authenticity.

A second letter from the director of the *Khorasan* daily newspaper in Iran addresses Akbarpour as "the director of the Satellite Section" of the newspaper, and shows that she was employed by the Martyrs Foundation of the Islamic Republic, a para-governmental agency that has been used to funnel financial support to foreign terrorist operations, according to court testimony and U.S. law enforcement officials.

In addition, Akbarpour's request for political asylum was put on hold due to unresolved issues pending an FBI security review. In an interview, Akbarpour soft-peddled her refugee status. "I don't even want to bring it up," she said. "It's off the record. I had some problems when I came here. But the reason that I came here is that I thought the United States is somewhere that I can try all my options at the time... I came here to—to the land of



opportunities. It's really the land of opportunities. It was!" She said she came to the United States on a tourist visa—a difficult feat for any Iranian in 1997—and changed her status several times. "At one point, I had an H-1 visa. Then I got married and got my green card."

An immigration lawyer in Los Angeles expressed doubt that Akbarpour could have obtained an H-1 visa, which is reserved for foreign workers who are sponsored by U.S. companies who need their specialized skills. "At the time, the INS was applying a very strict interpretation of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act and was not allowing any hiring of Iranian nationals. And you couldn't convert from a tourist visa to an H-1 visa, especially if the tourist visa had already expired," the attorney said.

**B**ECAUSE THE UNITED STATES has no embassy in Tehran, Iranians seeking to visit the United States must travel to Turkey or the United Arab Emirates to apply for a tourist or student visa, then wait several months while a background check is performed in order to screen out regime operatives seeking to enter the United States under cover. Susan Akbarpour has put loosening visa requirements for Iranians on the top of her political agenda, along with lifting U.S. sanctions on Iran and getting the U.S. government to open a dialogue with the regime in Tehran. Those are three top priorities of the Tehran regime as well.

Akbarpour's claim to political refugee status in the United States simply doesn't comport with her actions since coming to this country, U.S. government officials and Iranian exiles said. This could explain why the biography posted on her *SiliconIran* website doesn't mention the refugee story. Just three years after she arrived in the United States as a self-avowed opponent of the regime, Akbarpour became its prominent public supporter.

In September 2000, as part of a failed effort by

the Clinton administration to renew ties with Tehran, Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi was allowed to make an unusual trip to California, home to estimated as many as one million Iranian-Americans. It was the first such trip by an Iranian government minister since the Islamic revolution

in 1979. But not everything went as planned. Kharrazi arrived just as 13 Jews from Shiraz received stiff jail sentences in Iran on trumped-up charges of spying on behalf of Israel. He was greeted by angry protesters at every stage of his four-day trip.

At UCLA, some 200 protesters—mainly well-dressed, middle-aged men and women, according to one reporter—greeted Kharrazi with pictures of relatives who had been executed or jailed by the Iranian regime. "All I want to know is why they executed my husband 12 years ago," said one woman, tears streaming down her face. The James West Alumni Center, where Kharrazi was to address a hundred or so carefully-screened guests, was ringed on four sides by barricades and police.

As someone who claimed to have been persecuted by the regime, Akbarpour could easily have blended into the anti-regime protesters. Or she just could have stayed home, as many recent arrivals have done who want to put Iranian politics behind them. Instead, Akbarpour got herself included among a select list of

insiders and regime-supporters who braved the demonstrators to schmooze with Kharrazi behind closed doors. Suzy Yashar was one of the protesters and remembers the day well. "We weren't allowed to go inside. I remember we had a fight with the pro-regime supporters. After the meeting, one woman came back out from the covered parking lot and started swearing at us, calling us losers for opposing the regime."

That woman was Susan Akbarpour.

Two other eyewitnesses, who asked not to be identified, said they recalled Akbarpour coming back

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from Kharrazi's entourage as it departed the area to scream insults at the anti-regime demonstrators. The event was captured by Iranian-American film crews.

**A**S COURT RECORDS IN SAN JOSE REVEAL, Susan Akbarpour never hesitates to change basic facts of her life story when it becomes convenient to do so. Before she met her new husband, for instance, she went under a different name: Zehra A. Mashhadi.

A January 2002 e-mail sent to Centillium Communications employees—which Aalaei cites in a lawsuit against Ladan Afrasiabi Parandoosh—charges that Akbarpour lied liberally about her past in Iran. She never received a journalism award, as she had claimed, and her parents never owned a newspaper, for which she claimed she once worked. “She wore chador and supported Khomeini and Hezbollah until she left Iran freely on a tourist visa. She escaped her husband of 13 years and not [sic] prosecution. In America, she quickly switched from chador to mini-skirt and from Khomeini to [Aalaei’s partner, Kamran] Elahian. I challenge her again to produce and print her articles written in Iran against Hezbollah.”

A subsequent e-mail, dated January 30, 2002, claims that Akbarpour was fired from her first job in California “after Mrs. Barghi discovered that she had been a reporter for the [official] Islamic Republic News Agency and never told her.”

Meanwhile, the intrigue thickens. Ladan Afrasiabi Parandoosh is herself well-known as a supporter of the Islamic Republic, and has worked for many years with the Society of Iranian Professionals to promote the cause of trade and technology ties with Tehran. She claims she never sent the e-mails—which came from a Yahoo account in the name of AliReza Karimi—and has counter-sued Centillium for defamation. Perhaps the most bizarre claim in the e-mails was repeated

accusations that Centillium chairman and co-founder Elahian was an Israeli agent, and Aalaei was “a puppet of an Israeli agent/accomplice.”

In a recent court filing, Afrasiabi’s attorneys presented a 57-page sworn statement from a woman who identified herself as a former girlfriend of Aalaei—and who admitted that she was the true author of the e-mails, not Afrasiabi. When asked why she had come forward three years after the e-mails were sent (which just happened to be beyond the statute of limitations), the woman said she learned that Afrasiabi’s teenage son had been so stressed by the lawsuit that he dropped out of school and was hospitalized after a nervous breakdown. “I was very upset when I heard that,” she said.

Iranian-Americans are acutely aware of attempts by the regime in Tehran to infiltrate their community and to create discord and false disputes, demoralize exile opposition groups, and discredit defectors from the Iranian intelligence services who have hard information on Iranian government misdeeds. These efforts were described in detail to *TAS* by U.S. government investigators and by prominent Iranian-Americans, who believe that Akbarpour is doing their community a disservice.

As a Kerry supporter, Susan Akbarpour comes with lots of heavy baggage—not all of which will help the Democratic nominee. “I am an actor in U.S. politics,” Akbarpour boasted in a phone interview. “I am a fundraiser for all candidates who listen to us and our concerns.” The two candidates Akbarpour said she would “never help” were President Bush and California U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, because both have taken a no-nonsense approach to the Iranian regime. ❧

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