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## TIMESONLINE

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# Defector spied on Iran for years

Uzi Mahnaimi, Tel Aviv

AN Iranian general who defected to the West last month had been spying on Iran since 2003 when he was recruited on an overseas business trip, according to Iranian sources.

This weekend Brigadier General Ali Reza Asgari, 63, the former deputy defence minister, is understood to be undergoing debriefing at a Nato base in Germany after he escaped from Iran, followed by his family.

A daring getaway via Damascus was organised by western intelligence agencies after it became clear that his cover was about to be blown. Iran's notorious secret service, the Vavak, is believed to have suspected that he was a high-level mole.

According to the Iranian sources, the escape took several months to arrange. At least 10 close members of his family had to flee the country. Asgari has two sons, a daughter and several grandchildren and it is believed that all, including his daughters-in-law, are now out of Iran. Their final destination is unknown.

Asgari is said to have carried with him documents disclosing Iran's links to terrorists in the Middle East. It is not thought that he had details of the country's nuclear programme.

An Israeli newspaper, Yedioth Aharonot, claimed this weekend that Mossad, Israel's external security service, had orchestrated his defection. There is some evidence that the Mossad station in Istanbul was involved in shadowing Asgari after he arrived in Turkey via Damascus last month.

It is unclear which intelligence organisation he was spying for. "He probably was working for Mossad but believed he was working for a European intelligence agency," said an Israeli defence source.

Asgari's escape has provoked alarm in the Iranian regime. "Asgari is a gold mine for western intelligence," said an Israeli defence source. "We have been following him for years, especially since the late 1980s when he was commander of the Revolutionary Guard in Lebanon."

In 1997 he was appointed deputy defence minister in charge of internal investigations. He uncovered several cases of embezzlement in the Republican Guard that made him unpopular. He was pushed aside after President Mahmoud Ahmadine-jad came to power in 2006. The two had been rivals for many years and Asgari realised that his days were numbered.

During an overseas business trip in 2003 he is said to have met a new business partner, who turned out to be a foreign intelligence officer. "Ali Reza was a wealthy man even before 2003," said an Iranian source. "Since 2003 he has become a very wealthy man."

On February 7, four days after arriving in Damascus and having been assured his family was safe, Asgari boarded a flight to Istanbul. He was given a new passport and left Turkey by car - to disappear into the shadows.