



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on August 7, 2012

Obama Advisor Accepted \$100,000 From Firm Tied to Iran

A top advisor to President Obama received \$100,000 in speaking fees in 2010 from a company doing business with Iran, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) earlier this week. David Plouffe, who also served as Obama's 2008 campaign manager, accepted the payment from a firm tied to the Iranian government.



In December 2010, a telecommunications company — and subsidiary of the highly scrutinized MTN Group — paid Plouffe for two speeches he delivered in Nigeria, only a month before [joining](#) the Obama White House. The speech was made to MTN Group, which according to the *Post*, “had been in a widely reported partnership for five years with a state-owned Iranian telecommunications firm.”

The Obama administration swiftly responded to the charge, insisting that no group had ever critically flagged MTN for its business ties with Iran. White House spokesman Eric Schultz said in a statement,

He gave two speeches on mobile technology and digital communications and had no separate meetings with the company's leadership. At the time, not even the most zealous watchdog group on this issue had targeted the Iranian business interests of the host's holding company. Criticism of Mr. Plouffe now for issues and controversies that developed only years later is simply misplaced.

One of the more damning allegations surrounding the debacle is that Iranian political leaders have used MTN to spy on government dissidents. “Since Plouffe's speeches, the U.S. government has become increasingly concerned that the Iranian government has used MTN operations or technology to help monitor dissidents,” the *Post* noted. In 2009, as rebels started to protest the hotly contested reelection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Irancell [disclosed](#) some conveniently-timed “technical problems” that suppressed the nation's cell phone service during the protests.

MTN “carried out orders from the regime to shut off text messaging and Skype during times of political protest, and reportedly has a floor in its Tehran headquarters where Iranian military officials compile and access tracking data,” [said](#) advocacy group United Against Nuclear Iran. “That data has been used to track, apprehend, torture and kill regime opponents.” “Simply put,” the group affirmed, “MTN has blood on its hands.”

The telecom firm that paid Plouffe \$100,000 in speaking fees is also embroiled in a lawsuit that [alleges](#) it managed a bribery and influence-trading campaign within the Islamic Republic to “steal” a cellphone license. The “premeditated program of corruption” purportedly involved an effort to arm Iran and allure positive United Nations votes regarding its nuclear program.

The allegations were highlighted in a lawsuit filed by a scorned competitor earlier this year. While the



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claims came to light in U.S. court a couple years after Plouffe accepted the speaking fees, the corruption allegedly dated back to 2004. Fox News reports further on the suit:

In the March lawsuit seeking \$4.2 billion, the competitor leveled scorching allegations, claiming MTN conspired to “steal” the telecom license that Turkcell initially won. To do that, according to the court filing, “MTN used its high-level political influence within the South African government to offer Iran the two most important items that the country could not obtain for itself: (1) support for the Iranian development of nuclear weapons; and (2) the procurement of high-tech defense equipment.”

The suit said MTN worked “behind the scenes to bribe, corrupt and control officials” from both governments — including working toward getting South Africa to abstain from three U.N. votes on Iran. It claimed that in 2005, the company secured South Africa’s abstention from an International Atomic Energy Agency decision referring Iran to the Security Council, giving Iran more “time to show compliance” on its nuclear program.

While there were no legal restrictions on Plouffe’s speaking fees, his status as an advisor to Obama could prove troublesome for an administration that has already been accused of being soft on Iran. Moreover, years ago the Bush administration revealed that MTN’s Iranian venture, Irancell, was “fully owned” by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, and that MTN owned a [49-percent stake](#) in the firm. The *Wall Street Journal* recently [reported](#) that 21 percent of MTN’s subscribers are based in Iran, and that South Africa suspended its former ambassador to Iran after he purportedly accepted a bribe from MTN to help the cellphone operator secure an Iranian business license.

Plouffe’s six-figure speeches have caused a stir among Obama’s critics, as Republicans and advocacy groups decry Plouffe’s standing role in the White House. “Anytime you start talking about \$100,000, red flags should have gone up right away,” [contended](#) Craig Holman, government affairs lobbyist at the Washington advocacy group Public Citizen. “He’d have to think about why is someone giving him that kind of money for a speech.”

“Today’s headlines reveal more ethically questionable conduct by a member of President Obama’s inner circle, adding to a growing pattern of behavior,” charged Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus. “Senior White House advisor David Plouffe profited handsomely by speaking to a company doing business with the radical, anti-American government of Iran.”

Photo of David Plouffe: AP Images



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