

# CIA launches task force to probe invisible attacks on US diplomats and spies as one victim finds some relief



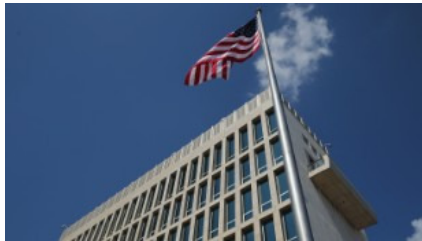
By [Kylie Atwood](#), CNN

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**Washington (CNN)** — More than three years after former senior US intelligence officer Marc Polymeropoulos suffered a mysterious attack in Moscow that changed his life forever, he finally has a diagnosis: a traumatic brain injury, sleep insomnia, and anxiety.

The determination from Walter Reed Medical Center this month comes after he spent years fighting to get specialized medical treatment as his own employer, among others, cast doubt on the nature of his illness.

"When they provided me the piece of paper with the diagnosis that said I had a traumatic brain injury, you know, I had tears in my eyes," Polymeropoulos told CNN. "I immediately, in fact, called another agency officer who had been affected by this, and all I could say was, you know, they didn't believe me before. And look at this now."



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Polymeropoulos is one of some 40 US government officials across multiple agencies who were victims of [debilitating invisible attacks](#) in Russia, Cuba, China and other places around the globe. Just last year, more of these assaults were carried out against Central Intelligence Agency officers, according to a source familiar with the cases.

Now, CNN has learned that the CIA has set up its first-ever task force to focus on suspected microwave attacks on US intelligence officers. The effort will draw on a wide range of resources at the agency and ensures a team and process exists to address any future incidents, according to a US government official.

The new task force is being stood up as multiple agencies signal that they will re-examine the mysterious attacks and prioritize the investigation. And Secretary of State Tony Blinken, who has been personally engaged on the topic, is elevating the coordinator investigating the incidents to a senior-level position at the State Department.

## New momentum

may have been botched from the beginning.

Polymeropoulos' story underscores the complicated challenge the Biden administration faces in confronting Russia. The list of known, and suspected, aggressions Russia has carried out against US democracy and American personnel is vast.

The Biden administration is [preparing to impose sanctions](#) on Russia in the coming weeks over the poisoning and jailing of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny and the SolarWinds hack. Any response by to the suspected microwave attacks would be far down the road, but President Joe Biden has committed to confront Moscow when American lives and US interests are at risk.

Polymeropoulos' attack occurred in December 2017, when he was on assignment in Moscow, where he ran clandestine operations against Russia after they meddled in the 2016 US elections.



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"I woke up in the middle of the night, with an incredible case of vertigo, the room was spinning. I wanted to throw up," he said. "I've been in places like -- Iraq and Afghanistan, I've been shot at. But this is by far the most terrifying experience of my life."

The perpetrator of the attack has not been identified by the US government, which is still investigating the incidents, but many current and former US officials believe Russia is to blame. The Russian embassy in Washington did not reply to a request for comment.

A US-government funded study by the National Academy of Sciences late last year [said that "directed" microwave radiation](#) was the most likely cause of symptoms observed in the affected US government personnel. The US intelligence community has studied microwave attacks for decades, according to documents obtained by CNN from a former CIA officer's personal collection. The US intelligence community [has also been aware](#) that Russia was researching microwave weapons as early as the 1970s, which they determined could be useful for "disrupting the behavior patterns of military or diplomatic personnel," according to NSA documents.

When Polymeropoulos first came to CIA medical officials, they did not believe he had suffered an attack similar to those that US diplomats in Cuba were experiencing at the time. But he was confident about the similarities.

Polymeropoulos, a 26-year veteran of the agency who spent his career fighting terrorism in the Middle East, felt betrayed. He described his relationship with the CIA as going from a love affair to a divorce.

The CIA declined to respond directly to Polymeropoulos' remarks, but spokesman Timothy Barrett said in a statement that the "CIA is working alongside other government agencies to double down on our efforts to find answers regarding the unexplained global health incidents that have impacted personnel. The Agency's top priority has been and continues to be the well-being of all of our officers."

## 'Needless suffering'

Polymeropoulos cut his career short when he retired in 2019. He points to the "needless suffering" he went through because the agency did not give him the support he felt he needed more immediately. Two other State Department officials who experienced similar attacks also cited frustration over the delay it took to get the care they needed.

It is hard to determine the medical impact of delayed specialized treatment, but experts say that early treatment for traumatic brain injuries leads to a more speedy recovery. Polymeropoulos, who fought to get treatment at Walter Reed, is now trying to move on and help others.

"It's not healthy for me to be angry about it," Polymeropoulos. "I'm putting my efforts forward to just ensuring that -- people will not suffer that kind of delay in the future."

Marc Zaid, Polymeropoulos's lawyer who represents almost a dozen other clients who became sick due to the mysterious attacks, said "Marc is the only one of my clients who received treatment at Walter Reed," the government's premier military medical facility. "All the others have all gone to their own personal doctors or went to" the University of Miami or the University of Pennsylvania for treatments and studies, Zaid said.



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"At no time ever to my knowledge did the Walter Reed TBI (traumatic brain injury) folks even come up as an option. Now, understanding what the benefit is, that is incredibly disappointing," Zaid said.

Polymeropoulos took part in art therapy during his month-long specialized program at Walter Reed Medical Center -- a treatment that he called one of the best things he's ever done. One of his projects shows a Superman mask punctured by a dagger --- representing the image his family had of him, being ruined by the attack which changed him forever. Behind the mask there is a CIA seal cracked in half "which signified kind of the betrayal I felt in not getting the health care," as immediately as he needed it, he said.

The Biden administration has a major challenge ahead in determining how it pursues these investigations. Early movement across multiple agencies signals that they are moving to re-examine the issue and prioritize the investigation, and Blinken is being updated on developments.

"Secretary Blinken requested a comprehensive briefing on the issue during the transition, and he has received updates during his time in office. He has made clear that this is a priority for him, and those updates will continue on a regular basis," said a State Department spokesman.

This new momentum comes after a recently [declassified 2018 State Department report](#) obtained by the George Washington University's National Security Archive concluded that the department's investigation

into what some called the 'Havana Syndrome' may have been botched from the beginning.

"You see chaos, lack of organization, you see excessive secrecy, as the authors of the report put it, all of which compromised an initial investigation assessment of what was going on," said Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst with the National Security Archive.

The State Department spokesman said, "we have no higher priority than the safety and security of US personnel, their families, and other US citizens. The US government is working to determine what happened to our staff and their families and to ensure the well-being and health of our officials going forward. That investigation is ongoing and is a high priority. The Department has not yet determined a cause or culprit."

Bill Burns, Biden's pick to lead the CIA, said during his confirmation hearing that he would prioritize care for affected CIA personnel, including at Walter Reed, as well as finding those responsible party behind the attacks.

"I will make it extraordinarily high priority to get to the bottom of who's responsible for the attacks that you just described," Burns said.



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The CIA's new task force, created at the end of 2020, is expected to be key to this effort.

The task force team will draw on agency physicians, as well as officers specializing in human resources, privacy and civil liberties, and counterintelligence, to provide affected individuals with the medical care and resources the CIA personnel may need, the official said. It will also leverage relationships with leading medical intuitions to best address issues impacting officers' health, the official added.

Sources familiar with the ongoing investigations out of the separate US agencies -- including the CIA, the FBI, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the State Department -- say that a major impediment to their efficacy is the fact that they are largely siloed efforts. Interagency coordination has been limited, in part due to the highly classified nature of some details and the privacy restrictions of health records, and that has hampered progress.

It is not clear if the Biden administration will bring the multiple investigations of these suspected microwave attacks under one roof, but officials at the National Security Council are discussing that possibility, two sources familiar with the discussions told CNN. The NSC did not respond to a request for comment.

## Lawmakers are seeking answers

While the federal government response had left victims feeling frustrated, members of Congress have taken up the cause.

"If we don't hold those responsible accountable, then we can be sure it's going to continue to happen. And that's a national security risk to the United States and to our personnel," Shaheen told CNN.

While classified briefings about these attacks have been provided on Capitol Hill, many members of Congress did not get all of the information they requested during the Trump administration, according to multiple congressional sources familiar with the matter.

Some suspect that Trump's failure to confront Russian aggression across the board was one factor in what they saw as an unsatisfactory response from his administration.

"The Trump administration did not demonstrate any level of urgency in confronting aggressions, Russian aggression of any sort," explained Democratic Rep. Abigail Spanberger, a former CIA officer and current member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "So alleged Russian aggression through a curious and not fully defined, be it sound attack, be it microwave attack on US personnel -- is clearly not something that would rise to the top of their to do lists when clear Russian aggression is not something that they were contending with."

Congressional intelligence, foreign affairs and oversight committees are continuing to investigate the matter, multiple congressional aides told CNN.

"The Committee has long-standing concern related to whether foreign adversaries might be seeking to do harm to Americans abroad, particularly the men and women of the Intelligence Community who often toil in shadows with no public recognition of their many sacrifices," House Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff told CNN in a statement. "We have conducted, and will continue to conduct, rigorous oversight to ensure the health and safety of all Intelligence Community personnel."

A former senior State Department official involved in the investigation told CNN that the department had not closed the investigation during the Trump administration, but described the effort as having hit a "dead end," due in part to the fact that the US was unable to gain access to the security footage of the residences of US diplomats in Cuba who were also attacked. The official said the Cuban government would not release that footage.

But Shaheen does not believe the cases are unsolvable.

"I think we are going to be able to find out, maybe not with 100% certainty, but most of our intelligence doesn't come with 100% certainty. So I think we will have a pretty good idea," Shaheen said.

*CNN's Michael Conte, Jennifer Hansler and Nicole Gaouette contributed to this report*

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