

HOW A USED CAR SALESMAN'S ALLEGED KIDNAPPING PLOT TURNED INTO AN INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT

Let me correct something the press has almost universally gotten wrong about the Manssor Arbabsiar plot. He was not originally sent to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the US in a spectacular bombing plot. According to the complaint, after Arbabsiar offered up his service to his cousin, Abdul Reza Shahlai, sometime in early spring, Shahlai asked him to find a drug cartel that would kidnap the Saudi Ambassador. Sometime between that point and July 17, the plot evolved into a kill or kidnap operation, and then a kill operation. But key details of how and when this happened rather curiously were not taped by the informant (whom I refer to as Narc). This raises the possibility that Narc suggested the most spectacular aspects of this plot, both the bombing attempt and the assassination, after he got approached to kidnap Saudi Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir. In other words, it is possible that Narc and his government handlers turned this from a kidnapping attempt into a terrorist plot complete with C4, which makes it a WMD plot.

I've got a timeline below, but first, a few points. There's one section of the complaint that obscures the chronology of how the kidnapping plot turned into the assassination plot. Paragraphs 39 a-e describe what Arbabsiar said in his confession, but the events are dated only with the description, "upon his return to Iran." There's one period of time that, the complaint makes clear, Arbabsiar was in Iran, from July 20 through September 28; given the complaint's clear signal he was in Iran in this

period and the wiring of the payment, I've put the events described in his confession in that period. However, Arbabsiar was "traveling internationally" during another period, from May 30 to June 23, when Arbabsiar likely was also in Iran, so the events (and therefore the decision to assassinate the Ambassador) may have come earlier. I actually think the most likely scenario is that the first part of paragraph 39a—describing him reporting he had "located a drug dealer"—happened in that earlier window, but the other events happened in the later window.

There's one other very critical issue about whether the assassination plot came from Narc or the Qods plotters. The complaint says clearly that the code name for the Ambassador assassination was "Chevrolet." But a number of the other conversations with Shakuri (and, indeed, the September 2 call between Arbabsiar and Narc) talk about a building. And the complaint (and some of the quoted comments below) make it clear they were also talking about other operations with Narc. And when Shakuri first talks to Arbabsiar after he's in FBI custody (remember, he believes Arbabsiar is with Los Zetas), he raises the building, not the Chevrolet, first. I actually suspect—given the discussion of "buying all of it"—that Chevrolet may actually refer to another plot, perhaps a drug deal (see Juan Cole's speculation this might be about drugs), whereas the building refers to the assassination attempt. But in any case, at the very least it says that if Chevrolet was, indeed, the code, then Shakuri was most interested in the building plot, not the Chevrolet plot when he first talked to Arbabsiar.

Early Spring 2011: According to Arbabsiar's confession, Shahlai approaches Arbabsiar and asked him to work with him. Arbabsiar offers up "that as a result of his business in both Mexico and the United States, he knew a number of people who traveled between the two countries, and some of those people, he believed, were

narcotics traffickers. Shahlai responds, "that he wanted Arbabsiar to hire someone who could kidnap the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States and that Arbabsiar should find someone in the narcotics business, because people in that business are willing to undertake criminal activity in exchange for money."

After that meeting: According to Arbabsiar's confession, Shahlai provided thousands of dollars for expenses. This is, at least from the detail given in the plot, the last that Shahlai is involved personally in the plot.

May 24, 2011: In one-day trip to Mexico from Texas, Arbabsiar meets with DEA informant posing as a Los Zetas member (Narc). The meeting is allegedly not recorded. After the meeting, Narc told his handlers that Arbabsiar was interested in, "among other things, attacking an embassy of Saudi Arabia." According to Narc, Arbabsiar asked about his expertise, including on explosives. In response, Narc offered up that he was knowledgeable in C4.

May 30, 2011: Arbabsiar leaves Texas and travels internationally.

First period when series of discussions with Qods Force co-conspirators may have taken place.

June 23, 2011: From his international trip, Arbabsiar enters Mexico by plane.

Late June to July 2011: In a series of unrecorded meetings, Arbabsiar tells Narc he has discussed a variety of missions with his Qods Force colleagues in Iran, including the murder of the Saudi Ambassador to the US.

July 14, 2011: Arbabsiar meets with Narc in what appears to be the first recorded meeting, which doesn't quote Arbabsiar discussing mention killing, rather than kidnapping, the Ambassador specifically. The quotations cited in the complaint from that meeting are:

[Los Zetas' team would need] at least four guys

[Narc was] talking to one of the guys

[Narc would] take the one point five for the Saudi Arabia

[Narc said he would] go ahead and work on Saudi Arabia, get all the information we can

[Narc said] you just want the, the main guy

[Arbabsiar said he wanted just the] Ambassador

[Narc told Arbabsiar to wire money to] an account number

[Arbabsiar said the] money is Iran ... [Individual 1] said he had it there

[Arbabsiar said Individual 1 had received] the money at nine in the morning

[Arbabsiar said the] money's a hundred thousand [but that he would have to] send a hundred ... ten thousand, ten thousand, then thousand. I don't wanna send it to one guy, one shot. [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar said his cousin Abdul Reza Shahlai was] wanted in America [, was a] big general in the army [, does] work in outside, in other countries for the Iranian government [and had been] on CNN

[Narc said] we're going to start doing the guy

July 17, 2011: Arbabsiar meets with Narc in what may be the second recorded conversation. Here, unlike the July 14 meeting, Arbabsiar appears to say something that explicitly indicates the plot has become an assassination rather than a kidnapping. Also note, Arbabsiar here introduces language about "guaranteeing the money;" later, the complaint suggests Narc asked Arbabsiar on August 28 to guarantee the money by sending

someone to Mexico. Also note the reference to "these people" [Arbabsiar's Qods Force co-conspirators] paying the government, which is instead interpreted by the FBI agent as the government paying them.

[Narc] my guy over there ... he's already in Washington [ellipsis original]

[Narc] I got this on the computer ... is this the guy right here? [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] Yeah, that's him

[Narc: The Ambassador has] eight to seven security people around him ... he goes out and eat like two times a week in a restaurant ... my guy is already over there ... doing surveillance [ellipses original]

[Narc] I don't know what exactly your cousin wants me to do

[The complaint makes it clear there is further conversation before the following statement]

[Arbabsiar] he wants you to kill this guy

[Narc] there's gonna be like American people there ... in the restaurant. You want me to do it outside or in the restaurant? [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] Doesn't matter how you do it. I mean, if you do it by himself, kill is better, but ... sometime, you know, you have no choice, is that right? [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar said he could] guarantee the money ... I got the money coming. [ellipsis original, my emphasis]

[Arbabsiar] this is politics, ok ... it's not like, eh, personal ... This is politics, so these people they pay this government ... [Shahlai's] got the, got

the government behind him ... he's not paying from his pocket. [ellipses original]

[Narc gives Arbabsiar] the account number ... in [a US bank] ... and the US routing number [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] I tell [Shahlai], give me just another fifteen. Just ... next morning they send one guy, you know, that work for him. He's like a colonel, that guy. [ellipsis original]

[Narc] Did the colonel take the money, the money to you?

[Arbabsiar] Yes, man. He opened the door for me, the colonel, he bring the envelope. He put the envelope there for me.

[Arbabsiar] They want that guy done, if they hundred go with him, fuck 'em.

[Narc] I'm gonna blow him up or shoot him, whatever you want.

[Arbabsiar] Yeah, it doesn't matter ... whatever is easy for ... how is possible for you. [ellipses original]

[Arbabsiar] Let it hit the restaurant. If, if you can do it outside, do it. If not, restaurant, hit it, it's ok.

[Narc: there are] from a hundred, a hundred and fifty [and] buildings on the sides [and] senators

[Arbabsiar] no big deal [,] no problem

July 20, 2011: Arbabsiar departs Mexico for a foreign country. The complaint notes that Arbabsiar had told Narc he'd be traveling to Iran to see his cousin.

Second period when series of conversations with Qods Forces co-conspirators could have taken place. According to his confession, during this

period (see note above about timing) Arbabsiar meets with Gholam Shakuri and Hamed Abdollahi together and Shakuri individually. Over the course of those meetings, he is asked to “kidnap or kill” the Saudi Ambassador to the US, quickly. They ask whether Narc will travel internationally—presumably so he can be vetted—but Arbabsiar says he will not. The QF co-conspirators approved a plan to blow up a restaurant, as well as a \$100,000 down payment. They told him to use the code name “Chevrolet” for the Ambassador plot. Shakuri told Arbabsiar that Qasem Soleimani was aware of what he was doing and that Arbabsiar could meet with him in the future.

August 1, 2011: One foreign entity sends ~\$49,960 through a NYC bank to another bank in the US.

August 6, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc talk on a recorded phone call. Note, it’s not clear who called whom.

[Narc asks whether Arbabsiar had] already finished with the other half of ... the money [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] I sent it yesterday

August 9, 2011: A second foreign entity sends ~\$49,960 through a NYC bank to another bank in the US.

August 11, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc talk again on a recorded phone call. Again, it’s not clear who called whom.

[Arbabsiar] Did you check the bank?

[Narc] I check in the bank, everything is there.

August 25, 2011: JP Morgan Chase signs a settlement admitting to, among other things, issuing a \$2.9 million line of credit to the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines on December 22, 2009.

August 28, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak by recorded call, again it's not clear who called whom. The complaint cites no content of this call, though does say (in a footnote) that Narc raised the possibility that Arbabsiar should "send someone" to Mexico as collateral.

September 2, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak in a recorded call again, again it's not clear who called whom.

[Arbabsiar: Is] the building getting painted

[Narc] We're still doing that.

[Arbabsiar] once we do this one, you gonna open a [U/I; bracket original] like, uh ... you got the number for the safe [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] once you open the door, that's it. You know what I mean? ... you don't have to worry about anything. [ellipsis original]

September 12, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak in a recorded call, again it's not clear who called whom.

[Arbabsiar] The number is gonna stay the same thing ... one and a half [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] the number we did

[Arbabsiar said he could] prepare for those two ... but we need to at least one of them [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar says if Narc does] at least one ... I'll send the balance for you [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] the first one they just want it for test

September 20, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak in a recorded call, again it's not clear who called

whom.

[Narc] I'm ready for the ... for the thing, for the house, man, to be painted but ... I need to, I need, either I need you or I need half of the ... of the check that we're gonna receive to ... so I can go ahead and ... be finished with the job.

[Arbabsiar] I'm gonna go over there two three days, I'll be over there ... Don't wait for me. Get ready, but I'll be over there.

September 20, 2011, during the night: Narc returns a call from Arbabsiar and records the call.

[Arbabsiar asks] how long [I] need to stay in Mexico

Late September 2011: According to Arbabsiar's confession, he and Shakuri meet. Arbabsiar explains that Narc either wants half the money or to have Arbabsiar to travel to Mexico to guarantee the future payment. Shakuri said no more money would be given to Narc, and advised Arbabsiar not to travel back to Mexico. Shakuri said Arbabsiar was responsible for himself if he did go to Mexico. Shakuri told Arbabsiar to call him after he arrived in Mexico.

September 28, 2011: Arbabsiar denied entry in Mexico

September 29, 2011: Arbabsiar arrested and within hours waives Miranda rights and agrees to talk

October 4, 2011: While in custody, Arbabsiar calls Shakuri on a call the FBI recorded and monitored. This and all other Shakuri-Arbabsiar conversations were translated from Farsi. Note that, in spite of the fact the complaint says "Chevrolet" was the code for the Ambassador op, Shakuri refers to the outstanding op as "the building."

[Shakuri] Are you okay ... are you well?
[ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] Yes, I wanted to see how
you're doing and to tell you I'm well.

[Shakuri] Okay, thank God, stay well. I
was waiting. What news ... what did you do
about the building? [ellipsis original]

October 5, 2011: Arbabsiar makes another
recorded and monitored call to Shakuri.

[Arbabsiar] I wanted to tell you, the
Chevrolet is ready, it's ready, uh, to
be done. I should continue, right?

[Shakuri] Yes, yes, yes. You mean you
are buying all of it?

[Arbabsiar] I don't know for now, it's
ready, okay?

[Shakuri] So buy it, buy it.

[Arbabsiar] Buy it? Okay.

[Shakuri] Buy it, yes, buy all of it.

[Arbabsiar] this boy wants, uh, some
money, he wants some expenditure. What
do you say, should we give him some
more? He wants another 50.

[Shakuri] With you, no, you ... that
amount is fine. [UI] give him the rest.
He should buy the car for us first.
[ellipsis original]

[Shakuri] Do it quickly, it's late, just
buy it for me and bring it already.

October 7, 2011: Arbabsiar places another
monitored and taped call to Shakuri. The FBI
seems to be trying, unsuccessfully, to get
Shakuri to agree to send money on tape (the
earlier payment had been laundered through
Individual #1, so nothing directly tied Shakuri
directly to the payment for the plot). Note the
seeming nonsensical comment suggesting that Narc

might give extra money.

[Arbabsiar] This Mexican, ... keeps on insisting on the thing. He says, 'If – I need money, 50. I won't do the job if you don't pay.' And everything's ready.

[Shakuri] I don't know. You guaranteed yourself ... of course, if we give it, we'll give it to you. Okay? If he gives it, fine; if not we must provide the 100 [or] 50. Tell him [U/I].

[Arbabsiar] Well, yeah. Now I–what do you say? What should I do? [U/I]

[Shakuri] How much is he talking about?

[Arbabsiar] I don't know. He's saying, for instance, well how–he says well–so, I thought, so that the 100 we gave won't go to waste; that's why. On the other hand, we gave a 100 and that would go to waste as well.

[Shakuri] Well, yeah, but what if you give this one it goes to waste as well?

[Arbabsiar] That's what the Mexican ... wants ... What can I do? [ellipses original]

[Shakuri] Okay, today I'll discuss it to see what they say.

[Shakuri] You said that for sure they're saying that much. We didn't discuss it though, we–in any case, he needs to deliver it to us, okay?

[Arbabsiar] Completely. Yeah, yeah, I know what you're saying.

[Shakuri] You guaranteed it.

[Arbabsiar] I guaranteed it, but they ... they're not ordinary people

[Shakuri] You said it yourself, they–from our point of view–when we get our merchandise, we get our merchandise.

We have guaranteed the rest. You were
our guarantee.