

LISA MONACO WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE ACADEMY

One nice touch of today's press conference rolling out the latest FBI-created plot (aside from comedy lines like "they had no regard for the rule of law" and "we will not let other countries use our soil as their battleground") is that the fairly new Assistant Attorney General for National Security, Lisa Monaco, got a speaking role.

That's certainly not inappropriate; given that this plot was either invented by or targeted at Iran, the NSD would be right in the thick of the action.

It's the content of her statements, focusing almost entirely on thanking participants in the "investigation," I find so interesting. She started by thanking her reports in the NSD, particularly the Counterterrorism Section. Then the US Attorney's Offices in Southern District of NY and Houston. Then the FBI, the DEA, and the NY Joint Terrorism Task Force. After having thanked those groups—two of which (FBI and DEA) are members of the Intelligence Community—she then thanked the Intelligence Community.

Finally, I want to thank the intelligence community for its critical role in this matter. The National Security Division was designed to serve as the place where intelligence and law enforcement come together at the Justice Department. I am proud to say that we served that purpose here. This case demonstrates exactly how the division is supposed to work and should serve as a model for future cases.

(Holder offers less demonstrative thanks to the intelligence community too.) In other words, the head of the NSD, which would handle cooperation

between the ops side and the law enforcement side, dedicated one-fifth of her comments, a quarter of her thanks, to the IC members presumably above and beyond the FBI and DEA officers who led this sting.

By itself, that's not a surprise. After all, even the recent model plane UAV plot the FBI invented would have involved the NSA and CIA closely because the FBI seems to have targeted Rezwan Ferdaus, the plotter, because of his comments in jihadist chat rooms. But by contrast with such operations as that one, the complaint in this case offers no obvious tip to the involvement of the IC.

Sure, there would be intelligence analysts, the experts on the Quds Force (though the FBI agent writing the complaint attributed information on the Quds to Treasury and State declarations and "other 'open source' information," in the same way he attributes information on Los Zetas to "published reports"). There might be Treasury investigators, the people who use SWIFT to track the two international wire transfers that are the primary evidence in the case, but the FBI could probably track the transfers themselves, not least because the transfers ended up in an FBI bank account and I suspect they went through a friendly bank in NYC. You'd think the NSA would be involved, but the informant, who I call "Narc," taped all the phone conversations himself until Arbabsiar's arrest, after which the FBI taped his calls. There is a reference to pictures of Quds members, presumably taken by intelligence agencies.

But those are the only visible signs of IC involvement. Indeed, the complaint appears designed to hide any hint of IC involvement and the sting appears designed to avoid any obvious involvement from the IC. That is, from the looks of things, this arrest required less involvement from the IC than Fardaus'.

Which I assume is the point: to create the appearance of an FBI arrest that seems entirely unmotivated by underlying intelligence plots.

And yet unnamed agencies in the IC got prominent kudos for their “critical role in this matter.”

With that in mind, I wanted to point to a few interesting details in the complaint.

Perhaps most interesting, the complaint’s account of how a seeming incompetent like Arbabsiar got sent out to negotiate ties between the Quds and Los Zeta indicates Arbabsiar suggested he get involved, not his cousin Abdul Reza Shahlai (described here as Iranian Official #1).

ARBABSIAR told Iranian Official #1 that as a result of his business in both Mexico and the United States, he (ARBABSIAR) knew a number of people who traveled between the two countries, and some of those people, he (ARBABSIAR) believed, were narcotics traffickers. Iranian Official #1 told ARBABSIAR 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.

And note how, at the start, Shahlai wanted only a kidnapping? Arbabsiar and Narc turned it into an assassination. And Narc offered up the C4 that is the entire basis of the WMD complaint (and, more largely, the terrorism charge).

Note, too, how it was orchestrated such that Arbabsiar would be in custody making calls back to Iran that would capture Arbabsiar’s co-conspirator, Gholam Shakuri, in the plot (every single one of these charges is a conspiracy charge, so getting some evidence against Shakuri was critical to even charging Arbabsiar without having him engage in an actual attack). The explanation was that Narc wanted something—either more money or Arbabsiar’s presence in Mexico—as a guarantee of the

remainder of the \$1.5 million payoff before he'd order the hit. Shakuri advised against Ababsiar traveling to Mexico.

SHAKURI stated that no more money should be given to [Narc], and advised ARBABSIIAR against traveling back to Mexico. SHAKURI said that ARBABSIIAR was responsible for himself if he did travel.

Then, when he was in custody pretending to be in Los Zetas custody, Arbabsiar called Shakuri and told him Narc wanted more money—presumably a ploy by the FBI to get Shakuri reconfirming the plan for the plot and his involvement in the money transfer. But Shakuri rejected that request.

SHAKURI then stated: "You said it yourself, they—from our point of view of—when we get our merchandise, we get our merchandise." SHAKURI added, "We have guaranteed the rest. You were our guarantee."

If this were a real plot and Los Zetas were really playing hardball for a bigger advance, then Shakuri's decision might well have gotten Arbabsiar killed. At the very least, Shakuri's refusal to pony up any more advance money suggests some ambivalence about the operation (or Arbabsiar's life).

Now, it's not clear when Arbabsiar decided to cooperate with the FBI—only when he was arrested (and promptly waived Miranda rights), or back in the spring when he proposed reaching out to Los Zetas to his cousin and along the way turned a kidnapping into a terrorist attack.

But it seems clear that someone orchestrated this sting from behind the scenes to create the appearance of a Quds-sponsored terrorism plot in the US. And for that reason, among the other players and directors and cinematographers Lisa Monaco thanked at the press conference, she also

thanked the IC for the critical role they played
in orchestrating the show.