

THE GHORBANIFAR TIMELINE, TWO

I will have more to say on specific details revealed in my Ghorbanifar Timeline in the coming days. But for now, I wanted to make my main point more strongly by focusing on particular dates in the timeline.

The timeline strongly suggests that the hawks within the White House sustained the contacts with Ghorbanifar as part of a (mostly successful) campaign to prevent the Administration from building a closer relationship with Iran.

Before I get into actual dates, recall Flynt Leverett's argument (which was so dangerous the Administration censored it heavily). Leverett argues that the only workable solution to our relations with Iran is to forge a "grand bargain," trading security for more constructive Iranian engagement throughout the Middle East.

In the current regional context, issue-specific engagement with Iran is bound to fail. The only diplomatic approach that might succeed is a comprehensive one aimed at a "grand bargain" between the United States and the Islamic Republic.

[snip]

Iran will only cooperate with the United States, whether in Iraq or on the nuclear issue, as part of a broader rapprochement addressing its core security concerns. This requires extension of a United States security guarantee – effectively, an American commitment not to use force to change the borders or form of government of the Islamic Republic – bolstered by the prospect of lifting United States unilateral sanctions and normalizing bilateral relations.

The parts of Leverett's op-ed that got censored reveal that, in fact, Iran has attempted to foster such a grand bargain several times during the Bush Administration. Colin Powell and Richard Armitage cautiously supported those attempts. But each time those efforts started developing, the Administration scuttled the efforts—usually based on inflammatory claims.

And at least some of those claims may have come from Manucher Ghorbanifar.

In other words, top Administration officials kept letting Ghorbanifar's fraudulent "intelligence" get inserted into the government because it provided critical—albeit fraudulent—support for a policy of regime change in Iran.

Now look at the known dates:

December to February 2001

Michael Ledeen says he first started putting this meeting together "soon after September 11, 2001, probably in the October 2001 timeframe." The first documented discussions about the meeting occurred on November 7, and the meeting occurred from December 10 through 13.

Thus, the meeting was set up during the time period when the US was engaging Iran closely—and productively—in context of its Afghan war.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration used the cover of the "6+2" process to stand up what was effectively a freestanding bilateral channel with Iran, with regular (for the most part, monthly) meetings between U.S. and Iranian diplomats.

U.S. engagement with Tehran over Afghanistan provided significant and tangible benefits for the American position during the early stages of the war on terror. At a minimum, U.S. engagement with Tehran helped to

neutralize the threat of Iranian actions on the ground, either by Afghan proxies or by Iranian intelligence and paramilitary assets, which could have made prosecution of Operation Enduring Freedom and subsequent post-conflict stabilization more difficult. More positively, engagement elicited crucial diplomatic cooperation from Iran, both during the war and afterwards. Over years, Iran had cultivated extensive relationships with key players on the Afghan political scene, including important warlords in northern and western Afghanistan. Iranian influence was critical for arming and managing these players during the U.S.-led coalition's military operations. After the war, Iranian influence induced these players to support the political settlement enshrined at the Bonn Conference in December 2001, when the Afghan Interim Authority under Hamid Karzai was established.

Most striking, the Rome meeting with Ghorbanifar took place on the days immediately following a December 9 public statement from Colin Powell expressing an openness to negotiate with Iran.

SECRETARY POWELL: On Iran, setting aside pipelines. I am open to explore opportunities. We have been in discussions with the Iranians on a variety of levels and in some new ways since September 11. Jim Dobbins spoke with Iranians in Bonn as we put together the new interim administration in Afghanistan, and I had a brief handshake and discussion with the Iranian Prime Minister in the UN. So there are a number of things going on and we recognize the nature of that regime and we recognize that the Iranian people are starting to try to find a new way forward and we are open to exploring

opportunities without having any vaseline in our eyes with respect to the nature of the government or the history of the past 22 years.

Finally, there's the issue of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Within the framework of cooperation with Iran and following the Bonn Conference that set up the Afghan government, the US asked Iran to hold Hekmatyar in Iran. The US asked Iran to hold Hekmatyar—one of the most effective warlords, going back to the anti-Soviet campaign—partly to keep close track of him, and partly to prevent him from returning to Afghanistan and destabilizing the fragile country. Iran consented to hold Hekmatyar, "so long as the Bush administration did not criticize it for harboring terrorists;" basically, they didn't want the US to simultaneously request they hold Hekmatyar and then label that action as the sheltering of terrorists.

In short, the US and Iran were cooperating productively, based on the hope that the US might grant Iran a security guarantee and premised on the understanding, in the short term, that the US wouldn't accuse Iran of support for terrorism.

So now look at the list of "intelligence" Ghorbanifar offered Ledeen, Rhode, and Franklin:

- Iranian "hit teams" targeting U.S. personnel in Afghanistan
- Iran's long standing relationship with the Palestinian Liberation Organization
- Tunnel complexes in Iran for weapons storage or exfiltration of regime leaders

- Iran's perception on Saddam Hussein's grip on Iraq
- Iranian regime attitudes toward the U.S.
- Internal rivalries among Iran's intelligence agencies

Of these pieces of "information," Franklin took action on the "hit teams" claim, informing a Special Forces Commander of it. The Commander then turned "the tables on these Iranians," presumably undermining any cooperation they had in Afghanistan.

In addition, there was Ghorbanifar's cocktail napkin plan for regime change, in which \$5 million of traffic disruption would result in the overthrow of the regime, which Ledeen passed on directly to Hadley, Luti, and Rodman.

At a time when the State Department was testing the possibility of closer ties to Iran, a known fraud provided information that suggested Iran was trying to undermine US efforts in Afghanistan and continued to have ties to terrorists (PLO). This meeting happened with the approval of Stephen Hadley, who the following year, at least, would play a key role in drafting the State of the Union speech. Further, in early 2002, someone from OVP was following up with Franklin on the information. In the SOTU in 2002, Bush included Iran among the Axis of Evil. Just weeks later, Iran expelled Hekmatyar; Hekmatyar would go on to be one of the strongest leaders in the Afghan insurgency fighting against the US. While it's not clear how important Ghorbanifar's "intelligence" was in the Administration's adoption of a hard line against Iran in the face of meaningful cooperation, key players within the Administration willingly pursued such information.

June 2003

The second planned Ghorbanifar meeting took place on June 30 to July 1, 2003, in Paris. As

with the first meeting, this one took place not long after Iran had tried to reach out to the US again.

This timing is a little confusing. Iran was reported to have sent a proposal to the US via Geneva "just after" the US conquered Baghdad in April 2003. The US complained to the Swiss Ambassador who had forwarded the document. But the US and Iran did enter into negotiations, lasting until May 21, when the Administration made unsubstantiated claims that Iran-hosted Al Qaeda leaders had planned a recent bombing in Saudi Arabia and shut down negotiations.

So, in the period following another attempt to negotiate with Iran, Harold Rhode once again met with Ghorbanifar. Significantly, this meeting appears to have been one set up by OVP—two OVP people sent Rhode instead after they were unable to make the meeting themselves (more on OVP's involvement in a future post). At the meeting, Ghorbanifar told Rhode things that played into notions of Iran as a sponsor of terrorism and of the counter-insurgency in Iraq.

The purpose of Mr. Rhode's meeting with Mr. Ghorbanifar was to receive "an update on the current political situation and conditions in Iran." Based on Mr. Rhode's notes, the subjects covered included the current situation in Iran, Iranian relations with Syria, the state of Islam in Iran, and Iran's activity in Iraq.

And, of course, another iteration of Ghorbanifar's cocktail napkin plan for regime change in Iran.

In the aftermath of this meeting, Senators Kyl, Santorum, Brownback, and Roberts started pressuring Tenet to act on Ghorbanifar's "intelligence." Meanwhile, Rhode continued to communicate with Ghorbanifar. And Michael Ledeen started claiming that Ghorbanifar could bring weapons inspectors to Iraq's uranium, now hidden

in Iran. This was also the period when OVP was taking raw intelligence from Ghorbanifar—some of it grievously incorrect—and demanding that David Kay follow up on the intelligence in Iraq.

Now, perhaps OVP was willing to meet with Ghorbanifar (or have Rhode do so in its stead) out of desperation with the WMD hunt. But it came in the wake of another attempt to establish closer relations between Iran and the US.

October 2003

Finally, there was a possible meeting between Harold Rhode and Ghorbanifar in early October 2003. While we don't know whether this actually happened, if it did, it would have occurred in another period of debate about the Administration's Iran policy. Just weeks after the potential meeting, Stephen Cambone halted CIFA's investigation into the meetings, preventing CIFA from investigating (among other things) the role of OVP in the meetings. And, just weeks after the possible meeting, the State Department once again announced it was prepared to restart negotiations with Iran.

Now, I frankly think we're dealing with an incomplete picture. We don't have a map of how often Ledeen was meeting with Ghorbanifar or whom he was sharing that "intelligence" with. Further, the fact that two OVP people were prepared to meet with Ghorbanifar in June 2003 suggests they may have had other meetings with him. That is, these three dates may represent a very incomplete picture of when the hawks in the Administration went to Ghorbanifar to get further useful "intelligence" to undercut closer ties to Iran.

But the dates we do know suggest there may be a connection between periods of increasing debate within the Administration about its Iran policy and formal meetings with Ghorbanifar. As with Chalabi, Ghorbanifar appeared to be providing the neocons the information they needed, when they needed it, all to support a grandiose strategy of empire in the Middle East.