

WHY DID THE SCARY IRAN PLOTTER SPEAK DIRECTLY FROM A CONTESTED TREASURY DEPARTMENT SCRIPT?

As I noted on Friday, Manssor Arbabsiar's cousin, Abdul Reza Shahlai, who purportedly directed him to arrange a plot with Los Zetas, was sanctioned by the Treasury Department in 2008, in part for involvement in an attack in Karbala.

Iran-based Abdul Reza Shahlai—a deputy commander in the IRGC-Qods Force—threatens the peace and stability of Iraq by planning Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Special Groups attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq. Shahlai has also provided material and logistical support to Shia extremist groups—to include JAM Special Groups—that conduct attacks against U.S. and Coalition Forces. In one instance, Shahlai planned the January 20, 2007 attack by JAM Special Groups against U.S. soldiers stationed at the Provincial Joint Coordination Center in Karbala, Iraq. Five U.S. soldiers were killed and three were wounded during the attack.

But as Gareth Porter pointed out yesterday, there are reasons to doubt the US has proof of Shahlai's role in that attack. Porter's original report on this from 2007 describes Michael Gordon trying, unsuccessfully, to get Brigadier General Kevin Bergner to provide real evidence of Iranian involvement in the plot. And he describes David Petraeus specifically denying the claim.

Another indication that the command had no evidence of Iranian involvement in

the attack was the statements of the top commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, on the issue in an April 26 **press briefing**. Petraeus had referred to a 22-page memorandum captured with the Shiite prisoners that he said “detailed the planning, preparation, approval process and conduct of the operation that resulted in five of our soldiers being killed in Karbala.” But he did not claim that either the document or the interrogation of Khazali had suggested any Iranian or Hezbollah participation in, much less direction of the planning of the Karbala assault.

Later in that briefing, a reporter asked whether Petraeus was “saying that there was evidence of Iranian involvement in that [Karbala] operation?” Petraeus responded, “No. No. No. That—first of all, that was the operation that you mentioned, and we do not have a direct link to Iranian involvement in that particular case.”

At the time Petraeus made this statement, Khazali, the chief of the militia group that had carried out the attack, had been in U.S. custody for more than a month. Despite nearly five weeks of intensive interrogation of Khazali, Petraeus’s comments would indicate that U.S. officials had not learned anything that implicated Iran or Hezbollah in the planning or execution of the Karbala attack

Porter’s post yesterday describes officers subsequently reiterating that the Iraqis, not the Iranians, launched this plot.

In a news briefing in Baghdad Jul. 2, 2007, Gen. Kevin Bergner confirmed that the attack in Karbala had been authorised by the Iraqi chief of the militia in question, Kais Khazali, not

by any Iranian official.

Col. Michael X. Garrett, who had been commander of the U.S. Fourth Brigade combat team in Karbala, confirmed to this writer in December 2008 that the Karbala attack “was definitely an inside job”.

Now, perhaps Treasury had additional evidence by the time it sanctioned Shahlai, perhaps not. But suffice it to say the claim that Shahlai had a role in that plot is at least contested, and there is reason to believe it is outright false.

Which is why I find it so interesting that, among the other things Manssor Arbabsiar repeats to Narc about Shahlai, is that he had ties to a bombing in Iraq.

ARBABSIAR further explained that his cousin was “wanted in America,” had been “on the CNN,” and was a “big general in [the] army.” ARBABSIAR further explained that there were a number of parts to the army of Iran and that his cousin “work[s] in outside, in other countries for the Iranian government[.]” ARBABSIAR further explained that his cousin did not wear a uniform or carry a gun, and **had taken certain unspecified actions related to a bombing in Iraq.** Compare supra ¶ 17. [my emphasis]

That reference back to paragraph 17? It’s a reference to the complaint’s background on the Quds Force. Note the content carefully:

[T]he IGRC is composed of a number of branches, one of which is the Qods Force. The Qods Force conducts sensitive covert operations abroad, including terrorist attacks, assassinations, and kidnappings, and provides weapons and training to Iran’s terrorist and militant allies. Among many other things, the Qods Force is believed to

sponsor attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq, and in October 2007, the United States Treasury Department designated the Qods Force, pursuant to Executive Order 13224, for providing material support to the Taliban and other terrorist organizations.

Note, the Treasury designation the FBI Agent refers to is **not** the 2008 designation naming Shahlai directly in connection to the Karbala plot, but instead an earlier one first designating Qods Force for material support to the Taliban. And even though that earlier designation included a laundry list of Qods Force proxies, it includes Iraq almost as a footnote.

IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF): The Qods Force, a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC; aka Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), provides material support to the Taliban, Lebanese Hizballah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).

The Qods Force is the Iranian regime's primary instrument for providing lethal support to the Taliban. The Qods Force provides weapons and financial support to the Taliban to support anti-U.S. and anti-Coalition activity in Afghanistan. Since at least 2006, Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, plastic explosives, and probably man-portable defense systems to the Taliban. This support contravenes Chapter VII UN Security Council obligations. UN Security Council resolution 1267 established sanctions against the Taliban and UN Security Council resolutions 1333 and 1735 imposed arms embargoes against the Taliban. Through

Qods Force material support to the Taliban, we believe Iran is seeking to inflict casualties on U.S. and NATO forces.

[snip]

In addition, the Qods Force provides lethal support in the form of weapons, training, funding, and guidance to select groups of Iraqi Shi'a militants who target and kill Coalition and Iraqi forces and innocent Iraqi civilians.

In fact, the complaint rather neatly avoids mentioning those allegations about Karbala at all, in spite of the fact that one of the people discussed (though not by name) in the complaint was specifically sanctioned by Treasury for that. Then, after choosing not to mention the Karbala allegations in the complaint, within hours of its release, the government was anonymously pushing journalists like Mike Isikoff to talk about that later designation. If they had wanted people to look at that later designation, why hadn't they included it in the complaint?

So to review, the complaint doesn't point to the Treasury sanction of the guy who purportedly directed this plot. But it does feature the star plotter mentioning the allegation behind that Treasury sanction, **presented from the interpretation the US government has spun**. And then, within hours of rolling out this show, the government then points journalists to that Shal'ai-specific Treasury sanction.

Now, Arbasiar's allusion to what appears to be the Karbala plot is not fatal to this story. It's possible he really did learn of the Shal'ai's purported role from CNN (I can't find their report of the 2008 sanction on Google), though that presumably would have been explicit about his role. It's possible that, in spite the fact that the government doesn't necessarily have proof on Shal'ai, Shal'ai was boasting of

it to his cousin.

But I find it mighty curious that the only mention of the sanctions on Shahlai—ultimately, our government's target in the investigation—come from the star plotter and not the FBI itself.