

THE IRANIAN PLOT: BANK TRANSFERS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

I'm sorry, but I'm having a really difficult time taking this latest terrorist plot seriously. Not just because the story is so neat, tying together all the enemies—the drug cartels and Iran—we're currently supposed to hate, but because it elicited such comical lines from Eric Holder and NY US Attorney Preet Bharara about assassinating other government's officials (like, say, Qaddafi's son) and doing battle on other country's soil (like, say, the entire world) and not taking sufficient precautions to prevent civilian casualties.

But just to unpack what the government claims it found, here's the amended complaint.

The big action that, the government suggests, proves the case involves two bank transfers:

On or about August 1, 2011, MANSSOR ARBABSIAR, a/k/a "Mansour Arbabsiar," the defendant, caused an overseas wire transfer of approximately \$49,960 to be sent by a foreign entity from a bank located in a foreign country to an FBI undercover bank account (the "UC Bank Account"). Before reaching the UC Bank Account, the funds were transferred through a bank in Manhattan, New York.

On or about August 9, 2011, ARBABSIAR caused an overseas wire transfer of approximately \$49,960 to be sent by a foreign entity from a bank located in a foreign country to an FBI undercover bank account (the "UC Bank Account"). Before reaching the UC Bank Account, the funds were transferred through a bank in Manhattan, New York.

And based on those transfers, one unsuccessful

attempt to enter Mexico, and a lot of talk between an informant and one of the defendants, we've got another terrorist plot.

Admittedly, there's a backstory to how that \$100,000 got transferred.

As the FBI tells it, back in May, Manssor Arbabsiar traveled to Mexico to meet with a guy he thought was a member of Los Zetas but was instead a narcotics convict-turned-informant I'll call "Narc." As always with these narratives, the FBI doesn't explain how Arbabsiar happened to choose Los Zetas for his hit squad, as implausible as that is. It says only that Arbabsiar's cousin told him that people "in the narcotics business ... are willing to undertake criminal activity in exchange for money." How plausible would a drug hit on the Saudi Ambassador be? Furthermore, don't Iranians have their own more subtle ways of working?

Nevertheless, we're led to believe it is plausible and not at all overdetermined that the cousin of an Iranian spook would launder their assassination through a Mexican drug cartel.

In their first meeting, Narc offered up that he was skilled in the use of C4. This is important, because unless you have explosives, you can't charge that someone wanted to use WMD. Semi-automatics or poison—which might be more apt weapons to assassinate a Saudi Ambassador (particularly since at one point Arbabsiar specified he'd prefer no civilian casualties)—legally don't offer the same benefits. In fact, in spite of the fact that Arbabsiar is alleged to have originally sought to have the Ambassador kidnapped or killed, and said, "it doesn't matter" in response to Narc's offer to shoot or bomb the Ambassador, Arbabsiar still got that magic WMD charge.

Note, that first meeting took place on May 24. There were other meetings in June and July. It's only a later meeting—a July 14 meeting—that the complaint first describes as being taped. That's important not just because these earlier

conversations always tend to be illuminating (the complaint notes that Arbabsiar “explained how he came to meet” Narc but doesn’t provide that detail), but also because those earlier, possibly untaped conversations describe the other targets.

Prior to the July 14, 2011 meeting, CS-1 had reported that he and ARBABSIIAR had discussed the possibility of attacks on a number of other targets. These targets included foreign government facilities associated with Saudi Arabia and with another country, and these targets were located within and outside of the United States.

These include, according to reports, Israel.

The complaint makes a point to repeatedly provide “proof” that Ababsiar’s plot was paid for by the Iranian government.

This is politics, so these people [ARBABSIIAR’s co-conspirators in Iran] they pay this government . . . he’s got [ARBABSIIAR’s cousin has got] the, got the government behind him . . . he’s not paying from his pocket.

And the complaint describes Narc describing the fictional plot that Arbabsiar was going to pay for. Narc had all the touches: a fictional restaurant, frequented by fictional Senators, and hundreds of other diners. Just so as to provide Arbabsiar with an opportunity to say he was okay with the death of those fictional Senators, if it had to happen that way.

But here’s the thing I really don’t get.

This complaint charges Arbabsiar and Ali Gholam Shakuri, who is apparently a Colonel in the Quds force. But the whole plot was originally conceived of by his cousin (called “Individual 1” or “Iranian Official 1” in the complaint), who is a Quds General “wanted in America.” In

addition, Arbabsiar spoke with another high-ranking Quds official. His cousin provided him the money for the plot, and directed him to carry it out.

And the FBI has evidence of the cousin's involvement; as part of Arbabsiar's confession (he waived the right to lawyer), he said,

men he understood to be senior Quds Force officials were aware of and approved, among other things, the use of [Narc] in connection with the plot; payments to [Narc]; and the means by which the Ambassador would be killed in the United States and the casualties that would likely result.

So the FBI had a Quds general directly implicated by his own cousin in a terrorist attack in the US, and another senior Quds official at least tangentially involved. But they don't indict those two, too? (Note, Fran Townsend just tweeted that Treasury imposed sanctions on these guys; will update when I get that information. Update: see below.)

The complaint may suggest they had an entirely different plan. After Arbabsiar was arrested on September 29, the FBI had him call Shakuri on several different occasions—October 4, October 5, and October 7. Claiming to be in Mexico as guarantor for the remaining 1.4 million promised for the hit, Arbabsiar told Shakuri—the complaint describes, “among other things”—that Narc wanted more money. Shakuri refused to give it to him, reminding him that he was himself the guarantee Narc would get paid. Before Arbabsiar purportedly went to Mexico, Shakuri had warned him not to go.

All this suggests the FBI was after something else—though it's not clear what. The obvious thing is that they would use Arbabsiar as bait to get first Shakuri and possibly his cousin.

But I also note that the complaint refers to the cousin and the other Quds officer as men

Arbabsiar knew to be Quds officers—as if they might be something else.

In any case, this indictment seems like a recruitment gone bad. If so, should we really have told the world we're using Los Zetas members we flipped to try to recruit Iranian spies?

Update: This Treasury release explains who the other Quds officers are.

Here are the allegations Treasury made as justifications for the new sanctions designations:

Manssor Arbabsiar

Arbabsiar met on a number of occasions with senior IRGC-QF officials regarding this plot and acted on behalf of senior Quds Force officials – including his cousin Abdul Reza Shahlai and Shahlai's deputy Gholam Shakuri – to execute the plot. During one such meeting, a \$100,000 payment for the murder of the Saudi ambassador was approved by the IRGC-QF. After this meeting, Arbabsiar arranged for approximately \$100,000 to be sent from a non-Iranian foreign bank to the United States, to the account of the person he recruited to carry out the assassination.

Qasem Soleimani

As IRGC-QF Commander, Qasem Soleimani oversees the IRGC-QF officers who were involved in this plot. Soleimani was previously designated by the Treasury Department under E.O. 13382 based on his relationship to the IRGC. He was also designated in May 2011 pursuant to E.O. 13572, which targets human rights abuses in Syria, for his role as the Commander of the IRGC-QF, the primary conduit for Iran's support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID).

Hamed Abdollahi

Abdollahi is also a senior IRGC-QF officer who coordinated aspects of this operation. Abdollahi oversees other Qods Force officials – including Shahlai – who were responsible for coordinating and planning this operation.

Abdul Reza Shahlai

Shahlai is an IRGC-QF official who coordinated the plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States Adel Al-Jubeir, while he was in the United States and to carry out follow-on attacks against other countries' interests inside the United States and in another country. Shahlai worked through his cousin, Mansour Arbabsiar, who was named in the criminal complaint for conspiring to bring the IRGC-QF's plot to fruition. Shahlai approved financial allotments to Arbabsiar to help recruit other individuals for the plot, approving \$5 million dollars as payment for all of the operations discussed.

Update: Max Fisher also thinks this stinks.

But, for all the plausibility that Iran might be willing to blow up a Saudi ambassador, it's not at all apparent what they would gain from it. Iran has never been shy about sponsoring terrorism, but only when it was within their interests, or at least their perceived interests. It's hard to see how they could have possibly decided on a plot like the one that Holder claimed today.

What would it really mean for Iran if the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. were killed in a terrorist attack in Washington? The U.S.-Saudi relationship has been **bad and getting worse** since the

start of the Arab Spring, with the Saudi monarchy working increasingly against the democratic movements that the U.S. supports. A senior member of the royal family even threatened to cut off the close U.S.-Saudi relationship if Obama opposed the Palestinian statehood bid, which he did. If the U.S. and Saudi Arabia really broke off their seven-decade, oil-soaked romance, it would be terrific news for Iran. Saudi Arabia depends on the U.S. selling it arms, helping it with intelligence, and overlooking its domestic and regional (see: Bahrain) abuses.

If the U.S.-Saudi alliance fell apart, the Shia-majority Islamic Republic of Iran would have an easier time pushing its regional influence against Saudi Arabia, especially in some of the crucial states between the two: Iraq, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Iran would be able to reverse its increasing regional isolation and perhaps flip some Arab leaders from the U.S.-Saudi sphere toward its own. The best part of this, for Iran, is that it probably wouldn't even have to do anything: the U.S.-Saudi special relationship, if it collapses, would do so without Iran having to lift a finger. The dumbest thing that Iran could possibly do, then, would be stop the collapse, to find some way to bring the U.S. and Saudi Arabia back together. For example, by attempting to blow up the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. on American soil.