

TELLING STORIES ABOUT WHAT IRAN IS CAPABLE OF

As I've mused on twitter and in comment threads, I've started wondering who paid more for Scary Iran Plot, the US Government or (allegedly) Quds Force?

After all, it's clear that Narc offered up the idea to attack Adel al-Jubeir at a restaurant with explosives rather than, say, shooting him or poisoning him. Narc invented the fictional 150 civilians who would be at the restaurant. Narc invented the fictional Senators who might be killed in the blast. Narc said he could, "blow him up or shoot him," and Arbabsiar said, "how is possible for you." When Narc warned about those fictional casualties, Arbabsiar said, "if you can do it outside, do it" (though he clearly okayed collateral damage if necessary). Thus, even assuming there is nothing else funny about the plot, it's clear that Narc authored the most spectacular details of it, the ones that resulted in a terrorism and WMD charges rather than just murder-for-hire, and quite possibly the ones that made this an alleged act of war against the US, rather than just an attack on Saudi Arabia.

Even assuming the Iranians dreamt up this plot, the US wrote the screenplay for it.

So how much did each side pay to create this plot?

I'd put the Quds force tab at \$175,000. They allegedly advanced \$100,000 for some kind of plot—but refused to send any more money. And on July 17, Arbabsiar describes asking Shahlai for "another \$15." Given that that happened in month 6 of a 9 month plot, I think it fair to estimate he was paid three installments of \$15,000, or \$45,000. Add in \$30,000 for Shukari's time, and you've got \$175,000. (It's not clear whether Arbabsiar paid for his international flights out

of his advance, but I'll also leave out the much greater travel costs on the American side. Further, all this assumes we haven't paid in the past or agreed to pay Arbabsiar in the future for his part in the plot.)

The government, for its part, paid Narc to work Arbabsiar for at least four months. They paid Craig Monteilh \$11,800 a month to run around safe mosques to try to entrap aspirational terrorists in LA; I presume they'd pay more for an actual cartel member to risk his life as an informant in Mexico. But let's assume they paid the same rate they paid Monteilh, which would work out to \$47,200, remarkably, about what Quds Force allegedly seems to have paid Arbabsiar. In addition, we've got at least the time of Robert Woloszyn, the FBI Agent who wrote the complaint. He doesn't seem to have been Narc's handler, so you've got Narc's handler working long hours. In the press conference rolling out this case, Preet Bharara said two prosecutors, their two supervisors, the Deputy US Attorney, and the Acting Criminal head in NY "have [not] gotten much sleep lately." In addition to SDNY, there was involvement from the Houston US Attorney and FBI offices, Houston DEA (which may be where Narc's handler worked), NY's JTTF. And all those intelligence personnel who played a critical role that we can't discuss (except in anonymous leaks to journalists). Now clearly, many of these people were probably not personally involved in the crafting of a story that took alleged Quds Force intent to attack Saudi Arabia and turned it into the spectacular attack on a fictional restaurant in DC. But it's probably safe to say that the US Government paid as much to craft this plot as the Quds Force allegedly did, even before you account for the money spent surveilling Arbabsiar, Shahlai, and Shakuri before the plot as well as the money spent stopping it.

With that in mind, check out the language State Department Spokesperson Victoria Nuland uses to describe how other countries are receiving the State Department's efforts to persuade them to

treat this plot as real.

Other countries are buying the basic idea of the plot, Nuland said, despite fairly widespread skepticism among Iran watchers about the likelihood the Quds Force would put such a clumsy plan into place.

“Countries may find it quite a story, but they’re not surprised that Iran would be capable of something like this,” she said.

It seems that our allies may be just as skeptical as many American observers that the Quds Force planned the precise plot that—it is clear—Narc’s handlers wrote the screenplay for. But, Nuland says, they buy the basic idea of it—“they’re not surprised that Iran would be capable of something like this.”

We had to invent this entire screenplay—perhaps investing as much money or more as Quds Force allegedly did—to get our allies to agree that the Quds Force might engage in terrorism? Didn’t they already know that?

(I sort of wonder whether our representatives are also asking our allies whether they think we’re capable of assassinating nuclear scientists?)

Therein lies the problem with the American practice of using stings to craft the scariest terror story possible. If the sheer improbability of it makes the story less credible, if all it does is reinforce a widely held belief, then doesn’t the theatricality of it work against the government?