

IGNATIUS: CIA IS INVOLVED WITH THE IRAN PLOT, SO IT MUST BE TRUE!

In the face of near universal ridicule over the Iran plot, the Administration is now trying to shore up the case that this plot is “real.” Many many media outlets are repeating one US official promising multiple sources corroborated the plot (forgetting, apparently, that one source reading a talking point saying he’s got multiple sources is not the same as multiple sources describing credible evidence).

“Multiple” sources have corroborated the report about an alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States, a scheme the administration is alleging is tied to Iran’s military, a U.S. official told CNN Thursday.

More interesting, the CIA’s mouthpiece, David Ignatius, has been trotted out to reassure us that this is true because the CIA says it is.

But over months, officials at the White House and the Justice Department became convinced the plan was real. One big reason is that the CIA and other intelligence agencies gathered information corroborating the informant’s juicy allegations – and showing that the plot had support from the top leadership of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the covert-action arm of the Iranian government.

It was this intelligence collected in Iran – not tips from someone inside the Mexican drug mafia – that led the Treasury Department to impose sanctions

Tuesday on four senior members of the Quds Force who allegedly were “connected” to a plot to murder the Saudi ambassador.

So after going to great lengths to scrub the complaint of any hint that the CIA or NSC was involved in this plot, pretending, for example, that we weren’t tracking where Manssor Arbabsiar was when he traveled abroad, that we weren’t wiretapping his conversations, and that we hadn’t kept a close eye on a car salesman with serial legal troubles and ties to the Quds Force even before this plot, the government has now decided to admit that the CIA was instead central to the plot.

The same CIA that used the equally dubious laptop of death for years to claim Iran had a nukes program. The CIA that dealt Iranians doctored blueprints for nukes. And hell, while we’re at it, the same CIA that overthrew the elected government of Iran to protect BP.

In short, David Ignatius wants to convince us we should believe this plot because the CIA, which has a long history of fabricating or using fabricated evidence to implicate Iran, says the plot is true.

They were better off when they were scrupulously hiding the CIA’s centrality to this plot!

Having established that the CIA was central in this operation, Ignatius then tries to lay some kind of foundation for the plot’s truth.

Let’s make two assumptions: The first is that the allegations made by the prosecutors about Arbabsiar are true. This seems likely, given that he’s a cooperating witness. The second is that Quds Force operatives were willing to talk with Arbabsiar about a covert operation in the United States. That, again, seems pretty clear from the transcript of the Oct. 4 telephone call Arbabsiar made to his main Quds Force

contact, Gholam Shakuri, under prosecutors' direction.

First, he says, we should believe that that a guy who is cooperating is telling the truth. That, in spite of the fact that thus far the government is hiding both when Arbabsiar's cooperation started and what charges the government used to convince him to cooperate.

Or let me put it another way. The DEA informant is also cooperating with the government. But we know that everything the DEA agent said (well, at least in those conversations he managed to tape) was in fact a fabrication. Given that the government is hiding key details, why shouldn't we default instead to "cooperation = fabrication"?

Then, Ignatius singles out the October 4 (not the October 5 or 7) taped conversations with Shakuri as proof this is real. Here's what the complaint says was recorded in that conversation.

[Shakuri] Are you okay ... are you well?
[ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] Yes, I wanted to see how you're doing and to tell you I'm well.

[Shakuri] Okay, thank God, stay well. I was waiting. What news ... what did you do about the building? [ellipsis original]

Now, I'm struck that Ignatius pointed to this conversation because it uses the same language—discussing a building—that Arbabsiar did in a September 2 conversation which in turn seems to refer back to the restaurant at which Narc, the informant, had proposed killing the Saudi Ambassador.

[Arbabsiar: Is] the building getting painted

[Narc] We're still doing that.

It's curious, though, that Ignatius doesn't point to the other conversations, in which Arbabsiar uses what the complaint claims is a code for the assassination but which sounds more like a drug deal.

[Arbabsiar] I wanted to tell you, the Chevrolet is ready, it's ready, uh, to be done. I should continue, right?

[Shakuri] Yes, yes, yes. You mean you are buying all of it?

[Arbabsiar] I don't know for now, it's ready, okay?

[Shakuri] So buy it, buy it.

[Arbabsiar] Buy it? Okay.

[Shakuri] Buy it, yes, buy all of it.

Nor does Ignatius point to the October 7 conversation where Shakuri speaks explicitly of merchandise.

[Shakuri] You said it yourself, they—from our point of view—when we get our merchandise, we get our merchandise. We have guaranteed the rest. You were our guarantee.

What we have here, after all, is a bank transfer purportedly between two organizations known to traffic in drugs, and the confession of a guy the extent of whose cooperation the government has obscured, claiming a code means something, as well as one earlier conversation clearly saying someone wants someone else dead. That is, we don't have independent corroboration—at least not in what DOJ has shown—indicating that Shakuri thought he was paying for an assassination rather than a drug deal.

But it's okay, Ignatius says, you can believe that's what happened because the CIA is involved.

Where Ignatius is useful—if only as a read of

how they plan to spin this—is in his assessment of the geopolitical state of affairs.

Officials say Quds Force operations have been more aggressive in several theaters: in Syria, where the Iranian operatives are working covertly to help protect the embattled regime of President Bashar al-Assad; in Iraq, where the Quds Force this year stepped up attacks against departing U.S. forces; in Afghanistan, where they have been arming the Taliban; in Azerbaijan, where they have been more aggressive in projecting Iranian influence; and in Bahrain, where their operatives worked to support and manipulate last spring's uprising against the Khalifa government. (Shakuri, who was indicted Tuesday, is said to have helped plan Quds Force operations in Bahrain.)

[snip]

A final factor in this unlikely plot is the political turmoil in Tehran. The Quds Force is seen by analysts as the executive-action arm of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, who is in a bitter battle with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During this feud, the Iranian ministries of foreign affairs and intelligence have increasingly been hobbled, leaving the field to the Quds Force. It's a chaotic situation tailor-made for risk-takers, score-settlers and freelancers.

It was probably ill-advised for Ignatius to note that this time is ripe for "freelancers," given Administration efforts to paint this as a Quds Force op, and not the work of freelancers.

Several of his claims about QF violence are true. His repetition though not endorsement of the Saudi claim that Shakuri fomented democratic opposition in Bahrain ought to be a red flag

that there is a pretty spooky entity that has a more logical reason to set up this plot than the Iranians. Though neither Ignatius nor the Saudis note the contentious debate about whether we ought to be selling arms to Bahrain right now so they can use them to more efficiently kill their Shiite majority. All of a sudden this plot justifies arms sales to oppress Shiites in Saudi Arabia's back yard!

But that's not the only salient detail Ignatius offers about why this would make sense—it would make sense for a lot of non-Iranian players, that is—from a geopolitical standpoint. For example, we're fighting to leave troops in Iraq in the face of Moqtada al-Sadr's objections. As it happens, his ties to the Mahdi Army are what got Abdul Reza Shahlai—Arbabsiar's cousin who purportedly recruited him for this caper—sanctioned the first time.

Abdul Reza Shahlai, a deputy commander in Iran's Qods Force, and Akram Abas al Kabi, a senior Mahdi Army leader are among five persons and two corporations that have had their assets blocked by the US Treasury under Executive Order 13438.

"These individuals are targeting and planning attacks against innocent Iraqis, the Government of Iraq, Coalition Forces, and U.S. troops," said Stuart Levey, the Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, in a press release issued by the Treasury. "Their lethal and destabilizing tactics, especially by Iran's Qods Force, are intended to undermine Iraq as it strives for peace and prosperity."

Shahlai "threatens the peace and stability of Iraq by planning Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM or Mahdi Army) Special Groups attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq," Treasury stated. He has "provided material and logistical support to Shia extremist group," to the Mahdi Army, and

other Shia terror groups in Baghdad and the Iraqi South. He has provided rockets, mortars, rocket propelled grenades, and C-4 explosives to the Mahdi Army in 2006.

Then there's our need to justify staying in Afghanistan. And against this background, the US attempt to stay in Saudi Arabia's good graces while opposing Palestine statehood at the UN. What is the relationship between the prisoner deal between Israel and Iran's proxy Hamas, negotiated as this plot broke, we ought to be asking.

It is, as Ignatius says, a tumultuous time in Iran. But it's also a tumultuous time in the Middle East more generally, as the US tries to craft a new strategy in the face of the Arab Spring. Such a new strategy threatens both Saudi hegemony and Israeli status quo.

All of which is a way to say that the now-acknowledged central involvement of the CIA in this plot, played out against the geopolitical developments this CIA mouthpiece parrots, ought to make people less, rather than more, convinced that this plot is "real."