

WAPO FORGETS THE SCAREQUOTES FOR THE WORD “PLOT”

I’m agnostic about how many of the plots attributed to Iran in this WaPo story are real. Certainly, there are hints, even from Joby Warrick’s sources, that the insinuation that “Iran and Hezbollah” are behind the attacks—which were reportedly led by criminal gangs, not by actual Hezbollah or Quds Force members—might be overblown.

“The idea that Iran and Hezbollah might have worked together on these attempts is possible,” said a senior U.S. official who has studied the evidence, “but this conclusion is not definitive.”

But the entire story loses credibility with this sentence.

U.S. intelligence officials believe that Americans would probably have been killed if an alleged Iranian plot to kill Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Washington last year had succeeded.

That’s because the outlines of that “plot”—the Scary Iran Plot hatched by bumbling car salesman Manssor Arbabsiar—were dreamt up by our own DEA informant. The explosives in the “plot” were fictional C4 that may well have been offered up by the informant when Arbabsiar suggested guns.

So if this “plot” with its hypothetical American dead is treated seriously, then how real are the other “plots” described in the article, particularly the “plots” targeting Americans in Azerbaijan that are the centerpiece of the article?

The whole article reads very differently if you consider the possibility that the previously unreported “plots” might be, like the Scary Iran

Plot, stings led by our—or another country’s—intelligence services.

Two more questions about this story. First, it makes no mention of Atris Hussein, the Lebanese-Swedish fan and fertilizer merchant arrested in January in Bangkok—based on Israeli intelligence—as an alleged terrorist. Hussein plead not guilty in March. Have the fear-mongers since decided that shipping fertilizer might not be a good terrorism story?

Also, on May 18, the House passed an Amendment to the NDAA mandating an investigation into the people who leaked—among other things—the allegations in this article, describing “Israel’s secret staging ground” in Azerbaijan. The story (which presumably must be true if senior Israeli officials are complaining to Congressional delegations that the US is leaking “classified operational information and capabilities” about the Israelis) describes how Israel is “buying airbases” in Azerbaijan.

In particular, four senior diplomats and military intelligence officers say that the United States has concluded that Israel has recently been granted access to airbases on Iran’s northern border. To do what, exactly, is not clear. “The Israelis have bought an airfield,” a senior administration official told me in early February, “and the airfield is called Azerbaijan.”

Senior U.S. intelligence officials are increasingly concerned that Israel’s military expansion into Azerbaijan complicates U.S. efforts to dampen Israeli-Iranian tensions, according to the sources. Military planners, I was told, must now plan not only for a war scenario that includes the Persian Gulf — but one that could include the Caucasus. The burgeoning Israel-Azerbaijan relationship has also become a flashpoint in both countries’ relationship with Turkey, a regional

heavyweight that fears the economic and political fallout of a war with Iran. Turkey's most senior government officials have raised their concerns with their U.S. counterparts, as well as with the Azeris, the sources said.

If one of the key pieces of evidence in this plot is some criminal moving weapons across the Iranian border, why are we so sure it's the Iranians and not the Israelis—whom Iran has accused of targeting its nuclear scientists from Azerbaijan?

The Iranians may well have sent out a bunch of incompetent terrorists to avenge the Israeli attacks on their scientists (if so, why aren't we hailing the shocking decline in skills of Hezbollah?). Or maybe we're getting disinformation.

But at the very least, we ought to distinguish between the details of "plots" that come from real intelligence and the details that were invented by our own informants.