

SCARY IRAN PLOT: FOLLOW THE MONEY

A number of people—from MadDog to the Administration—have claimed that the money trail in the Scary Iran Plot is what makes it credible.

I'd like to lay out what the Administration showed in the complaint—as opposed to in its predictable trail of anonymous leaks that the Administration apparently believes can replace actual evidence—regarding the money trail. I actually find their anonymous claims that the money trail shows more damning details to be more believable than some of the other things they've said about this. But the most solid evidence described in the complaint—as I described here—shows money being delivered with no explanation into the hands of a person, Individual #1, and from there being sent to the US. Yet Individual #1 doesn't even appear to be Quds Force and was neither charged in the complaint nor sanctioned by Treasury.

Money was exchanged, but for *what*?

Before I lay out what the money details show, though, let's lay out the many possible operations the money paid for. According to Manssor Arbabsiar's confession, his cousin Abdul Reza Shahlai told him to go get drug traffickers to kidnap the Saudi Ambassador. Arbabsiar's confession says it evolved into a capture or kill deal (though says it did so in conversations with Gholam Shakuri and Hamed Abdollahi, not Shahlai). The complaint also mentions plans of "attacking an embassy of Saudi Arabia" (Narc's account of the May 24 meeting with Arbabsiar), for "a number of violent missions" (Narc's account of purportedly unrecorded June-July meetings), "the murder of the Ambassador" (Narc's account of purportedly unrecorded June-July meetings), and targeting foreign government facilities located outside of the United States, associated with Saudi Arabia

and with another country [reported to be Israel]" (footnote 6 describing what Narc reported from these earlier meetings). The quotes from July 14 are ambiguous whether they refer to kidnapping or assassination of al-Jubeir. The quotes from July 17 include clear reference to killing what is presumably (thought not specified as) al-Jubeir. And note what the complaint rather damningly doesn't mention, though Administration leakers admit?

The plotters also discussed a side deal between the Quds Force, part of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and Los Zetas to funnel tons of opium from the Middle East to Mexico, the official said.

In other words, several things were being negotiated: the kidnapping and/or assassination of al-Jubeir, hits on embassies in Argentina, possibly some other horrible things, and drug deals. So we need to be careful to tie any payments to specific ops.

The use of two different codes in the taped conversations doesn't make tying payments to specific ops any easier—the complaint mentions "painting," or "doing" a building (September 2, 20, and October 4), which the FBI Agent interprets without stated confirmation in Arbabsiar's confession as the murder, as well as the "Chevrolet" (October 5 and 7), which Arbabsiar's confession says also referred to the murder (syntactically, though, the Chevrolet sounds like a drug deal, while the building seems more closely connected to the murder).

Finally, a conversation on September 12 seems to suggest (though the FBI Agent doesn't interpret it this way) that Arbabsiar had presented Narc several choices of operations, and the plotters just wanted them to pick one to carry out. After insisting the price would be "one point five," Arbabsiar told Narc, for example, that he could "prepare for those too [two] ... but we need at least one of them" [ellipsis original]. He went

on to say that if Narc did “at least one ... I’ll send the balance for you” [ellipsis original]. Particularly given the two different codes—building and Chevrolet—it seems possible there were still at least two different operations (both Arbabsiar and Shakuri offer up the building, not the Chevrolet, when they are not being coached as the operation they’re most anxious about). At the very least, this means that two months after the two meetings supposedly finalizing the plan for the assassination, both the price and the objective remained unclear.

No quoted passage ties the \$100,000, the \$1.5 million, and the assassination

Those two meetings—which do tie money to an attack on the Saudis—took place on July 14 and July 17. Before those meetings even started, however, the \$100,000 that was purportedly the down-payment for the al-Jubeir assassination had already been transferred to a middleman; Arbabsiar tells Narc that Individual #1 (who is not described in the same way the Quds officers are, and appears not to have been sanctioned with everyone else) got the “money at nine in the morning.” The quoted passages definitely tie what appears to be the \$1.5 million to doing something with Saudi Arabia. “Take the one point five for the Saudi Arabia.” That might be doing something with the Saudi embassy, though later in the same conversation Arbabsiar does confirm Narc’s question that “you just want the main guy.” Given the number of plots they were discussing, that’s not definitive that the \$100,000 was tied to the al-Jubeir plot at all, nor is it definitive that the “one point five” was the agreed upon payment for assassinating—as opposed to kidnapping—al-Jubeir. There is no quote that ties all these things together; but assuming the FBI Agent’s interpretation is not really wacko, it does seem this conversation ties the money to some kind of attack on al-Jubeir.

The July 17 conversation—which with the July 14

conversation, includes one of two discussions of bank account numbers for the transfer—makes the focus on assassination much more clear. Narc pretends his guys are in Washington (meaning there's no doubt the attack in discussion was al-Jubeir rather than the Saudi Embassy in Argentina). And—in the sole quotations in the entire complaint that make it clear Arbabsiar was talking about assassination—in response to Narc's cue, "I don't know what exactly your cousin wants me to do," Arbabsiar says his cousin "wants you to kill this guy" and goes on to say that if necessary, collateral damage of citizens is acceptable.

Consider how laughable this deal-making is. On July 14, Narc gives his price for the job. Then on July 17, he's still looking for clarification about what the task really is! Nevertheless, the FBI seems to use the July 14 quotation as the definitive proof that a deal was done. I assume if Arbabsiar were really talking to Los Zetas, such sloppy deal-making would have already gotten him shot.

The whole connection between the money and the assassination here would be a lot stronger if the actual deal-making were shown, if the complaint explained how Arbabsiar came to ask for the \$100,000 in the first place, particularly given that the conversations at least appear to show that the final deal and even the ultimate target seem to have been decided after the down payment got sent to Individual #1 (and I'll suggest the later money issues may derive from lack of clarity even among the parties). That said, these two conversations—if the conversation had indeed come to focus just on the assassination, though we don't know that it had—do seem to have tied the money to that killing.

The person who forwarded the money appears to be neither Quds Force nor sanctioned

Then there's the question of whether Quds fronted the money. The complaint goes to some length to describe that Shahlai and Shuktari

were paying Arbabsiar's expenses, but given the general range of deals that got discussed and given that this whole process purportedly started in February, three months before the first conversation with Narc, I'm not sure that is a definitive tie to an assassination (particularly not the earlier chunk of money from Shahlai). And even the quote from the July 17 meeting describing Arbabsiar asking Shahlai for more money—which the FBI agent claims was tied to the assassination—includes no identification of it as tied to the assassination attempt.

I tell [Shahlai], give me just another fifteen. Just ... next morning they send one guy, you know, that work for [Shahlai]. He's like a colonel, the guy.

In fact, the passage doesn't even include a description of when Arbabsiar asked for and got this money, which is pretty telling given that Narc was still trying to clarify what was the intended operation on that day.

The description of the \$100,000 is more specific. The complaint describes the original transfer to Individual #1 (who as I noted above, is not described the same as the Quds Force figures and was not sanctioned by Treasury with the others) this way:

ARBABSIAR stated that the "money is [in] Iran," and that he [ARBABSIAR] had received a call indicating the money would be at the house of a certain individual ["Individual #1"]. When Arbabsiar called Individual #1, "he [Individual #1] said he had it there" and that he [Individual #1] had received "the money at nine in the morning."

The quoted passages go on to describe what almost certainly constitutes a clear intent to launder the money (though it's not clear those methods were used in the actual money transfer,

which seems to have been accomplished in two \$49,960 chunks).

Not only does this passage not tie the \$100,000 to QF, but even the person who called Arbabsiar to tell him Individual #1 would get the money was not described at all, and not in any way to tie him or her to QF. The complaint also doesn't say the the two different "Foreign Entities" from which the money was transferred have any tie to QF. Likewise, in the quoted discussions of Arbabsiar making sure Narc received the money, there's no indication of a tie to QF, to the assassination, or even to Shakuri. And even the complaint's description of Arbabsiar's confession (which does confirm these things) does not identify who approved the \$100,000, instead using the passive voice: "A down-payment of \$100,000 to [Narc] for the murder of the Ambassador was approved."

Passages showing Shakuri aware of down payment don't make sense

Now, in two of the three calls recorded while Arbabsiar was in custody, Shakuri seems aware that money has passed hands. But the tie of it to any murder relies on the syntactically odd treatment of Chevrolet as code for the murder. More importantly, the references are just bizarre (and since these are translations from Farsi, the confusion shouldn't derive from the speakers using a second language—English—as is possible in conversations between Narc and Arbabsiar).

Arbabsiar: This boy wants, uh, some money, he wants some expenditure. What do you say, should we give him some more? He wants another 50.

Shakuri: With you, no, you ... **that amount is fine, [unintelligible] brought me another car.** Tell him to finish his work, then we'll give him the rest.

[snip]

Arbabsiar: ...this Mexican ... keeps on

insisting on the thing. He says, 'If—I need money, 50. I won't do the job if you don't pay.' And everything's ready.

Shakuri: Okay.

Arbabsiar: What do you say now?

Shakuri: I don't know. You guaranteed this yourself ... of course, **if we give it, we'll give it to you.** Okay? **If he gives it, fine; if not we must provide the 100 [or] 50.** Tell him [unintelligible] [emphasis mine, ellipses original]

Shakuri at first seems to approve another \$50,000, then seems to suggest they've already taken delivery of a different car—for whatever car means (Arbabsiar said it was code for the assassination, but given that there have been no known assassinations [update: this one, which the Saudis blame on QF, would be too early], this passage seems to raise questions about that). The next passage is even weirder: at first Shakuri suggests that if they were to give more money, they'd give it to Arbabsiar, not Narc. How would that help things? Then Shakuri suggests that if Narc doesn't "give it," which contextually should mean if Narc doesn't kill the Ambassador, then "we must provide provide the 100 or 50."

Now, in all the conversations where Arbabsiar (surely at the instruction of the FBI) is trying to get Shakuri to agree to more money, he only says Narc wanted another \$50,000. So in spite of the fact that one explanation for this is Shakuri saying that if Narc held out, they might have to meet his demand, it doesn't explain why he'd have to pay Narc twice what he was demanding (unless Arbabsiar was being paid at a 100% cut on any job).

Another possibility is they've promised someone else to do the job or borrowed the money from someone. In which case, in response to a request for more money purportedly as a further down

payment, Shakuri would be talking about paying some fourth party. In short, while Shakuri does seem to know some amount of money was forwarded, his discussion of it makes it sound less clear that QF provided the funding and that it was for the assassination, as opposed to one of the other deals being negotiated.

Is QF getting money from Iran ... or giving it to another government?

There's a similarly odd passage in the quotations purportedly showing that Shahlai was being funded for this by Iran.

[Arbabsiar] this is politics, ok ... it's not like, eh, personal ... **This is politics, so these people they pay this government** ... [Shahlai's] got the, got the government behind him ... he's not paying from his pocket. [ellipses original]

Now this passage, unlike the last two (which are translations from Farsi), might best be explained by Arbabsiar's less than perfect English. With that caveat, though, the bolded passage appears to suggest not that Iran was paying QF, but that QF was paying some other government (or someone else was paying Iran). QF is, as I understand it, the part of the Iranian government that bribes people like Hamid Karzai and the Taliban and presumably Shiite factions in Iraq. So while I consider this passage to be as unclear as the Shakuri passages, it at least provides a hint that some third entity sponsored whatever happened here (and given the possibility this includes an opium deal, Afghans are a possible explanation).

Why was the FBI so intent on getting additional money transferred?

Finally, I'll leave you with this question. After the initial \$100,000 was transferred on August 1 and 9, Narc is described as making at least three requests that more money get sent: on September 20, October 5, and October 7 (plus

a conversation on August 28 where providing a guarantee first came up, and a conversation on September 12 where Arbabsiar insists the number would remain the same).

The FBI went to great lengths—but failed—to get the plotters to send more money.

If the one transfer, the \$100,000, was such solid evidence, then why were they trying so hard to get another transfer?

SCARY IRAN PLOT: MAKING AN INTERNATIONAL CASE BEFORE PASSING THE HAM SANDWICH TEST

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger;

I want to return to something Manssor Arbabsiar's attorney, Sabrina Shroff, said the other day. "If he is indicted, he will plead not guilty."

I've suggested Shroff may have reason to believe Arbabsiar will get a plea deal before this ever goes to the grand jury. Which would mean no one would ever challenge the government on the many holes in this case [oh hey! that's me at Atlantic.com]: the claimed lack of taped conversations, the explanation why Arbabsiar cooperated, some holes in the government's money

trail (at least as it appears in the complaint), the remarkable coinkydink Arbabsiar just happened to ask a DEA informant to help him kidnap the Saudi Ambassador, and some perhaps incorrect interpretations of existing tape transcripts.

It would be very convenient for the government if this never went to trial.

But think, for a moment, about the government's actions in this affair. It rolled out a splashy press conference. Joe Biden has declared no options off the table; Susan Rice is "unit[ing] world opinion" against Iran. And if that doesn't work, Hillary Clinton will make personal calls followed by onsite teams to persuade allies that this whole plot isn't a bunch of bupkis.

We have rolled out a giant campaign to use this plot to do ... something ... with Iran.

But it has yet to pass the ham sandwich test.

Our government has had eleven business days now to subject its amended case to the scrutiny of a grand jury, it had two and a half months to subject its original case to the scrutiny of a grand jury, and it hasn't yet bothered to do so. We're sharing our case with the rest of the world before we're subjecting it to the most basic level of oversight enshrined in our Constitution. Instead of using the legal process laid out in our founding document, we've gotten the signature of a Magistrate Judge and run off with it to the rest of the world. And while I have no doubt of the competence of Magistrate Judge Michael Dolinger, the judge who signed the complaint in this case, that's simply not the way our judicial system is supposed to work. Average citizens are supposed to review the work of the government when it makes legal cases, not just Magistrates.

All of which ought to raise real questions why our government has decided to share these details with the rest of the world, but bypassed the step where they're supposed to share them with its own citizens.

WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF GHOLAM SHAKURI'S URGENCY?

I'm working on a big post that raises more questions about the government's interpretation of the Scary Iran Plot.

But for the moment I want to raise an issue that might provide a nugget of plausibility for the larger story. And that's Gholam Shakuri's urgency.

According to the complaint, Arbabsiar confessed that when he traveled back to Iran (I've taken this to be sometime after July 20, but as I explained here, it may have happened earlier) Shakuri told him the kidnap or kill operation had to happen quickly.

ARBABSIAR was asked to have [Narc] kidnap or kill the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United States, and told that it would need to be done fast.

Because the government has sealed evidence explaining on what terms Arbabsiar is cooperating, I find his confession to be suspect. But Shakuri does repeat that urgency in the recorded call on October 5 (though note I also find the government's interpretation of the "code" here suspect, both because it derives from Arbabsiar's confession and the syntax suggests the FBI Agent is reading a multiplicity of codes to all refer to the assassination).

[After discussing "the Chevrolet"] SHAKURI urged ARBABSIAR "[j]ust do it quickly, it's late, just buy it for me and bring it already."

I find the urgency interesting because of

several events that would implicate Quds Force power, like the push to sell Bahrain weapons, the negotiations on leaving troops in Iraq and—most notably—the negotiation of a prisoner swap between Hamas and Israel on the very day the plot was announced. And remember, the US managed the timing of this, drawing out its denouement over two months after money got transferred and 12 days after Arbabsiar was arrested. I don't know what role Adel al-Jubeir had in this prisoner swap (Egypt is a key player), but the exchange certainly seems like it would serve Saudi goals of giving Palestine some relief while serving Israeli-dictated US goals of thwarting the PLO UN statehood bid, all while lessening Iranian influence with Hamas.

Frankly, that's all just based on the coincidence between the announcement of the plot and the prisoner swap.

But it seems that one key to understanding who really sponsored this plot—if there really was one—is understanding Shakuri's urgency.

YEMEN TRIES TO CLAIM US DRONE STRIKES AS YEMENI AIR FORCE STRIKES

As MadDog alerted us this morning, there were multiple strikes against alleged terrorist targets in southern Yemen Friday night. What stands out to me in scanning the various media reports about these attacks is that even though it is crystal clear that these attacks are carried out by US drones firing missiles, Yemeni defense officials try to claim that the attacks are carried out by the Yemeni air force. This is an interesting contrast to the approach taken

by Pakistani officials, where even though the official position of Pakistan's government is that US missile strikes are not allowed, Pakistani officials make no efforts to claim the strikes as their own, allowing the assumption that the strikes are carried out by the US to go unchallenged.

The most recent report on the strikes in Yemen that I can find is this brief update from Reuters [Note: the Reuters article was revised and expanded significantly while this post was being written; the passage quoted is from the earlier version and no longer appears directly as quoted, but the drone death toll of 24 and government claim of responsibility survives.]:

The death toll from air strikes that killed a senior al Qaeda official in southern Yemen has risen to 24, local officials said on Saturday.

The Defense Ministry said Yemeni aircraft had carried out the attack on Friday night.

This report has the highest death toll I've seen on the story and includes the note that Yemeni officials claim they carried out the attacks.

By contrast, the CNN report on the attacks puts the death toll at only 7 and reports that there were three drone attacks. This report, although it quotes Yemeni officials, is silent on responsibility for this attack, although it does reference the earlier attack that killed Anwar al-Awlaki as having been carried out by the US [Note: this article also was updated, with the death toll up to 9 now.]:

The son of U.S.-born militant cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki was among those killed in a trio of drone attacks in southern Yemen on Friday night, a security official said.

The attacks, carried out in the Shabwa district, killed seven suspected militants, the defense ministry said. It

would not confirm that Abdul Rahman Anwar Awlaki was among them.

The senior security official in Shabwa, who did not want to be named because he is not authorized to speak to the media, said the younger Awlaki had been hiding in the mountains of Shabwa for more than eight months. He had first-hand knowledge of the death, he said.

As also mentioned in a number of other reports, the CNN story goes on to mention that Ibrahim al-Banna, the head media officer for AQAP, was killed. They cite Yemeni defense officials as the source of this information.

The same AP article that MadDog cited also is carried by the Washington Post. Note that this article opens by flatly stating that the attacks were carried out by US drones and later actually cites confirmation by Yemeni “security officials”, with no reference to Yemeni defense officials trying to claim responsibility, even though the Defense Ministry is cited in identifying the key figures killed:

An American drone strike in southern Yemen has killed seven al-Qaida-linked militants, including the media chief for the group’s Yemeni branch and the son of a prominent U.S.-born cleric slain in a similar attack last month, government officials and tribal elders said Saturday.

/snip/

The Yemeni Defense Ministry identified the slain media chief as Egyptian-born Ibrahim al-Bana. Tribal elders in the area also said the dead included Abdul-Rahman al-Awlaki, the 21-year-old son of Anwar al-Awlaki, a gifted Muslim preacher and savvy Internet operator who became a powerful al-Qaida recruiting tool in the West. He, along with another

propagandist, Pakistani-American Samir Khan, were killed in a Sept. 30 U.S. drone attack.

/snip/

Security officials said the strike that killed them was one of five carried out over night by an American drones on suspected al-Qaida positions in Shabwa and the neighboring province of Abyan in Yemen's largely lawless south.

Interestingly, this report indicates that there were five separate drone attacks Friday night, but reports only the death toll of seven from the most prominent single attack, rather than summing the toll from all five attacks to the higher level of 24 reported by Reuters.

Pakistan's Dawn.com carries AFP's report on the attacks in Yemen. This report is noteworthy both because the Dawn headline puts both "US air" and "Qaeda militants" in quotation marks and because it does the best job of any of the media reports I've seen in adding some perspective to Yemen trying to claim responsibility for the attacks:

Apparent US air strikes killed seven suspected al Qaeda militants in southern Yemen, one of them the media chief of the jihadist network's regional affiliate, a local official said on Saturday.

The Yemeni defence ministry confirmed the deaths but insisted that Friday evening's strikes in Shabwa province, a militant stronghold east of the main southern city of Aden, were carried out by its own forces.

"Three strikes, apparently American, which were launched against positions held by al Qaeda militants in Azzan, one of the group's bastions, killed seven of them, including the Egyptian, Ibrahim

al-Banna'a," the local official said.

The article conclude with this helpful explanation:

Yemen routinely denies that the United States carries out offensive operations on its territory, insisting that it plays a purely logistic and intelligence role in support of Yemen's own counter-terror operations.

Accounts of drone attacks in Pakistan, by contrast, do not hesitate in noting that the drones are American, even though the official Pakistani position is that they do not approve of these actions. Here is Pakistan's Express Tribune carrying an AFP report on drone attacks there on Friday:

A US drone strike targeting a militant compound in a Pakistani tribal region killed four rebels in the fourth attack in two days near the Afghan border, security officials said Saturday.

The drones fired eight missiles Friday night at the compound in Baghar, 40 kilometres west of Wana, the main town of South Waziristan tribal district, where the military launched a ground offensive two years ago.

"The strike killed four militants and wounded three others," a senior security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The delicate dance relating to attribution of the drone strikes does not stop here, however. Despite the report leading with identifying the drones as American and no claims to the contrary coming from either Pakistan government officials or local officials at the attack site, this article concludes by noting that the US doesn't officially admit to the use of drones:

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has said for the first time that the United States was waging “war” in Pakistan against militants, referring to the covert CIA drone campaign that Washington refuses to discuss publicly.

And there we have the lovely circumstances regarding the US reliance on drones to carry out attacks that in some cases are described as amounting to illegal extrajudicial executions.

The US refuses to publicly acknowledge these actions, citing their “covert” nature in a convenient dodge from accepting responsibility for controversial (or possibly illegal) measures. Yemen is quick to falsely claim responsibility, perhaps to curry favor with the US and perhaps as an attempt to enhance the posture of a government facing a very popular citizen uprising that appears to be poised on ousting the President. By contrast, Pakistan does not fear public disagreements with the US.

Its government has a stronger grip on power.

That allows it to maintain its public position that Pakistani forces alone should be in charge of attacking militants in Waziristan, and allows the Pakistani government to object to US drone strikes as a breach of sovereignty, especially when innocent civilians are killed.

Whatever the posturing by the host countries, however, the US drones on, determined to strike “enemies” wherever they are to be found.

GOVERNMENT REMAINS MUM ABOUT WHEN IT FIRST CHARGED

ARBABSIAR AND FOR WHAT

Yesterday, I pointed out some oddities of the docket for Manssor Arbabsiar, the accused plotter in the Iran assassination plot. Most notably, the docket for this crime starts with the amended complaint. That indicated there was an original complaint. But the numbering on the docket—which starts with the amendment complaint—suggested the original complaint **might** relate to an entirely different crime.

bmaz called the court house to try to figure out the oddity. And court personnel did some checking—and consulted directly with the AUSA trying this case—they explained only that there had been a prior complaint in SDNY which Chief Judge Loretta Preska had approved having sealed. The court house offered no insight on when all this happened.

The government's unwillingness to unseal that original complaint is just another weird aspect of this case, as it suggests Arbabsiar might have been arrested for totally different charges. Or he might have been charged months ago.

To add the curiosity, consider this quote from Arbabsiar's public defender, Sabrina Shroff.

Mr. Arbabsiar, who has lived in Texas for many years, made a brief appearance in federal court in Manhattan on Tuesday afternoon, dressed in a blue checked shirt and with a pronounced scar on his left cheek. He did not enter a plea, but his lawyer, Sabrina Shroff, said after the hearing that **"if he is indicted, he will plead not guilty."** [my emphasis]

Arbabsiar's lawyer isn't sure he'll be indicted? She's not sure this will ever be presented to a grand jury?

That may indicate the government is already talking plea deal with Arbabsiar (and why not, since he's been chatting freely about this for two weeks and apparently would prefer to stay in jail than go free).

Which, if that were to happen, would mean—barring the unlikely extradition of Shakuri—none of this questionable evidence would ever be challenged by an antagonistic lawyer a nor evaluated by a jury.

And if that were to happen, then the whole wacky plot, with all its dubious aspects, would serve nothing more than to cause an international incident and keep Arbabsiar in US government custody, potentially on easier terms than the prison term he might have expected for whatever he was charged with in his first complaint.

THE FOUR MONTH WARNING OF A NOT-YET RIPE PLOT

I suspect Ha'aretz and Reuters think they're helping build credibility for the Scary Iran Plot by reporting that the Saudis warned the Argentines of the plot four months ago.

Saudi officials advised Argentina four months ago of an alleged Iran-backed plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington and possibly attack the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Buenos Aires, an Argentine diplomatic source said on Thursday.

[snip]

"The Saudis advised us four months ago, at the request of the United States," the Argentine source told Reuters on

condition of anonymity, without providing further details.

[snip]

President Barack Obama was briefed in June about the alleged plot, soon after U.S. law enforcement agents were tipped off by a paid informant, according to court documents.

But it seems to introduce more questions than credibility.

Four months ago—assuming the anonymous Argentine diplomat is correct—would mean they were tipped off in mid-June. As Reuters points out, that may be around the time Obama first got briefed on the purported plot.

According to the complaint, the **only** piece of evidence the US had at that time was one unrecorded meeting between Manssor Arbabsiar and Narc. The complaint only supports that Narc learned Arbabsiar wanted to attack an embassy—consistent with the possibility of attacking the Saudi Embassy in Argentina—or maybe wanted to kidnap Adel Al-Jubeir, not kill him.

Perhaps the anonymous diplomat is off by a few weeks, and she was tipped by the Saudis in late June, after Arbabsiar had returned to Mexico on June 23, and after Arbabsiar had had another unrecorded meeting or more with Narc.

Even if that were the case, the Argentines (and Saudis) were purportedly warned before any recordings of Arbabsiar's statements were made and before any money got transferred—in spite of the fact that sources say the Administration didn't really believe in this plot until that transfer.

Law enforcement and intelligence officials penetrated the alleged plot from the start. But American officials said Wednesday that what persuaded them they were tracking something much more

than just idle talk between an Iranian American used-car salesman and a Drug Enforcement Administration informant was the transfer of \$100,000 from Iran in July and August as a down payment to set the assassination in motion.

Note, the reference to a July transfer must refer to the receipt of the money by "Individual 1" before Narc had even provided bank data to Arbabsiar, as the actual transfers through NYC happened in August, which also supports the completely unsurprising conclusion that we didn't need to hear about the transfer from Arbabsiar because we were tracking it electronically.

Nevertheless, do we customarily tell other countries of seemingly improbable plots before we start collecting any hard evidence on those plots?

There are some explanations for this, even setting aside more tinfoil possibilities (like the Saudis dreamt up the plot and then got Arbabsiar to perform it). The government might, for example, have tape from that May 24 meeting between Narc and Arbabsiar, either taken by Narc or by surveillance in Mexico, that they haven't revealed in the complaint. The government may have a lot more Sigint from Arbabsiar's conversations with Quds Forces figures in Iran, though if that's the case, it means our role performing this plot is even more overdetermined than it already seems. Or it may be we knew directly from Arbabsiar what he was purportedly planning on doing without him having explained it to Narc.

There's one more interesting aspect of this revelation, if true. Why did we outsource informing Argentina to the Saudis rather than telling them ourselves? Meanwhile, the Argentines remain officially mum about the plot.

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.”

GAPS IN THE IRAN PLOT DOCKET TO GO ALONG WITH THE GAPS IN THE STORY

[youtube]WfsWIo02CPc[/youtube]

Retired Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Shaffer has some questions about the Iran plot, based partly

on what his friend at DOJ said about the lack of record on the purported assassination plot at DOJ.

I did talk to one of my inside guys today and he's saying that he thinks the same thing—you know why? Because he can't find any real information and he's got a clearance. So that tells him that there's something going on that's extraordinary by the fact that he's an inside investigator, knows what's going on, and yet—I'm gonna quote here, "There's nothing on this within the DOJ beyond what they've talked about publicly," which means to him there's something very wrong with it.

The docket in Manssor Arbabsiar's case at least partly confirms what Shaffer's buddy said, because there are things that would normally be there but aren't.

Date Filed	#	DocID Text
10/15/2011		Amicus of Manssor Arbabsiar. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	1	MEMORANDUM FOR THE COURT: In re Manssor Arbabsiar (1:11-cr-00001-MD). (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	2	ORDER of the Manssor Arbabsiar Criminal Division. After the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	3	U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	4	ORDER AFFIRMING FEDERAL PUBLIC DEFENDER. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	5	Amicus of Manssor Arbabsiar to DOJ. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	6	Manssor Arbabsiar's motion for summary judgment. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	7	ORDER FOR MEDICATION ATTENTION FORM. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)
10/15/2011	8	ORDER of the Manssor Arbabsiar Criminal Division. After the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. (pgs) (Entered: 10/15/2011)

There are a couple of weird aspects to the docket (click to enlarge).

First (and this is what got me looking at the docket in the first place), the complaint is an **amended complaint**. That says there's a previous complaint. But that complaint is not in the docket. Not only is it not in the docket, but the docket starts with the arrest on September 29 (notice the docket lists his arrest twice, on both September 29 and October 11), but the numbering starts with the amended complaint (normally, even if there were a sealed original complaint, it would be incorporated within the numbering, such that the docket might start with the amended complaint but start with number 8 or something).

Two things might explain this. First, that there

was an earlier unrelated complaint—say on drug charges, but the charges are tied closely enough to this op such that this counts as an amended complaint. Alternately, that Arbabsiar was charged with a bunch of things when he was arrested on September 29, but then, after at least 12 days of cooperation (during which he waived Miranda rights each day), he was charged with something else and the new complaint incorporated Ali Gholam Shakuri's involvement, based entirely on Arbabsiar's confession and Shakuri's coded conversations with Arbabsiar while the latter was in US custody.

Both of those scenarios suggest that what we see—the WMD and terror charges—might be totally different charges than what the original complaint included (or just focused less closely on Arbabsiar). In any case, the presence of an original complaint, even putting the docket weirdness aside, makes it pretty likely that Arbabsiar decided to cooperate because of what was in that complaint.

Now look at his status. "Detention on consent without prejudice." Arbabsiar wants to be in jail. Given that his cooperation and implication of the Qods Force has turned into an international incident, I don't blame the guy.

All of which does sort of make you wonder what medical attention the court ordered for Arbabsiar.

Now we may find there are perfectly reasonable explanations for why an already funky complaint that goes to great lengths to pretend the spooks weren't involved in the case when they played an explicitly critical role has some oddities in its docket. But I would suggest—and I hope to at more length tomorrow—that DOJ's records system might be the wrong place to look for background information on Manssor Arbabsiar.

And at the very least, the gaps in the docket mean that DOJ is currently unwilling to tell us when and on what charges Arbabsiar was first charged, and on what basis he cooperated with

the authorities.

Update: This post was tweaked for clarity.

Update: As I was responding to EH, I realized something. As I said to him, the least damning explanation for the two complaints is that the original complaint had the same charges—WMD, terrorism, etc.—but charging just Arbabsiar.

But that's not right! Three of the four charges are conspiracy charges (the exception was Foreign Travel and Use of Interstate and Foreign Commerce Facilities in the Commission of Murder-for-Hire). Unless the government were preparing a really crazy prosecution theory, **you don't charge just one person with conspiracy**. Which raises real questions about what the charges in the original complaint were, particularly given the only evidence they had were money transfers not tied directly to Qods Force. And some tapes (as well as some key conversations that were not taped). The missing tapes would be particularly problematic given that Arbabsiar claims he was not sent to do murder for hire, he was sent to do kidnapping, and those missing tapes might explain how the plot evolved).

Update: I think I finally got the August/September fix right. Thanks, MD.

HOW A USED CAR SALESMAN'S ALLEGED KIDNAPPING PLOT TURNED INTO AN INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT

Let me correct something the press has almost

universally gotten wrong about the Manssor Arbabsiar plot. He was not originally sent to **assassinate** the Saudi Ambassador to the US in a spectacular bombing plot. According to the complaint, after Arbabsiar offered up his service to his cousin, Abdul Reza Shahlai, sometime in early spring, Shahlai asked him to find a drug cartel that would **kidnap** the Saudi Ambassador. Sometime between that point and July 17, the plot evolved into a kill or kidnap operation, and then a kill operation. But key details of how and when this happened rather curiously were not taped by the informant (whom I refer to as Narc). This raises the possibility that Narc suggested the most spectacular aspects of this plot, both the bombing attempt and the assassination, after he got approached to kidnap Saudi Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir. In other words, it is possible that Narc and his government handlers turned this from a kidnapping attempt into a terrorist plot complete with C4, which makes it a WMD plot.

I've got a timeline below, but first, a few points. There's one section of the complaint that obscures the chronology of how the kidnapping plot turned into the assassination plot. Paragraphs 39 a-e describe what Arbabsiar said in his confession, but the events are dated only with the description, "upon his return to Iran." There's one period of time that, the complaint makes clear, Arbabsiar was in Iran, from July 20 through September 28; given the complaint's clear signal he was in Iran in this period and the wiring of the payment, I've put the events described in his confession in that period. However, Arbabsiar was "traveling internationally" during another period, from May 30 to June 23, when Arbabsiar likely was also in Iran, so the events (and therefore the decision to assassinate the Ambassador) may have come earlier. I actually think the most likely scenario is that the first part of paragraph 39a—describing him reporting he had "located a drug dealer"—happened in that earlier window, but the other events happened in the later window.

There's one other very critical issue about whether the assassination plot came from Narc or the Qods plotters. The complaint says clearly that the code name for the Ambassador assassination was "Chevrolet." But a number of the other conversations with Shakuri (and, indeed, the September 2 call between Arbabsiar and Narc) talk about a building. And the complaint (and some of the quoted comments below) make it clear they were also talking about other operations with Narc. And when Shakuri first talks to Arbabsiar after he's in FBI custody (remember, he believes Arbabsiar is with Los Zetas), he raises the building, not the Chevrolet, first. I actually suspect—given the discussion of "buying all of it"—that Chevrolet may actually refer to another plot, perhaps a drug deal (see Juan Cole's speculation this might be about drugs), whereas the building refers to the assassination attempt. But in any case, at the very least it says that if Chevrolet was, indeed, the code, then Shakuri was most interested in the building plot, not the Chevrolet plot when he first talked to Arbabsiar.

Early Spring 2011: According to Arbabsiar's confession, Shahlai approaches Arbabsiar and asked him to work with him. Arbabsiar offers up "that as a result of his business in both Mexico and the United States, he knew a number of people who traveled between the two countries, and some of those people, he believed, were narcotics traffickers. Shahlai responds, "that he wanted Arbabsiar to hire someone who could kidnap the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States and that Arbabsiar should find someone in the narcotics business, because people in that business are willing to undertake criminal activity in exchange for money."

After that meeting: According to Arbabsiar's confession, Shahlai provided thousands of dollars for expenses. This is, at least from the detail given in the plot, the last that Shahlai is involved personally in the plot.

May 24, 2011: In one-day trip to Mexico from Texas, Arbabsiar meets with DEA informant posing as a Los Zetas member (Narc). **The meeting is allegedly not recorded.** After the meeting, Narc told his handlers that Arbabsiar was interested in, "among other things, attacking an embassy of Saudi Arabia." According to Narc, Arbabsiar asked about his expertise, including on explosives. In response, Narc offered up that he was knowledgeable in C4.

May 30, 2011: Arbabsiar leaves Texas and travels internationally.

First period when series of discussions with Qods Force co-conspirators may have taken place.

June 23, 2011: From his international trip, Arbabsiar enters Mexico by plane.

Late June to July 2011: In a series of **unrecorded meetings**, Arbabsiar tells Narc he has discussed a variety of missions with his Qods Force colleagues in Iran, including the murder of the Saudi Ambassador to the US.

July 14, 2011: Arbabsiar meets with Narc in what appears to be the first recorded meeting, **which doesn't quote Arbabsiar discussing mention killing, rather than kidnapping, the Ambassador specifically.** The quotations cited in the complaint from that meeting are:

[Los Zetas' team would need] at least four guys

[Narc was] talking to one of the guys

[Narc would] take the one point five for the Saudi Arabia

[Narc said he would] go ahead and work on Saudi Arabia, get all the information we can

[Narc said] you just want the, the main guy

[Arbabsiar said he wanted just the] Ambassador

[Narc told Arbabsiar to wire money to]
an account number

[Arbabsiar said the] money is Iran ...
[Individual 1] said he had it there

[Arbabsiar said Individual 1 had
received] the money at nine in the
morning

[Arbabsiar said the] money's a hundred
thousand [but that he would have to]
send a hundred ... ten thousand, ten
thousand, then thousand. I don't wanna
send it to one guy, one shot. [ellipsis
original]

[Arbabsiar said his cousin Abdul Reza
Shahlai was] wanted in America [, was a]
big general in the army [, does] work in
outside, in other countries for the
Iranian government [and had been] on CNN

[Narc said] we're going to start doing
the guy

July 17, 2011: Arbabsiar meets with Narc in what may be the second recorded conversation. Here, unlike the July 14 meeting, Arbabsiar appears to say something that explicitly indicates the plot has become an assassination rather than a kidnapping. Also note, Arbabsiar here introduces language about "guaranteeing the money;" later, the complaint suggests Narc asked Arbabsiar on August 28 to guarantee the money by sending someone to Mexico. Also note the reference to "these people" [Arbabsiar's Qods Force co-conspirators] paying the government, which is instead interpreted by the FBI agent as the government paying them.

[Narc] my guy over there ... he's already
in Washington [ellipsis original]

[Narc] I got this on the computer ... is
this the guy right here? [ellipsis
original]

[Arbabsiar] Yeah, that's him

[Narc: The Ambassador has] eight to seven security people around him ... he goes out and eat like two times a week in a restaurant ... my guy is already over there ... doing surveillance [ellipses original]

[Narc] I don't know what exactly your cousin wants me to do

[The complaint makes it clear there is further conversation before the following statement]

[Arbabsiar] he wants you to kill this guy

[Narc] there's gonna be like American people there ... in the restaurant. You want me to do it outside or in the restaurant? [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] Doesn't matter how you do it. I mean, if you do it by himself, kill is better, but ... sometime, you know, you have no choice, is that right? [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar said he could] **guarantee the money** ... I got the money coming. [ellipsis original, my emphasis]

[Arbabsiar] this is politics, ok ... it's not like, eh, personal ... **This is politics, so these people they pay this government** ... [Shahlai's] got the, got the government behind him ... he's not paying from his pocket. [ellipses original]

[Narc gives Arbabsiar] the account number ... in [a US bank] ... and the US routing number [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] I tell [Shahlai], give me just another fifteen. Just ... next morning they send one guy, you know, that work for him. He's like a colonel, that guy. [ellipsis original]

[Narc] Did the colonel take the money, the money to you?

[Arbabsiar] Yes, man. He opened the door for me, the colonel, he bring the envelope. He put the envelope there for me.

[Arbabsiar] They want that guy done, if they hundred go with him, fuck 'em.

[Narc] I'm gonna blow him up or shoot him, whatever you want.

[Arbabsiar] Yeah, it doesn't matter ... whatever is easy for ... how is possible for you. [ellipses original]

[Arbabsiar] Let it hit the restaurant. If, if you can do it outside, do it. If not, restaurant, hit it, it's ok.

[Narc: there are] from a hundred, a hundred and fifty [and] buildings on the sides [and] senators

[Arbabsiar] no big deal [,] no problem

July 20, 2011: Arbabsiar departs Mexico for a foreign country. The complaint notes that Arbabsiar had told Narc he'd be traveling to Iran to see his cousin.

Second period when series of conversations with Qods Forces co-conspirators could have taken place. According to his confession, during this period (see note above about timing) Arbabsiar meets with Gholam Shakuri and Hamed Abdollahi together and Shakuri individually. Over the course of those meetings, **he is asked to "kidnap or kill" the Saudi Ambassador** to the US, quickly. They ask whether Narc will travel internationally—presumably so he can be vettted—but Arbabsiar says he will not. The QF co-conspirators approved a plan to blow up a restaurant, as well as a \$100,000 down payment. **They told him to use the code name "Chevrolet" for the Ambassador plot.** Shakuri told Arbabsiar that Qasem Soleimani was aware of what he was

doing and that Arbabsiar could meet with him in the future.

August 1, 2011: One foreign entity sends ~\$49,960 through a NYC bank to another bank in the US.

August 6, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc talk on a recorded phone call. Note, it's not clear who called whom.

[Narc asks whether Arbabsiar had]
already finished with the other half of
... the money [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] I sent it yesterday

August 9, 2011: A second foreign entity sends ~\$49,960 through a NYC bank to another bank in the US.

August 11, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc talk again on a recorded phone call. Again, it's not clear who called whom.

[Arbabsiar] Did you check the bank?

[Narc] I check in the bank, everything
is there.

August 25, 2011: JP Morgan Chase signs a settlement admitting to, among other things, issuing a \$2.9 million line of credit to the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines on December 22, 2009.

August 28, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak by recorded call, again it's not clear who called whom. The complaint cites no content of this call, though does say (in a footnote) that Narc raised the possibility that Arbabsiar should "send someone" to Mexico as collateral.

September 2, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak in a recorded call again, again it's not clear who called whom.

[Arbabsiar: Is] the building getting
painted

[Narc] We're still doing that.

[Arbabsiar] once we do this one, you gonna open a [U/I; bracket original] like, uh ... you got the number for the safe [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] once you open the door, that's it. You know what I mean? ... you don't have to worry about anything. [ellipsis original]

September 12, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak in a recorded call, again it's not clear who called whom.

[Arbabsiar] The number is gonna stay the same thing ... one and a half [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] the number we did

[Arbabsiar said he could] prepare for those two ... but we need to at least one of them [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar says if Narc does] at least one ... I'll send the balance for you [ellipsis original]

[Arbabsiar] the first one they just want it for test

September 20, 2011: Arbabsiar and Narc speak in a recorded call, again it's not clear who called whom.

[Narc] I'm ready for the ... for the thing, for the house, man, to be painted but ... I need to, I need, either I need you or I need half of the ... of the check that we're gonna receive to ... so I can go ahead and ... be finished with the job.

[Arbabsiar] I'm gonna go over there two three days, I'll be over there ... Don't wait for me. Get ready, but I'll be over there.

September 20, 2011, during the night: Narc returns a call from Arbabsiar and records the call.

[Arbabsiar asks] how long [I] need to stay in Mexico

Late September 2011: According to Arbabsiar's confession, he and Shakuri meet. Arbabsiar explains that Narc either wants half the money or to have Arbabsiar to travel to Mexico to guarantee the future payment. Shakuri said no more money would be given to Narc, and advised Arbabsiar not to travel back to Mexico. Shakuri said Arbabsiar was responsible for himself if he did go to Mexico. Shakuri told Arbabsiar to call him after he arrived in Mexico.

September 28, 2011: Arbabsiar denied entry in Mexico

September 29, 2011: Arbabsiar arrested and within hours waives Miranda rights and agrees to talk

October 4, 2011: While in custody, Arbabsiar calls Shakuri on a call the FBI recorded and monitored. This and all other Shakuri-Arbabsiar conversations were translated from Farsi. Note that, in spite of the fact the complaint says "Chevrolet" was the code for the Ambassador op, Shakuri refers to the outstanding op as "the building."

[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]

October 5, 2011: Arbabsiar makes another recorded and monitored call to Shakuri.

[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.

[Arbabsiar] this boy wants, uh, some money, he wants some expenditure. What do you say, should we give him some more? He wants another 50.

[Shakuri] With you, no, you ... that amount is fine. [UI] give him the rest. He should buy the car for us first. [ellipsis original]

[Shakuri] Do it quickly, it's late, just buy it for me and bring it already.

October 7, 2011: Arbabsiar places another monitored and taped call to Shakuri. The FBI seems to be trying, unsuccessfully, to get Shakuri to agree to send money on tape (the earlier payment had been laundered through Individual #1, so nothing directly tied Shakuri directly to the payment for the plot). Note the seeming nonsensical comment suggesting that Narc might give extra money.

[Arbabsiar] This Mexican, ... keeps on insisting on the thing. He says, 'If – I need money, 50. I won't do the job if you don't pay.' And everything's ready.

[Shakuri] I don't know. You guaranteed yourself ... **of course, if we give it, we'll give it to you. Okay? If he gives it, fine; if not we must provide the 100 [or] 50.** Tell him [U/I].

[Arbabsiar] Well, yeah. Now I–what do

you say? What should I do? [U/I]

[Shakuri] How much is he talking about?

[Arbabsiar] I don't know. He's saying, for instance, well how—he says well—so, I thought, so that the 100 we gave won't go to waste; that's why. On the other hand, we gave a 100 and that would go to waste as well.

[Shakuri] Well, yeah, but what if you give this one it goes to waste as well?

[Arbabsiar] That's what the Mexican ... wants ... What can I do? [ellipses original]

[Shakuri] Okay, today I'll discuss it to see what they say.

[Shakuri] You said that for sure they're saying that much. We didn't discuss it though, we—in any case, he needs to deliver it to us, okay?

[Arbabsiar] Completely. Yeah, yeah, I know what you're saying.

[Shakuri] You guaranteed it.

[Arbabsiar] I guaranteed it, but they ... they're not ordinary people

[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.

LISA MONACO WOULD

LIKE TO THANK THE ACADEMY

One nice touch of today's press conference rolling out the latest FBI-created plot (aside from comedy lines like "they had no regard for the rule of law" and "we will not let other countries use our soil as their battleground") is that the fairly new Assistant Attorney General for National Security, Lisa Monaco, got a speaking role.

That's certainly not inappropriate; given that this plot was either invented by or targeted at Iran, the NSD would be right in the thick of the action.

It's the content of her statements, focusing almost entirely on thanking participants in the "investigation," I find so interesting. She started by thanking her reports in the NSD, particularly the Counterterrorism Section. Then the US Attorney's Offices in Southern District of NY and Houston. Then the FBI, the DEA, and the NY Joint Terrorism Task Force. After having thanked those groups—two of which (FBI and DEA) are members of the Intelligence Community—she then thanked the Intelligence Community.

Finally, I want to thank the intelligence community for its critical role in this matter. The National Security Division was designed to serve as the place where intelligence and law enforcement come together at the Justice Department. I am proud to say that we served that purpose here. This case demonstrates exactly how the division is supposed to work and should serve as a model for future cases.

(Holder offers less demonstrative thanks to the intelligence community too.) In other words, the head of the NSD, which would handle cooperation between the ops side and the law enforcement side, dedicated one-fifth of her comments, a

quarter of her thanks, to the IC members presumably above and beyond the FBI and DEA officers who led this sting.

By itself, that's not a surprise. After all, even the recent model plane UAV plot the FBI invented would have involved the NSA and CIA closely because the FBI seems to have targeted Rezwan Ferdaus, the plotter, because of his comments in jihadist chat rooms. But by contrast with such operations as that one, the complaint in this case offers no obvious tip to the involvement of the IC.

Sure, there would be intelligence analysts, the experts on the Quds Force (though the FBI agent writing the complaint attributed information on the Quds to Treasury and State declarations and "other 'open source' information," in the same way he attributes information on Los Zetas to "published reports"). There might be Treasury investigators, the people who use SWIFT to track the two international wire transfers that are the primary evidence in the case, but the FBI could probably track the transfers themselves, not least because the transfers ended up in an FBI bank account and I suspect they went through a friendly bank in NYC. You'd think the NSA would be involved, but the informant, who I call "Narc," taped all the phone conversations himself until Arbabsiar's arrest, after which the FBI taped his calls. There is a reference to pictures of Quds members, presumably taken by intelligence agencies.

But those are the only visible signs of IC involvement. Indeed, the complaint appears designed to hide any hint of IC involvement and the sting appears designed to avoid any obvious involvement from the IC. That is, from **the looks** of things, this arrest required less involvement from the IC than Fardaus'.

Which I assume is the point: to create the appearance of an FBI arrest that seems entirely unmotivated by underlying intelligence plots.

And yet unnamed agencies in the IC got prominent

kudos for their “critical role in this matter.”

With that in mind, I wanted to point to a few interesting details in the complaint.

Perhaps most interesting, the complaint’s account of how a seeming incompetent like Arbabsiar got sent out to negotiate ties between the Quds and Los Zeta indicates Arbabsiar suggested he get involved, not his cousin Abdul Reza Shahlai (described here as Iranian Official #1).

ARBABSIAR told Iranian Official #1 that as a result of his business in both Mexico and the United States, he (ARBABSIAR) knew a number of people who traveled between the two countries, and some of those people, he (ARBABSIAR) believed, were narcotics traffickers. Iranian Official #1 told ARBABSIAR that he wanted ARBABSIAR to hire someone who could kidnap the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States and that ARBABSIAR should find someone in the narcotics business, because people in that business are willing to undertake criminal activity in exchange for money.

And note how, at the start, Shahlai wanted only a kidnapping? Arbabsiar and Narc turned it into an assassination. And Narc offered up the C4 that is the entire basis of the WMD complaint (and, more largely, the terrorism charge).

Note, too, how it was orchestrated such that Arbabsiar would be in custody making calls back to Iran that would capture Arbabsiar’s co-conspirator, Gholam Shakuri, in the plot (every single one of these charges is a conspiracy charge, so getting some evidence against Shakuri was critical to even charging Arbabsiar without having him engage in an actual attack). The explanation was that Narc wanted something—either more money or Arbabsiar’s presence in Mexico—as a guarantee of the remainder of the \$1.5 million payoff before he’d

order the hit. Shakuri advised against Ababsiar traveling to Mexico.

SHAKURI stated that no more money should be given to [Narc], and advised ARBABSIIAR against traveling back to Mexico. SHAKURI said that ARBABSIIAR was responsible for himself if he did travel.

Then, when he was in custody pretending to be in Los Zetas custody, Arbabsiar called Shakuri and told him Narc wanted more money—presumably a ploy by the FBI to get Shakuri reconfirming the plan for the plot and his involvement in the money transfer. But Shakuri rejected that request.

SHAKURI then stated: “You said it yourself, they—from our point of view of—when we get our merchandise, we get our merchandise.” SHAKURI added, “We have guaranteed the rest. You were our guarantee.”

If this were a real plot and Los Zetas were really playing hardball for a bigger advance, then Shakuri’s decision might well have gotten Arbabsiar killed. At the very least, Shakuri’s refusal to pony up any more advance money suggests some ambivalence about the operation (or Arbabsiar’s life).

Now, it’s not clear when Arbabsiar decided to cooperate with the FBI—only when he was arrested (and promptly waived Miranda rights), or back in the spring when he proposed reaching out to Los Zetas to his cousin and along the way turned a kidnapping into a terrorist attack.

But it seems clear that someone orchestrated this sting from behind the scenes to create the appearance of a Quds-sponsored terrorism plot in the US. And for that reason, among the other players and directors and cinematographers Lisa Monaco thanked at the press conference, she also thanked the IC for the critical role they played

in orchestrating the show.