

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?