

From: H
Sent: 10/29/2011 3:12:16 AM +00:00

RELEASE IN PART
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To: Oscar Flores [redacted]

NEAR
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Subject: Fw: Iran Plot op-ed

Pls print.

From: Sullivan, Jacob J [mailto:SullivanJJ@state.gov]
Sent: Friday, October 28, 2011 06:19 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Iran Plot op-ed

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Fyi

From: Benjamin, Daniel S
Sent: Friday, October 28, 2011 05:31 PM
To: Rice, Susan E (USUN); Sherman, Wendy R; Feltman, Jeffrey D; Einhorn, Robert J; Godec, Robert F; 'Rasmussen, Nicholas J.'

[redacted]; Hammer, Michael A; Nuland, Victoria J; Wells, Alice G; Sullivan, Jacob J; [redacted]

Subject: Iran Plot op-ed

Wooster, Henry T

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Dan Byman, whose new book on Israeli counterterrorism has been very well reviewed, was receptive to some ideas I tried out on him on the Iran Plot. If you think this is useful, might try to get out to sympathetic influentials and journalists.

DB

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/28/iran_assassination_plot_plausible_culpability?page=full

Plausible Culpability

Don't be so quick to dismiss Iran's bumbling assassination plot -- it's likely that it was green-light ed at the highest levels. And not responding forcefully is an invitation for more attacks.

BY DANIEL BYMAN | OCTOBER 28, 2011



Incredulity has been the most common response to reports that Iran plotted with Mexican drug traffickers to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, at a Washington, D.C. restaurant. Given past U.S. intelligence failures, the opacity of the Iranian regime, and the seemingly clumsy nature of the operation, it is easy to dismiss the Obama administration's allegations that Iran planned such a risky attack. But there are plenty of reasons to think that the Islamic Republic's senior leadership was responsible for the plot.



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The incredulity takes three forms: the Iranians would never conduct such an operation because it goes against their interests; the Iranians are too competent for such a cartoonish plot; and if Iran did do such a thing, it must have been a rogue operation by junior intelligence officers. All these arguments are plausible -- and all are probably wrong.

The suspected Iranian agent, Mansour Arbabsiar, allegedly met with a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) source whom he tried to hire for murder. "They want that guy done," he reportedly told the agent, referring to the Saudi ambassador. "If the hundred [of collateral victims] go with him, [expletive] them," according to the U.S. government complaint. Arbabsiar also "met several times in Iran" with Ali Gholam Shakuri, a senior member of Iran's paramilitary Quds Force, a special unit of the country's Revolutionary Guards that has carried out **many terrorist attacks**. Shakuri in turn informed the head of the Quds Force, who reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader. There are also intercepted phone calls between Arbabsiar and Shakuri, which is hard evidence to dismiss. And then there is the money -- \$100,000 -- transferred for the plot. Together this is pretty damning evidence.

But why would Iran do such a thing? Even FBI Director Robert Muller noted that the allegations seemed like "a Hollywood script." The blowback from the operation could be considerable, particularly if, as Arbabsiar anticipated, a hundred bystanders were killed along with the Saudi ambassador.

Tehran may have felt it still needed to act despite these risks. Iran has suffered serious recent setbacks in the Middle East. Its Syrian ally is under siege. Closer to home, Saudi troops led a crackdown in March in Bahrain, Iran's Gulf neighbor; the Sunni government there brutally repressed fellow Iran's Shiites, and the United States seemed to give tacit approval. Indeed, Saudi officials claim that Shakuri helped to plan Quds Force operations in Bahrain giving him a personal motive to lash out against the Saudis and the United States.

Revenge may also have been a motive, since several Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated in recent years -- killings that are widely thought to be the handiwork of Israel intelligence, with U.S. approval. At a minimum, Iran would certainly believe that the "Little Satan" would not take such actions without the support of the "Big Satan." So payback and setbacks may have led Iran to lash out.

But even if Iran had a compelling motive, why would it use a bumbler like Arbabsiar and then allow him to use drug traffickers as allies?

Iran may have hoped that using a drug gang as a cutout would give it just enough deniability to frustrate any U.S. response, while still sending enough of a message that Iran would not be pushed around. In 1996, Iran worked with the Saudi branch of Hezbollah to bomb Khobar Towers, killing 19 American soldiers. It took the United States years to prove, to its own satisfaction, who was responsible -- even though Iran was a leading suspect from the start. And Iran, of course, suffered no price for Khobar or for subsequent attacks by its proxies on U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another explanation for the Iranian turn to such unconventional means may simply be that the FBI is doing a good job: Washington, D.C., is not southern Iraq, where the Quds Force has assets everywhere. Iran simply may not have its own assets in the United States and was thus forced to rely on amateurs like Arbabsiar and Mexican drug gangs. This explanation seems particularly plausible: Arbabsiar, after all, is a relative of a Quds Force member and thus had a personal connection that explains why he might be trusted, despite his lack of experience.

Even the best intelligence services are not always intelligent, particularly when final decisions are in the hands of politicians. No intelligence service is more fabled than Israel's Mossad, which has killed terrorists around the world and otherwise shown a competence and derring-do that is the envy of other spies.

Yet the Mossad too has had its share of incompetence when it comes to assassination plots. In 1973, Mossad agents in Norway gunned down Ahmed Bouchiki, a Moroccan waiter, whom they thought was the leader of the Black September terrorist organization. The strike team ignored multiple clues that Bouchiki was not their man, and some of their captured operatives quickly caved under questioning (and the interrogators were Norwegians, mind you, not the KGB), surrendering details of Mossad operations throughout Europe.

Some twenty-five years later, Mossad agents tried to poison the Hamas leader Khaled Mishal in Jordan, at a time when the radical Palestinian group was considering a 30-year truce with Israel. They bungled the operation, turning Mishal into a hero and enraging Jordan's King Hussein, Israel's best friend in the Arab world. Turning disaster into farce, Mossad operatives fleeing the scene got lost in Amman's winding streets and were captured, forcing Israel to cut a deal with Hussein that released Hamas founder Shaykh Yasin from jail. If the Israelis can bungle these kind of operations, surely the Iranians can too.

Political leaders can also make things worse for intelligence professionals by demanding risky operations. Then (and current) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed the Mossad to try to kill Mishal because he felt a political need to retaliate for Hamas terrorism in Jerusalem. Recall, too, that Kennedy administration officials pushed the CIA hard to overthrow Castro, with tragedy and farce as the result there as well.

The jury is still out on who ordered the plot, at least in the unclassified world, but there is good reason to suspect Iran's senior leaders, who have been tied to assassination attempts in the past. A German court found, for instance, that the Islamic Republic's president and Supreme

Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had approved the killing of Kurdish-Iranian dissidents in a Berlin restaurant in 1992. And Khamenei is still the man in charge.

Nor should we forget that Iran has become more aggressive in the Middle East in recent years, supporting militias in Iraq that have killed U.S. forces, aiding the Syrian regime in its repression, and forging ties to the Taliban in Afghanistan. An attack in the United States would have been an escalation, but Iran is already showing its teeth.

The leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, of which the Quds Force is a part, reports directly to the supreme leader. The paramilitary group is at the core of the regime, not a marginal player. Before mounting a strike that would certainly escalate tensions with both the United States and Saudi Arabia, the leadership of the Guards would certainly have wanted to make sure that it had approval and political cover. To do otherwise in a dictatorship is to risk harsh reprisals.

A little skepticism is healthy in how we interpret the claims and evidence presented by our own intelligence agencies, but giving Iran a pass on this outrageous plot just because the operation went awry would be a mistake. And responding with a passive shrug or weak-kneed condemnations may look to Iran like a green light for a second try.

Daniel Benjamin

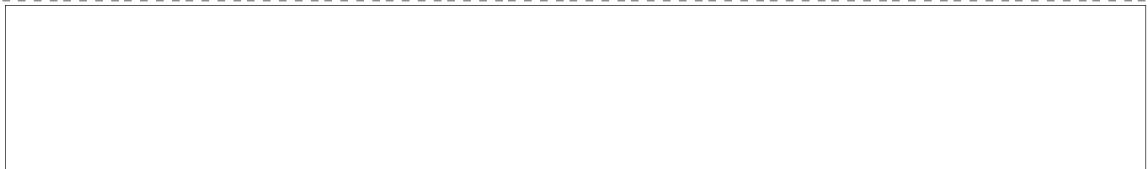
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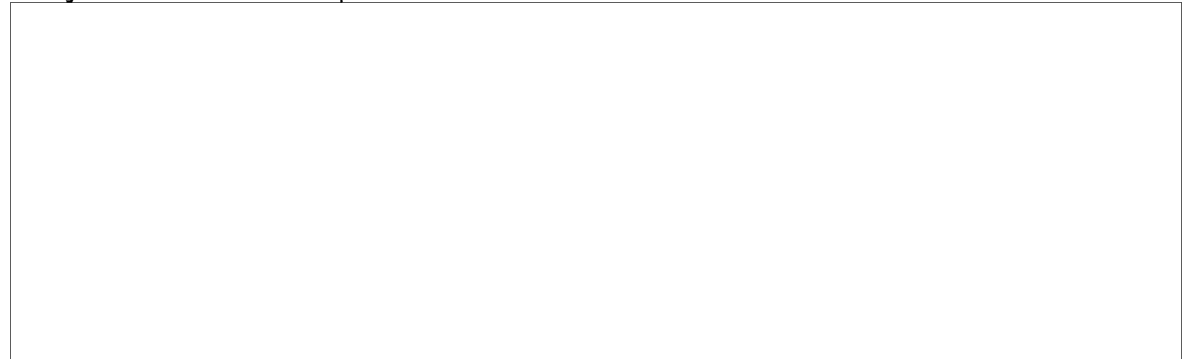
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Message Headers:



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From: H <HDR22@clintonemail.com>
To: Oscar Flores <Oscar@presidentclinton.com>
Date: Fri, 28 Oct 2011 23:12:16 -0400
Subject: Fw: Iran Plot op-ed



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