

Petraeus's CIA Fuels Iran Murder Plot

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Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, in his accustomed role as unofficial surrogate CIA spokesman, has thrown light on how the CIA under its new director, David Petraeus, helped craft the screenplay for this week's White House spy feature: the Iranian-American-used-car-salesman-Mexican-drug-cartel plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S.

In Thursday's [column](#), Ignatius notes that, initially, White House and Justice Department officials found the story "implausible." It was. But the Petraeus team soon leapt to the rescue, reflecting the four-star-general-turned-intelligence-chief's deep-seated animus toward Iran.

Before Ignatius's article, I had seen no one allude to the fact that much about this crime-stopper tale had come from the CIA. In public, the FBI had taken the lead role, presumably because the key informant inside a Mexican drug cartel worked for U.S. law enforcement via the Drug Enforcement Administration.

However, according to Ignatius, "One big reason [top U.S. officials became convinced the plot was real] is that 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."

Ignatius adds that, "It was this intelligence collected in Iran" that swung the balance, but he offers no example of what that intelligence was. He only mentions a recorded telephone call on Oct. 4 between Iranian-American cars salesman Mansour Arbabsiar and his supposed contact in Iran, Gholam Shakuri, allegedly an official in Iran's Quds spy agency.

The call is recounted in the FBI affidavit submitted in support of the criminal charges against Arbabsiar, who is now in U.S. custody, and Shakuri, who is not. But the snippets of that conversation are unclear, discussing what on the surface appears to be a "Chevrolet" car purchase, but which the FBI asserts is code for killing the Saudi ambassador.

Without explaining what other evidence the CIA might have, Ignatius tries to further strengthen the case by knocking down some of the obvious problems with the allegations, such as "why the Iranians would undertake such a risky operation, and with such embarrassingly poor tradecraft."

"But why the use of Mexican drug cartels?" asks Ignatius rhetorically, before adding dutifully: "U.S. officials say that isn't as implausible as it sounds."

But it IS as implausible as it sounds, says every professional intelligence officer I have talked with since the "plot" was somberly announced on Tuesday.

The Old CIA Pros

There used to be real pros in the CIA's operations directorate. One — Ray Close, a longtime CIA Arab specialist and former Chief of Station in Saudi Arabia — told me on Wednesday that we ought to ask ourselves a very simple question:

“If you were an Iranian undercover operative who was under instructions to hire a killer to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Washington, D.C., why in HELL would you consider it necessary to explain to a presumed Mexican [expletive deleted] that this murder was planned and would be paid for by a secret organization in Iran?”

“Whoever concocted this tale wanted the ‘plot’ exposed ... to precipitate a major crisis in relations between Iran and the United States. Which other government in the Middle East would like nothing better than to see those relations take a big step toward military confrontation?”

If you hesitate in answering, you have not been paying attention. Many have addressed this issue. My last stab at throwing light on the Israel/Iran/U.S. nexus appeared ten days ago in [“Israel’s Window to Bomb Iran.”](#)

Another point on the implausibility meter is: What are the odds that Iran's Quds force would plan an unprecedented attack in the United States, that this crack intelligence agency would trust the operation to a used-car salesman with little or no training in spycraft, that he would turn to his one contact in a Mexican drug cartel who happens to be a DEA informant, and that upon capture the car salesman would immediately confess and implicate senior Iranian officials?

Wouldn't it make more sense to suspect that Arbabsiar might be a double-agent, recruited by some third-party intelligence agency to arrange some shady business deal regarding black-market automobiles, get some ambiguous comments over the phone from an Iranian operative, and then hand the plot to the U.S. government on a silver platter – as a way to heighten tensions between Washington and Teheran?

That said, there are times when even professional spy agencies behave like amateurs. And there's no doubt that the Iranians – like the Israelis, the Saudis and the Americans – can and do carry out assassinations and kidnappings in this brave new world of ours.

Remember, for instance, the case of Islamic cleric Osama Moustafa Hassan Nasr, also known as Abu Omar, who was abducted off the streets of Milan, Italy, on Feb. 17, 2003, and then flown from a U.S. air base to Egypt where he was imprisoned and tortured for a year.

In 2009, Italian prosecutors [convicted](#) 23 Americans, mostly CIA operatives, in absentia for the kidnapping after reconstructing the disappearance through their unencrypted cell phone records and their credit card bills at luxury hotels in Milan.

Then, there was the suspected Mossad assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh at a hotel in Dubai on Jan. 19, 2010, with the hit men seen on hotel video cameras strolling around in tennis outfits and creating an international furor over their use of forged Irish, British, German and French passports.

So one cannot completely rule out that there may conceivably be some substance to the

alleged Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador.

And beyond the regional animosities between Saudi Arabia and Iran, there could be a motive – although it has been absent from American press accounts – i.e. retaliation for the assassinations of senior Iranian nuclear scientists and generals over the last couple of years within Iran itself.

But there has been close to zero real evidence coming from the main source of information – officials of the Justice Department, which like the rest of the U.S. government has long since forfeited much claim to credibility.

Petraeus's 'Intelligence' on Iran

The public record also shows that former Gen. Petraeus has long been eager to please the neoconservatives in Washington and their friends in Israel by creating “intelligence” to portray Iran and other target countries in the worst light.

One strange but instructive example comes to mind, a studied, if disingenuous, effort to blame all the troubles in southern Iraq on the “malignant” influence of Iran.

On April 25, 2008, Joint Chiefs Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, told reporters that Gen. Petraeus in Baghdad would give a briefing “in the next couple of weeks” providing detailed evidence of “just how far Iran is reaching into Iraq to foment instability.” Petraeus's staff alerted U.S. media to a major news event in which captured Iranian arms in Karbala would be displayed and then destroyed.

Oops. Small problem. When American munitions experts went to Karbala to inspect the alleged cache of Iranian weapons, they found nothing that could be credibly linked to Iran.

At that point, adding insult to injury, the Iraqis announced that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had formed his own Cabinet committee to investigate the U.S. claims and attempt to “find tangible information and not information based on speculation.” Ouch!

The Teflon-clad Petraeus escaped embarrassment, as the David Ignatiuses of the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) conveniently forgot all about the promised-then-canceled briefing. U.S. media suppression of this telling episode is just one example of how difficult it is to get unbiased, accurate information on touchy subjects like Iran into the FCM.

As for Attorney General Eric Holder and President Barack Obama, some adult adviser should tell them to quit giving hypocrisy a bad name with their righteous indignation over the thought that no civilized nation would conduct cross-border assassinations.

The Obama administration, like its predecessor, has been dispatching armed drones to distant corners of the globe to kill Islamic militants, including recently U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki for the alleged crime of encouraging violence against Americans.

Holder and Obama have refused to release the Justice Department's legal justification for the targeted murder of al-Awlaki whose “due process” amounted to the President putting al-Awlaki's name on a secret “kill-or-capture” list.

Holder and Obama have also refused to take meaningful action to hold officials of the Bush administration accountable for war crimes even though President George W. Bush has

publicly acknowledged authorizing waterboarding and other brutal techniques long regarded as acts of torture.

Who can take at face value the sanctimonious words of an attorney general like Holder who has acquiesced in condoning egregious violations of the Bill of Rights, the U.S. criminal code, and international law — like the International Convention Against Torture?

Were shame not in such short supply in Official Washington these days, one would be amazed that Holder could keep a straight face, accusing these alleged Iranian perpetrators of “violating an international convention.”

America’s Founders would hold in contempt the Holders and the faux-legal types doing his bidding. The behavior of the past two administrations has been more reminiscent of George III and his sycophants than of James Madison, George Mason, John Jay and George Washington, who gave us the rich legacy of a Constitution, which created a system based on laws not men.

That Constitution and its Bill of Rights have become endangered species at the hands of the craven poachers at “Justice.” No less craven are the functionaries leading today’s CIA.

What to Watch For

If Petraeus finds it useful politically to conjure up more “evidence” of nefarious Iranian behavior in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, Lebanon or Syria, he will. And if he claims to see signs of ominous Iranian intentions regarding nuclear weapons, watch out.

Honest CIA analysts, like the ones who concluded that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear weapon in late 2003 and had not resumed that work, are in short supply, and most have families to support and mortgages to pay.

Petraeus is quite capable of marginalizing them, or even forcing them to quit. I have watched this happen to a number of intelligence officials under a few of Petraeus’s predecessors.

More malleable careerists can be found in any organization, and promoted, so long as they are willing to tell more ominous — if disingenuous — stories that may make more sense to the average American than the latest tale of the Iranian-American-used-car-salesman-Mexican-drug-cartel-plot.

This can get very dangerous in a hurry. Israel’s leaders would require but the flimsiest of *nihil obstat* to encourage them to provoke hostilities with Iran. Netanyahu and his colleagues would expect the Obamas, Holders, and Petraeuses of this world to be willing to “fix the intelligence and facts” (à la Iraq) to “justify” such an attack.

The Israeli leaders would risk sucking the United States into the kind of war with Iran that, short of a massive commitment of resources or a few tactical nuclear weapons, the U.S. and Israel could almost surely not win. It would be the kind of war that would make Iraq and Afghanistan look like minor skirmishes.

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