

U.S. Officials Peddle False Intel to Support Terror Plot Claims

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WASHINGTON, Oct 17, 2011 (IPS) – Officials of the Barack Obama administration have aggressively leaked information supposedly based on classified intelligence in recent days to bolster its allegation that two higher-ranking officials from Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were involved in a plot to assassinate Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir in Washington, D.C.

The media stories generated by the leaks helped divert press attention from the fact that there is no verifiable evidence of any official Iranian involvement in the alleged assassination plan, contrary to the broad claim being made by the administration.

But the information about the two Iranian officials leaked to NBC News, the Washington Post and Reuters was unambiguously false and misleading, as confirmed by official documents in one case and a former senior intelligence and counterterrorism official in the other.

The main target of the official leaks was Abdul Reza Shahlai, who was identified publicly by the Obama administration as a “deputy commander in the Quds Force” of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Shahlai had long been regarded by U.S. officials as a key figure in the Quds Force’s relationship to Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army in Iraq.

The primary objective of the FBI sting operation involving Iranian- American Manssor Arbabsiar and a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) informant that was started last June now appears to have been to use Arbabsiar to implicate Shahlai in a terror plot.

U.S. officials had learned from the DEA informant that Arbabsiar claimed that Shahlai was his cousin.

In September 2008, the Treasury Department designated Shahlai as an individual “providing financial, material and technical support for acts of violence that threaten the peace and stability of Iraq” and thus subject to specific financial sanctions. The announcement said Shahlai had provided “material support” to the Mahdi Army in 2006 and that he had “planned the Jan. 20, 2007 attack” by Mahdi Army “Special Groups” on U.S. troops at the Provincial Coordination Center in Karbala, Iraq.

Arbabsiar’s confession claims that Shahlai approached him in early spring 2011 and asked him to find “someone in the narcotics business” to kidnap the Saudi ambassador to the United States, according to the FBI account. Arbabsiar implicates Shahlai in providing him with thousands of dollars for his expenses.

But Arbabsiar's charge against Shahlai was self-interested. Arbabsiar had become the cornerstone of the administration's case against Shahlai in order to obtain leniency on charges against him.

There is no indication in the FBI account of the investigation that there is any independent evidence to support Arbabsiar's claim of Shahlai's involvement in a plan to kill the ambassador.

The Obama administration planted stories suggesting that Shahlai had a terrorist past, and that it was therefore credible that he could be part of an assassination plot.

Laying the foundation for press stories on the theme, the Treasury Department announced Tuesday that it was sanctioning Shahlai, along with Arbabsiar and three other Quds Force officials, including the head of the organisation, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, for being "connected to" the assassination plot.

But Michael Issikof of NBC News reported the same day that Shahlai "had previously been accused of plotting a highly sophisticated attack that killed five U.S. soldiers in Iraq, according to U.S. government officials and documents made public Tuesday afternoon".

Isikoff, who is called "National Investigative Correspondent" at NBC News, reported that the Treasury Department had designated Shahlai as a "terrorist" in 2008, despite the fact that the Treasury announcement of the designation had not used the term "terrorist".

On Saturday, the Washington Post published a report closely paralleling the Issikof story but going even further in claiming documentary proof of Shahlai's responsibility for the January 2007 attack in Karbala. Post reporter Peter Finn wrote that Shahlai "was known as the guiding hand behind an elite militia of the cleric Moqtada al Sadr", which had carried out an attack on U.S. troops in Karbala in January 2007.

Finn cited the fact that the Treasury Department named Shahlai as the "final approving and coordinating authority" for training Sadr's militiamen in Iran. That fact would not in itself be evidence of involvement in a specific attack on U.S. forces. On the contrary, it would suggest that he was not involved in operational aspects of the Mahdi Army in Iraq.

Finn then referred to a "22-page memo that detailed preparations for the operation and tied it to the Quds Force..." But he didn't refer to any evidence that Shahlai personally had anything to do with the operation.

In fact, U.S. officials acknowledged in the months after the Karbala attack that they had found no evidence of any Iranian involvement in the operation.

Talking with reporters about the memo on Apr. 26, 2007, several weeks after it had been captured, Gen. David Petraeus conceded that it did not show that any Iranian official was linked to the planning of the Karbala operation. When a journalist asked him whether there was evidence of Iranian involvement in the Karbala operation, Petraeus responded, "No. No. No... [W]e do not have a direct link to Iran involvement in that particular case."

In a news briefing in Baghdad Jul. 2, 2007, Gen. Kevin Bergner confirmed that the attack in Karbala had been authorised by the Iraqi chief of the militia in question, Kais Khazali, not by any Iranian official.

Col. Michael X. Garrett, who had been commander of the U.S. Fourth Brigade combat team in Karbala, confirmed to this writer in December 2008 that the Karbala attack “was definitely an inside job”.

Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force, is on the list of those Iranian officials “linked” to the alleged terror plot, because he “oversees the IRGC-QF officers who were involved in this plot” , as the Treasury Department announcement explained. But a Reuters story on Friday reported a claim of U.S. intelligence that two wire transfers totaling 100,000 dollars at the behest of Arbabsiar to a bank account controlled by the FBI implicates Soleimani in the assassination plot.

“While details are still classified,” wrote Mark Hosenball and Caren Bohan, “one official said the wire transfers apparently had some kind of hallmark indicating they were personally approved” by Soleimani.

But the suggestion that forensic examination of the wire transfers could somehow show who had approved them is misleading. The wire transfers were from two separate non-Iranian banks in a foreign country, according to the FBI’s account. It would be impossible to deduce who approved the transfer by looking at the documents.

“I have no idea what such a ‘hallmark’ could be,” said Paul Pillar, a former head of the CIA’s Counter-Terrorism Center who was also National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East until his retirement in 2005.

Pillar told IPS that the “hallmark” notion “pops up frequently in commentary after actual terrorist attacks,”, but the concept is usually invoked “along the lines of ‘the method used in this attack had the hallmark of group such and such’.”

That “hallmark” idea “assumes exclusive ownership of a method of attack which does not really exist,” said Pillar. “I expect the same could be said of methods of transferring money.”

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, “Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam”, was published in 2006.

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