

Case 47: Iran and Scarface

John Mueller

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In one of the strangest cases in this book, Manssor Arbabsiar, a 66-year-old Iranian-American with little ideological bent (he was mainly interested in expensive cars, alcohol, and women, notes Zachary Zaerr), found himself at the center of a bizarre Iran-inspired conspiracy to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador in a Washington, DC, restaurant.

Arbabasiar, who earned the name “Scarface” after he was knifed in the face in a Texas barroom brawl 30 years earlier, was quite possibly the least likely participant in a conspiracy. A repeated failure in business, he was friendly, but hopelessly unreliable and absent-minded according to people who knew him. “His socks would not match. He was always losing his keys and cellphone.”

He did, however, have a cousin who was a General in Iran and who offered the failed Texas businessman \$1.5 million to arrange for the violent death of the Saudi ambassador. The idea was to hire gangsters in a Mexican drug cartel to carry out the deed. Arbabsiar asked a woman he had once sold a car to whether she knew anyone who knew about explosives, and she referred him to one of her relatives, a member of such a cartel who also happened, as it turned out, to be an informant for the US Drug Enforcement Agency.

They plotted for a while, and Arbabsiar was able to get \$100,000 wired to the presumed assassin as earnest money. Arrested in 2011, Arbabsiar cooperated with US authorities, ultimately receiving a sentence of 25 years.

It remains unknown how far up, if at all, the plot went in the Iranian hierarchy, and Arbabsiar’s apparent co-conspirators remain at large, and quiet, in Iran. Without them, concludes Zaerr, Arbabsiar would likely have been “content to live out his life bouncing from business to business and from woman to woman.”

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Zachary Zaerr

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1. Overview

On September 29, 2011, Manssor Arbabsiar was arrested at JFK International Airport in New York following denial of entry into Mexico. Per Mexican law, those who are refused entry into Mexico must be returned to their last point of departure. During the return flight to New York he realized, “[He] was finished.”¹ Upon landing he was arrested, and soon after waived his Miranda rights. During nearly two weeks of interrogation without an attorney present, Arbabsiar admitted to his part in the plot.² Throughout the time he was interrogated he repeatedly signed statements waiving his Miranda rights.³

Arbabsiar’s role in the terrorism scheme for which he as arrested began when he was courted by a cousin of his—Iranian Quds Force official Abdul Reza Shahlai—to facilitate the kidnapping of the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States.⁴ At some point in the planning stage the kidnapping plan morphed into an assassination plot. Arbabsiar made several trips to Iran throughout 2010 and early 2011. After one such trip in the spring of 2011, he traveled to Mexico at least four times between May and July of 2011. During these trips to Mexico he was hosted by someone who he took to be an associate of the Los Zetas drug cartel. In actuality this man was an informant working for the Drug Enforcement Administration. On July 14, 2011, he and Arbabsiar agreed to a deal that included 1.5 million dollars in exchange for the assassination of the Saudi Ambassador. Final discussions of the plan concluded with the decision to kill Adel Al-Jubeir by bombing a Washington, DC, restaurant that both he and a multitude of American senior government officials frequented. When told by the informant about the potential of significant civilian casualties, Arbabsiar responded with, “They want that guy done, if the hundred go with him f**k ‘em.”⁵ As a down payment, he facilitated the wiring of approximately \$100,000 to the DEA informant before the attack by way of a non-Iranian foreign bank.

On October 17, 2012, slightly more than a year after his arrest, Arbabsiar pleaded guilty to three separate counts: one for conspiracy to commit an act of terrorism transcending national boundaries, one for murder-for-hire, and one for conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire.⁶ Gholam Shakuri—an Iranian Quds Force

¹ Vytenis Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador,” abcnews.com, October 22, 2012.

² Department of Justice, “Two Men Charged in Alleged Plot to Assassinate Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States,” DOJ.com, October 11, 2011.

³ Benjamin Weiser, “Questions Over Whether Terror Suspects’ Aid in Inquiries Was Voluntary,” NYTimes.com, November 24, 2011.

⁴ Benjamin Weiser, “Man Sentenced in Plot to Kill Saudi Ambassador,” NYTimes.com, May 30, 2013.

⁵ Department of Justice, “Manssor Arbabsiar Sentenced in New York City Federal Court to 25 Years in Prison for Conspiring with Iranian Military Officials to Assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States,” DOJ.com, May 30, 2013.

⁶ Department of Justice, “Manssor Arbabsiar Sentenced.”

Colonel and co-conspirator—was also charged, but remains at large and is presumed to be in Iran. In May 2013 Arbabsiar was sentenced by a New York City federal court to 25 years in prison for his role in the plot.⁷

2. Nature of the adversary

Manssor Arbabsiar was born in Iran in 1955, immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s, and attended Texas A&I University in Kingsville in the early 1980s.⁸ It can be reasonably assumed that he immigrated alone, but it is unclear. While enrolled in college he was attacked outside of a bar by men who were angry at him for allegedly flirting with their girlfriends. He was stabbed multiple times in the face and body, leaving him with his nickname, “Scarface.”⁹ The attack left him severely injured and hospitalized for many weeks. Shortly after the attack Arbabsiar married his first wife, which gained him citizenship. They divorced in 1987, only a few years after their wedding day. Although seemingly traumatic, neither the incident that left his face mildly disfigured nor his short lived marriage seemingly had any impact on his future decision to engage in terrorist activity.

In 2001 he was arrested in connection to the illegal sale of an establishment, although the charges were later dropped due to lack of evidence.¹⁰ This incident was out of character for the normally smooth Arbabsiar. A devoutly entrepreneurial man, he was known around the area where he lived for his many started and failed businesses. From the late 1980s until 2010 he muddled through a string of failed businesses, including selling Kebobs and Gyros, running convenience stores, and owning or operating a multitude of used car lots.¹¹ He was known in the Corpus Christi area for his fondness for Jack Daniels whiskey and drove a Porsche 911 and a Mercedes.¹² In 2010 he returned to Iran after running into financial problems with more failed business. While in Iran he was recruited by his cousin, Quds Force General Abdul Reza Shahlai, to initiate a connection with a Mexican Drug Cartel that could assassinate the Saudi Ambassador. In return he was set to receive five million dollars for his role as the US-based facilitator of the plot.¹³

There is no evidence of any connection by Arbabsiar to Islamic terror. While his patron happened to be a high ranking member of the Iranian military, Arbabsiar was no zealot. He was a lover of expensive cars, alcohol, and women. While speaking with a jailhouse psychiatrist, he went so far as to say, “I have had so many girls... So many that you couldn’t count them. I never had one girl more than once.”¹⁴ The twice-married man had a history of marital infidelity, one such

⁷ Department of Justice, “Manssor Arbabsiar Sentenced.”

⁸ Robert Worth and Laura Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot,” NYTimes.com, October 12, 2011.

⁹ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

¹⁰ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

¹¹ Joseph Straw, “Manssor Arbabsiar, Charged in Iranian Plot to Kill Saudi Diplomat, Was Used Car Salesman: Report,” nydailynews.com, October 12, 2011.

¹² Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador”

¹³ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals.

¹⁴ Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador”

instance resulting in his now ex-wife chasing him out of the house with a shotgun.¹⁵ A deli owner in Corpus Christi stressed that Arbabsiar was not a radical, saying, “He was a businessman, and people with money always want to make more money.”¹⁶ A neighbor of Arbabsiar stated that her family considered his house to be “the scary house,” and that some in the community thought there to be drug deals going on due to a large number of people coming and going from the house.¹⁷ The case against Arbabsiar lacks any mention of anything fishy happening at his home, though. Although he was clearly overly self-confident, he appeared to be fully mentally competent throughout both the plot and the ensuing trial.

The patron of this foiled plot, Quds Force General Abdul Reza Shahlai, is a notorious Iranian adversary of the United States. In 2007 he was identified as the highest ranking Iranian authority responsible for the training of notorious Iraqi Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s militia, just one of his many purported transgressions due to his work as a Quds Force member.¹⁸ While discussing Abdul Shahlai in conversations with the DEA informant, Arbabsiar stated, “... [He] works in outside, in other countries for the Iranian government,” in addition to stating that he was wanted in America and had been “on the CNN.”¹⁹ The Quds Force—which translates literally to Jerusalem Force—is the Iranian Special Forces unit responsible for “extraterritorial actions.”²⁰ It is unclear whether this was a “lone wolf” plan by Shahlai, or if he was simply acting on behalf of his higher-ups in the Quds Force. During Arbabsiar’s trial and sentencing the United States asserted the latter. During the course of interrogation it was verified via scripted telephone conversations that Ali Gholam Shakuri, Shahlai’s deputy, was involved in both the planning and transaction of funds for the plot. Gholam Shakuri was charged along with Arbabsiar, but his whereabouts remain unknown. Shahlai was not charged—the evidence in the case implicated Shakuri—but did receive sanction from the Department of the Treasury.²¹

3. Motivation

As the highest ranking Iranian official officially known to be involved in the case, Shahlai set the course of action for the other two to follow. He would have to approve the funding and be the final say for every move that was made. It can be reasonably assumed that the implicated members of the Iranian military are involved for either the advancement of their personal position in the Quds Force or, more broadly, for Iran. Although US Attorney General Eric Holder, and

¹⁵ Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador”

¹⁶ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

¹⁷ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

¹⁸ Peter Finn, “Notorious Iranian Militant Has a Connection to Alleged Assassination Plot Against Saudi Envoy,” *WashingtonPost.com*, October 14, 2011.

¹⁹ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar and Gholam Shakuri*, US District Court for the Southern District of New York, Case num. 11 MAG 2617, October 11, 2011.

²⁰ Amy Zalman, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards: How Iran Trains Foreign Terrorists,” *terrorism.about.com*.

²¹ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals.”

therefore the US government, takes the position that multiple “factions” of the Iranian government played a role in the plot, it is unclear how far up the ladder knowledge of the plot went.²² It could be that this was an attempt by Shahlai to impress his superiors and prove his worth in what would amount to a very low risk, high reward move on his part. If that were the case, Shahlai would have essentially used his cousin Manssor Arbabsiar as a pawn in an attempt to gain personal recognition. Another viable option would be that Shahlai was simply in charge of carrying out a Quds Force mission against Iran’s main geopolitical enemy in the Middle East. As expected in the aftermath of a failed attack, Iranian officials denounced US accusations of Iranian meddling. In the Iranian response to US allegations, the Iranian Ambassador to the UN said, “The Islamic Republic of Iran strongly and categorically rejects these fabricated and baseless allegations, based on the suspicious claims by an individual” (the letter can be found in the appendix).

From all gathered information it would appear that Arbabsiar was actually a proponent of the United States and held a negative view of terrorist activities. He did not seem to want to harm the USA or even American citizens, but in recorded phone conversations with the DEA informant he mentioned multiple times that it is better to only kill the Ambassador, but if bystanders had to be killed to achieve the goal of killing the Saudi Ambassador it would be an unfortunate necessity.²³ Former coworker and friend Dan Keetch recalled that Arbabsiar’s response to 9/11 was one of sorrow; Arbabsiar even sought to assure Mr. Keetch that not all Middle Easterners were like those who had committed such heinous terrorist activities.²⁴ A radical jihadist would be extremely unlikely to be deeply troubled by the events of 9/11.

4. Goals

When attempting to identify the goals of this failed plot, we must first identify which actor the goal originated from. The main actors in the plot are Manssor Arbabsiar, Quds Force General Abdul Reza Shahlai, and Shahlai’s deputy, Colonel Gholam Shakuri. While the three main actors involved in the attempted bombing were working with one another, the goals of the Iranian military members are very different than that of the American citizen, Arbabsiar.

The overarching goal for the plot was to kill the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States, Adel Al-Jubeir. Adel is one of Saudi King Abdullah’s most trusted advisors, and the only non-member of the royal family to hold an ambassadorship. Any attack on a Saudi Ambassador is viewed by Saudi officials as an attack on the King himself. In addition to the primary target, the Iranian military would view the instillation of fear into the American and Saudi public as a victory. Some allege that the plot was an attempt to get back at the

²² Chris Boyette, “Iranian-American gets 25 years in plot to kill Saudi ambassador,” *cnn.com*, June 2, 2013.

²³ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

²⁴ BBC News, “Friends’ shock at ‘Iran plot’ suspect Manssor Arbabsiar.”

Saudi King for sending troops to Bahrain in 2010.²⁵ More generally it could simply be viewed as an Iranian attempt to attack a well-known, prominent Saudi, interfering with the affairs of their competitor for Middle East supremacy. Because Arbabsiar was simply acting as the middleman for his Iranian connections, there was never a trial with the Iranians to test their goals outside of the death of Al-Jubeir.

Describing the goals of Arbabsiar is a far simpler exercise. His clear-cut motivation was the five million dollars he was set to receive for facilitating the operation.²⁶ Manssor was a man dedicated to a few things: the endless pursuit of business success and the pursuit of women. A handful of failed businesses had landed him in hot water, and the prospect of a hefty payday for making what he seemed to regard as a few business transactions must have seemed very welcoming for the experienced used car salesman.

5. Plans for violence

The plan that Shakuri and Arbabsiar believed they were setting in motion was sending a team from the Los Zetas drug cartel in Mexico to kill the Saudi Ambassador in a Washington, DC, restaurant that he frequented--approximately 2 visits per week, according to the intelligence provided to Arbabsiar by the DEA informant.²⁷ The precise details of the attack were left by Arbabsiar to those who he expected to actually carry it out; although the details of the attack were finalized between him and the informant. He described the feelings of Shahlai in a discussion with the DEA informant, saying, "He wants you to kill this guy...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?"²⁸ Arbabsiar goes on to state that the manner of death doesn't matter, so long as the cartel is able to take care of the Saudi Ambassador, agreeing that either death by shooting or bombing is acceptable. As far as the Iranian players and Arbabsiar were concerned, the plot was ready to be carried out. Arbabsiar was arrested on his attempt to get into Mexico to serve as human collateral for the attack, after which the remaining 1.4 million owed to the man he took to be an associate of the Los Zetas cartel would be paid. However, he was denied entry into Mexico and sent back to New York where he was detained.

The plot was destined to fail from the moment that Arbabsiar become involved. While the Quds Force is known for well thought out attacks around the world, this plan was uncharacteristically flawed. The selection of a man who had failed in business many times over seems odd, particularly when many of his acquaintances first reaction to hearing about his involvement is that he was always far too absent minded to carry out such a plot. According to Tom Hosseini, a college roommate and friend of Arbabsiar, "His socks would not match. He was always losing his keys and cellphone. He was not capable of

²⁵ Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran's Shadowy Assassins," Newsweek, Volume 158 Issue 17, October 24, 2011.

²⁶ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals."

²⁷ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

²⁸ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

carrying out this plan.” Others quipped that he was “hopelessly unreliable,” friendly but utterly careless, and even a social pariah in the area where he lived.²⁹ It seems almost unbelievable that an organization known for its tact would select such an unlikely partner for a plot with such a high profile target. Arbabsiar had no training in any military style activities or tactics, and likewise no intention of participating in the plot outside of functioning as the middleman between his Iranian patrons and who he thought was a Los Zetas cartel associate.

Arbabsiar flew to Mexico from New York on September 28, 2011. He was denied entry into Mexico by Mexican customs officials, and was sent to New York by the cooperating Mexican officials. Federal authorities arrested him on September 29, 2011 upon his arrival at JFK International Airport in New York. They interrogated him from the time of his arrest until October 10, 2011.³⁰ Arbabsiar repeatedly waived his right to an attorney. He also confessed to his part in the plot after he was played voice recordings of his conversations with the DEA informant that he took to be a Los Zetas associate. During a session with a government retained psychiatrist he said, “I know about making deals – I have done that all my life in the car business. Hell, if you want information, I will give your information. If you want addresses, I will give you addresses.”³¹

On October 17, 2012, he pleaded guilty to one count of murder-for-hire, one count of conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, and one count of conspiracy to commit an act of terrorism transcending national boundaries.³² On Thursday, May 30, 2013 Arbabsiar was sentenced to 25 years in prison for his crimes. Gholam Shakuri was also charged in the case but remains at large.

6. Role of informants

Throughout the plot Arbabsiar routinely meets with a man he took to be an associate of the Los Zetas drug cartel. Rather than being a drug cartel member, this man was a confidential DEA informant who was working with the DEA after being faced with drug charges himself.³³ Arbabsiar contacted a woman to whom he had previously sold a car asking if she knew anyone who knew about explosives. She referred him to the DEA informant—who happened to be her relative—by happenstance.³⁴

It is unclear how the informant was rewarded for his cooperation; whether the informant was paid in cash or simply in a reduction in his own sentencing we do not know. The informant prodded Arbabsiar for specifics, although he certainly did not force Arbabsiar into any changes of plans. Throughout multiple recorded exchanges the informant voices concerns over endangering innocent bystanders, to which Arbabsiar returns a rather uncaring attitude.³⁵ Consistent

²⁹ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

³⁰ Gregory B. Saathoff, Forensic Psychiatric Evaluation, Re: United States v. Manssor Arbabsiar, 11 Cr. 897 (JFK), October 3, 2012.

³¹ Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador.”

³² Department of Justice, “Manssor Arbabsiar Sentenced.”

³³ Devlin Barrett and Evan Perez, “Drugs and Terror Mix in Case,” *wsj.com*, October 14, 2011.

³⁴ Mark Hosenball and Tabassum Zakaria, “Iran suspect met DEA informant through acquaintance,” *Reuters.com*, October 13, 2011.

³⁵ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

with his view of himself as a businessman, Arbabsiar routinely agrees with any specifics the informant proposes, sticking to his original opinion that the manner of attack and death do not matter, so long as the ambassador is dead when the dust settles.³⁶ Although the original plan from the Iranian side of things was focused on kidnapping, it is presumed that either the Iranian actors or Arbabsiar himself changed the plot's focus to assassination—he did, after all, meet the informant after asking for someone who knew about explosives. His first conversation with the informant occurred on May 24, 2011, where Arbabsiar questioned if the informant was knowledgeable in use of explosives.³⁷ The identity of DEA informant remains confidential, presumably for his safety from retribution from either the Iranian Quds Force or from members of Los Zetas.

7. Connections

Manssor Arbabsiar had no connection to any Islamic extremist groups outside of the Quds Force. Even as such, he is only connected by way that he was recruited by his cousin, General Shahlai, to help facilitate the terror plot. The Council on Foreign Relations described a brief history of the Quds Force this way:

“Military analysts say the Guards began deploying fighters abroad during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), ‘exporting the ideals of the revolution throughout the Middle East.’ The Quds Force, a paramilitary arm of the Revolutionary Guard with 10,000 to 15,000 personnel (as of 2013), emerged as the de facto external affairs branch.... Its mandate was to conduct foreign policy missions--beginning in Iraq's Kurdish region--and forge relationships with Shiite and Kurdish groups. The Quds force has since supported terrorist activities and armed pro-Iranian militant groups across the Mideast and beyond, including in Lebanon--most notably Hezbollah--the Palestinian territories, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf states, and several others, according to the State Department.”³⁸

As far as the activities in the United States and Mexico go, there was no link by Arbabsiar to any terror groups outside of the Quds Force; nor was anyone else in the United States involved. Arbabsiar was not operating as part of a terrorist network, nor did he have any desire to found or join one. His desire to enter into the plot was purely for economic reasons, rather than ideological or political ones.

8. Relation to the Muslim Community

Neither Islam nor the Muslim community played a substantial role in the terrorist activities of Arbabsiar. The information presented on Arbabsiar's life reflects on a man with very little or no religious reverence. During a jailhouse

³⁶ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

³⁷ Sentencing Memorandum of The United States of America, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*, US District Court of Southern New York, 11 Cr. 897 (JFK), May 2, 2013.

³⁸ Greg Bruno, Jayshree Bajoria, and Jonathan Masters, “Iran's Revolutionary Guards,” CFR.org, June 14, 2013.

interview he stated, “Girls love money and cars...That was my weakness.”³⁹ Mosque attendance, or any other sort of religious devotion, was not observed in his life. Former associates noted that he was neither religious nor political, but seemed to be always in pursuit of money.⁴⁰ Despite the support from the Iranian Quds Force, Arbabsiar performed his actions absent any domestic support. His connections in the plot came only from the Iranian military.

9. Depiction by the authorities

Federal authorities managed to put out a competent and reasonable depiction of the plot and Arbabsiar’s role in it. Collaboration between the DEA and FBI on an international terror plot aimed at the assassination of a major US ally’s most important diplomat would seem to elicit a strong response by federal authorities, and it did. The use of terror over international borders is a serious crime, not to mention the charges of murder-for-hire and the desire to kill a possibly large amount of civilians, amongst others.⁴¹ The original Department of Justice press release included the following:

“The criminal complaint unsealed today exposes a deadly plot directed by factions of the Iranian government to assassinate a foreign Ambassador on U.S. soil with explosives...through the diligent and coordinated efforts of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies, we were able to disrupt this plot before anyone was harmed. We will continue to investigate this matter vigorously and bring those who have violated any laws to justice... The investigation leading to today’s charges illustrates both the challenges and complexities of the international threat environment, and our increased ability today to bring together the intelligence and law enforcement resources necessary to better identify and disrupt those threats, regardless of their origin...The disruption of this plot is a significant milestone that stems from months of hard work by our law enforcement and intelligence professionals...I applaud the many agents, analysts and prosecutors who helped bring about today’s case...As alleged, these defendants were part of a well-funded and pernicious plot that had, as its first priority, the assassination of the Saudi Ambassador to the United States, without care or concern for the mass casualties that would result from their planned attack...”⁴²

The press release put out by the Department of Justice following the sentencing of Arbabsiar included pointed wording as well, but no more than should be expected. Naturally the May 2013 press release by the DOJ included a lot of back-patting for the agencies involved, but mostly resulted in a summary of the results of the case. The quote that sticks out the most about a reaction to the sentencing is from US Attorney Bharara, who said, “Manssor Arbabsiar was an enemy among us – the key conduit for, and facilitator of, a nefarious international plot concocted by members of the Iranian military...” Although nothing explicitly

³⁹ Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador”

⁴⁰ BBC News, “Friends’ shock at ‘Iran plot’ suspect Manssor Arbabsiar.”

⁴¹ Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

⁴² Department of Justice, “Manssor Arbabsiar Sentenced.”

alarming was stated, calling Arbabsiar an “enemy among us” may be too severe. It appears that he was controlled by his cousin Shahlai, on whom the DOJ wanted to gather more information than Arbabsiar was willing to pursue while under interrogation, claiming he feared for his family’s safety. Federal authorities did claim, however, that Arbabsiar’s pre-coded conversations with his Iranian contacts provided some valuable intelligence.⁴³ Ironically enough, these phone calls revealed the code name that the Iranians and Arbabsiar called the plot: Chevrolet. During the calls Shakuri told Arbabsiar to buy the Chevrolet, their code word for the assassination.⁴⁴

10. Coverage by the media

When news of Arbabsiar’s arrest broke, the media was inundated with updates on the story. The first flood of news came simply from the information released by the US authorities from both the Department of the Treasury and the Department of Justice. Shortly after knowledge of the plot went public Texan media immediately got to work on Arbabsiar’s biographical information. Within days the media had largely accurate reporting on some important specifics of the case, including a telling profile with interviews from former associates and friends.⁴⁵ The national media heavily focused on the Iranian involvement after Arbabsiar’s interrogation and those who knew him portrayed him as incompetent and essentially a puppet. Liberal media website Media Matters collected assorted statements from mostly conservative commentators and contributors who advocated for action against Iran—and they had quite a few to collect.⁴⁶ There was much debate in the media over whether Arbabsiar’s actions constituted an act of war by Iran, and this filled much of the national media’s air time over the case. In time discussions moved to be more focused on the Iran-Saudi Arabia-United States relationships and the tensions amongst Saudi Arabia and the United States vs. Iran. The media responded appropriately to a very important plot with far reaching political impacts beyond the threat to loss of life. Media content at the end of the trial seemed to identify slightly more with Arbabsiar. A good example of this is a piece by Benjamin Weiser for the *New York Times*, which seems to identify Arbabsiar’s lack of competency displayed throughout his entire life.⁴⁷

11. Policing costs

The cost of policing is impossible to determine; the DEA informant remains a confidential source and so many different agencies were involved. It would appear that hundreds of thousands of hours were put in by at least dozens of agents from the Department of Justice/DEA Houston office, the DEA informant himself, the FBI, and Mexican authorities. The cost of such an elaborate investigation and operation would certainly find itself somewhere in the

⁴³ Didziulis, “Behind Manssor Arbabsiar’s Plot to Kill the Saudi U.S. Ambassador”

⁴⁴ Fox News Insider, “Manssor Arbabsiar Used ‘Chevrolet’ as Code for ‘Assassination,’” foxnewsinsider.com, October 12, 2011.

⁴⁵ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

⁴⁶ Leslie Rosenberg, “Right-Wing Media React To Alleged Assassination Plot: ‘Bomb Iran Now,’” mediamatters.org, October 14, 2011.

⁴⁷ Weiser, “Man Sentenced in Plot to Kill Saudi Ambassador.”

tens of millions of dollars in manpower and more. The original interrogation lasted approximately two weeks, while trial and sentencing lasted less than two years—from arrest on September 28, 2011 to his sentencing on May 30, 2013. The case moved rather smoothly for an international terrorism case, as Arbabsiar was mostly cooperative.

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet did not play a significant factor in this case. Arbabsiar and Shakuri conducted their meetings either face to face in Iran or via telephone. The only semblance of relevance the internet played was the tracking of funds to the DEA informant that Arbabsiar facilitated. Through this action the US Treasury was able to designate Arbabsiar, Shakuri, Shahlai, Hamed Abdollahi, and Qasem Soleimani as persons with whom Americans are prohibited from engaging in transactions with (Shahlai reports to Abdollahi and Soleimani).⁴⁸ Outside of US Treasury action, no vital communication or planning was aided by use of the internet.

13. Are we safer?

The American public is undeniably safer following the arrest and prosecution of Arbabsiar. The intelligence gleaned from his interaction with his Iranian handlers was extremely useful—it led to the US Department of Treasury being able to take meaningful financial action against five Iranian military members identified by the case (freezing assets and prohibiting US persons from transacting with those identified).⁴⁹ Further, the investigation allowed for intelligence to be gathered on the way the very secretive Quds Force operates. If Arbabsiar had somehow managed to strike a deal with an actual member of Los Zetas, we could be looking at a very different situation. The organization is extremely brutal and effective at killing. Had Arbabsiar himself contacted an actual member of the Los Zetas cartel, rather than a DEA informant, it is of my opinion that he would be more likely to be executed than strike a deal for the ambassador's assassination. A more politically connected or criminally respected middleman, however, could pose a threat to US security. The case is a microcosm for a threat of potentially great magnitude facing the US: the threat of cooperation between the powerful drug cartels of South America and terror groups from the Middle East. It has been exceptionally hard for an enemy to “bring the fight” to the American homeland, as the United States is so conveniently situated geographically. Hopefully this case will result in more cooperation between the Department of Homeland Security, DEA, FBI, and CIA, as they face new materializations of terror in our increasingly globalized world.

Arbabsiar, on the other hand, posed no real threat outside of his status as a middleman. If not recruited by Shahlai, he would have likely been content to live out his life bouncing from business to business and from woman to woman. He is no radical ideologue, yet somehow managed to convince himself that his actions were far different from the egregious acts of 9/11, which he unequivocally

⁴⁸ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals.”

⁴⁹ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals.”

expressed distaste for. Arbabsiar personally is of far more interest as an example of cognitive dissonance than as a terror threat. When examining this case, one is left wondering how someone who is in no way a radical terrorist could willingly contribute to such a sinister plot; one that had the potential to leave hundreds wounded or dead.

14. Conclusions

While much reporting on terrorist activities focuses on the impact on the secondary targets—those directly impacted—instead of the primary target—those who the attackers wish to influence—this case illustrates the far reaching implications of the actions of a few players. The impact of this case is stunning, as it is one of the first concrete examples of a dangerous foreign military unit using the strength of non-governmental paramilitary cartels of northern Mexico as a base to launch attacks in the US. While this case illustrates the guns-for-hire type of relationship that may form between terror cells and drug cartels, other types of cooperation must be examined as well. Ecuadorian and Columbian authorities occasionally find what are known as “narco subs,” and some are worried that these subs could be used in the future to ferry either small or large groups of terrorists into the United States undetected.⁵⁰

As for Arbabsiar, it becomes increasingly more difficult to regard him as a serious threat as more information becomes available. Described as unable to even do so much as match his socks, it appears clear that he was a pawn in the game of chess that Shahlai was playing.⁵¹ Shahlai was able to recruit a “nobody” in the world of politics to attempt a plot that was likely to fail. By using a middleman who appears to be such a foolish choice, the Iranians who were involved were able to maintain—in CIA terms—plausible deniability, which the government did its best to claim in its letter to the UN. This would have been the expected response by the Iranians no matter if this went up the entire chain of command or if it was a rogue agent. Arbabsiar, who outside of this event was largely normal, will now spend 25 years behind bars for his actions, while Shahlai is likely to receive a promotion. In addition, I am highly amazed at Arbabsiar’s ability to exhibit distaste for militant Islam, yet so willingly contribute to a potentially large scale terror attack, despite his lack of political or religious motivation. Tony Randall once said, “Sooner or later, we sell out for money.” Arbabsiar may well be the textbook definition of that, as he sold out his personal enmity towards terror for a hefty sum of cash.

While very apparent that at least some members of the Quds Force were involved in this plot, I also believe that some higher forces in the Iranian military were at play. During one of the recorded phone calls while Arbabsiar was being interrogated Shakuri responded to an Arbabsiar request for more money by saying he would “...discuss it to see what they say.”⁵² In my opinion, a publically known official like Shahlai would either have enough autonomy to initiate this plan with

⁵⁰ John Reed, “New Generation of Narco Subs Could Carry Terrorists,” *defensetech.org*, February 8, 2011.

⁵¹ Worth and Tillman, “Unlikely Turn for a Suspect in a Terror Plot.”

⁵² Sealed Amended Complaint, *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar*.

the implied consent of the Iranian government, or he would have the explicit permission—either way I think it is fair to assume that some Iranians even higher than Shahali were involved.

Those who initiated this plan were able to achieve some minor achievements without facing significant risk to their persons or Iran's respectability around the world (or lack thereof). The Iranians essentially made a very low risk, high reward gamble. Ideally they would have liked for the assassination of the ambassador to be successful, but the failed plot achieved two main results for the Iranians. First, they were able to cause the United States and Saudi Arabia to devote precious time and money to something they themselves had very little invested in. Second, they were able to take a shot at their biggest geopolitical rival, Saudi Arabia, without committing an overt act of war. Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir will be forced to be extremely cautious throughout his extensive traveling. The plot, although seemingly failed, could certainly be viewed as a success from the Iranian point of view.

Appendix: Iranian Response to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

*H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon Secretary General United Nations, New York
In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful No. 1110 11 October 2011*

Excellency,

I am writing to you to express our outrage regarding the allegations leveled by the United States officials against the Islamic Republic of Iran on the involvement of my country in an assassination plot targeting a foreign diplomat in Washington.

The Islamic Republic of Iran strongly and categorically rejects these fabricated and baseless allegations, based on the suspicious claims by an individual. Any country could accuse other countries through fabrication of such stories. However, this would set dangerous precedents in the relations among States.

Iran has always condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. Iran has been a victim of terrorism, a clear recent example of which is the assassination of a number of Iranian nuclear scientists in the past two years carried out by the Zionist regime and supported by the United States.

The Iranian nation seeks a world free from terrorism and considers the current US warmongering and propaganda machine against Iran as a threat not just against itself but to the peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. The Islamic Republic of Iran warns against the implications of this horrible scenario and submits that the continuation of such divide-and-rule policies could have detrimental effects on peace and security.

The US allegation is, obviously, a politically-motivated move and a showcase of its long-standing animosity towards the Iranian nation. The Islamic Republic of Iran categorically and in the strongest terms condemns this shameful allegation by the United States authorities and deplors it as a well-thought evil plot in line with

their anti-Iranian policy to divert attention from the current economic and social problems at home and the popular revolutions and protests against United States long supported dictatorial regimes abroad.

The Islamic Republic of Iran underlines its determination to maintain its friendly relations with all regional countries, particularly with its Muslim neighbors, and invites all to be vigilant against the vicious campaigns targeting stability and peace and friendly relations among States in our region.

As the Secretary-General of the United Nations you have an important responsibility in enlightening the international public opinion about the dangerous consequences of warmongering policies of the United States Government on international peace and security.

I am sending identical letters to the President of the Security Council and the President of the General Assembly. It would be appreciated if this letter could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly under the agenda item 83 and of the Security Council.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurance of my highest consideration.

Mohammad Khazaei Ambassador Permanent Representative