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Iranian plot stirs US hawks

By Jim Lobe
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WASHINGTON - In a move certain to escalate tensions on a number of fronts, the United States Justice Department on Tuesday charged a dual Iranian-American national and an alleged member of the Islamic Republic's special operations unit of conspiring to assassinate the Saudi ambassador here.

A 21-page indictment filed in New York federal court said the two named defendants, US-based Manssor Arbabsiar and Iran-based Gholam Shakuri, sought to hire someone who they believed was a member of a Mexican drug cartel but who was actually an informant for the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to carry out the plot in exchange for US\$1.5 million.

Arbabsiar, who allegedly arranged a down payment of \$100,000 to the informant, was arrested on September 29 at JFK Airport in New York on a return flight from Mexico where he had been denied entry.

Once in custody, he cooperated with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in making calls to his cousin and alleged co-conspirator Shakuri in Iran to confirm and record details of the plot, which featured the bombing of a restaurant frequented by Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir, according to the indictment.

Shakuri, it alleged, is a member of Iran's Qods Force, a specialized unit of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which US officials have accused of providing training,

weapons and even direction to indigenous militias that have carried out attacks against US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The criminal complaint unsealed today exposes a deadly plot directed by factions of the Iranian government to assassinate a foreign ambassador on US soil with explosives," said Attorney General Eric Holder, who announced the indictment.

The spokesman at the Iranian mission at the United Nations in New York, Alireza Miryousefi, said his government "categorically reject[s] these baseless allegations".

While Iran specialists said they were dumbfounded by the plot and what the regime could hope to gain from such an action, senior officials in the administration of President Barack Obama told reporters they planned to impose new sanctions on the regime and intensify efforts to isolate and punish it diplomatically.

"This really, in the minds of many diplomats and government officials, crosses a line that Iran needs to be held to account for," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the Associated Press (AP).

She added that the plot "creates a potential for international reaction that will further isolate Iran, that will raise questions about what they're up to, not only in the United States and Mexico".

"The idea that they would attempt to go to a Mexican drug cartel to solicit murder-for-hire to kill the Saudi ambassador, nobody could make that up, right?" she was quoted as telling AP.

The indictment comes as anti-Iran hawks, who have been frustrated that the so-called Arab Spring has pushed Tehran out of the media spotlight, are both pressing the US Congress to impose a new round of economic sanctions against Iran - including banning all transactions with Iran's Central Bank - and persuading Republican presidential hopefuls to attack Obama for not pursuing a more confrontational policy.

Tuesday's indictment will no doubt work in their favor. Indeed, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Republican chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who is also the principal author of pending sanctions legislation, seized on the indictment to promote her cause.

"The multi-faceted threat posed by Iran becomes more severe with each passing day," she said in a statement that cited Iran's alleged "campaign to partner with extremist groups, drug traffickers and other outlaws based in the Western hemisphere".

"Tehran is actively working to attack our homeland and our allies and interests all around the world, and we simply can't spare any more time. Responsible nations must unite against this threat and immediately bring to bear crippling pressure on the Iranian regime and its enablers," she said.

Elliott Abrams, a prominent neo-conservative who served as former president George W Bush's top Middle East aide, also jumped on the announcement.

"The recklessness - is the only appropriate word - of this planned act of terrorism in our nation's capital should teach us that the regime in Tehran cannot be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons," he wrote on his blog at the Council on Foreign Relations website. "If they will act this way now, how will they act if they ever get nuclear arms?"

United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI), a hawkish group whose founders included two key members of the Obama foreign policy team, called openly on Tuesday for the president to "make it clear that Iran will face consequences for its actions, including military retaliation for attacks on Americans".

Others voiced caution. "If the alleged Iranian action was aimed at provoking the US, the Obama administration should be careful not to walk into such a trap," noted Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council.

"A war with Iran would be devastating to US interests and to the people of Iran," he added.

Parsi also noted that the alleged plot was taking place amid growing regional tensions over the fate of the so-called Arab Spring as "Iran, the US and Saudi Arabia are jockeying for influence throughout the region in Egypt, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and elsewhere. If today's allegations are true, this means that regional rivalries may have spilled over onto US shores," he said.

Among other recent events, he cited the revelation by WikiLeaks cables suggesting that King Abdullah and al-Jubeir were pushing the US to attack Iran; Saudi accusations that Tehran was seeking to overthrow Bahrain's Sunni royal family and inciting the Shi'ite population in Riyadh's Eastern province; and the assassination of nuclear scientists in Iran which Tehran has blamed on the US and Israel.

Regional specialists here expressed bafflement over both the plot and the specific target.

"Let's suppose they succeeded in knocking off al-Jubeir who, to my mind, doesn't have any enemies," said Thomas Lippman, a Gulf expert at the Middle East Institute (MEI). "What would they accomplish besides infuriating the United States and Saudi Arabia? It's been years since the Iranians were in the business of going around and blowing people up."

Alex Vatanka, an Iran expert also based at MEI, agreed that such a plot was neither "consistent of the typical actions of the regime", nor did it appear that "the regime has anything strategic to gain from wanting to do this".

At the same time, he told Inter Press Service, "We've seen a number of cases over the years where they seem to act irrationally and incompetently," as in the case of its aborted efforts to ship weapons through Nigeria last year.

"It may be that someone in Iran is trying to undermine any potential for rapprochement between the US and Iran," he said, noting recent clashes between President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and

officials close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei over the former's more forthcoming stance on relations with the US.

"The question is, would they go so far as to try to pull something like this off? It doesn't seem consistent with a regime that is generally very cautious and has tended to not want to invite serious US reaction to its actions."

According to the indictment, Arbabsiar first made contact with the informant, who pretended to be an associate of the Zetas drug cartel, in Mexico in late May in regard to a possible attack using explosives on the Saudi Embassy in Washington. In June and July, he held additional meetings with the informant during which they discussed murdering the ambassador at a restaurant and claimed that his cousin was a "big general" in the Iranian military.

At a July 17 meeting in Mexico, the informant asked about possible collateral deaths resulting from such a bombing, to which Arbabsiar allegedly said: "They want that guy [al-Jubeir] done, if one hundred go with him, f**k 'em."

After allegedly obtaining Shakuri's approval, Arbabsiar transferred about \$100,000 to an FBI-controlled bank account in August as a down payment on the assassination.

On September 20, the informant allegedly asked Arbabsiar to either pay one half of the total \$1.5 million price or that he personally travel to Mexico as collateral for final payment. Arbabsiar chose the latter option, flying to Mexico on or about September 28 where he was refused entry and returned. He was then arrested at JFK.

The Justice Department said he confessed several hours later, telling agents that he had been "recruited, funded and directed by men he understood to be senior officials in Iran's Qods Force". He also admitted to meeting several times in Iran with Shakuri and another senior Qods Force official who allegedly approved the assassination plan.

While in custody, Arbabsiar made monitored phone calls to Shakuri, who allegedly told him on October 5 to "just do it quickly, it's late".