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Obama: ‘All Options on the Table’ Over Alleged Iran Plot

By John Glaser

October 13, 2011

Whether or not Iran’s leadership knew about the alleged plot to assassinate a Saudi ambassador in Washington, they should be held accountable in any event, [President Obama insisted on Thursday](#).

Skeptical backlash from Iran experts on the US government’s official narrative of the plot has led Obama to justify punishing Iran, even if the doubters are right and the Iranian government had no knowledge of it. “Even if at the highest levels there was not detailed operational knowledge, there has to be accountability with respect to anybody in the Iranian government engaging in this kind of activity,” he said.

Obama said that, in terms of a response to the alleged plot, “[we don’t take any options off the table](#),” which is a government euphemism for considerations of military attack.

The Obama administration has [vowed to “unite the world” against Iran](#) in the wake of the implausible assassination plot, sending a secret cable to all American embassies and consulates around the world ordering them to alert their host governments of the Iranian plot.

Vice President Joe Biden insisted it was “critically important” to convince the rest of the world of the importance of “dealing with the Iranians,” while [several members of Congress](#) and [many in the media](#) called the plot “an act of war,” which demands a response.

The goal is “making sure that they pay a price,” Obama said.

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Meanwhile, evidence of the Iranian leadership's complicity [is lacking and many officials have admitted there are gaps](#) in their understanding of the plot. There is no solid information about "exactly how high it goes," as one official put it.

At best, all signs point to a rogue element in the Iranian Quds Force, given the information the government has so far made available. US officials admit it was very out of character for the Quds Force, known for their caution and finesse. "The Iranian modus operandi is only to trust sensitive plots to their own employees, or to trusted proxies," [wrote Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service on Gulf2000 on Wednesday](#).

The accused perpetrator, Manssor Arbabsiar, and a Mexican drug gang don't fit that protocol. "Are we to believe that this Texas car seller was a Quds sleeper agent for many years resident in the US? Ridiculous," said Mr. Katzman. "They never ever use such has-beens or loosely connected people for sensitive plots such as this."

Former CIA agent Robert Baer said the culpability of the Iranian leadership is not believable. "I don't think it's credible, not the central government, there may be a rogue element behind it," [Baer said in an interview](#). "They wouldn't be sending money through an American bank, they wouldn't be going to the cartels in Mexico to do this. It's just not the way they work."

Additionally, the plot was developed for the most part by the FBI and the undercover DEA agent, not by Arbabsiar or his Iranian contacts. Arbabsiar had originally planned to kidnap the Saudi ambassador, and [only after meeting with the undercover agent did kidnapping turn into assassinating](#), and it was the undercover agent [who first suggested using explosives](#), the two key factors that have raised the plot to the level of a terrorist attack.

Still, the Obama administration – facing no perceivable threat from Iran and no evidence of Iranian involvement – is choosing the most aggressive posture at their disposal, imposing [additional economic sanctions](#) and issuing vague warnings of impending retribution.

Candidate Obama criticized the Bush administration for engaging in a "war of choice" in Iraq, but war as a first resort instead of a last resort seems to have since gained his favor – at least rhetorically at this point. He and his administration have insisted that [all options are on the table](#).

This kind of diplomatic and rhetorical escalation of tensions in response to a fanciful threat from a much weaker power follows closely the narrative in the lead up to the Iraq war in 2003. The administration has insisted, contradicting expert opinion, that there is "no dispute" that Iran was involved, echoing Colin Powell's [bold proclamations of certainty](#) about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction at the United Nations. "These are not assertions," he insisted, "these are facts."