

Tehran's Unlikely Assassins

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Articles & Testimony

In addition to elite Iranian and Hizballah operatives, Tehran has a long history of employing unlikely surrogates to target dissidents abroad, including in the United States.

Over the past few months, Iran has demonstrated a renewed willingness to carry out attacks targeting its enemies. From India and Azerbaijan to Cyprus and Thailand, recent Iran directed plots have targeted diplomats and civilians, Israelis, Americans, Saudis, and more. To execute these attacks, Iran has sometimes dispatched its own agents, such as members of its elite IRGC Quds Force. Other times Iran has relied on trusted proxies like Hezbollah. In a number of cases Quds Force and Hezbollah operatives have worked together to execute attacks abroad.

Now, evidence has emerged indicating Tehran is employing another type of agent -- the unlikely surrogate assassin -- to target Iranian dissidents abroad, including here in the United States. Last October, dual U.S.-Iranian citizen Manssor Arbabsiar and Gholam Shakuri, a commander in Iran's Quds Force, the special-operations unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), were charged in New York for their roles in an alleged plot to murder the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir. According to the Department of Justice, Arbabsiar told a Drug Enforcement Administration confidential source posing as an associate of an international drug cartel that "his associates in Iran had discussed a number of violent missions" for the source and his associates to perform, including the murder of the ambassador. When the DEA source noted that others could be killed in the attack, including U.S. senators known to frequent the restaurant where they planned to target the ambassador, Arbabsiar allegedly dismissed these concerns as "no big deal." Later, after Arbabsiar was arrested and confessed to his role in the plots, he reportedly called Shakuri at the direction of law enforcement. Shakuri again confirmed that the plot should go forward and as soon as possible. "Just do it quickly. It's late," he said.

For many pundits, the plot was deemed too outlandish and unprofessional to be taken seriously. Surely Iran's vaunted Quds Force was too clever to tap a failed used car salesman to carry out an operation as sensitive as this? In

fact, Iran has relied on fairly unskilled and simple operatives to carry out attacks in the past. For example, Iran and Hezbollah relied on Fouad Ali Saleh to run a cell of twenty operatives responsible for a series of bombings in Paris in 1985 and 1986. Saleh, a Tunisian-born Frenchman (a convert from Sunni to Shia Islam) who sold fruits, vegetables, and clothing in the Paris subway, was as unskilled and unlikely an operative as Arbabsiar, the Iranian-American car salesman arrested in the al-Jubeir assassination plot.

In fact, this is no new tactic, but a tried and true operational model Iran has used to target political opponents in the United States as early as 1980. Recently, ProPublica's Sebastian Rotella offered the most detailed account to date of the July 2009 arrest of Iranian-American house painter Mohammad Reza Sadeghnia. Arrested in California, Sadeghnia, a Michigan resident, had conducted surveillance of an Iranian dissident who hosted a Farsi language radio program. He hired an Iranian immigrant with a criminal record as an accomplice, and the two planned their assassination. But his accomplice got cold feet and alerted police to the plot. Sadeghnia suspected his accomplice wanted out, and threatened to have his family in Iran killed. "I have done other missions around the world," he warned.

Indeed, Sadeghnia had reportedly conducted surveillance of another Iranian dissident in London, Ali Reza Nourizadeh. He befriended Nourizadeh, a Voice of America radio personality, who soon grew suspicious and broke off contact. British authorities later warned Nourizadeh that Sadeghnia had been "working for the Iranian intelligence services."

While the Arbabsiar and Sadeghnia plots seem outlandish, unprofessional, and out of character with Iran's known intelligence capabilities, Tehran actually has a long history of employing unlikely surrogates to carry out assassinations abroad.

Within months of the revolution that led to the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran had recruited a stable of violent extremist supporters it could call upon around the world to carry out acts of terrorism. In the United States, one group of concern was the Islamic Guerillas of America. In an interview for a documentary film, former State Department special agent Lou Mizell recalls that it "was sponsored by the Iranian intelligence service, operated out of Washington, D.C., and primarily recruited black African American Muslim converts to do their bidding for them."

In 1980, Dawud Salahuddin (aka David Belfield), an American convert to Islam and a reported Islamic Guerillas of America operative, was recruited by the Islamic Republic of Iran to assassinate Ali Akbar Tabatabai, a former press attache at the Iranian embassy in Washington. Tabatabai had become a vocal critic of Ayatollah Khomeini and founded the Iran Freedom Foundation, an organization opposed to the Islamic revolutionary regime.

A year earlier, the Iranian embassy's charge d'affaires Ali Agha had offered Salahuddin a post as a security guard. Salahuddin was moved to a head security post at the Iranian Interest Section at the Algerian embassy after the United States and Iran severed diplomatic relations in April 1980. While there, according to Salahuddin, he was contracted and paid \$5,000 to kill for the Iranian government. Dressed as a U.S. Postal Service mail carrier, Salahuddin carried a parcel concealing a handgun to Tabatabai's front door on July 22, 1980. Salahuddin shot Tabatabai three times when the latter answered the door to his Bethesda, Maryland, home.

Following the killing, Salahuddin fled to Canada and purchased a ticket to Paris. Eventually, he arrived at the Iranian embassy in Geneva and received a visa to Iran, where he was accorded a private meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini. Charged with murder in the United States, Salahuddin was employed in Iran by the Iranian intelligence service, according to Mizell, the former State Department agent. He remains a fugitive of American justice to this day.

Another episode occurred three years later. In December 1983, U.S. authorities foiled an attempt by pro-Khomeini students to firebomb a Seattle, Washington, theater where a large number of pro-Shah theatergoers were attending a performance by an Iranian singing group. The FBI and local law enforcement agents learned, by interviewing pro-

Khomeini students, that the group planned to bar the doors of the theater and set the building on fire. Testifying before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1988, Oliver ("Buck") Revell, then the FBI's executive assistant director of investigation, reported that the students "had in hand not only the plans, but also the explosives and the gasoline to carry out these fire bombings."

By 1985, the CIA would warn that "radicals in the Khomeini regime are committed to spreading their Islamic ideology, and many clerics view terrorism as a legitimate, effective tool of state policy, particularly against the U.S. position in the Middle East." But Iran could also turn to individual radicals worldwide to carry out acts of terrorism abroad, "including some in the U.S." The CIA noted that "Iran provides its surrogates with money, equipment, training, and intelligence," making them more capable than they would otherwise be operating on their own.

Such was the case with Mansour Ahani, described by Singaporean authorities as "an Iranian terrorist," who first arrived in Singapore on a seaman's passport in 1989 with the express purpose, according to Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD), of establishing a new identity as cover for his mission to assassinate a known Iranian dissident in Italy. At the time, Iranians did not require a visa to travel to Singapore, making it an ideal place to stop and establish a cover story en route to Ahani's intended mission in Europe. In March 1991, after some time in Singapore, Mansour married a local woman six years his senior and applied for a "long-term social visit pass" on the basis of this relationship. This application was rejected, for reasons unknown, so after only five months of marriage Mansour left Singapore and abandoned his bride. Having failed to secure Singaporean travel documents and cover for future travel to Europe, he restarted his efforts. A few months later, he appeared in Canada, where the ISD reported that he "targeted" another Singaporean woman, a student in Toronto, and married her.

Soon after Ahani's arrival in Canada, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service suspected that he was a highly trained assassin sent by the Iranian government to plan an attack on author Salman Rushdie. After fathering a son with his new wife, he left Canada for Switzerland on a forged passport in 1992. Ahani met his handler in a wooded area of Zurich before the pair traveled to Italy on separate trains. Ahani's mission was ultimately thwarted by Italian police. Before police could apprehend him, though, he fled to Turkey on yet another forged passport. In Istanbul, he made his way to the Iranian consulate, where he provided reconnaissance photographs of specific buildings requested by his MOIS handler, Akbar Khoshkooshk. Lying low, he stayed in Turkey a month before returning to Canada to the cover life he had built for himself there.

In June 1994, Canadian authorities arrested Ahani and deemed him an "inadmissible person" under Canadian immigration laws. He was deported to Iran in June 2002 after Canadian courts determined he was a member of MOIS and after a lengthy appeals process. His wife and son returned home to Singapore.

Last month, when the State Department published its annual terrorist report for 2011, Daniel Benjamin, the department's counterterrorism coordinator, noted that Washington is "increasingly concerned about Iran's support for terrorism and Hezbollah's activities as they've both stepped up their level of terrorist plotting over the past year." Pointing in particular to the plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador as he ate lunch at a popular Washington restaurant, Benjamin concluded that Iran and Hezbollah "are engaging in their most active and aggressive campaigns since the 1990s."

That campaign includes not only highly trained Quds Force or Hezbollah operatives, but -- in a return to history -- a motley crew of unlikely assassins as well.

Matthew Levitt is director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God (Georgetown University Press). ❖

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