

# The Domestic Logic of Iran's Foreign Plots

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## The plot against al-Jubeir was intended to delegitimize Ahmadinejad's foreign policy agenda.

**T**hough Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir is alive and well in Washington, the plot to assassinate him may have succeeded -- if its aim was not to kill al-Jubeir, but rather Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's foreign policy.

The history of the Islamic Republic is filled with cases of factions exploiting foreign policy to gain power against their domestic rivals. It is common for competing groups to sacrifice national interests -- such as Iran's international credibility -- to achieve their own goals.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Ronald Reagan's national security adviser, Robert McFarlane, paid a clandestine visit to Iran with the approval of the country's highest authorities, to pursue a deal that would have been to Iran's advantage. But anti-American elements in the government leaked the news to an Arab newspaper, killing the deal and landing both the Reagan administration and the Iranian government in huge trouble.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, the former prime minister who now leads the opposition, spelled out the problem more than 20 years ago. On September 5, 1988, he resigned in protest against then-president Ali Khamenei's interference in his duties. In his resignation letter, Mousavi complained that the "government's authority on foreign policy was taken away." He charged that "[military and intelligence] operations outside the country are taking place without the government's knowledge or orders....Only after an airplane is hijacked are we made aware of it. Only after a machine gun opens fire in one of Lebanon's streets and its noise echoes everywhere do we find out. Only after [Saudi police] find explosive material in Iranian pilgrims' baggage am I informed."

Iranian intelligence has assassinated more than 400 Iranian dissidents outside of Iran, including the last prime minister under the Shah, Shapour Bakhtiar, and four Kurds in Berlin's Mikonos restaurant in 1992 (a German judge later officially named Iran's Supreme Leader as one of the senior officials involved in the terrorist attack). Similarly,

the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard has carried out hundreds of operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

By contrast, the plot targeting al-Jubeir seems to have been highly unprofessional, almost unconcerned with success. So unlikely are the details that only a power struggle within Iran could justify it. If so, the plot's target likely was not al-Jubeir himself, but rather those elements in the regime that seek a diplomatic opening to the U.S. -- namely, Ahmadinejad and his circle.

When news about the assassination plot first appeared, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, was on his way to the western province of Kermanshah. In his first speech after the story broke, he made no reference to it, most likely expecting the president to make a statement. After two days of Ahmadinejad's meaningful silence, Khamenei felt forced to reject the U.S. allegations publicly. Only after five days did Ahmadinejad issue a statement denying the accusations -- and not as strongly as did Khamenei.

It is ironic to see Iran's radical Islamist president portray himself as open to resuming U.S.-Iran relations and suffer for it at the hands of a supposedly pragmatic Supreme Leader. But Ahmadinejad is no exception to the historical rule in Iran: Every faction that loses out to its domestic rivals looks beyond the country for an alliance with outside powers.

In the Islamic Republic, those interested in opening up to the West are typically those with little authority. Ahmadinejad and his faction face a two-edged problem: Khamenei has boxed them in politically, while rampant economic corruption and failed efforts at reform have disillusioned many of the president's supporters.

As a result, Ahmadinejad, in a further ironic twist, is seeking to glorify Iran's pre-Islamic history in order to stir nationalist sentiment in his favor and accomplish what he is sure that Khamenei does not want: Greater openness to the West, particularly to the U.S. He has repeatedly expressed his willingness to meet with U.S. President Barack Obama -- even sending him a congratulatory letter on his inauguration -- and has traveled to New York to be interviewed by the American media much more often than his predecessors.

Ahmadinejad is well aware that if he succeeds in portraying himself as someone who -- in opposition to the Supreme Leader's will -- wants to solve major issues between Iran and the U.S., that could partly compensate for his economic failures and gain him some new supporters. For that plan to work, Ahmadinejad needs to survive through the next parliamentary election in March 2012 and the presidential election in June 2013, despite Khamenei's determination to marginalize him.

Regardless of whether Khamenei was aware of the plot against al-Jubeir, its purpose was to delegitimize Ahmadinejad's foreign-policy agenda. So, if Khamenei really was unaware of the plot, it means that some elements in the government or the Revolutionary Guards are acting on their own, which is deeply troubling in its own right. If there are elements powerful enough to plan such a plot -- even an unsuccessful one -- they could do it again in the future.

That raises an even more troubling question: If such "independent" decision-makers exist, are they able to affect Iran's nuclear policy, too?

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