

Iran plot story a shot in the arm for hawks

By **Justin Logan**, Special to CNN
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Editor's note: Justin Logan is director of foreign policy studies at the [Cato Institute](#).

Washington (CNN) -- The U.S. Department of Justice has announced charges accusing Manssor Arbabsiar, a Quds Force-linked Iranian-American, and an Iranian co-conspirator of trying to hire who they thought was a member of a Mexican drug gang to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States.

If anyone comes to you with firm conclusions drawn from this, stop listening. It's far too early to do that. America was rushed into a war in Iraq eight years ago without scrutinizing our evidence and theories enough, and we're still paying the price. We ought to take a step back and think about what's been alleged here before doing anything rash.

First: Assuming everything alleged is precisely true, what was assassinating Adel al-Jubeir at a Washington restaurant supposed to accomplish? It's no secret that the Saudis and Iranians have been struggling with each other for influence across the Middle East for years. But whether you think the Iranians are making decisions on the basis of realpolitik or trying to get the 12th Imam to reemerge, how was whacking the Saudi ambassador supposed to help?

Second: This plot is not exactly drawn from the Quds Force's main playbook. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and the Quds Force particularly, are evil but effective. By contrast, this plot seemed destined for disaster. Assuming they wanted to kill the Saudi ambassador, why do it in Washington? Wiring money through a New York bank account to pay for the hit was almost certain to set off alarms. If the allegations are true, we need to reevaluate our view both of the Quds Force's competence and caution.

Further, the accused seem to have believed that the Zetas would blow up al-Jubeir (and potentially a hundred people nearby, explicitly including possible U.S. senators) having only been fronted \$100,000 of the \$1.5 million payoff, and holding Arbabsiar as collateral.

There's little evidence that the Zetas are stupid enough to cause themselves the trouble that blowing up a Washington restaurant containing the Saudi Ambassador and a hundred others would inevitably cause -- especially for a potential payday of only \$100,000 and a dead

Iranian operative. Why did Arbabsiar or the IRGC think that the Zetas would be willing to do this deal?

Some final questions for my fellow doves, again assuming that the American government has gotten everything exactly right:

Should it make us more or less comfortable if this proved to be a "rogue" IRGC operation? If mid-level entrepreneurs within the IRGC feel comfortable farming out an attack on U.S. soil to what they think is a Mexican drug gang, what does that say? For their part, the Iranian government is vociferously denying the charges, suggesting that even if the plot was the product of a rogue faction within the IRGC, Iran's central government is protecting them. And if it was directed by the upper echelons of the Iranian government, what does the plot say about Iran's decision-making process?

Given what we know, this plot looks like a disaster waiting to happen from Iran's point of view. So, of course, would an attack on U.S. soil, even one backed up by a possible Iranian nuclear deterrent. But if the Iranians went forth with this destined-for-disaster plot, what would stop them from going forward with another?

I am at pains to reiterate that all of these questions are predicated on the idea that the American government got everything right, which given recent history, is a debatable assumption at best.

One thing is for sure. This announcement is an extraordinary shot in the arm to Washington's Middle East hawks, who have seized on the alleged plot to press for further action against Iran. With the American people exhausted by the hawks' projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, and focused on the wrecked American economy, there had been little public attention to Iran in recent years.

With the vivid imagery of a blood-spattered Washington restaurant and a chortling Persian operative in the public's mind, that is likely to change. For that reason, particularly, the press and national security analysts need to do an excellent job fleshing out just what we know and how we know it before jumping to conclusions about what we ought to do in response.