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Iran Assassination Claim Could Harm Push for Atomic Deal

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The incident involving the Saudi Embassy, which on Tuesday was shown Obama administration allegations that Iran supported a plot to kill Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, could undermine efforts to peacefully resolve a standoff over Tehran's nuclear program, [according to experts](#).

"I wouldn't say that [nuclear dialogue with Iran] is dead forever," said Gala Riani, a Middle East expert with IHS Global Insight in London. "But it is difficult to see it being restarted [anytime soon](#)."

The Justice Department on Tuesday announced charges against two men believed to be involved in the [planned killing](#). Official doubts about Iranian ties to the effort dissipated after the nation's Quds Force was found to have provided \$100,000 to the suspects, high-level U.S. government sources said on Wednesday in remarks reported by *The Wall Street Journal*. However, many conclusions in the U.S. narrative were drawn indirectly or not fully fleshed out, such as whether the plan had been known at the highest levels of Iran's government, according to the newspaper.

Washington on Wednesday called for new punitive steps against the Persian Gulf state, which has denied involvement in the assassination plan. "We are looking for countries to join us in increasing the political and economic pressure on Iran," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said (*Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 13).

The United States and its allies suspect Iran's nuclear program is geared toward developing a weapons capability; Tehran has maintained its atomic ambitions are strictly peaceful. The five permanent U.N. Security Council member nations and Germany convened talks with Iran on two separate occasions in December and January, but neither gathering yielded clear progress toward [resolving the dispute](#).

"It is obvious that it is going to have a very negative impact on all the efforts to return to negotiations or to diplomacy," said Oliver Thraenert, an analyst at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

President Obama wants to avoid signaling "any weakness" on Iran as the 2012 electoral race heats up, he said.

"The assassination plot will almost surely make it impossible for Obama to take any diplomatic initiative on the nuclear front," added former U.S. State Department analyst Mark Fitzpatrick.

"Now, the impulse will be strongly focused on teaching Iran a lesson, not exploring possibilities for compromise," said Fitzpatrick, who is at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The United Kingdom indicated it was conferring with the United States and other governments over potential new economic penalties against Iran. Washington and Riyadh were weighing the option of raising the issue at the U.N. Security Council, which has adopted four sanctions resolutions to date over Iran's disputed atomic activities (Dahl, Reuters).

Some analysts, though, played down the potential for significant additional Security Council measures against Iran, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

"The U.S. would be very happy to see support for new sanctions within the U.N. Security Council, but I don't think there is a lot of optimism within Washington that is likely to manifest itself," said Suzanne Maloney, an Iran specialist with the Brookings Institution.

Cato Institute expert Ted Carpenter [added](#): "At this point, Iran is as isolated as the international community is willing to accept."

The U.S. Defense Department on Wednesday minimized armed force as a potential response to the purported assassination plan, instead stressing the importance of dialogue and judicial action, Agence France-Presse reported.

"The U.S. military has long-standing concerns about Iran's malign influence in the region. But with respect to this case, it is a judicial and diplomatic issue," Capt. John Kirby said.

Addressing the prospect of an armed attack on Iran, the spokesman said: "Only the president gets to rule in or rule out how he wants to use his military."

"This is being handled primarily through the Justice Department. That's appropriate in this case," Kirby said.

Pentagon representative George Little added: "The focus right now is on continuing to apply financial and diplomatic pressure on the Iranians."

"They continue to isolate themselves, while they show no signs of stemming their own bad behavior in the region and beyond," Little said during an information session led by U.S. envoys for Security Council officials.

It was uncertain at which tier of government officials had been complicit in the assassination plan, Little noted. "I can't confirm at this point in terms of how high this may have been at," he said.

Vice President Joe Biden [said Iran would be](#) "held accountable" for the plan and denounced on the matter by other nations.