

Washington Post airs another unlikely Iranian assassination plot

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An odd article appeared in the *Washington Post* on Monday claiming that US officials in Azerbaijan might have been among “the targets of Iran-linked assassination plots.” The article, which relied heavily on anonymous US and Western officials, had all the characteristics of a planted story designed to further blacken the Iranian regime in preparation for a stepped-up US confrontation with Iran.

The timing is no accident, coming in the immediate aftermath of talks in Baghdad last week between Iran and the P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—over the Iranian nuclear program. The negotiations all but broke down. While another round of talks is due in Moscow next month, the prospect of an, even limited, agreement is unlikely.

The US ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro warned yesterday: “We don’t intend on continuing talks for talks’ sake. The window [for negotiations] is closing.” He again repeated the Obama administration’s mantra that “all options are on the table”, including “the military option.” Harsh US and European Union sanctions are due to come into effect on July 1 aimed at greatly reducing Iran’s much-needed oil exports.

In this context, the *Post* story can only be construed as part of an intensifying propaganda campaign against Iran. The article has only been published now even though the events described stretch back to last October, with the most recent in April. If there was a plot to kill US officials, it was neutralised months ago.

The “threat” allegedly came to light after an unnamed foreign spy agency intercepted electronic messages “that appeared to describe plans to move weapons and

explosives from Iran to Azerbaijan.” Some of the messages were traced to an Azerbaijani national Balagardash Dashdev—“a man with an extensive criminal background and, according to a Middle East investigator involved in the case, deep ties to a network of operatives and militant groups based inside Iran.”

Anonymous officials allege that in late October Dashdev coordinated a shipment of explosives, weapons and cash from Iran to “relatives and former criminal associates” inside Azerbaijan. The “Middle Eastern investigator” told the *Post* that “US and Middle Eastern intelligence” uncovered “a jumble of overlapping plans” targeting the Jewish community, diplomats and foreign-owned businesses in the capital Baku. At least 10 Iranian nationals were also “smuggled” into Azerbaijan to carry out the plans.

The alleged plans all came to nothing after Azerbaijani authorities arrested nearly two dozen people in several waves of arrests in late January and early March. Dashdev reportedly told investigators that the planned attacks were in retaliation for the murder of Iranian nuclear scientists and a videotaped confession was broadcast on Azerbaijani television. Iran vigorously denied any involvement and denounced the claims as US and Israeli propaganda.

The plot as described in the *Post* resembles previous allegations of vague and implausible Iranian assassination plots. Last October US authorities claimed to have unearthed a plan by an Iranian-American used-car dealer to hire a Mexican drug cartel to kill the Saudi ambassador to the US by blowing him up in a Washington restaurant. US officials have also pointed to bombings or supposedly planned bombings

by Iranian nationals in India, Thailand and Georgia against Israeli diplomats.

In every case, the alleged plots were poorly planned and amateurish involving figures with no direct connection to the Iranian regime or intelligence agencies and who quickly told authorities what they wanted to hear—in return no doubt for leniency.

The only intelligence agency in the Middle East with a long and well-established record of assassination is Israel's Mossad, which is widely believed to have been behind the murder of four Iranian nuclear scientists over the past three years and the attempted murder of a fifth—the current Atomic Energy Agency chief Fereydoon Abbasi.

The most recent assassination was of Iranian nuclear scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan on January 11, which Tehran blamed on Mossad and specifically claimed that the Israeli plot had used Azerbaijan as a base. The arrests of Dashdev and his conspirators, which took place as tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan rose, were likely carried out to deflect attention from the accusations of Azerbaijani involvement in Roshan's murder.

There is no doubt that Baku is a hotbed of intrigue. Both Israel and the US support the autocratic regime of President Ilham Aliyev. The country is a vital link for the US-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline aimed at exploiting the large energy reserves of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Israel is dependent on Azerbaijan for 30 percent of its energy needs.

Azerbaijan is also conveniently based on Iran's northern border, and has undoubtedly been used for intelligence operations inside Iran. In a February interview with the British-based *Times* newspaper, a Mossad agent named only as "Shimon" declared: "This [Azerbaijan] is ground zero for intelligence work. Our presence here is quiet, but substantial. We have increased our presence in the past year, and it gets us very close to Iran. This is a wonderfully porous country."

More ominously, a lengthy article in the US-based

Foreign Policy magazine reported that Israel had quietly secured access to airfields in Azerbaijan that could potentially be used in any attack on Iran—if not directly, then as a site for refuelling after the attacks and to mount search-and-rescue operations for any downed Israeli pilots. The Israeli and Azerbaijani governments denied the report.

There is no doubt, however, that Israel maintains the closest political and economic ties with Azerbaijan. In February, it reached a \$1.6 billion agreement to supply sophisticated drones and missile-defence systems to the country. A 2009 WikiLeaks cable from the US embassy in Baku entitled "Azerbaijan's discreet symbiosis with Israel" cited President Ilham Aliyev as saying that his countries relations with Israel were like an iceberg—"nine-tenths of it is below the surface."

Adding to the web of conspiracies, Tehran, which confronts claims by Azerbaijani nationalists to areas of northern Iran, promotes its cause among Azerbaijani Shiites. Last October an Azeri court sentenced the leader of the banned, pro-Iranian Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Movsun Samadov, to 12 years in jail for criticising Aliyev.

All of this, along with the operation of criminal gangs, makes it difficult to unravel the "jumble of overlapping plans", in which Dashdev and his associates were allegedly involved. All the allegations, whatever their factual basis, pale into insignificance compared to the criminal plans of the US and Israel—openly discussed in the American and Israeli media—to launch an unprovoked attack on Iran that could trigger a regional war.

To the extent that Azerbaijan is involved in this plot, it threatens to drag the unstable patchwork of rival states in the Caucasus, and potentially Russia, into the conflict.



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