

Petraeus's CIA Steers Obama on Policy

Exclusive: President Barack Obama may have thought appointing David Petraeus as CIA director was a political masterstroke, keeping the ambitious ex-general inside the tent. But Petraeus's close ties to the neocons may now be undercutting Obama's policy goals, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Obama administration is having trouble overcoming skepticism about its allegations that Iran's Quds spy agency devised a buffoonish plot to murder the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Part of the trouble is the lingering credibility crisis from the bogus WMD charges about Iraq, but that is compounded by what appears to be a re-politicized CIA.

Whatever credibility the CIA has rebuilt in the nine years since it embraced the neoconservative falsehoods about Iraq hiding stockpiles of unconventional weapons is now jeopardized by the activism being shown by its new director, retired Gen. David Petraeus, known as a hard-liner on Iran and a strong ally of the neocons.

Last week, Petraeus found himself caught up in a controversy over whether his top aides were implementing a new analytical approach designed to skew intelligence reporting on the Afghan War to make it more favorable to the ex-general's insistence that measurable progress is being made there.

The Associated Press reported on Oct. 14 that "the CIA is giving the military a greater say in the debate over how the war in Afghanistan is going by allowing battlefield commanders to weigh into the analysis at early stages."

The article prompted [an angry denial](#) from Petraeus, who sent his response to CIA personnel in a blast e-mail and then had it published at the CIA's Web site.

While not challenging the AP's central point that the military would have "a greater say" the thin-skinned Petraeus attacked the suggestion that the change "was somehow designed to impose a military viewpoint on our analysis. That is flat wrong."

Petraeus also noted that the change was "put in place by Michael Morell when he was Acting Director" before Petraeus assumed the post on Sept. 6. But it was obvious for months that Petraeus would get the job and Morell is known as a bureaucrat sensitive to the whims of those above him.

Morell also knew that Petraeus had bristled at the CIA's gloomier assessments of

Afghan War progress while then-Gen. Petraeus was pushing a rosier analysis with the help of his influential neocon friends, such as Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations and Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute.

In 2009, Petraeus granted Boot and Kagan extraordinary access to U.S. field commanders, and the pair returned home with glowing reports of Afghan War progress if only President Barack Obama would send more troops. It doesn't take a seasoned yes man like Morell to know which way the wind is now blowing at CIA headquarters. [For more on Morell, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Rise of Another CIA Yes Man.](#)"]

While acknowledging that more military input would be injected into the CIA's analytical process, Petraeus told CIA employees that "the change will in no way undermine the objectivity of DI [Directorate of Intelligence] analysis on the war in Afghanistan. We will still 'call it like we see it,' but now with even better ground truth."

Yet even more than other government officials, CIA employees are expert at reading between the lines. And the message from their new boss couldn't be clearer: he wants analysis that hews more closely to his political desires.

Getting Iran

Though shoring up the Afghan War is one Petraeus (and neocon) priority, an even more important objective is stoking the fires against Iran. So, when the Obama administration initially balked at the bizarre accusations about Iran plotting to murder the Saudi ambassador, it was Petraeus's CIA that pushed the charges.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, a favored recipient of official CIA leaks, reported that "one big reason [top U.S. officials became convinced the plot was real] is that CIA and other intelligence agencies gathered information corroborating the informant's juicy allegations and showing that the plot had support from the top leadership of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the covert action arm of the Iranian government."

Ignatius added that, "it was this intelligence collected in Iran" that swung the balance. But Ignatius offered no examples of what that intelligence was.

The FBI's [amended criminal complaint](#) also lacks any direct evidence that the Iranian government approved the plot, and the case boils down to the word of Iranian-American used-car salesman Mansour Arbabsiar and an unidentified paid informant of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Arbabsiar, who agreed right after his arrest to become a cooperating FBI witness, presumably in exchange for lenient treatment, is one of the two people

charged in the purported plot. The other is Arbabsiar's supposed contact in Iran, Gholam Shakuri, allegedly a Quds operative.

But the real target of the case appears to be Abdul Reza Shahlai, an alleged deputy commander in the Quds Force. Arbabsiar supposedly claims to be Shahlai's "cousin."

U.S. officials have long regarded Shahlai as a key liaison between Quds and Iraq's Mahdi Army of the anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. In that role, Shahlai drew Petraeus's wrath as U.S. troops under Petraeus's command faced violent reversals in Iraq.

In 2008, Petraeus suffered a rare public embarrassment when he planned to give a briefing about captured Iranian weapons in Karbala, Iraq, as proof of Iran's key role in fomenting Iraqi instability. But American munitions experts pulled the rug out from under him when they concluded that they couldn't credibly tie the weapons to Iran.

Even, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki described the allegations as "based on speculation."

So, it shouldn't be surprising that the new Petraeus-led CIA was eager to jump into the dispute about the implausible plot to kill the Saudi ambassador and lay the blame on the retired general's old nemesis, Shahlai.

Who Is Shakuri?

The Iranians added more murkiness to the convoluted plot this week with press reports that Arbabsiar's co-defendant, Gholam Shakuri, has no connection to Quds but instead is a member of Mujahedeen Khalq, a violent organization dedicated to overthrowing the Iranian government.

Iranian news outlets citing Interpol, the international agency that coordinates information for the police of many countries – reported that Shakuri, who is still at large, travels on forged passports and was last seen in Washington and at Camp Ashraf, the Mujahedeen Khalq's base inside Iraq.

Though U.S. officials pooh-poohed the Iranian reports as disinformation, Interpol responded to press inquiries with a refusal to comment.

Of course, spy tradecraft is largely about concealing who is who, so operatives can work in the gray area of deniability. That's the whole point to make the relationship between an individual and a government unclear.

That is also why the CIA's decision to weigh in on the side of pinning the murder plot on Iran's government was so critical. The CIA is the U.S.

government's expert on such matters. Though the CIA has not detailed the reasons behind its conclusion, the analysis appears to rest on the methods used in transferring funds.

But there also remain curious omissions in what has so far been made public about the case against Iran. For instance, after the FBI detained car salesman Arbabsiar, he was told to place pretext calls to Shakuri seeking to implicate him more directly in the plot.

According to the FBI complaint, the two men discussed a "Chevrolet" purchase supposedly being negotiated with Mexican underworld figures. FBI Special Agent O. Robert Woloszyn said he understood from Arbabsiar that "Chevrolet" was the code word for the assassination, but nothing in the conversation addresses any specifics of a murder plot.

So, the levels of uncertainty extend not only to the implausibility of the plot that the Iranian government would undertake the risks of a high-profile assassination in the U.S. capital and entrust the killing to a car salesman with no apparent training in rudimentary intelligence tradecraft and with no hesitancy to become an FBI witness.

There is also the murkiness of the recorded conversations between Arbabsiar and Shakuri and now there is the uncertainty about who Shakuri actually is.

On top of that there is the dog-that-didn't-bark omission in the U.S. allegations: why did the FBI not have Arbabsiar place a pretext phone call to his "cousin," Abdul Reza Shahlai, the presumed "big fish" in the plot?

Shahlai is not explicitly identified in the FBI complaint and no known criminal charges have been lodged against him. However, the U.S. Treasury Department subjected him, along with Shakuri and two other purported Quds Force officials, to new financial sanctions. In Treasury's statement, Shahlai is accused of having "coordinated this operation."

New Doubts

Adding to the doubts about the case is the new recognition that Petraeus, who has a longstanding animus toward Shahlai, is now at the head of the American spy agency that tipped the balance in favor of the Obama administration taking the plot accusations seriously.

The larger significance of the CIA joining the "get-Iran" camp may be that the still-influential American neocons have gained a powerful institutional ally in their determination to bring U.S. policy in line with Israeli government claims that a reckless Iran, especially with a nuclear program, poses an "existential

threat.”

If Petraeus’s CIA can change how the White House and the Justice Department view the seemingly preposterous claims about an Iranian murder plot in Washington, it follows that a CIA shift in its longstanding skepticism about Iran’s intent to build a nuclear bomb could align the Obama administration with Israeli intentions on bombing Iran’s nuclear sites.

There are also indications that Petraeus’s leadership has halted the CIA’s activities in backchannel contacts with Iran. The CIA under former director Leon Panetta had served as Obama’s hub of those contacts, aimed at finding ways to reduce tensions between the two countries.

However, with Panetta moving to Defense Secretary and Petraeus replacing him as CIA director, it now appears those backchannels are being shut down.

President Obama also may have underestimated Petraeus’s ties to the neocons. During his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, the four-star general developed cozy (even dependent) relationships with high-powered neoconservatives, such as Max Boot and Frederick Kagan.

For instance, early in 2009, Petraeus personally arranged for Boot, Kagan and Kimberly Kagan to get extraordinary access during a trip to Afghanistan.

“Fears of impending disaster are hard to sustain, however, if you actually spend some time in Afghanistan, as we did recently at the invitation of General David Petraeus, chief of U.S. Central Command,” they wrote upon their return.

“Using helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and bone-jarring armored vehicles, we spent eight days traveling from the snow-capped peaks of Kunar province near the border with Pakistan in the east to the wind-blown deserts of Farah province in the west near the border with Iran. Along the way we talked with countless coalition soldiers, ranging from privates to a four-star general,” the trio said.

Their access paid dividends for Petraeus when they penned a glowing report in the Weekly Standard about the prospects for success in Afghanistan if only President Obama sent more troops and committed the United States to stay in the war for the long haul.

Emoticon from Petraeus

Besides getting neocons to put public pressure on the President, Petraeus turned to Boot in 2010 when Petraeus felt he had made a mistake in allowing his official congressional testimony to contain mild criticism of Israel.

His written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee had included the observation that “the enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests” in the Middle East and added:

“Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.”

Though the testimony might strike some readers as a no-brainer, many neocons regard any suggestion that Israeli intransigence on Palestinian peace talks contributes to the dangers faced by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as a “blood libel” against Israel.

So, when Petraeus’s testimony began getting traction on the Internet, the general quickly turned to Boot and began backtracking on the testimony.

“As you know, I didn’t say that,” Petraeus said, according to one e-mail to Boot timed off at 2:27 p.m., March 18, 2010. “It’s in a written submission for the record.”

In other words, Petraeus was arguing that the comments were only in his formal testimony and were not repeated by him in his oral opening statement. However, the written testimony is treated as part of the official record at congressional hearings with no meaningful distinction from oral testimony.

In another e-mail, as Petraeus solicited Boot’s help in tamping down any controversy over the Israeli remarks, the general ended the message with a military “Roger” and a sideways happy face, made from a colon, a dash and a closed parenthesis, “:-).”

The e-mails were made public by James Morris, who runs a Web site called “[Neocon Zionist Threat to America](#).” He said he apparently got them by accident when he sent a March 19 e-mail congratulating Petraeus for his testimony and Petraeus responded by forwarding one of Boot’s blog posts that knocked down the story of the general’s implicit criticism of Israel.

Petraeus forwarded Boot’s blog item, entitled “A Lie: David Petraeus, Anti-Israel,” which had been posted at the Commentary magazine site at 3:11 p.m. on March 18. However, Petraeus apparently forgot to delete some of the other exchanges between him and Boot at the bottom of the e-mail.

Morris sent me the e-mails at my request after [an article](#) by Philip Weiss appeared about them at [Mondoweiss](#), a Web site that deals with Middle East

issues. When I sought comment from Petraeus and Boot regarding the e-mails, neither responded.

A Lesson Unlearned

Obama's decision to entrust a position as crucial as CIA director to Petraeus, an ambitious man with strong ties to the neocons, suggests that the President has yet to learn a key lesson of leadership: It is incredibly risky to place adversaries in places where they can undermine you.

While Obama may have been thinking that he was keeping Petraeus out of a possible run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, the President put Petraeus in a spot where he can manipulate the intelligence that drives government policies.

Obama has made this mistake before. After taking office, he prided himself on filling key jobs with a "team of rivals," including leaving George W. Bush's military command structure in place with Robert Gates as Defense Secretary and Petraeus as commander of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As Bob Woodward reported in his book, *Obama's Wars*, it was Bush's old team that made sure Obama was given no option other than to escalate troop levels in Afghanistan. The Bush holdovers also lobbied for the troop increase behind Obama's back.

According to Woodward's book, Gates, Petraeus and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, refused to even prepare an early-exit option that Obama had requested. Instead, they offered up only plans for their desired escalation of about 40,000 troops.

Woodward wrote: "For two exhausting months, [Obama] had been asking military advisers to give him a range of options for the war in Afghanistan. Instead, he felt that they were steering him toward one outcome and thwarting his search for an exit plan.

"He would later tell his White House aides that military leaders were 'really cooking this thing in the direction they wanted.'"

Though Obama was taken in by this Afghan War trickery in 2009 and he has gradually phased out key Bush holdovers such as Gates and Mullen he has still not seized decisive control over his own foreign policy, with another rival, Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, and Petraeus now running CIA.

Obama may find that Petraeus and the neocons have more surprises for him ahead as they steer the intelligence analyses on Iran, the Afghan War and other Middle

East policies more in their favored directions.

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
