



THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
SOUTHERN DISTRICT *of* NEW YORK

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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Southern District of New York

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, July 13, 2021

Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Kidnapping Conspiracy Charges Against An Iranian Intelligence Officer And Members Of An Iranian Intelligence Network

Iranian Intelligence Services Allegedly Plotted to Kidnap a U.S. Journalist and Human Rights Activist from New York City for Rendition to Iran

Audrey Strauss, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Mark J. Lesko, the Acting Assistant Attorney General for National Security, and William F. Sweeney Jr., Assistant Director in Charge of the New York Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation ("FBI"), announced the unsealing of kidnapping conspiracy, sanctions violations conspiracy, bank and wire fraud conspiracy, and money laundering conspiracy charges against ALIREZA SHAVAROGHI FARAHANI, a/k/a "Vezarat Salimi," a/k/a "Haj Ali," MAHMOUD KHAZEIN, KIYA SADEGHI, and OMID NOORI, and sanctions violations conspiracy, bank and wire fraud conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy, and structuring charges against NILOUFAR BAHADORIFAR, a/k/a "Nellie Bahadorifar." The charges are contained in a Superseding Indictment unsealed today in Manhattan federal court. The case is pending before U.S. District Judge Ronnie Abrams. BAHADORIFAR was arrested on July 1, 2021 in California on charges contained in an underlying indictment. BAHADORIFAR will be arraigned on the charges in the Superseding Indictment by Judge Abrams at a date and time to be set by the Court. FARAHANI, KHAZEIN, SADEGHI, and NOORI, all of whom are based in Iran, remain at large.

U.S. Attorney Audrey Strauss said: "As alleged, four of the defendants monitored and planned to kidnap a U.S. citizen of Iranian origin who has been critical of the regime's autocracy, and to forcibly take their intended victim to Iran, where the victim's fate would have been uncertain at best. Among this country's most cherished freedoms is the right to speak one's mind without fear of government reprisal. A U.S. citizen living in the United States must be able to advocate for human rights without being targeted by foreign intelligence operatives. Thanks to the FBI's exposure of their alleged scheme, these defendants have failed to silence criticism by forcible abduction."

Acting Assistant Attorney General Mark J. Lesko said: "Every person in the United States must be free from harassment, threats and physical harm by foreign powers. Through this indictment, we bring to light one such pernicious plot to harm an American citizen who was exercising their First Amendment rights, and we commit ourselves to bring the defendants to justice."

FBI Assistant Director William F. Sweeney Jr. said: “This is not some far-fetched movie plot. We allege a group, backed by the Iranian government, conspired to kidnap a U.S. based journalist here on our soil and forcibly return her to Iran. Not on our watch. FBI special agents and analysts will continue to aggressively hunt for foreign operatives who attempt illegal action inside our borders or against our citizens. Working side-by-side with our international partners, the FBI’s reach is global. When we find you, you will be brought here and held accountable under U.S. law.”

According to the allegations contained in the Superseding Indictment, other court filings, and statements made during court proceedings:^[1] _

FARAHANI is an Iranian intelligence official who resides in Iran. KHAZEIN, SADEGHI, and NOORI are Iranian intelligence assets who also reside in Iran. Since at least June 2020, FARAHANI, and the intelligence network he manages – including KHAZEIN, SADEGHI, and NOORI – have plotted to kidnap a U.S. citizen of Iranian origin (“Victim-1”) from within the United States in furtherance of the Government of Iran’s efforts to silence Victim-1’s criticisms of the regime. Victim-1 is a journalist, author, and human rights activist, residing in Brooklyn, New York, who has publicized the Government of Iran’s human rights abuses.

Prior to the plot to kidnap Victim-1 on U.S. soil, the Government of Iran attempted to lure Victim-1 to a third country in order to capture Victim-1 for rendition to Iran. In approximately 2018, Iranian government officials attempted to induce relatives of Victim-1, who reside in Iran, to invite Victim-1 to travel to a third country for the apparent purpose of having Victim-1 arrested or detained and transported to Iran for imprisonment.

Victim-1’s relatives did not accept the offer. Iranian intelligence services have previously lured other Iranian dissidents from France and from the United States for the purposes of capturing and imprisoning regime critics and have publicly claimed responsibility for these capture operations. An electronic device used by FARAHANI contains, among other things, a photo of Victim-1 alongside photos of two other individuals, both of whom were captured by Iranian intelligence, with one later executed and the other imprisoned in Iran, and a caption in Farsi stating, “Gradually the gathering gets bigger... Are you coming, or should we come for you?”

On multiple occasions in 2020 and 2021, as part of the plot to kidnap Victim-1, FARAHANI and his network procured the services of private investigators to surveil, photograph, and video record Victim-1 and Victim-1’s household members in Brooklyn. The extensive surveillance that FARAHANI’s network procured included requests for days’ worth of surveillance at Victim-1’s home and the surrounding area, videos and photographs of Victim-1’s family and associates, surveillance of Victim-1 outside Victim-1’s residence, and the installation of and access to a live high-definition video feed depicting Victim-1’s home. The network repeatedly insisted on high-quality photographs and video recordings of Victim-1 and Victim-1’s household members; a large volume of content; pictures of visitors and objects around the house; and depictions of Victim-1’s body language. The network procured the surveillance by misrepresenting their identities and the purpose of the surveillance to the investigators, and laundered money into the United States from Iran in order to pay for the surveillance, photos, and video recordings of Victim-1. SADEGHI acted as the network’s primary point of contact with the private investigators in the United States, and NOORI facilitated payment to the investigators in furtherance of the plot targeting Victim-1.

As part of the kidnapping plot, the FARAHANI-led intelligence network also researched methods of transporting Victim-1 out of the United States for rendition to Iran. SADEGHI, for example, researched a service offering military-style speedboats for self-operated maritime evacuation out of New York City, and maritime travel from New York to Venezuela, a country whose *de facto* government has friendly relations with Iran. KHAZEIN researched travel routes from Victim-1’s residence to a waterfront neighborhood in Brooklyn, the location of Victim-1’s residence relative to Venezuela, and the location of Victim-1’s residence relative to Tehran.

The network that FARAHANI directs has also targeted victims in other countries, including victims in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates, and has worked to procure similar surveillance of those

victims.

BAHADORIFAR is originally from Iran and is currently a California resident. BAHADORIFAR has provided financial and other services from the United States to Iranian residents and entities, including to KHAZEIN, since at least in or about 2015, including access to the U.S. financial system and U.S. financial institutions through the use of card accounts, and has offered to manage business interests in the United States on KHAZEIN's behalf. Among other things, BAHADORIFAR caused a payment to be made to a private investigator for surveillance of Victim-1 on KHAZEIN's behalf. BAHADORIFAR is not charged with participating in the kidnapping conspiracy, but is alleged to have provided financial services that supported the plot and is charged with conspiring to violate sanctions against Iran, to commit bank and wire fraud, and to commit money laundering. BAHADORIFAR is also charged with structuring cash deposits totaling more than approximately \$445,000.

* * *

ALIREZA SHAVAROGHI FARAHANI, 50, MAHMOUD KHAZEIN, 42, KIYA SADEGHI, 35, and OMID NOORI, 45, all of Iran, have each been charged with: (1) conspiring to kidnap, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison (Count One), (2) conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and sanctions against the Government of Iran, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison (Count Two), (3) conspiring to commit bank and wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison (Count Three), and (4) conspiring to launder money, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison (Count Four). NILOUFAR BAHADORIFAR, 46, of California, is charged in Counts Two, Three, and Four, and is further charged with structuring (Count Five), which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison. The potential maximum sentences in this case are prescribed by Congress and provided here for informational purposes only, as any sentencing of the defendants will be determined by Judge Abrams.

BAHADORIFAR was arrested on charges contained in an underlying indictment on July 1, 2021, and was arraigned by Judge Abrams on that indictment on July 8, 2021. FARAHANI, KHAZEIN, SADEGHI, and NOORI remain at large.

Ms. Strauss praised the outstanding investigative work of the FBI's New York Field Office Counterintelligence-Cyber Division and the New York FBI Iran Threat Task Force. Ms. Strauss also thanked the New York City Police Department ("NYPD") and the NYPD Intelligence Bureau, the FBI's Los Angeles Field Office Orange County Resident Agency, and the Department of Justice's National Security Division, Counterintelligence and Export Control Section, for their assistance.

This case is being handled by the Office's Terrorism and International Narcotics Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Michael D. Lockard, Jacob H. Gutwillig, and Matthew J.C. Hellman are in charge of the prosecution, with assistance from Trial Attorney Nathan Swinton of the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section.

The charges in the Superseding Indictment are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

[1] As the introductory phrase signifies, the Superseding Indictment, and the description of the Superseding Indictment set forth herein, constitute only allegations, and every fact described should be treated as an allegation.

Attachment(s):
[Download u.s. v. farhani et al S1indictment \(21 cr. 430\).](#)

Topic(s):

Counterintelligence and Export Control
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Component(s):

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