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Department of Justice

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Justice Department Announces Charges and New Arrest in Connection with Assassination Plot Directed from Iran

Members of Eastern European Organized Crime Group Allegedly Plotted to Murder a U.S. Citizen of Iranian Origin in New York City Who Has Publicly Opposed the Iranian Government

A federal court in New York today unsealed murder-for-hire and money laundering charges against three members of an Eastern European criminal organization for plotting the murder of a U.S. citizen who has been targeted by the Government of Iran for speaking out against the regime's human rights abuses.

According to court documents, Rafat Amirov, aka Farkhaddin Mirzoev, aka Рим, aka Rome, 43, of Iran; Polad Omarov, aka Araz Aliyev, aka Polad Qaqa, aka Haci Qaqa, 38, of the Czech Republic and Slovenia; and Khalid Mehdiev, 24, of Yonkers, New York, are charged with money laundering and murder-for-hire in a superseding indictment unsealed today in the Southern District of New York. Amirov, who resides in Iran, arrived in the Southern District of New York on Jan. 26, and will be arraigned on charges before Magistrate Judge Sarah L. Cave today. Mehdiev was arrested on July 29, 2022, on charges contained in an underlying criminal complaint and will be arraigned on the charges in the superseding indictment before the Honorable Colleen McMahon on Jan. 31, 2023, at 4 p.m. ET. Omarov was arrested in the Czech Republic on Jan. 4, 2023, and the United States will request his extradition on the charges in the superseding indictment.

"The Victim in this case was targeted for exercising the rights to which every American citizen is entitled. The Victim publicized the Iranian Government's human rights abuses; discriminatory treatment of women; suppression of democratic participation and expression; and use of arbitrary imprisonment, torture, and execution," said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. "The Department of Justice will not tolerate attempts by an authoritarian regime to undermine those protections and the rule of law upon which our democracy is based. We will not tolerate attempts by a foreign power to threaten, silence, or harm Americans. We will stop at nothing to identify, find, and bring to justice those who endanger the safety of the American people."

"Today's indictment exposes a dangerous menace to national security – a double threat posed by a vicious transnational crime group operating from what it thought was the safe haven of a rogue nation: Iran," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco. "As national security and criminal threats continue to blend, the Department of Justice will use all its tools to zealously protect freedom and hold accountable all those who would use violence to undermine it."

"The indictment unsealed today reflects the FBI's commitment to follow the facts wherever they lead, to work our way up to the leaders of criminal plots wherever they are, and to use our long reach to bring those responsible here to face justice in the United States," said FBI Director Christopher Wray. "The conduct charged shows how far Iranian actors are willing to go to silence critics, even attempting to assassinate a U.S. citizen on American soil. We are determined to safeguard the rights of all Americans from the oppressive reach of hostile regimes."

"Today's charges underscore the Department's commitment to protecting Americans and our fundamental values in the face of all forms of transnational repression," said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department's National Security Division. "To foreign actors who plot violence on our soil believing they are out of our reach, know that we will pursue you, wherever you may be, until we deliver justice."

"As alleged, the defendants are members of an organized crime group hired to assassinate, right here in New York City, a U.S. citizen of Iranian origin who has been critical of the regime's autocracy and its disregard for human rights," said U.S. Attorney Damian Williams for the Southern District of New York. "This is the second time in the past two years that this office and our partners at the FBI have disrupted plots originating from within Iran to kidnap or kill this victim for the 'crime' of exercising the right to free speech, to independent political thought, and to advocating for the rights of the oppressed and disenfranchised inside Iran. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of the career prosecutors and FBI agents who led the investigation, this new plot to silence the victim has been disrupted and the defendants will face justice in an American court."

According to the allegations contained in the superseding indictment, other court filings, and statements made during court proceedings:

Amirov is a leader in an Eastern European criminal organization (the Organization) who resides in Iran. Omarov also holds a leadership role in the Organization and resides in Eastern Europe. Mehdiyev, a member of the Organization, resides in Yonkers, New York. The Organization has ties to Iran and is violent, engaging in murders, kidnappings, assaults, and extortions, and members typically identify themselves with tattoos and other displays of eight-pointed stars.

Since at least July 2022, the Organization was tasked with carrying out the murder of a U.S. citizen of Iranian origin (the Victim), who previously has been the target of plots by the Government of Iran to intimidate, harass and kidnap the Victim. The Victim is a journalist, author and human rights activist, residing in Brooklyn, New York, who has publicized the Government of Iran's human rights abuses and suppression of political expression, including in connection with continuing protests against the regime across Iran. As recently as 2020 and 2021, Iranian intelligence officials and assets plotted to kidnap the Victim from within the United States for rendition to Iran in an effort to silence the Victim's criticism of the regime. That plot was disrupted and exposed by the FBI and led to the filing of federal kidnapping conspiracy and other charges in the Southern District of New York against several participants in the plot in *United States v. Farahani, et al.*, 21 Cr. 430.

About one year after the *Farahani* charges were filed, the Organization was tasked with carrying out the Victim's assassination on U.S. soil. Beginning in approximately mid-July 2022, Amirov sent targeting information – which Amirov had received from other individuals in Iran – about the Victim and the Victim's residence to Omarov. Omarov, in turn, communicated the targeting information to Mehdiyev in order to begin conducting surveillance of the Victim and reconnaissance of the Victim's residence and surrounding neighborhood. Mehdiyev sent photographs and videos of the Victim's residence to Omarov for further sharing with Amirov and the plot's orchestrators in Iran.

After Mehdiyev's initial surveillance of the Victim's residence, Amirov and Omarov arranged for the delivery of a \$30,000 cash payment to Mehdiyev in New York City in furtherance of the plot. Mehdiyev used a portion of this cash payment to buy an AK-47-style assault rifle along with two magazines for ammunition and at least 66 rounds. Mehdiyev bragged in electronic communications that he had procured for himself a "war machine."

Between July 20 and 28, 2022, Mehdiyev repeatedly traveled to the Victim's neighborhood to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, sending reports of the Victim's activities, photographs, and videos to Omarov for further distribution to Amirov. On July 24, 2022, after arriving at the Victim's residence, Mehdiyev reported to Omarov that Mehdiyev was "at the crime scene." Omarov encouraged Mehdiyev, "You are a man!" Mehdiyev described to Omarov that "we blocked it from both sides, it will be a show once she steps out of the house." Omarov forwarded this report to Amirov, who responded, "God willing."

Mehdiyev was unable to carry out the assassination that day and returned on several subsequent days to seek out opportunities to complete the murder mission. Amirov, Omarov and Mehdiyev schemed different strategies to attempt to draw the Victim out, including by attempting to ask the Victim for flowers from the Victim's garden. On July 28, 2022, Mehdiyev sent Omarov a video taken from inside the car Mehdiyev was driving showing the assault rifle, along with the

message that “we are ready.” The Victim, after observing suspicious activity outside the residence, left the area, and Mehdiyev drove away shortly afterwards. After Mehdiyev drove away from the Victim’s residence, he was stopped after a traffic violation, and during a subsequent search of the car, police officers found the assault rifle, 66 rounds of ammunition, approximately \$1,100 in cash, and a black ski mask.

Amirov, Omarov, and Mehdiyev are charged with: (1) murder-for-hire, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison; (2) conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison; and (3) conspiracy to commit money laundering, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. Mehdiyev is additionally charged with possessing a firearm with an obliterated serial number, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

The FBI and its New York Field Office Counterintelligence-Cyber Division, the New York FBI Iran Threat Task Force, the New York FBI Counterintelligence Task Force and the New York FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force are investigating the case, with valuable assistance provided by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and the NYPD Intelligence Bureau, as well as the Justice Department’s National Security Division and Office of International Affairs.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Michael D. Lockard, Jacob H. Gutwillig, and Matthew J.C. Hellman for the Southern District of New York are prosecuting the case, with valuable assistance provided by Trial Attorney Christopher M. Rigali of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section.

An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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