

PRESS RELEASE

Iranian Intelligence Agent Convicted of Terrorism and Murder for Hire in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Politicians and Government Officials

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<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/iranian-intelligence-agent-convicted-terrorism-and-murder-hire-connection-foiled-plot>

Today, a federal jury convicted Asif Merchant, also known as “Asif Raza Merchant,” of murder for hire and attempting to commit an act of terrorism transcending national boundaries. Merchant was a trained operative of the Iranian government’s global terrorist force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Merchant admitted at trial that the IRGC sent him to the United States to arrange for political assassinations and steal documents, but law enforcement foiled the plot before any attack could be carried out. Merchant arrived in the United States in April of 2024, met with purported hitmen in June—who were in fact undercover U.S. law enforcement officers in New York—and was placed under arrest before leaving the country in July of 2024. Merchant faces up to life in prison.

“This man landed on American soil hoping to kill President Trump — instead, he was met with the might of American law enforcement,” said Attorney General Pamela Bondi. “The Department of Justice will remain ever-vigilant to protect Americans, prosecute terrorists, and halt acts of terrorism before they happen.”

“Merchant tried to hire someone to kill a politician or a U.S. government official, but the FBI and our partners stopped that deadly plot,” said FBI Director Kash Patel. “This was not the first attempt by Iran to harm our citizens on U.S. soil; the other efforts also failed. Let this verdict serve as a reminder that the FBI is committed to detecting such

threats and preventing acts of violence, and we will hold accountable anyone who tries to interfere with our democratic system.”

“Merchant, a trained Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operative, entered the United States intending to commit acts of terror, and ultimately, to facilitate the assassination of U.S. government officials, including President Trump,” said Assistant Attorney General for National security John A. Eisenberg. “Merchant’s plot struck at the heart of our democracy and our commitment to the rule of law. NSD remains committed to defending our Nation from the pernicious threat of terrorism.”

“Iran’s terrorist regime sent Asif Merchant here to sow mayhem and murder,” stated United States Attorney Nocella for the Eastern District of New York. “Thanks to the vigilance of our law enforcement partners, his scheme ended in failure. Today, with Merchant’s conviction, that failure is complete. This Office will always remain vigilant in our mission to protect the United States from foreign terrorist adversaries. ”

As set forth in trial exhibits and testimony, including the defendant’s own testimony, Merchant began working for the IRGC in Pakistan in late 2022 or early 2023, when he received training in tradecraft, including countersurveillance. Later in 2023, he was sent to the United States to look for potential IRGC recruits who could stay behind in the United States. Merchant testified that he knew that the IRGC was a designated terrorist organization. Throughout this period, Merchant repeatedly traveled to Iran to meet with his IRGC handler.

Merchant testified that in 2024, he was sent back to the United States with a new mission: to recruit “Mafia” members to steal documents, stage a protest, and arrange the murder of one of three specific U.S. government officials and politicians. To that end, Merchant contacted an acquaintance in New York who he thought could help him with his scheme. That person, Nadeem Ali, instead reported Merchant’s conduct to law enforcement and became a confidential source.

In early June, Merchant met Ali in New York and explained his assassination plot. Merchant told Ali that he had an ongoing opportunity for him and then made a “finger gun” motion with his hand, indicating that the opportunity was related to a killing. Merchant further stated that the intended victims would be “targeted here,” in the United States. Merchant instructed Ali to arrange meetings with individuals whom Merchant could hire to carry out these actions. Merchant explained that his plot involved multiple criminal schemes: (1) stealing documents or USB drives from a target’s home; (2) planning a protest; and (3) killing a politician or government official.

At that meeting, Merchant began planning potential assassination scenarios and quizzed Ali on how he would kill a target in the various scenarios. Specifically, Merchant asked Ali to explain how the target would die in different scenarios. Merchant told Ali that there would be "security [] all around" the person.

Merchant stated that the assassination would occur after he left the United States and he would communicate with Ali from overseas using code words. Ali asked whether Merchant had spoken to the unidentified "party" back home with whom Merchant was working. Merchant responded that he had and that the party back home told him to "finalize" the plan and leave the United States. Merchant would later testify that the "party" was his IRGC handler.

In mid-June, Merchant met with the purported hitmen, who were in fact undercover U.S. law enforcement officers (the UCs) in New York. Merchant advised the UCs that he was looking for three services from them: theft of documents, arranging protests at political rallies and for them to kill a "political person." Merchant stated that the hitmen would receive instructions on who to kill after Merchant had departed the United States.

Throughout this period, Merchant performed internet searches for the locations of political rallies and sent reports back to his IRGC handler regarding security protocols at rallies.

Merchant then began arranging means to obtain \$5,000 in cash to pay the UCs as an advance payment for the assassination, which he eventually received with assistance from an individual overseas. On June 21, Merchant met with the UCs in New York and paid them the \$5,000 advance. After Merchant paid the \$5,000 to the UCs, one of the UCs stated, "now we're bonded," to which Merchant responded "yes." The UC then stated "Now we know we're going forward. We're doing this," to which Merchant responded "Yes, absolutely."

Merchant subsequently made flight arrangements and planned to leave the United States on Friday, July 12, 2024. On that day, law enforcement agents placed Merchant under arrest before he could leave the country.

The FBI's Field Offices in Dallas, Houston, Tampa, Boston, Washington D.C., Chicago and Albany for partnered in the investigation of this case. The New York City Police Department, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection assisted with the investigation.

The case is being handled by the Office's National Security & Cybercrime Section for the Eastern District of New York. Assistant United States Attorneys Sara K. Winik, Nina

Gupta and Gilbert Rein for the Eastern District of New York are in charge of the prosecution, with assistance from Deputy Chief Paul Casey and Trial Attorney Jessica Joyce of the Department of Justice's Counterterrorism Section of the National Security Division.