

Pakistani National with Ties to Iran Charged in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate a Politician or U.S. Government Officials

Tuesday, August 6, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/pakistani-national-ties-iran-charged-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-politician-or>

The Defendant Allegedly Traveled to New York City to Hire Hitmen to Murder a Politician or U.S. Government Officials on U.S. Soil

Earlier today, in federal court in Brooklyn, a complaint was unsealed charging Asif Merchant, also known as "Asif Raza Merchant," 46, with murder-for-hire as part of a scheme to assassinate a politician or U.S. government officials on U.S. soil. Law enforcement foiled the charged plot before any attack could be carried out. Merchant is in federal custody in New York.

Merrick B. Garland, Attorney General, Department of Justice, Breon Peace, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, Christopher Wray, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Matthew G. Olsen, Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department's National Security Division, and Christie M. Curtis, Acting Assistant Director in Charge, FBI, New York Field Office, announced the arrest and charges.

"For years, the Justice Department has been working aggressively to counter Iran's brazen and unrelenting efforts to retaliate against American public officials for the killing of Iranian General Soleimani," said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. "The Justice Department will spare no resource to disrupt and hold accountable those who would seek to carry out Iran's lethal plotting against American citizens, and will not tolerate attempts by an authoritarian regime to target American public officials and endanger America's national security."

"Working on behalf of others overseas, Merchant planned the murder of U.S. government officials on American soil," said U.S. Attorney Breon Peace for the Eastern

District of New York. "This prosecution demonstrates that this Office and the entire Department of Justice will take swift and decisive action to protect our nation's security, our government officials and our citizens from foreign threats."

Mr. Peace expressed his appreciation to the FBI's Field Offices in Dallas, Houston, Tampa, Boston, Washington D.C., Chicago and Albany field offices for their partnership on this case. Mr. Peace also expressed his appreciation to 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 for their assistance.

"This dangerous murder-for-hire plot exposed in today's charges allegedly was orchestrated by a Pakistani national with close ties to Iran and is straight out of the Iranian playbook," said FBI Director Christopher Wray. "A foreign-directed plot to kill a public official, or any U.S. citizen, is a threat to our national security and will be met with the full might and resources of the FBI."

"The complaint unsealed today underscores, yet again, that those who engage in lethal plotting on U.S. soil will face the full force of the American justice system," said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the National Security Division. "The targeting of former and current officials by foreign actors is an affront to our sovereignty and our democratic institutions and the Department of Justice will use every possible tool to expose and disrupt this egregious activity."

"Fortunately, the assassins Merchant tried to hire were undercover FBI Agents," said Acting Assistant Director Christie Curtis of the FBI New York Field Office. "This case underscores the dedication and formidable efforts of our agents, analysts and prosecutors in New York, Houston and Dallas. Their success in neutralizing this threat not only prevented a tragic outcome but also reaffirms the FBI's commitment to protecting our nation and its citizens from both domestic and international threats."

According to court documents, Merchant orchestrated a plot to assassinate a politician or U.S. government officials on U.S. soil. In approximately April 2024, after spending time in Iran, Merchant arrived in the United States from Pakistan and contacted a person he believed could assist him with the scheme. That person reported Merchant's conduct to law enforcement and became a confidential source (the CS).

In early June, Merchant met the CS in New York and explained his assassination plot. Merchant told the CS that the opportunity he had for the CS was not a one-time opportunity and would be ongoing. Merchant 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," meaning in the United States.

Merchant instructed the CS 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 the CS on how he would kill a target in the various scenarios. Specifically, Merchant asked the CS to explain how the target would die in different scenarios. Merchant told the CS 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 the CS from overseas using code words. The CS 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.

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 either the last week of August or the first week of September, after Merchant had departed the United States.

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 July 12th, law enforcement agents placed Merchant under arrest before he could leave the country. Merchant has stated that he has a wife and children in Iran and a wife and children in Pakistan.

The charges in the complaint are allegations and Merchant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

The case is being handled by the Office's National Security & Cybercrime Section. Assistant United States Attorneys Sara K. Winik and Gilbert Rein and Douglas

Pravda are in charge of the prosecution, with assistance from Trial Attorneys David Smith and Joshua Champagne of the Department of Justice's Counterterrorism Section of the National Security Division.

The Defendant:

ASIF MERCHANT (also known as "Asif Raza Merchant")

Age: 46

Karachi, Pakistan; Tehran, Iran

E.D.N.Y. Docket No. 24-MJ-467 (JRC)

Contact

John Marzulli

Danielle Blustein Hass

U.S. Attorney's Office

(718) 254-6323

Updated December 3, 202