

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 19, 2024

The Honorable Merrick Garland  
Attorney General  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Garland,

Recent reporting indicates Iran is paying criminal organizations to carry out violent plots—including assassinations—against their critics within the United States. We write to request information regarding how the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) is prosecuting criminals who commit or attempt to commit acts of violence in the United States on behalf of foreign adversaries, and what statutory changes to the criminal code would help DOJ to robustly prosecute these crimes.

According to recent reporting, “Iran has cultivated and exploited connections to criminal networks that are behind a recent wave of violent plots secretly orchestrated by elite units in the [Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] and Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence.”<sup>1</sup> Iran’s violent plots include attempted assassinations and abductions around the world.

A December 2023 Justice Department indictment of Iranian resident Naji Sharifi Zindashti exemplifies the problem. Mr. Zindashti stands accused of participating in a plot with a Canadian member of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club in an attempt to murder two Maryland residents who fled to the United States after one of them defected from Iran.<sup>2</sup> The Treasury Department has identified Zindashti as the leader of a network that targeted Iranian dissidents for assassination at the direction of the Iranian regime.<sup>3</sup>

An additional example includes a plot, allegedly ordered by individuals in Iran, to use members of an Eastern European criminal organization who refer to themselves as “Thieves-In-Law” in an attempt to murder a prominent critic of Iran—who is a United States citizen—within the United States.<sup>4</sup> The attempted assassination followed a prior plot by Iranian intelligence officials to abduct the same critic from within the United States for rendition to Iran.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Miller, Souad Mekhennet, & Cate Brown, *Iran Turns to Hells Angels and Other Criminal Gangs to Target Critics*, N.Y. Times (September 12, 2024, 5:00 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/12/iran-criminal-gangs-target-dissidents/>

<sup>2</sup> Indictment, *United States v. Zindashti* (D.Minn. Dec. 12, 2023), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/media/1335411/dl?inline>

<sup>3</sup> Department of the Treasury, *The United States and United Kingdom Target Iranian Transnational Assassinations Network*, Press Release (Jan. 29, 2024), <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2052>

<sup>4</sup> Sealed Superseding Indictment, *United States v. Amirov*, S4 22 Cr. 438 (CM) (S.D.N.Y.), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/1564471/dl>; Department of Justice, *Justice Department Announces Charges and New Arrest in Connection with Assassination Plot Directed from Iran*, Press Release (Jan. 27, 2023),

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-and-new-arrest-connection-assassination-plot-directed>

<sup>5</sup> Sealed Superseding Indictment, *United States v. Amirov*, S4 22 Cr. 438 (CM) (S.D.N.Y.), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/1564471/dl>; Department of Justice, *Justice Department Announces Charges and New Arrest in Connection with Assassination Plot Directed from Iran*, Press Release (Jan. 27, 2023), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-and-new-arrest-connection-assassination-plot-directed>

These plots are even more troubling in light of last week’s indictment of Asif Merchant, a Pakistani national with ties to Iran, who is accused of attempting to pay individuals to assassinate a politician or government official in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

We request that you provide us with a written response as soon as possible, but no later than October 15, 2024, that provides an overview of recent efforts by foreign governments to use criminal actors, including members of criminal organizations, to commit violent crimes against individuals within the United States. We also request your response include answers to the following questions:

1. Please confirm reported news about foreign plots targeting critics in the United States. What has DOJ identified regarding efforts foreign governments have undertaken to enlist criminal actors to commit violent crimes against persons in the United States?
2. Has DOJ observed an increased amount of these activities in recent months or years?
3. What steps is DOJ taking to thwart this type of foreign government activity?
4. What statutory changes to the criminal code—including increased criminal penalties for persons convicted of participating in these types of activities—would support efforts to deter and prosecute this criminal behavior?

If any relevant information is classified, we request you produce both an unclassified response that is suitable for public release, as well as a classified version for review by appropriate Congressional personnel.

Thank you for responding to our concerns and for your continued work to protect our national security.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senator



Shelley Moore Capito  
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Justice, *Pakistani National with Ties to Iran Charged in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate a Politician or U.S. Government Official*, Press Release (Sept. 11, 2024), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/pakistani-national-ties-iran-charged-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-politician-or-us-0>