

*As DOJ Unseals Assassination
Plot, Fears of Trump's
Aggressive Iran Policy Grow*

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When reportedly briefed about Iran’s alleged plot against him, Trump threatened to bomb the nation “to smithereens.”

Iranian man picks up a newspaper with an image of the U.S. President-elect, Donald Trump, published on its front page in downtown Tehran, Iran, on November 7, 2024. Morteza Nikoubazl / NurPhoto via Getty Images

By Jessica Corbett / Common Dreams

Amid growing concerns about what U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House will mean for Washington's rocky relationship with Tehran, the Department of Justice on Friday announced charges against an Afghan national accused of plotting to assassinate the Republican at the direction of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Though Trump survived two shooting attempts during the campaign, neither appears to be tied to Iran's alleged plot to kill him.

"There are few actors in the world that pose as grave a threat to the national security of the United States as does Iran," U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a Friday statement announcing the charges against Farhad Shakeri, "an asset of the Iranian regime who was tasked by the regime to direct a network of criminal associates to further Iran's assassination plots against its targets," including Trump.

"We have also charged and arrested two individuals who we allege were recruited as part of that network to silence and kill, on U.S. soil, an American journalist who has been a prominent critic of the regime," Garland added, referring to New Yorkers Jonathon Loadholt and Carlisle Rivera, who are both in custody — unlike Shakeri, who is believed to be in Iran. "We will not stand for the Iranian regime's attempts to endanger the American people and America's national security."

The department did not publicly identify the reporter but its statement "matched the description of Masih Alinejad, a journalist and activist who has criticized Iran's head-covering laws for women," Reuters noted Friday. "Four Iranians were charged in 2021 in connection with a plot to kidnap her, and in 2022 a man was arrested with a rifle outside her home."

The Friday announcement about these three men follows another case related to Trump and Iran. As Politico detailed: "In August, Brooklyn federal prosecutors charged a Pakistani man suspected of plotting on behalf of Iran to kill high-ranking U.S. politicians or officials — including perhaps Trump. The man is accused of trying to hire hitmen to carry out the plot."

The next month, after Trump was reportedly briefed about alleged Iranian assassination threats against him, he declared during a campaign rally that "if I were the president, I would inform the threatening country — in this case, Iran — that if you do anything to harm this person, we are going to blow your largest cities and the country itself to smithereens."

"We're gonna blow it to smithereens, you can't do that. And there would be no more threats," added Trump, whose comments were swiftly decried by the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) as "an outrageous threat" and "genocidal."

Responding to Reuters coverage of the Justice Department's Friday statement on social media, NIAC said that "threats of violence against political officials are unacceptable and only risk further opening Pandora's box of war and destruction. Trump is inheriting a mess that he helped create and reports like this demonstrate just how grave the stakes are. All parties need to focus not on threats but on dialogue to end these crises."

During Trump's first presidential term, he ditched the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, often called the Iran nuclear deal; ramped up deadly sanctions against the Middle East country; and ordered the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Iraq — actions that heightened fears of a U.S. war with Iran.

Such fears have surged since Trump's Tuesday win. He is set to return as commander-in-chief after more than a year of the Biden-Harris administration backing Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip and strikes on other countries including Lebanon and Iran.

NIAC Action executive director Jamal Abdi said in a statement after the U.S. election that “many in our community feared this day — worried about the return of the travel ban, attacks on our civil liberties, demonization of immigrant communities, and deepening militarism in the Middle East. But we have been here before and our resilience is unwavering in standing up for our community and our rights.”

“In the coming weeks, Trump, along with his new vice president, JD Vance will select the advisers who will shape his policies,” Abdi noted. “We will not stand down, disengage, or give up but will redouble our efforts for peace and justice by any means necessary. The resilience and unity of our community are more vital now than ever.”

CNN and Politico have reported that Brian Hook is expected to lead Trump’s transition team at the U.S. Department of State. As Drop Site News’ Murtaza Hussain wrote, Hook is “known as a major Iran hawk who helped lead the ‘maximum pressure’ campaign of sanctions, sabotage, and assassinations that characterized Trump’s approach to Tehran.”

Speaking with Hussain, Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, pointed out that Trump’s previous Iran policy was largely guided by John Bolton, who spent over a year as his national security adviser, and Mike Pompeo, who served as secretary of state and director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

“The Trump administration’s approach towards Iran depends very much on who he chooses to staff his administration. In his first term, he was sold on an idea by people like Pompeo and John Bolton that Iran could be sanctioned and pressured into oblivion, but that was an approach more likely to deliver war than an agreement,” Parsi said. “The Iranian view is that Trump himself wants to make a deal, but it depends on whether he appoints the same neoconservatives as last time to his administration.”

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