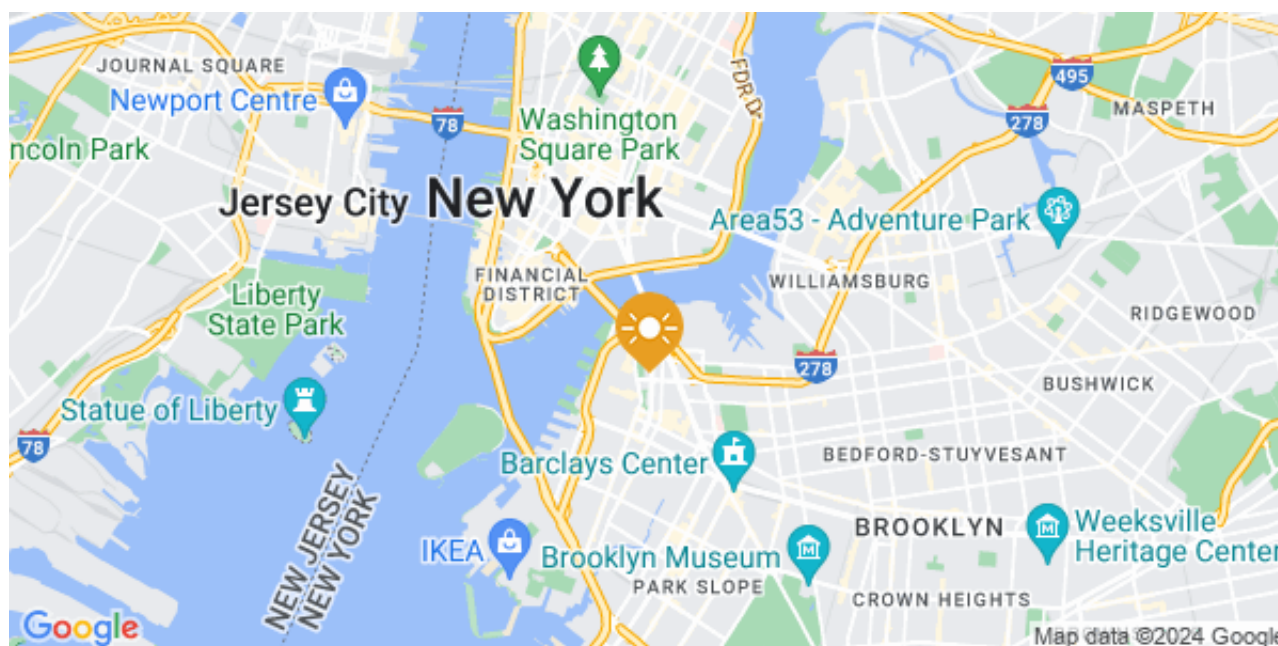




Developing



07

AUG

10:42 UTC

USA Alert: Iran-linked Pakistani national charged with plot to attack US officials on August 6; strict surveillance of Iranian networks limits risk

Current Situation

- On August 6, authorities charged Asif Merchant, a Pakistani national, arrested on July 12 for plotting to assassinate unspecified US politicians and government officials in August-September and planning protests at political rallies.
- Merchant arrived in the US from Pakistan in April after spending time in Iran.

Source: [Department of Justice](#)

Assessments & Forecast

1. The development, which follows [July 16 reports indicating authorities having detected an Iranian plot against former President Donald Trump](#), underscores the recurring threat of clandestine Iranian activities on US soil. Such plots have largely germinated in retaliation against the killing of IRGC Commander Soleimani in 2020 and are likely to have been exacerbated by Tehran's escalating tensions in the Middle East.
2. However, Merchant's plot is unlikely to have posed an imminent threat to high-profile officials and politicians, given that undercover law enforcement agents became proactively involved in

communications with the culprit at an early stage.

3. Merchant's alleged ties to Iran and attempted recruitment suggest the coordinated nature of Tehran-led plots. **FORECAST:** Iran-supported networks are liable to rely on Hezbollah sleeper cells in the Americas as well as apolitical individuals or groups to execute plots, who can be primarily lured by financial gains. The latter is reflected in the January 29 charges against two Canadian nationals, including a Hells Angels criminal group member, in an alleged Iran-led murder-for-hire plot against a Maryland-based Iranian dissident. Overall, the heightened surveillance of suspected Iran-supported proxies limits the risk of a successful attack against US officials and politicians.
4. Moreover, Merchant's plan to stage protests highlights Tehran's potential to increasingly capitalize on existing societal divisions and fuel polarization ahead of the November 5 elections. This is consistent with Tehran's broader influence campaigns, as evidenced with Iran-based networks allegedly encouraging the pro-Palestinian campus protests in April and spreading misinformation online during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

Recommendations

1. Those operating or residing in the USA in the coming months are advised to maintain heightened vigilance in the vicinity of prominent political establishments and political gatherings due to the potential for targeted attacks driven by varied factors.
2. Public, private, and third sector organizations are advised to increase their awareness of threats on social media through the use of threat monitoring services. Increased awareness of an organization's political footprint and perceptions from fringe online groups can help uncover potential violent actors and plots before they occur.