



THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Columbia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

Two U.S. Citizens, One Pakistani National Charged with Moving U.S. Currency to Iran

WASHINGTON – A complaint was unsealed today, charging two U.S. citizens with federal crimes related to Iran. Muzzamil Zaidi, 35, a U.S. citizen who resides in Qom, Iran, was charged with acting in the United States as an agent of the government of Iran without first notifying the Attorney General. Zaidi, Asim Naqvi, 35, a U.S. citizen who lives in Houston, Texas, and Ali Chawla, 36, a Pakistani national who lives in Qom, Iran, were all charged with violations of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. The complaint alleges that both charges stem from the defendants' campaign to transport U.S. currency from the United States to Iran on behalf of the Supreme Leader of Iran in 2018 and 2019. Both Zaidi and Naqvi were arrested in Houston on August 18, 2020.

"Disrupting Iran's ability to raise U.S. dollars is key to combatting its ability to sponsor international terrorism and destabilize the Middle East, including through its military presence in Yemen," said Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers. "Zaidi, Naqvi, and Chawla allegedly raised money in the United States on behalf of Iran's Supreme Leader, and illegally channeled these dollars to the government of Iran. As a result of the charges unsealed today, their unlawful scheme has been exposed and brought to an end. The U.S. Department of Justice and its National Security Division are committed to holding accountable individuals who operate covert networks within the United States in order to provide support and funds to hostile foreign governments like Iran in violation of U.S. law."

"This case is significant on many levels," said Michael R. Sherwin, Acting United States Attorney for the District of Columbia. "To begin, as alleged in the criminal complaint, the defendants have considerable operational links to the IRGC, which has conducted multiple terrorist operations throughout the world over the past several years. The life-blood of these terrorist operation is cash – and the defendants played a key role in facilitating that critical component."

"The charges unsealed today demonstrate our commitment to preventing agents of hostile foreign governments from having access and freedom to operate within the borders of the United States," said James A. Dawson, Acting Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI's Washington Field Office. "In addition to violating the Foreign Agents Registration Act, Zaidi allegedly operated with his co-conspirators at the behest of the Iranian government—a known sponsor of terrorism—to overtly solicit U.S. money to further Iranian causes, in violation of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). This is why IEEPA was

established: to prevent hostile foreign governments from leveraging the U.S. financial system in furtherance of their global destabilizing endeavors.”

"The arrests in this case are the direct result of the undeterred efforts of the FBI Houston Counterterrorism investigative team," said FBI Houston Field Office Special Agent in Charge, Perrye K. Turner. "By engaging in around the clock collaboration with multiple Field Offices and Intelligence Community partners, our agents ensure that those who send money to terrorist regimes will ultimately be held accountable and lose their freedom."

As alleged in the affidavit in support of a criminal complaint, Zaidi offered his services to the Supreme Leader of Iran in or around July 2015 and said that he could serve the “Islamic Republic in the socio-political or another field.” The complaint alleges that Zaidi traveled to Syria in or around June 2018 and that, while there, flew to an active war zone in an armed Iranian military or intelligence aircraft. The complaint alleges that Zaidi had access to bases under the command of the Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) while in that war zone, including a “Sepah Qods” (IRGC Qods Force) base. The IRGC was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. on April 4, 2019. Qassem Soleimani, a major general in the IRGC, was commander of the Qods Force until he was killed in a U.S. airstrike on Jan. 3, 2020.

According to the complaint, in December 2018, Zaidi and other members of an organization known as “Islamic Pulse,” including Chawla, received the permission of the Supreme Leader of Iran to collect khums, a religious tax, on the Supreme Leader’s behalf, and to send half of that money to Yemen. The complaint alleges that permission was formalized on or about Feb. 28, 2019, in a letter confirming the permission of the Supreme Leader of Iran and another Ayatollah to spend khums money in Yemen.

Based on the complaint, in or around July 2019, Islamic Pulse released a video soliciting donations for its purported Yemen campaign that showed money moving from the United States and other Western countries to Yemen through Iran. The complaint alleges that Chawla replied to donors’ concerns about how the campaign was able to get money into Yemen by stating that the matter could not be discussed over email. The complaint further alleges that Chawla sought U.S. dollars specifically, stated that Islamic Pulse could not accept electronic transfers, and admitted that Islamic Pulse was not a registered charity.

The complaint alleges that after the United States placed sanctions on the Supreme Leader of Iran in June 2019, Zaidi told Naqvi that the action was a “straight hit on khums.” The complaint alleges that in summer and fall 2019 Zaidi and Naqvi continued to collect U.S. currency in the United States and have it transported to Iran, sometimes via Iraq, structured in such a way as to avoid reporting requirements. After a group of 25 travelers carried money destined for Iran on behalf of Zaidi and Naqvi in October 2019, Zaidi and Naqvi discussed the screening the travelers underwent at the airport and Naqvi’s hope that none of the travelers would confess to authorities upon their return.

The complaint alleges that, during his current stay in the United States, which began in June 2020, Zaidi has exhibited behavior that is consistent with having received training from a foreign government or foreign intelligence service, such as the government of Iran or IRGC. According to the complaint, that behavior includes a reluctance to discuss matters over the phone, or even over encrypted applications, because Zaidi claims that doing so could be dangerous.

The charges in criminal complaints are merely allegations, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. The maximum penalty for a violation of 18 U.S.C. § 951 is 10 years, and the maximum penalty for a violation of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act is 20 years. The maximum statutory sentence is prescribed by Congress and is provided here for informational purposes.

The investigation into this matter was conducted by the FBI’s Washington Field Office and Houston Field Office. The case is being prosecuted by the National Security Section of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for

the District of Columbia, along with the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section and Counterterrorism Section of the National Security Division of the Department of Justice.

Attachment(s):

[Download signed chawla criminal complaint](#)

[Download signed zaidi affidavit in support](#)

[Download signed naqvi criminal complaint](#)

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Topic(s):

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Counterterrorism

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Press Release Number:

20-097

Updated August 19, 2020