



Don't Be a Pawn of Repressive Foreign Governments

SAFEGUARDING THE PUBLIC

March 2023

Threat:

Foreign intelligence entities (FIEs) and elements working on behalf of repressive regimes have sought to use U.S.-based persons to facilitate their efforts to threaten or harm perceived critics and opponents in the United States. For instance, FIEs from the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and other nations have used U.S.-based persons to conduct surveillance against and collect personal information on individuals their regimes were targeting in the United States. Examples include:

- As recently as February 2022, an individual who was later charged as acting as an illegal agent of the Chinese government worked with a private investigator and a local U.S. law enforcement officer as part of efforts to forcibly repatriate targeted individuals to China.
- In mid-2020, Iranian intelligence utilized the services of a private investigator as part of a foiled plot to kidnap a critic of Iran from the United States.

FIEs and other elements of repressive regimes have used U.S.-based individuals and groups to support their efforts to intimidate, threaten, assault, and lure abroad perceived critics and opponents in the United States by, among other activities:

- Hiring private investigators
- Co-opting law enforcement officers
- Soliciting services of social media employees
- Recruiting members of local diaspora communities

Individuals, businesses, and other private entities in the United States with access to personal data should be vigilant against improper efforts to obtain such information or to solicit other support for malicious foreign operations. If you learn of or receive a suspicious request, know how your activities could affect others and what steps you can take to avoid becoming a pawn of a foreign government's plot. For more information, including recent indictments by the U.S. Department of Justice, visit the [FBI's website](#) on this threat.

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Impact:

Knowingly helping an FIE to target individuals in the United States could not only be illegal, but could also result in direct, physical and emotional harm to targeted victims. If a foreign government solicits your assistance to target individuals or groups, understand that your activities could support:

- Online hacking and the spread of disinformation
- Suppression of free speech
- Harassment, stalking, assault, or murder
- Involuntary or forced repatriation (including kidnapping) of a person to another country
- Violations of domestic laws associated with the actions above, possibly resulting in federal charges

Mitigation:

Consider the following steps to help protect those in the United States exercising their rights and to keep yourself from being used as a pawn in repressive foreign plots:

- Know your customer. Conduct due-diligence when others approach you to research personal information or lifestyle details of an individual, particularly data of a person who may be a member of a repressive regime's diaspora community.
- Be wary of gifts. Promises of rewards in exchange for services could be masking a malicious scheme to harm a person or group.
- Do not abuse access to personal data. Individuals, businesses, and other private entities with access to personal data should consider creating process triggers that might prevent targeting diaspora members.
- When in doubt, coordinate. All requests by foreign law enforcement entities must be coordinated with the FBI and US Department of State; some requests from certain foreign governments could be in support of a malicious plot to harm a person or group.
- Contact <https://tips.fbi.gov>, 1-800-CALL-FBI, or your local FBI office to report suspicious activity.

