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US Justice Department alleges Indian intelligence agent plotted assassinations in North America

The US Department of Justice announced the filing of “murder-for-hire” charges last month against Nikhil Gupta, a 52-year-old Indian citizen who it alleges was recruited by an unnamed Indian government official to orchestrate the assassination of a US citizen of Indian origin active in the Khalistan (Sikh separatist) movement.

Gupta, who is described as being involved in drug and arms trafficking, was arrested on June 30 in Prague by Czech authorities at Washington’s request and extradited to the US.

The November 19 indictment of Gupta comes on the heels of the gunning down of a prominent Indo-Canadian proponent of Khalistan, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, by two gunmen in Vancouver last June 18.

In September, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took the extraordinary step of publicly accusing state operatives of India—a country Ottawa has been assiduously courting for geo-strategic and economic reasons—of being responsible for Nijjar’s murder. This provoked a major diplomatic spat between New Delhi and Ottawa, with the Narendra Modi-led BJP government denouncing Trudeau for making baseless and scurrilous allegations and announcing a series of diplomatic reprisals against Canada.



Assassinated Indo-Canadian Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar [Photo: Wikipedia]

According to the US indictment, Nijjar worked closely with the unnamed person whose killing Gupta was tasked with organizing.

Canadian government officials and representatives of its national security apparatus—which works in the closest collaboration with the CIA, FBI, NSA and Pentagon—have been quick to point to the US indictment as corroboration of Trudeau’s claim. All the more so as the indictment suggests the Indian government official had targeted a whole series of North American-based leaders of the Khalistan movement for assassination. It even cites him telling Gupta in a recorded phone conversation that they had arranged for “some other guy” to do “the job ... in Canada.”

The Biden administration, meanwhile, is doing its utmost to play down and contain the fallout from the explosive DOJ indictment.

Speaking to reporters last Thursday, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby baldly declared that the indictment would have no impact on Indo-US relations and all but announced that Washington will accept whatever “explanation” the Modi government comes up with as to how and why an Indian “official” came to be organizing assassinations on US soil.

Kirby specifically praised the Modi government’s announcement that it has instructed a senior committee to probe the matter. India’s media is already trying to attribute the contract assassination plot to a “rogue” element in India’s foreign intelligence agency, RAW.

“I would just say two things,” Kirby concluded. “India remains a strategic partner, and we’re going to continue to work to improve and strengthen that strategic partnership with India. At the same time, we take this very seriously.”

Kirby’s muted reaction has nothing to do with any sense of embarrassment over US imperialism’s own record of bloody global crimes, including torture, kidnapping and

assassinations. Had the DOJ brought an indictment implicating Moscow, Beijing, Tehran or another regime viewed as an obstacle to Washington's drive for global hegemony in a murder plot, the Biden administration would be thundering about the sanctity of international law and threatening sanctions, if not more.

India, however, is a "global strategic partner" of Washington. For more than two decades Democratic and Republican administrations alike have worked to harness India to the US military-strategic offensive against China. India has been drawn into an ever tighter web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral security ties with the US and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. Washington is also promoting India as an alternate production chain hub to China and seeking to transform it into a cheap labour armaments producer for the US and its allies.



President Joe Biden led Washington in feting India's far-right prime minister, Narendra Modi, when he visited Washington for a state visit last June. [AP Photo/Evan Vucci]

In August, the Modi government let it be known that at Washington's behest, India's military top brass was concretizing what steps it would take to assist the US if and when war erupts with China.

The unsealed indictment in the US District Court for the Southern District of New York states that "Earlier this year, an Indian government employee ('CC-1'), working together with others, including GUPTA, in India and elsewhere, directed a plot to assassinate on US soil an attorney and political activist who is a US citizen of Indian origin residing in New York City (the 'Victim')."

According to the indictment, the Indian official identified as "CC-1" had told Gupta that various criminal cases against him in India would be made to go away if he orchestrated the victim's assassination. It further says that the official had authorized \$100,000 for

carrying out this assassination. Gupta then approached a so-called go-between to put him in touch with a contract killer. However, the go-between was an informant of an unidentified US law enforcement agency, and the “hitman” he arranged for Gupta to meet was an undercover agent of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

Although the indictment does not name the target of the assassination plot, the *Washington Post* has identified him as Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, the founder of and attorney for the New York-based Sikh separatist group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ). Like the assassinated Nijjar, Pannun is among the principal organizers of an ongoing “referendum” among Sikhs outside of India on whether the Punjab, the Sikh-majority state within the Indian Union, should secede and form a religio-communal Sikh state—Khalistan (“the land of the pure”). The Indian government has labelled Pannun and other referendum organizers as “terrorists”—a charge they vehemently deny—without providing so much as a shred of evidence.

Sikhs for Justice also calls for “justice” for the thousands of innocent Sikhs massacred in Delhi and elsewhere in north India in 1984. This pogrom—which occurred in the immediate aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination in retaliation for the Indian military’s invasion of the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple—was orchestrated by senior Congress Party leaders, who have never been indicted let alone convicted.

The Khalistan movement is a reactionary communalist movement. Its roots lie in the British Empire’s manipulation of religious identities as part of its “divide-and-rule” strategy and the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. It became a significant factor in Indian politics in the 1970s due to the machinations of Indira Gandhi and her then dominant Congress Party. But when it escaped their political control and became an armed insurgency, they brutally suppressed the Khalistani militants, while running roughshod over the rights of ordinary Sikhs.

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Today the Khalistan movement has little support among the Sikh masses of India. However, the rabid Hindu supremacism promoted by the Modi government and its Hindutva allies undoubtedly grates on the sensibilities of Sikhs, especially the more religious. Overseas, especially in the US and Canada, which is home to the largest number of Sikhs outside India, the Khalistan movement continues to be promoted by more conservative and generally better off Sikhs.

Canadian-based Sikh separatists were responsible for the horrific June 23, 1985 terrorist bombing of an Air India flight from Montreal to London, in which all 329 passengers and crew died.

The US indictment suggests that the Modi government, buoyed by the support it has received from the US, Canada and the other Western imperialist powers, now believes it can act with impunity, not just at home, but abroad in repressing and even physically eliminating political opponents it designates as “terrorists.”

In releasing the indictment of Gupta, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York Damian Williams postured as a great sentinel of the rule of law. “We will not tolerate,” he declared, “efforts to assassinate US citizens on US soil and stand ready to investigate, thwart, and prosecute anyone who seeks to harm and silence Americans here or abroad.”

Had Williams been more honest, what he would have declared is that the US ruling class and its state will not tolerate any foreign power violating its monopoly of state violence; and that while the US proclaims fealty to international law, when it comes to upholding its own predatory interests, as is now being demonstrated in its backing for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, it is a law unto itself.

Not only did the US, in the name of the “war on terror,” assert the right to kill with impunity those it deemed foreign terrorists through drone strikes. President Barack Obama boasted about assassinating Anwar al-Awlaki, a 40-year-old US citizen, in Yemen in September 2011. Two weeks later his administration murdered Awlaki’s 16-year-old American-born son.

It should come as no surprise that the Modi government, which rules India by openly thuggish methods, imprisoning journalists and activists under notorious catch-all UAPA anti-terrorism legislation, should adopt methods of state terror employed by India’s closest allies, US imperialism and the Zionist state of Israel. The Hindu-supremacist Modi regime, it should be noted, in addition to developing increasingly important military-security ties with Jerusalem, has an ideological-political affinity for Zionism, especially its ever-more

pronounced fascistic wing, based on their common hostility to Muslims, religious exclusivism and outright criminality.

The US indictment has caused New Delhi pause. Whereas it dismissed Canada's charge that agents of the Indian government orchestrated Nijjar's killing as "absurd," motivated" and an insult to Indian "democracy," it has been quick to indicate that it takes the New York indictment very seriously. Washington, in pursuit of its own rapacious imperialist interests, above all, its anti-China war drive, has no doubt made it clear that it will help the Modi government bury the whole affair in exchange for assurances that there will be no future such transgressions.

In addition to setting up a "high-level committee" to supposedly probe the allegation made in the indictment, the Modi government, through a Foreign Ministry statement, said, "India takes such inputs seriously since they impinge on our national security interests as well, and relevant departments were already examining the issue."

There is one further significant element in this whole sordid affair, one to which some media outlets have pointed. The Gupta indictment indicates US authorities had detailed prior knowledge of Nijjar's assassination; yet no explanation has been provided as to why they apparently took no steps to inform Canada or otherwise prevent this cold-blooded murder.

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