



Center for a Secure Free Society Global Dispatch



Checking Iran's Gambit

A Review of Canada's Policy
Toward the Islamic Republic

by Candice Malcolm

Iran's Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi recently confirmed what security scholars have long known – that Iranian agents are covertly working to advance the Islamic Republic of Iran's agenda in the West. A March 2017 television interview shows Alavi boasting about Iran's network of lobbyists and spies in Washington D.C., London, England and Canada.¹ Alavi claims there is a powerful "lobby group"—described as dual citizens in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom—who remain loyal to the Islamic Republic and clandestinely work to promote the regime's agenda. Likewise, Iran's Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan recently discussed his strategy for dealing with Iran's "enemies"—stated as the U.S. and Israel—during a February 2017 interview with Iran's state broadcaster.² According to Dehghan, Iran wants to be able "to surprise the enemy... (and) hit the enemy where it hurts the most," claiming, "there will be a situation of asymmetric warfare."³

These threats must be taken seriously by policymakers in Washington. And in crafting a comprehensive strategy to counter Iran's belligerence, policymakers can look to Canada for an example of how former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government took swift and decisive action to stop Iran's subversive agenda. Canada, much like the United States, has long been a target of Iran's covert foreign operations; Iran has a well-documented history of using Canada as a launching pad for its global fundraising and money-laundering operations, and has been caught openly calling for the infiltration of Canada's governing institutions and civil society. In 2012, in response to ongoing concerns about Iran's activities inside Canada, alongside Iran's increasingly aggressive activities on the world stage, Canada's Government closed Iran's embassy in Ottawa, expelled Iranian diplomats, cut diplomatic ties with Tehran and took a series of policy measures

to weaken Iran's efforts in Canada and abroad.

This Dispatch provides an overview of Iran's activities in Canada, including those of its proxy group Hezbollah, that led to Canada's firm response in 2012. In detailing the steps taken by the Harper government to halt Iran's efforts inside Canada, while also working to undermine Iran's ability to raise funds and bankroll global terrorist groups around the world, this paper provides an important case study for dealing with Iran. Under Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, elected in 2015, Canada's position towards Iran has shifted and has since fallen in line with other Western nations in lifting sanctions, re-opening diplomatic channels, and engaging in appeasement towards the regime in Tehran. Without a well-founded position against Iran, Canada could once again be vulnerable to Iran's subversive agenda. This paper will conclude with a policy framework and recommendations for the Trump administration on how best to deal with the threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's covert activities in Canada

Iran's historic activities in Canada have centered around its proxy group, Hezbollah. For much of the past three decades, Canada has been an important source of financing for the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shi'ite militia.

The case of Mohammad Hassan Dbouk shined a light on the organization's stronghold in Canada. After arriving in Vancouver and seeking refugee status in Canada in 1998, Dbouk established a major fundraising and procurement network in Canada under the command of Haj Hassan Hilu Laqis, then-chief military procurement officer of Hezbollah.⁴ Dbouk manipulated Canadian insurance agencies to obtain life

insurance policies for Hezbollah militants and raised funds through credit card and banking scams, as well as cigarette smuggling rings – the proceeds of which were sent to purchase high-tech military supplies used in Lebanon.

Dbouk became an important asset for Hezbollah, and was rejected five times for suicide missions because he was considered too valuable in Canada.⁵ Canadian and American law enforcement and intelligence services began monitoring Dbouk's activities, and worked together to have him indicted by a U.S. federal court in 2001.⁶ According to U.S. investigators, Dbouk was an Iranian-trained "intelligence specialist and propagandist (who) was dispatched to Canada by Hezbollah for the express purpose of obtaining surveillance and military equipment." Dbouk is believed to have fled to Lebanon to avoid his indictment, although the case against his cell was successfully litigated in North Carolina.⁷

In 2002, Hezbollah was listed as a banned terrorist entity in Canada, following a federal court case brought forward by Jewish organization B'nai Brith, however, its subversive reach into Canada continues.⁸ In 2011, the U.S. Treasury Department identified the Lebanese Canadian Bank (LCB),⁹ along with its subsidiaries, as a "financial institution of primary money laundering concern under Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act for the bank's role in facilitating money laundering activities for an international narcotics trafficking and money laundering network."¹⁰

The U.S. Treasury alleged that this bank's network had been facilitating the movement of illicit funds and narcotics from Latin America to Europe via the Middle East, laundering hundreds of millions of dollars monthly. This was allegedly done through bank accounts and other assets, including American car dealerships. Hezbollah was accused of deriving direct "financial support from the criminal activities of [this] network."¹¹

Apart from Hezbollah, the Iranian regime had its own direct reach into Canada vis-à-vis its embassy in Ottawa. Prior to the 2012 closing of the Iranian Embassy in Ottawa, sources believe that the Islamic

An Iranian diplomat urged individuals from Iran to "occupy high level positions" in government and society and to "resist melting into the dominant Canadian culture."

Republic was using its embassy to build a network of sympathizers and allies. Among its activities, for instance, the Islamic Republic's embassy worked with the local public school board in Ottawa to develop courses on Iranian culture and language.¹² Targeting second-generation Canadian children of Iranian origin, one course used textbooks that included Islamic Republic propaganda and images that glorified child soldiers, suicide bombers and martyrdom, as well as prominent and complementary photographs of Ayatollah Khomeini.¹³ Other course material included a cartoon with racist overtones depicting dark-skinned Israeli soldiers with large noses menacing a light-skinned Palestinian child.¹⁴

The Canadian government also had reason to believe that the Iranian embassy was being used as a headquarters for espionage and subversive activities within Canada. These concerns reached a tipping point when Iran's cultural attaché in Ottawa made troubling statements in a message to Canadians of Iranian descent. In a Farsi-language statement, Hamid Mohammadi urged individuals from Iran to "occupy high-level key positions" in government and society, and to "resist being melted into the dominant Canadian culture."¹⁵ It is against this backdrop that Canada's policy towards Iran changed.

The Harper Doctrine: A Case Study

Stephen Harper was first elected Prime Minister with a minority government in 2006. Within days of assuming office, sources say the Harper government began negotiating with European countries to order arrest warrants for various members of the Iranian regime. In June 2006, according to a senior source inside the Canadian government who worked closely on this file at the time, Harper urged his German counterparts to charge Iran's chief prosecutor with war crimes for the death of Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, who was raped, tortured and killed while being held in the Evin Prison in Iran. Germany had agreed to arrest Iran's chief prosecutor and extradite him to Canada to face charges. He was tipped off, however, and changed his travel plans at the last minute to avoid travelling through Germany.

In November 2006—seemingly as retribution and retaliation—Iran's Foreign Minister filed an official complaint against Canada with the United Nations, claiming that Canada was violating the human rights of its first nations' communities.¹⁶ Again, in seeming retaliation, one month later in December 2006, Iran's Foreign Minister accused the Canadian embassy in Tehran of being "a den of spies" for the United States.¹⁷

In 2010, after mounting concerns with the Lebanese-Canadian Bank were coming to the surface, the Harper government began banning banks from dealing with Iranian firms and businesses. Many Canadian banks, in turn, began closing accounts and seizing assets of Iranians in Canada.¹⁸ Relations worsened in early 2012, as Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird froze all remaining trade with Iran and imposed harsh sanctions against Iranian-based businesses and the Islamic Republic. Following the hostile raid on the U.K.'s embassy in Tehran in November 2011 by regime officials, Canada



Stephen Harper, former Prime Minister of Canada

decided to recall most of its diplomatic staff.¹⁹

Within a few months, relations between the two countries worsened, and, in September 2012, Canada called back its 10 remaining embassy staff from Tehran, citing safety concerns and what

was considered a "blatant disregard" for the Vienna Convention – an agreement guaranteeing the safety of diplomatic personnel. Meanwhile, on September 7, 2012, Canada declared Iranian diplomats 'persona non-grata' in Canada, and posted a notice on the Iranian embassy door ordering all Iranian officials to leave Canada within 5 days. At the time, Minister Baird said, "Canada views the government of Iran as the most significant threat to global peace and security in the world today."²⁰

Alongside expelling Iranian officials from Canada and severing diplomatic relations, the Harper government also declared the Islamic Republic of Iran as a state-sponsor of terrorism. The Government of Canada stated that "Iran sheltered and provided material support to violent non-state actors that engaged in terrorism."²¹ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite paramilitary wing, the Qods Force, was listed as a terrorist entity under the Canadian Criminal Code.²² Canada acknowledged Iran's association with other recognized terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and recognized that financing is the lifeblood of any terrorist organization. Cutting off this lifeline, therefore, was an important measure to curb Iran's funding of proxy groups and terrorist activities. Harper's major accomplishment was recognizing Iran as a state-sponsor of terrorism and taking

steps to limit its ability to support terror networks.

The Harper government's hardline position against Iran was accompanied by a legal framework aimed to curb Iran's reach in Canada and undermine its global financing of terrorism, while also enabling victims of Iranian-backed terrorism in their quest for justice. The Harper government amended Canada's State Immunity Act, which provides diplomatic immunity to foreign government actors. It also adopted the Justice for the Victims of Terrorism Act, allowing families and victims of terrorism to take legal action and seek damages against the perpetrators of terrorism and those who support terrorist organizations, including the government of Iran. This law effectively eliminated the legal distinction between terrorist groups and states who bankroll them, ending the immunity protection usually given to governments.

To assist victims in identifying and locating Iran's state assets, the Harper government released a list of known Iranian state-owned properties in Canada. In 2014, an Ontario judge ordered the seizure of more than \$7 million in bank accounts and property belonging to the Iranian regime.²³ The historic ruling validated the Harper government's legal changes, and enabled more than 90 Canadian victims of terrorism and their families to launch claims in Ontario's Superior Court to seek compensation from Iran for its role in training, arming and financing Islamic terrorist networks.

Trembling under Trudeau

While security experts and Iranian regime skeptics applauded Harper's firm stance against the Islamic Republic, many in the Iranian community in Canada opposed the closing of diplomatic ties. There are approximately 300,000 Canadians of Iranian origin, making up nearly 1% of the population and forming a well-organized political block. Most Canadians of Iranian background

reside in the suburbs of Toronto and Vancouver, creating a concentrated political base for the Liberal Party of Canada.²⁴

Appealing to a subset of this community that is sympathetic to the Islamic Republic, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau promised that, if elected, he would re-establish ties and seek to normalize relations with the Iranian regime. In the 2015 election, Trudeau



Justin Trudeau, current Prime Minister of Canada

secured a majority government and won all electoral districts with significant populations of Canadians from Iran. Trudeau's Liberal caucus now includes three MPs of Iranian origin, all elected to Parliament for the first time in 2015.²⁵

Ali Ehsassi, a Tehran-born businessman, and Majid Jowhari, an engineer who spent time working in Iran for a state-owned bank, both represent Toronto-area districts with large Persian populations.²⁶ In September 2016, Jowhari sponsored a petition from the Iranian Canadian Congress—an Iranian special interest group that is seen as sympathetic to the Iranian regime—calling on the government of Canada to re-establish diplomatic ties with Iran.²⁷

In November 2016, Ehsassi and Jowhari hosted an invitation-only roundtable to engage with the Iranian community in Toronto. Many members of the Iranian community complained that these meetings were stacked with supporters of the regime and those in favour of restoring ties, while ignoring and excluding regime critics, human rights activists, and political dissidents.²⁸

Meanwhile, the Trudeau government is working to strike a deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since taking office, Trudeau has lifted virtually all economic sanctions against Iran. During the UN General

Assembly meeting in September 2016, then-Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion quietly met with regime officials to discuss the status of Canada-Iran relations. Just days later, 65-year-old Montreal professor Homa Hoodfar was released from the Evin prison in Tehran and allowed to return to her family in Canada. Trudeau released a statement saying, “I would like to recognize the cooperation of those Iranian authorities who facilitated her release and repatriation,”²⁹ while failing to acknowledge that these were the same regime officials who arrested and jailed Hoodfar for undisclosed charges and held her in solitary confinement for several months.

The Mystery of Maryam Monsef

While Jowhari and EhSassi’s connections to Iran were known before their election, another member of Trudeau’s team was found to have ties with Iran that were unknown at the time of her election. A rising star in Liberal circles and a key member of Trudeau’s own inner circle, former Democratic Institutions Minister Maryam Monsef was discovered to have potentially misrepresented details of her birth and early life in Iran.³⁰

After an investigative report by the *Globe and Mail*, Monsef admitted that she was born in Mashhad, Iran in 1984, not Herat, Afghanistan in 1985 as she had previously claimed. Contrary to her official biography, Monsef revealed that she was born in Iran and had lived most of her early life in Mashhad, only staying in Afghanistan for approximately two years, between the ages of 9 and 11.³¹

Monsef maintains that she did not know the truth about where she was born or where she spent the early years of her life, however, it was revealed that Monsef travelled back to Iran on several occasions, in 2010, 2012 and 2013.³² In a 2014

interview, Monsef explicitly stated that it was her time in Iran—apparently volunteering with Afghan refugees in Mashhad—that motivated her to run for political office in Canada. Monsef later revealed that she travelled back to Iran using an Afghan passport and a pilgrimage visa, since Canadians were banned from independent travel to Iran following the diplomatic conflict in 2012. It took the Trudeau government and Monsef’s office over a week to respond to media requests regarding how she was able to travel to Iran and what travel documents she used.³³

Many questions remain unanswered when it comes to Maryam Monsef. It is unclear, for instance, when Monsef herself learned the truth about her place of birth or how she was able to obtain top secret security clearance in the Government of Canada without this information being discovered. Canada’s security and intelligence service, CSIS, would have conducted a comprehensive background check in order to grant Monsef clearance, so it is worrisome that information about Monsef’s birthplace only came to the surface due to the work of journalists in Canada. Following the controversy, Monsef was quietly demoted from her position as the Minister for Democratic Institutions and

Canadian intelligence services were apparently unable to discover [Monsef’s] true place of birth and frequent travels to Iran before granting her security status as a high-ranking minister of the Crown

moved to the symbolic role of the Minister for the Status of Women.³⁴

While there is no evidence, and no suggestion here, that Maryam Monsef is connected with the Iranian regime, the fact that Canada’s intelligence agencies were apparently unable to discover her true place

of birth and frequent trips to Iran before granting her security status as a high-ranking Minister of the Crown is cause for concern.

Implications for U.S. National Security

At a time when other Western leaders were negotiating with Iran and making backroom deals to facilitate a nuclear agreement, Canada, under the leadership of Stephen Harper, went in a different direction. Rather than appeasing Iran's mullahs—incorrectly categorizing this regime as “moderate” and legitimizing its reign of terror—Harper's actions sought to isolate the regime and prevent further subversive actions. When the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran was signed, Harper's foreign minister John Baird asserted that, “Canada has long held the view that every diplomatic measure should be taken to ensure Iran never obtains the capacity to sprint to nuclear weapons capability.”³⁵ Baird went on to say that “If Iran continues to obfuscate its international obligations, the international community must take immediate action and implement tough and binding sanctions. Until Canada is satisfied, our sanctions against the regime will remain in full force.”³⁶

Unlike the Obama administration, Harper urged other world leaders to look at Iran's actions, not its words, and sought to hold Iran accountable for its aggressive behavior. Harper took meaningful steps to curb Iran's ability to finance terrorism, and worked to prevent Iran from using Canada as a base for supplying resources to terror networks. Harper's actions, although scantily noticed, represented significant global leadership at the time, and serve as a model in dealing with nefarious global actors. Harper was said to be ‘Public Enemy Number One’ in the eyes of the Mullahs of the Islamic Republic, and since the election of Justin Trudeau, Canada no longer has

a vocal champion standing tall against the cruel and oppressive regime in Tehran.

Policy Recommendations

1. The U.S. State Department should designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity.
2. Close the loopholes on advocacy groups and ensure that individuals who lobby the U.S. on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Iran are legally registered and disclose their work under the Foreign Agents Registration Act.
3. The U.S. Congress should study the Islamic Republic's influence in the United States to determine whether U.S. interests are compromised.
4. In light of the recent travel ban on Iranians, the administration should seek to draw a distinction between political dissidents and regime loyalists, and avoid punishing allies within the Iranian community for their place of birth (if it is Iran).

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Candice Malcolm, International Fellow (Canada)

Candice Malcolm is an International Fellow with the Center for a Secure Free Society and a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. She is a columnist with the Toronto Sun and writes a syndicated national column for Post Media (the largest newspaper chain in Canada). Previously, Candice worked as the press secretary and advisor to the Honourable Jason Kenney, MP, PC, former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and former Defence Minister. She has also worked for several market-oriented think tanks in Canada, including the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and the Fraser Institute. As an expert on international political economy, immigration and trade—Candice has authored various policy reports, guest lectured at several universities, and has testified multiple times before the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs within the Canadian Parliament. She is the author of *Generation Screwed*, an Amazon best-selling book about public economics in Canada, and is a regular commentator on Canadian television & radio. A native of Vancouver, British Columbia, Candice splits her time between Toronto and San Francisco.

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Edited by Fernando Menéndez

TEL: +1 (703) 628.6988

EMAIL: info@securefreesociety.org

WEBSITE: securefreesociety.org

TWITTER: Follow us @securefreesoc

FACEBOOK: Like us /securefreesociety

509 C Street, Northeast
Washington D.C. 20002

