

# Closing submission by Iranian Canadian Congress

## Stage 1 hearings of Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions

- 1- In this document, we start with our comments regarding specific topics discussed in phase one of the hearings. While we have focused first on issues of particular concern to the Iranian Canadian community, as our organizational mandate requires of us, we follow that with increasingly general observations that we feel are our right and duty to communicate as Canadian citizens, regarding issues affecting Canadian democracy in general, which by extension affect Iranian Canadians in particular.
- 2- The most reliable information, regarding Iran, we found in the first phase of the inquiry was provided by CSIS in the summary report CAN.SUM.000014 (“Country Summary: Iran”) which indicates that “The Islamic Republic of Iran is not currently, nor has it been historically, a significant foreign interference (FI) threat actor in relation to Canadian federal elections including the 43<sup>rd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> General Elections”.

The report indicates the belief that “officials from Iran are likely monitoring, influencing, and collecting information on the Iranian diaspora community as part of its efforts to prevent criticism of the regime”.

It continues, "In some cases, Iran seeks to silence Canada-based critics through harassment and intimidation. For example, Canada-based families of several victims of the downing of flight PS752 have reported being pressured for their criticism of the regime's handling of the incident".

- 3- During the Public Hearing on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Mr. Hamed Esmailion stated:

*“A very small minority of Iranians in Canada are engaged directly or indirectly as either sympathizers or sometimes even overt operatives of the Islamic regime. It’s a small minority, however, leverages financial advantages that mostly originate from inside Iran and political backing advantages that -- political backing from the Islamic regime to create institutions disguised as community advocacy groups, media, social media, or even research institutes, but effectively*

*seek to undermine the majority of the community that opposes the regime, as well as to meddle with the influence Canadians or influence Canadian government and non-government institutions in favour of the regime's agenda."*

This claim broadly categorizes diverse organizations and individuals within the Iranian Canadian community as having illicit ties to the Islamic regime, without providing concrete evidence. It is critical to question such allegations, especially when considering Canada's legal and security frameworks that would address any such 'overt operatives'.

- 4- During the Public Hearing on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Mr. Hamed Esmaeilion stated:

*"Just recently, a member of the Iranian community in Canada sought to run for as a member of the federal Parliament. The intensity of the smear campaign against him went far beyond the normal fervor of political competition in Canada. We believe that this is indicative of a much more sophisticated and multi-layered attempt by the regime and its operatives to hinder the participation of Iranians opposed to the regime in the Canadian democratic institutions."*

In this instance, Mr. Esmaeilion seems to refer to a recent Conservative Party nomination race in Richmond Hill, for which he has not, to our knowledge, provided any evidence of foreign interference. According to publicly available information and reports, the campaign against the mentioned member of the Iranian Canadian community appears to have been a domestic initiative by Canadians, including those of Iranian heritage, rather than a result of foreign meddling. Notably, a Progressive Conservative Member of Provincial Parliament in Ontario emerged as the most vocal opponent of the individual who was referred to by Mr. Esmaeilion. It is essential to recognize that Canadians of all ethnic backgrounds have the right to freely participate in civic activities, supporting or opposing political candidates as they see fit.

In a democratic society such as Canada, members of political parties should not be intimidated by potential retaliatory accusations of foreign interference by their opponents. We hope that the commission will require Mr. Esmaeilion to provide evidence and will thoroughly investigate the merit of the claim of foreign interference in the internal procedures of the Conservative Party of Canada, through all available channels.

- 5- During the Public Hearing on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Mr. Hamed Esmaeilion stated:

*"We have organizations here that they don't have any relations with the civic organizations in the community, with the cultural organizations in the community like Tirgan civic association, civic organizations like us or even political members of the*

*community like our Parliament member, Mr. Ali Ehsassi, but they are everywhere, and they get funded by -- unfortunately, by our governments.”*

This statement suggests a biased view that legitimate Canadian entities are only those affiliated with certain cultural groups or political figures. By not mentioning other Iranian Canadian members of parliament or the many cultural organizations of the Iranian Canadian community, it fails to recognize the diversity within the Iranian Canadian community and undermines the legitimacy of various organizations that operate independently of the mentioned affiliations. Furthermore, the commission may take note that the Canadian government’s funding of organizations that “don’t have any relations with the civic organizations in the community”, does not, per se, indicate foreign interference.

We hope that the commission will exercise utmost caution in evaluating these claims and will mandate that all witnesses substantiate their statements with evidence and factual data.

Our apprehension stems from the potential for such claims to perpetuate long-standing internal divisions and conflicts within various diaspora and ethnic communities, including the Iranian Canadian community. Historically, certain factions within the Iranian Canadian community have engaged in discrediting individuals of Iranian origin based on their political beliefs and opinions, often levelling unfounded accusations of association with the Islamic Republic.

- 6- We want to use this opportunity to draw the attention of the commission to the fact that the primary source of discord in the Iranian Canadian community stems from differing views on Canada’s foreign policy toward Iran. Iranian Canadian activists who oppose military action or sanctions, citing their detrimental impact on the Iranian populace and regional peace and stability, are frequently discredited by hardline political factions. These factions prioritize regime change in Tehran over all else, disregarding both Canada’s interests and the potential harm that increased instability may inflict on the people of Iran and the broader region. We are concerned about the potential misuse of the commission’s public hearings by some parties, though the use of framing and exclusion, to limit the diversity of expressed opinion by Iranian Canadians. We oppose those assertions by Mr. Esmaeilion that conflate foreign influence with the legitimate and varied perspectives of Canadians of Iranian descent.
- 7- We unequivocally support Mr. Esmaeilion’s appeal for the federal government to actively pursue and investigate corrupt Iranian officials who seek refuge in Canada, along with

their illicit financial activities. Our organization has been at the forefront, leading the Iranian Canadian community in advocating against the laundering of corruption proceeds within our borders. This advocacy underscores our commitment to uphold justice and integrity, not just within the Iranian Canadian community, but also in safeguarding Canada's financial system against such abuses.

- 8- As interveners we were asked to submit questions to the panel, and we did submit them by e-mail as required. However, the only question tabled was about each panelist's beliefs regarding how foreign interference should be addressed. Therefore, there is a risk that the public, without further information, may assume the words of the panelists to be authoritative.
- 9- We found the testimony of many public servants and representatives of CSIS, who explained the definition of foreign interference and its distinction from foreign influence highly informative. This information was also laid out in document JKW0000069 ("Foreign Interference in Canada").

We also appreciated, in particular, the response from the Honorable Karina Gould to a question about Mr. Guillaume Sirois about why her threshold for alert would have been different from those of the panelists. "With all due respect", she said, "the member of the diaspora community is not necessarily charged with protecting Canada's democracy, and so their understanding of when and what to say publicly may be different". This comment underscores our belief that in some cases, claims of foreign interference may be based on political leveraging rather than rigorous standards of inquiry laid out by governmental bodies. We trust those rigorous standards will be applied throughout the commission proceedings.

- 10- It would have been a more comprehensive representation of the communities' concerns had we seen panelists with a more diverse set of opinions. We believe democracy requires equitable representation, and we do not believe that the panelists rightfully represented the diverse views from each of the broader diasporic communities to which they belong. Rather, they happened to be some of the more vocal factions within their communities.
- 11- Our impression is that many of the claims of foreign interference in specific electoral campaigns were heavily based on subjective feelings. The quotation by Mr. Gib van Ert during the April 4<sup>th</sup> proceedings is an illustration of such an observation. He stated: *"Maybe Mr. O'Toole is just a sore loser and he should look in the mirror"*.

We wish to point to a potential danger in allowing this type of subjective claim to be presented by many witnesses. When certain actors are given a public platform to repeat claims that are based on vague feelings and are not justified with adequate evidence, without sufficient questioning or cross-examination, there is a risk that those claims become the accepted as truth by the public. We wish to reiterate that uncovering truth requires various viewpoints to be represented.

12- In closing, we express our concern regarding the potential misapplication of the Commission's esteemed platform to propagate personal biases and unsubstantiated claims. Such actions could detract from the Commission's fundamental objective of conducting a fair and fact-based inquiry. We place our trust in the Commission's commitment to thorough, objective, and unbiased examination of all testimonies and evidence. It is our hope that the Commission will handle these sensitive matters with the high level of diligence and impartiality they demand, ensuring that the inquiry remains a credible and respected instrument of justice and truth-seeking. Alignment of public opinion with the official positions of a foreign state is not an adequate reason to conclude that foreign state interference has occurred. Making such an assumption denies the agency of the individuals in coming to rational conclusions based on their own interests.