



## Interview Summary: Kaveh Shahrooz

Kaveh Shahrooz was interviewed by Commission counsel on July 29, 2024.

### Notes to reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

### 1. Background

- [1] Kaveh Shahrooz is an Iranian-Canadian lawyer who is an outspoken critic of the current Iranian government. He ran in nomination contests to become a federal candidate in 2014 and in 2024.
- [2] Mr. Shahrooz was born in Iran in 1980. Around this time, several relatives of Mr. Shahrooz were imprisoned by the government of Iran as part of widespread crack down on perceived opponents of the regime. In 1988, his uncle was executed as part of a series of mass executions of political prisoners. Mr. Shahrooz's family moved to Canada in 1990.
- [3] The last time Mr. Shahrooz visited Iran was in 2000. At present times, neither he nor his family members in Canada feel safe returning to visit Iran.
- [4] Mr. Shahrooz received an undergraduate degree in political science and philosophy from the University of Toronto, and a law degree from Harvard. He has worked primarily as a lawyer. He has also been a Senior Policy Advisor at Global Affairs Canada, where he worked on human rights issues. He is a senior fellow with the MacDonald-Laurier Institute.

## 2. Activism Related to Iran

- [5] Mr. Shahrooz indicated that ever since he was a law student, he has been involved in human rights and democratic issues related to Iran. He identifies himself as an outspoken public critic of the Iranian regime.
- [6] Mr. Shahrooz's activism has taken a number of forms, including:
- a. Public writing in various forums on human rights issues and Iran;
  - b. Participation at conferences, including speaking engagements;
  - c. Frequent appearances on television broadcasts;
  - d. Organizing protests and other public events; and
  - e. Lobbying parliamentarians and public officials.
- [7] Mr. Shahrooz helped establish the Iran Justice Collective. This is a Canadian organization that focuses on planning, coordinating and assisting advocacy efforts outside Iran that assist and amplify the voices and demands of Iranian prisoners of conscience, victims or the Iranian regime's human rights violations and their families, refugees and dissidents. Mr. Shahrooz has also provided legal advice and support to the Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims.
- [8] Mr. Shahrooz's activism has made him a known figure in the Iranian-Canadian community, and in the western public more generally. He has also been the subject of reporting by Iranian state media, where he has been described as a "stooge" of western imperialism and Zionism.
- [9] Mr. Shahrooz stated that he has always experienced a baseline of harassment due to his advocacy work. This has included receiving threatening messages, defamatory and untrue messages about him on social media, and attempts to break into his digital accounts, including by actors identified by Google as state-backed.

### 3. The Iranian Diaspora in Canada

- [10] Mr. Shahrooz described the Iranian diaspora in Canada as large and growing. It is relatively well educated and economically successful.
- [11] Mr. Shahrooz explained that there have been several waves of immigration from Iran to Canada. The general political alignment of these waves are different. Earlier waves of immigration were comprised of a large number of people fleeing political persecution by the Government of Iran. Members of this group tend to be opposed to the Iranian regime and prioritize regime change and democratization.
- [12] Subsequent waves of immigration included a substantial number of people who immigrated to Canada based on economic criteria. These individuals often flourished under the Iranian regime and were accordingly more supportive of it. These individuals often prioritize normalizing relations with Iran and developing closer economic ties.
- [13] Mr. Shahrooz believes that the Iranian diaspora in Canada is the subject of interest by the Government of Iran due to its size, and the fact that a significant portion of it is both hostile towards the regime and outspoken in its views. More recent immigration from Iran includes individuals with close ties to the Iranian Regime, who the Regime wants to protect.

### 4. Foreign Interference Tactics by the Iranian Regime

- [14] Mr. Shahrooz described his understanding of Iranian foreign interference tactics used in Canada and its general impacts on the community.

#### 4.1 Foreign Interference Activities

- [15] He indicated that there was a general fear within activist and dissident communities that Iran could engage in direct violence against them, even when they are abroad. This fear is informed by events in the 1980s and 1990s where there were coordinated assassination and kidnapping campaigns against dissidents living abroad, as well as recent successful kidnapping of dissidents and failed plots of such kidnappings.

- [16] The Iranian government also implicitly or explicitly threatens diaspora members' family members who continue to live in Iran. Mr. Shahrooz described one incident that followed his appearance on Voice of America's Persian language service. A family member living in Iran contacted him to say that a government security official had visited him in his home shortly after the broadcast and questioned him about his relationship with Mr. Shahrooz.
- [17] Mr. Shahrooz also described fear within the Iranian community about participating in political demonstrations or protests. He described how protestors photos can be taken and posted on social media, which is monitored by the Iranian government. This can lead to them being identified as dissidents and being subsequently targeted, including arrest should they subsequently visit Iran.
- [18] Mr. Shahrooz also indicated that the Iranian government has taken steps to infiltrate and take control over domestic Canadian organizations. They use these proxies to attempt to influence domestic Canadian politics, for example, by normalizing the Iranian regime in the eyes of the Canadian public.
- [19] Mr. Shahrooz also discussed online harassment and targeting by the Iranian government through what is commonly known as its "cyber army". This can involve the use of government controlled social media accounts or bots to slander individual activists and dissidents in the eyes of the broader Iranian community. The cyber army also is used to amplify pro-regime messages.
- [20] One way that the Iranian government attacks the credibility of dissidents – frequently using social media – is to falsely associate them with an organization called the Mojahedin-e-Khalq or "MEK".

## 4.2 The Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK)

- [21] Mr. Shahrooz described the Mojahedin-e-Khalq ("**MEK**") as a controversial organization within the Iranian community. It originated in the 1960's as an armed Islamic-Marxist movement that was opposed to the Shah. Following the 1979 revolution, it became the target of repression by the Iranian government. Members of the MEK relocated to Iraq and, in cooperation with the Iraqi government, fought against Iranian government during

the Iran-Iraq war. As a result of this, the MEK is widely viewed as a traitor within the Iranian community. Over time, the MEK has evolved into what Mr. Shahrooz describes as a cult-like entity, which has further damaged its reputation within Iranian society.

- [22] Mr. Shahrooz explained that the MEK plays a role within the Iranian community that is difficult to understand for outsiders. It is deeply unpopular with both supporters and opponents of the Iranian regime. Mr. Shahrooz explained that the Iranian regime discredits its opponents by alleging that they are associated with the MEK. This can be successful, notwithstanding the fact that the MEK is also opposed to the Iranian government, because of the deep unpopularity of the MEK in mainstream Iranian society.

### 4.3 Impact of Foreign Interference

- [23] Mr. Shahrooz described what he viewed to be impacts of foreign interference. They included making individuals fearful of criticizing foreign governments, as well as hesitancy in engaging in the Canadian political process (both in terms of running for office as well as being a supporter of a particular political campaign).
- [24] Mr. Shahrooz commented that it can be difficult for outsiders to see foreign interference when it occurs or how it impacts community members. This is because it can often take a nuanced understanding of the politics, culture and language of a diaspora community to be able to properly contextualize activities and recognize them as foreign interference. Without this understanding, outsiders may also fail to appreciate the impacts of foreign interference on individuals.

## 5. Experience in Nomination Campaigns

- [25] The federal riding of Richmond Hill is located in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario. It has a large Iranian Canadian population, as well as a large Chinese Canadian population. Mr. Shahrooz believes that the large Iranian population makes the riding vulnerable to Iranian foreign interference.

[26] Mr. Shahrooz has sought a party nomination to contest the Richmond Hill riding at the federal level on two occasions. In 2014 he sought the Liberal Party nomination and was unsuccessful. In 2024 he sought the Conservative Party nomination. He withdrew shortly after entering.

### 5.1 2014 Liberal Party Nomination Contest

[27] Mr. Shahrooz had always been interested in politics. He cared about political issues, particularly foreign affairs. In 2014, he sensed that there was an opportunity to get involved personally. He had a sense that the public wanted to see change, and that some of what he was hearing from the Liberal Party said appealed to him.

[28] He described the reaction of the Iranian community to his candidacy as largely positive. However, he noted that there were rumours that he was associated with the MEK spreading within the Iranian diaspora community. This was not on social media, but rather on private communication groups, like informal email groups.

[29] Mr. Shahrooz explained that he has previously been accused of being associated with the MEK. This is because his uncle, who was executed in 1988, was in fact connected to the MEK. Because of this family connection, there had been allegations over the years that he was also MEK. However, when he launched his nomination campaign, he noted a notable increase in this narrative spreading within the community.

[30] Mr. Shahrooz noted that, in 2014, the language of “foreign interference” was not widely used, and he did not think about his experiences at the time in those terms. However, in retrospect, he recalls events that could have been related to foreign interference by Iran.

[31] In particular, he recalls that, on the date of the nomination meeting, his opponent – who was also a member of the Iranian Canadian diaspora and is regarded as more sympathetic to the Iranian regime – bussed in significant numbers of community members to the contest. He described them as appearing not to know why they were being brought into the contest, and being told on arrival that they were there to vote for his opponent. He noted that there was essentially no checking of the eligibility for the individuals on the buses to vote.

[32] Mr. Shahrooz made reference to the Commission’s description of the 2019 nomination contest in the Don Valley North riding. [This topic was discussed in Section 6.2 of the Commission’s *Initial Report*.] He indicated that the description of bussing in Don Valley North resonated with his experiences in Richmond Hill in 2014. Mr. Shahrooz indicated, however, that it is challenging to distinguish between foreign interference and the “ordinary dirtiness” of party politics.

## 5.2 2014-2024 Political Activism

[33] In between his unsuccessful 2014 nomination campaign and launching his 2024 nomination bid, Mr. Shahrooz described himself as becoming even more outspoken in his criticism of the Iranian government. Much of his most public anti-regime advocacy took place during this period, and as a result, his public profile as an Iranian advocate also grew.

[34] During this period, Mr. Shahrooz also began to write on the topic of foreign interference. Mr. Shahrooz described he first became aware of the threat that foreign states could seek to influence Canadian elections during his participation in the Liberal nomination contest in 2014. From that point on, he continued to pay attention to similar issues, including in nomination and general election races throughout the country. For example, he recalled public reporting on a local religious leader in Canada who was alleged to be connected to the Iranian Regime.

[35] Mr. Shahrooz also described having various conversations within the Iranian community, such as relating to a local institution believed to be a front of the Iranian Regime, and with people involved in politics (including specifically on the nature of nomination contests).

[36] His experience and observations in this area led him to publish two articles relating to foreign interference: (1) an article titled “Foreign influence from Iran in Canada is a real concern” in the Toronto Sun in February 2019;<sup>1</sup> and (2) an article titled “Canada needs

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<sup>1</sup> COM0000487.

to fix its democratic blind spot: nomination contests” through the McDonald-Laurier Institute in November 2019.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.3 2024 Conservative Party Nomination Contest

- [37] In 2023, Mr. Shahrooz was approached by high ranking officials within the Conservative Party of Canada (“**CPC**”) who encouraged him to run for the CPC nomination in Richmond Hill. Mr. Shahrooz was reluctant to run. One of the reasons was his belief that Richmond Hill would be the target of foreign interference by Iran, and that if ran there, he would be a target. He suggested other ridings where he could run, but the CPC leadership was not interested in those options.
- [38] Mr. Shahrooz believed that Richmond Hill could be a target of foreign interference given its sizable Iranian and Chinese diaspora communities, as well as his prior experience as an Iranian rights activist.
- [39] Mr. Shahrooz had further discussions with other senior CPC officials in January 2024, who continued to urge him to seek the CPC nomination. He was told that Richmond Hill was a winnable riding for the CPC, and that all he needed to do to win the nomination was to knock on doors and sign-up members.
- [40] Mr. Shahrooz ultimately decided to seek the CPC nomination. He took basic steps to protect himself against foreign interference threats: He limited access to his campaign’s computer system in case there were hacking attempts, and he worked on a communications plan in case there were renewed allegations that he was associated with the MEK.
- [41] The CPC did not provide information or guidance to Mr. Shahrooz about how to protect against foreign interference threats.
- [42] Mr. Shahrooz explained that he raised concerns with the CPC of the potential of foreign interference in the Richmond Hill nomination contests on several occasions. He described that the party acknowledged the threat but did not engage further.

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<sup>2</sup> COM0000483.



- [43] Even before Mr. Shahrooz officially announced his intention to seek the CPC nomination, his intentions became known within the Iranian Canadian community. When this occurred in late January or early February 2024, Mr. Shahrooz noted a dramatic increase in online activity that was critical of him.
- [44] Mr. Shahrooz was asked why he believed that the online attacks against him were foreign interference, as opposed to ordinary political discourse. He explained that his team examined the social media accounts that were used to attack him and that they were highly suspicious. Most of the attacks against him were from accounts that purported to be hardline regime critics. Mr. Shahrooz explained that if he were attacked by pro-regime accounts, this would have actually helped him by bolstering his anti-regime credentials. However, when the anti-regime accounts were researched by his campaign team, they discovered that most of them were previously used to spread pro-regime talking point. Mr. Shahrooz believed that these accounts had been intentionally re-purposed to be used to discredit regime critics such as him in the eyes of the wider Iranian diaspora.
- [45] The specific attacks against Mr. Shahrooz also did not align with the purported identity of the posters. Mr. Shahrooz noted that one of the attacks against him from these accounts was that he unfairly defamed certain members of the Iranian community. Mr. Shahrooz explained that this was a reference to statements that he had made about members of the “Iran lobby”. The Iran lobby is how Mr. Shahrooz refers to a loose group of individuals and organizations that work to normalize the Iranian regime in the eyes of Canadians by white washing its crimes.
- [46] Mr. Shahrooz explained that it would not make sense for allegedly anti-regime activists to criticize Mr. Shahrooz for defaming the Iran lobby, as any anti-regime activists would have shared the same negative view of the Iran lobby. Mr. Shahrooz indicated that it would only make sense for a pro-regime actor to criticize him for his own comments about the Iran lobby.
- [47] Several of the accounts repeated the allegations that Mr. Shahrooz was affiliated with the MEK. In addition to referencing his uncle, the accounts also stated that a different, more distant relative of Mr. Shahrooz was a member of the MEK. While this was true,

Mr. Shahrooz noted that his connection to that relative was not a matter of public knowledge. He had never spoken publicly about the relative, who had a different family name. Several online accounts posted photos of this relative. Mr. Shahrooz would have expected individual to be aware of his relationship to his uncle, but not the other relative. Mr. Shahrooz believes that only someone with links to the Iranian government or security services would have that information.

- [48] Mr. Shahrooz was shown a X post (formerly Twitter)<sup>3</sup> which he identified as an example of the online attacks that he was facing. He described that this X post, which was published on January 24, 2024, contains allegations that he is connected to the MEK. Specifically, the text of the post alleges that Mr. Shahrooz received funding for his campaign from the MEK, that he was holding himself out to be a lawyer when he was not licensed and that he sued his critics to silence them.
- [49] The post also contained several photos and screenshots at various events and speaking engagements. For example, there are multiple pictures of Irwin Cotler and Justin Trudeau, including ones with Mr. Shahrooz. He described that the allegation in the post is that Mr. Cotler advocated for the removal of the MEK from the Canadian terrorist entities list, and that since Mr. Shahrooz and Mr. Cotler know each other, Mr. Shahrooz was involved in this. Mr. Shahrooz described that this was categorically false, especially as Mr. Cotler was no longer an elected official when the MEK was removed from the terrorist entities list.
- [50] In another photo attached to the same January 24 X post, someone had found an old photograph of Mr. Shahrooz in the Parliamentary press gallery during an event commemorating the 1988 killings in Iran. One of the other persons in the photo had a husband who in turn had relatives that were associated with the MEK. The poster used this fact to link Mr. Shahrooz to the MEK. Mr. Shahrooz indicated that it would take a high degree of time and energy to dig up a connection like this, and that he did not expect that an ordinary domestic critic of him to do so.

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<sup>3</sup> COM0000488.

- [51] Other pictures attached to the post include screenshots of Mr. Shahrooz's membership and participation in various advocacy organizations, as well as miscellaneous social media posts he has published relating to minority rights (e.g., LGBTQ, International Women's Day, Eid-al-Fitr celebrations).
- [52] Mr. Shahrooz expressed his view that the attacks against him online were being amplified at an unnatural rate. He noted that on two occasions during the contest, within a two-week period, his name was trending on X. He indicated that there was no conceivable way that he would become the focus of sufficient "organic" interest to make him trend on X. Being a contestant in a party nomination contest would not attract the necessary degree of attention without some form of manipulation.
- [53] Mr. Shahrooz noted that there were also online comments that he interpreted as threats against him. For example, one social media post indicated that he was holding meetings at a specific Tim Horton's, coupled with threatening statements. Mr. Shahrooz indicated that he had, in fact, been at that location, but that it was not a public event. He believed that he was being surveilled, and that the online messages were threatening. He was concerned for his safety as a result of viewing them.
- [54] Mr. Shahrooz believed that his online activities were also being surveilled. His campaign prepared a campaign website and, as a testing measure, made it go live for a 1-hour period in the middle of the night. Otherwise, the website was not accessible, or had its URL been announced. Within hours of the test, there were social media posts with screen shots of his website circulating. Mr. Shahrooz indicated that the only way that this could occur is if someone were constantly monitoring URLs that happened to include his name in them. He believed that ordinary critics of his campaign would not have engaged in this kind of monitoring.
- [55] There was also a letter writing campaign directed at the CPC leadership urging it not to green light Mr. Shahrooz's candidacy. [Under Party rules, the Party had to approve or "green light" nomination contestants before they could become the Party's candidate in the election.] This was done using an online platform that made it easy to send a letter to the Party. Mr. Shahrooz's campaign could not identify the organizers of the campaign.

- [56] Mr. Shahrooz attempted to alert the Party about the various issues that he believed were foreign interference related. For example, he recounted that he specifically forwarded the January 24 tweet to the CPC as an example of the several lies being spread from unknown accounts, and informing the CPC that they should be concerned about these kinds of attack.
- [57] He indicated that the party was not receptive. Mr. Shahrooz's impression was that the Party did not fully understand the nature of foreign interference or why the things that he was reporting were troubling.
- [58] Mr. Shahrooz was extremely frustrated by the online attacks against him, as well as the failure of the CPC to respond to the concerns he was raising.
- [59] Later, the January 24 X post was retweeted by a sitting member of the Ontario Legislative Assembly.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Shahrooz did not claim that the MPP was acting at the behest of the Iranian government. However, he felt that the retweet effectively laundered and amplified the inauthentic campaign against him. While he and his campaign attempted to counter the narratives that were circulating, the negative messages were now reaching hundreds of thousands of persons, and there was little that he could do.
- [60] Mr. Shahrooz noted that the campaign against him was having an impact not only on himself but also his volunteers. He knew of individuals who wanted to support his candidacy but did not volunteer out of fear of what might happen to them or their family. One of his volunteers told him that they could no longer work on his campaign because their parents were planning to travel to Iran and they were afraid for their safety if they were associated to Mr. Shahrooz's campaign.
- [61] One week after the launch of Mr. Shahrooz's campaign, he was informed by the CPC that they were going to close the race shortly, meaning impose a deadline after which newly signed up members could not vote. Mr. Shahrooz believed that this would effectively end his candidacy, as his main opponent had been campaigning for months and had signed up more memberships than he had. He believed that, with more time, he

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<sup>4</sup> COM0000488.

would have made up the difference, but with the contest being cut off, he had no prospect of success.

[62] Mr. Shahrooz was never given an explanation for why the campaign was, in his view, cut short. He believes that the CPC had been scared away from his candidacy due to the inauthentic online controversy surrounding him.

[63] As a result, on February 22, 2024, he made a public announcement indicating that, due to both the foreign interference he faced and the quick end to the campaign, he would be withdrawing.<sup>5</sup>

[64] Following this announcement, he contacted the party directly to inform them of his choice. He has never heard anything back from the party.

[65] Ultimately, Mr. Shahrooz's campaign was cut short so quickly that he never actually filed the necessary paperwork with the CPC to formally become a nomination contestant.

## 6. Events Following the End of the 2024 Nomination Campaign

[66] Following his announced withdrawal, Mr. Shahrooz became aware of a letter writing campaign directed at the CPC asking for an investigation into the party's handling of Mr. Shahrooz's complaints. To the best of Mr. Shahrooz's knowledge, there has been no response to this campaign from the CPC.

[67] Following media reporting in February 2024 on the events of the nomination contest in Richmond Hill<sup>6</sup>, Mr. Shahrooz was contacted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They wished to interview him about his allegations of foreign interference in the Richmond Hill nomination race. He agreed and was interviewed about his allegations. No response or follow-up has been received from the RCMP since.

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<sup>5</sup> COM0000488.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see COM0000484 and COM0000486.

[68] Looking back at his experience in the nomination contest, Mr. Shahrooz described that while it does not impact his desire or resolve to speak out against human right injustices, it reduces his willingness to engage in the Canadian electoral process.

[69] Mr. Shahrooz also noted the particularities that exist within diaspora communities, such as the nuances of these communities and the role language can play. This can make it harder for mainstream entities to fully appreciate potential manifestations of foreign interference. He also noted the challenges posed by private networks through which false information and lies are spread, including the difficulty in countering these narratives, as well as the sheer volume of disinformation.