



## Foreign Interference Commission

### Public Consultation Process

## Small Group Consultation Meeting Public Summary

In the summer of 2024, Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue and members of the Foreign Interference Commission's (the "**Commission**") Public Consultation Process ("**PCP**") team met with five individuals belonging to the Iranian Canadian community in a consultation meeting organized with the assistance of the Iranian Justice Collective ("**IJC**"). This is a summary of the information shared at that meeting.

Notes to reader:

- The Commissioner has not and will not be making any findings about the accuracy of the information shared at the consultation meeting or make any findings of fact based on this information.
- The meeting attendees did not make an oath or swear to tell the truth before sharing information at this meeting.
- The meeting attendees were not subjected to cross-examination.
- The meeting attendees have reviewed and approved the contents of this public summary.
- Meeting attendees were given the option of anonymizing themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees opted to anonymize themselves, they are designated as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", etc.
- At each of the consultation meetings, the meeting attendees were asked to answer two questions, which are set out below. The meeting attendees were each given a total of 15 minutes to respond to both questions.
- Where necessary, Commission counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets and in the footnotes to assist the reader.

## Executive Summary

- Certain attendees described how their advocacy and activism opposing the Iranian regime have placed them at risk. Certain attendees described measures they have put in place in an effort to protect themselves. Certain attendees described their experiences living under threat, including death threats, and in constant fear. Certain attendees said that, despite reporting threats they have received to the Canadian authorities, they do not feel safe in Canada.
- Certain attendees described threats made against their loved ones in the Islamic Republic of Iran (“Iran”) because of the attendees’ actions in Canada. Certain attendees described measures taken against their loved ones in Iran, including interrogation, detention, and prohibitions placed on their ability to travel out of Iran.
- One attendee described being the subject of disinformation, including allegations that they were providing assistance to extremist and paramilitary groups in Iran. One attendee described sophisticated means used by the regime to subject Iranian Canadian advocates and activists to character assassination, including through traditional and social media.
- Certain attendees discussed money laundering activities by the Iranian regime in Canada. Certain attendees said that money laundering benefiting the Iranian regime takes place through unregulated currency exchange offices in Canada.
- Certain attendees talked about the presence of Iranian government officials who were involved in criminal activities and human rights abuses in Canada. Certain attendees discussed the impact that the presence of Iranian government officials in Canada has on members of the Iranian Canadian community.
- Certain attendees said that Iranian Canadian community organizations have been infiltrated and taken over by persons acting on behalf of the Iranian regime.

## 1. Participants' responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the participants was: *How are you, your loved ones and members of your community impacted by foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes and democratic institutions?*

### Participant 1: Ms. Farzaneh<sup>1</sup>

Ms. Farzaneh said that she moved to Canada from Iran twelve years ago. Ms. Farzaneh said that her ties with Iran remain strong. Ms. Farzaneh said that her activism on behalf of Iranians and Iranian Canadians has put her in dangerous situations due to Iran's foreign interference, impacting her safety and that of those close to her.

Ms. Farzaneh described hateful messages published by individuals associated with Canadian academic institutions calling for the execution of those activists who oppose the Iranian regime. Ms. Farzaneh said that her complaints to the institutions about these messages were dismissed on the pretext of freedom of expression.

Ms. Farzaneh said that she has been openly threatened on social media, including threats that she will be reported to the Iranian government.

Ms. Farzaneh recalled that when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ("**IRGC**") were designated as a terrorist entity by the Canadian government [in June 2024], there were calls by pro-regime individuals for the Iranian government to reciprocally designate the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("**RCMP**") as a terrorist entity, which was done by the Iranian regime.

Ms. Farzaneh also opined that pro-Hamas demonstrations taking place in Canada were supported by the Iranian regime, a fact which she says has been confirmed in recent media reporting. Further, Ms. Farzaneh noted that the Iranian regime downplayed the violence against activists protesting in Iran after the murder of Mahsa Amini.

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<sup>1</sup> **Note:** Last name withheld at the request of the participant.

Ms. Farzaneh described her experience of being targeted for her activism, stating that after she engaged with Canadian politicians, her photo was shared online. Ms. Farzaneh said this caused her great distress because some of her close loved ones still live in Iran. Ms. Farzaneh said that this put her loved ones in Iran at great risk of retribution by the Iranian regime for her actions, given the Iranian regime's history of kidnapping and arresting activists' family members. Ms. Farzaneh said that this had a profound impact on her. Ms. Farzaneh said her loved ones in Iran live in constant fear. Ms. Farzaneh said that the Iranian regime's efforts to silence Iranians and Iranian Canadians through threats and harassment are well-known in Iran and throughout the Iranian diaspora. Ms. Farzaneh said that this perpetuates an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship.

## Participant 2

Participant 2 said that they work in academia and left Iran to pursue higher education abroad. Participant 2 said that they have chosen not to engage with Iran as a result of the sensitivity of their field of research. Participant 2 said that their loved ones in Iran have been approached multiple times and pressured to share details about Participant 2's work, activities, and Canadian address. Participant 2 said that their loved ones have refused to disclose any such information.

Participant 2 said that one of their close loved ones was interrogated for over five hours due only to their connection with Participant 2. Participant 2 said that another one of their close loved ones was also interrogated and misled about Participant 2's activities. Participant 2 said that their loved one was also told that Participant 2 was being monitored and surveilled by the Iranian regime, and that Participant 2 is not safe in Canada. Participant 2 said that their loved one was asked to tell Participant 2 to stop their activism.

Participant 2 said that they have been the subject of media coverage stating that they were assisting anti-regime, extremist, and paramilitary groups in Iran. Participant 2 said they reported this to the provincial police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("**RCMP**"). Participant 2 said that the RCMP did not follow up. Participant 2 said that, while the RCMP advised it was communicating with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service ("**CSIS**"), Participant 2 checked with other channels and apparently there was no such

communication from the RCMP to CSIS. Participant 2 said they took steps to protect themselves on the advice of others, including relocating from their home for weeks. Participant 2 said they are considering moving homes to protect themselves.

Participant 2 said that people in the Iranian Canadian community know that when they are featured in communications from the IRGC, they become targets for agents acting on behalf of the Iranian regime and are no longer safe.

### Participant 3

Participant 3 said that money laundering by the Iranian regime in Canada is a major concern for the Iranian Canadian community. Participant 3 said that this illegal activity, which involves millions of dollars, is not controlled by the Canadian government or banks. Participant 3 said that this illegal activity is harming the Canadian economy.

Participant 3 said that one of the means of money laundering in Canada that IRGC uses is food importing. Participant 3 stated that the IRGC has a foothold on the Iranian food distribution business in Canada. Participant 3 said that the IRGC is aided by accountants and immigration lawyers, and that it exacts the cooperation of Iranian Canadian business owners by threatening their loved ones in Iran, and by bribing them.

Participant 3 said that there are at least 30 currency exchange stores on Yonge Street in Toronto, Canada, with a total of 50 – 60 currency exchange stores on Yonge Street between Yonge and Finch, and Richmond Hill. Participant 3 stated that there are too many exchanges for them all to be legitimately profitable. Participant 3 said that these exchanges are not controlled.

Participant 3 expressed their concern that Iranian Canadians who oppose the Iranian regime will never be able to get into Canadian politics or contribute to Canada's affairs because of the IRGC and its supporters. Participant 3 said that members of the Iranian Canadian diaspora that support the regime have a voice in Canadian politics. Participant 3 said this is a huge disappointment.

Participant 3 spoke about sophisticated means used to accomplish the character assassination of Iranian Canadian human rights, political, and community activists. Participant 3 said that both traditional and social media have been used to incorrectly portray targets as pro-war and pro-sanctions against Iran. Participant 3 said that new immigrants from Iran have very strong ties to Iran, which are easy to manipulate.

Participant 3 said that when Iranian Canadians who oppose the regime try to start a new community organization or become involved in elections, they are attacked. Participant 3 said that Facebook groups have been started specifically to target people. Participant 3 said that these efforts have a big impact on the community and that they can undermine the community's trust in the target and its efforts to organize.

Participant 3 said that people acting on behalf of the regime infiltrate and take over community and public organizations. Participant 3 cited the example of efforts to deflect the Canadian government's investigation into flight PS 752. Participant 3 said that those working on behalf of the regime work with the media and politicians in Canada to normalize Iran and its actions. Participant 3 said that some such community groups are receiving Canadian government grant funding.

## Participant 4

Participant 4 said that they live under constant fear and stress because of their work with the IJC. Participant 4 said that they know that agents of the Iranian regime are monitoring them in Canada. Participant 4 said that they have to remain anonymous in all public fora in order to protect their loved ones. Participant 4 said that their activism has forced them to be constantly vigilant, and that they are always looking over their shoulder. Participant 4 said that they have come to terms with the fact that they will never be able to return to Iran.

Participant 4 described enduring beatings on the streets of Tehran for attending protests and other actions. Participant 4 described sacrificing their professional career in Iran. Participant 4 described their feelings knowing that an official who commanded those who

beat Mahsa Amini is living consequence-free in Canada enjoying the benefits of Canadian democracy while ordinary people live in fear.

Participant 4 described the unprecedented level of fear they experienced resulting from their involvement in a political campaign. Participant 4 said that one of their campaign meeting locations was shared anonymously on Twitter. Participant 4 described threats sent to members of their team. Participant 4 spoke about the concerns their loved ones expressed for Participant 4's safety as a result of their volunteer work.

Participant 4 said that the life of an Iranian Canadian activist is one of constant threat and fear.

### Participant 5: Dr. Hamed Esmaelion

Dr. Esmaelion lost close loved ones on flight PS 752 and has been engaged in advocacy efforts connected to that event since then.

Dr. Esmaelion said that he has conducted many advocacy campaigns since flight PS 752, and during these campaigns, he has seen the extent of these attacks get worse.

Dr. Esmaelion said that about a year ago, a member of the IRGC was captured on video walking freely in Montreal, which generated widespread objections within the Iranian Canadian community. Dr. Esmaelion said that this individual had threatened certain of his close loved ones living in Iran and has threatened Dr. Esmaelion should he return to Iran. Dr. Esmaelion said that his close loved ones living in Iran were not permitted to leave Iran to attend a memorial for flight PS 752. Dr. Esmaelion said that one of his close loved ones living in Iran, who is elderly, was interrogated for two hours which was very distressing for them. Dr. Esmaelion said that another of his close loved ones living in Iran has been unable to obtain their passport. Dr. Esmaelion said that this close loved one, as part of their efforts to obtain their passport, was told to return the following week – they returned on the day that Canada designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization [on June 19, 2024], and his close loved one was told they would not be permitted to leave Iran. Dr.

Esmaelion said that others who lost loved ones on flight PS 752 have been subjected to this and other mistreatment, including abductions, arrest, and sham trials.

Dr. Esmaelion said that he has been the subject of verbal attacks in Canada as well as in the United Kingdom. Dr. Esmaelion said that a man tried to physically attack him at a protest. Dr. Esmaelion said that he has reported these incidents to the RCMP. Dr. Esmaelion said that the RCMP mostly collects information, that they do not take action.

Dr. Esmaelion said that, further to a recommendation from the RCMP and the police, he has taken a different path to work each day to minimize the risk. Dr. Esmaelion said that he has also had cameras installed in his home and business, and he checks his business appointments in advance for possible connections to the Iranian regime. Dr. Esmaelion said that he has undertaken these additional measures on his own initiative. Dr. Esmaelion said that he does not feel safe in Canada.

Dr. Esmaelion said that his photo was taken during a court proceeding in Toronto related to flight PS 752, and that the photo was published on social media. Dr. Esmaelion said that the person who posted the photo did so under their own name on their social media account, so it is clear who was responsible for posting the photo. Dr. Esmaelion said that he contacted the Toronto police and the judge in charge of the proceedings, who advised him that there is a severe punishment for taking pictures during court proceedings. Dr. Esmaelion said that there has been no follow-up with him about this incident.

## 2. Participants' answers to Question 2

The second question posed to participants was: *What are your suggestions for how you and others in your community who may be vulnerable to foreign interference could be supported and protected, and for how foreign interference could be detected or combated?*



## Participant 1: Ms. Farzaneh

Ms. Farzaneh said that Canada took an important step when it designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization, but she stated that many IRGC representatives remain active in Canada.

Ms. Farzaneh said that Canada should increase surveillance to identify people with direct ties to hostile regimes, and expel those found to have ties with hostile regimes. Ms. Farzaneh said that if a few such individuals are identified and expelled, others may voluntarily leave. Ms. Farzaneh said that this would reduce the amount of monitoring and intimidation she faces.

Ms. Farzaneh said that asset seizure should be used to cut off foreign financial support to regime-linked individuals.

Ms. Farzaneh said that legal protections for those speaking out against foreign governments should be enhanced.

Ms. Farzaneh said that clear mechanisms are required for the targets of foreign interference to report instances of foreign interference to the appropriate authorities.

Ms. Farzaneh said that public awareness campaigns about foreign interference should be implemented. Ms. Farzaneh said that topics that should be covered include how foreign interference is done, and the threats that activists and their families face. Ms. Farzaneh said that this will help Canadians understand the impact on our democracy.

Ms. Farzaneh said that background checks and verifications should be implemented for immigration applications connected to Iran. Ms. Farzaneh said that this process should include trusted Iranian Canadians who can verify the information provided through trusted contacts in Iran. Ms. Farzaneh said that this will prevent people from entering Canada under false pretenses or identities.

## Participant 2

Participant 2 said that the knowledge that Canadian authorities, including the police, the RCMP, and intelligence services, have about Iran and how it operates in Canada is limited. Participant 2 said that the Canadian authorities have a limited number of people and limited resources devoted to Iran's foreign interference in Canada. Participant 2 said that Canada's intelligence services, police, and RCMP require training on Iranian services and the IRGC. Participant 2 said that financial resources and the right people with the right knowledge of the region, and who are known to the Iranian Canadian community, are required within Canadian intelligence services. Participant 2 said that an effective response will require a good connection between the Iranian diaspora and law enforcement.

Participant 2 said that a few high-ranking Iranian government representatives have appeared in Canada, and wondered whether they were allowed into the country due to a lack of information on the part of the Canadian government. Participant 2 suggested that people responsible for human rights violations who are physically present in Canada should be held accountable.

Participant 2 said that community education about foreign interference, and support for communities targeted by foreign interference, is required. Participant 2 said that this support should include training on what constitutes cyber harassment and how to report and respond to cyber harassment.

## Participant 3

Participant 3 asked the Commission to add Iran to the list of countries explicitly identified in the Commission's Terms of Reference.

Participant 3 said that Iranian Canadian community members who are working to protect Canada's democracy from the Iranian regime live in fear and do not feel safe in Canada. Participant 3 said that Canada needs a better system to protect Iranian Canadian activists and community leaders.

Participant 3 said that the government of Canada must foster a close working relationship with the Iranian Canadian activist community in order to effectively fight foreign interference from the Iranian regime. Participant 3 said that Iranian Canadian activists are a necessary part of this effort.

#### Participant 4

Participant 4 said that the Canadian department currently responsible for responding to foreign interference threats from Iran consists of a desk that is responsible for both Iran and Yemen. Participant 4 said that this desk is staffed by a few individuals who lack proficiency in Iranian language, and who are unfamiliar with Iranian culture and history. Participant 4 said that Canadian policies to combat Iranian foreign interference must be developed in meaningful consultation with the Iranian Canadian community, who fully understand the threat.

Participant 4 said that Canada must develop a policy that prevents Iranian regime officials from using Canada as a safe haven. Participant 4 said that as part of this effort, there should be an Iranian-focused floor in Immigration or Foreign Affairs, as the United States has done with China. Participant 4 said that this group should scrutinize immigration applications from Iran.

Participant 4 stressed that Canada should routinely consult with Iranian Canadian community organizations, explaining that these community organizations are on the front lines of advocacy and have the necessary knowledge and experience to guide Canada's response. Participant 4 cautioned against including regime-affiliated organizations in this consultation process.

#### Participant 5: Dr. Hamed Esmaelion

Dr. Esmaelion said that he wanted to see the Islamic regime named in the Commission's Initial Report. Dr. Esmaelion said that he wants to see the Islamic regime discussed in the Commission's final report.

Dr. Esmaelion said that Global Affairs Canada (“**GAC**”) has a single desk responsible for both Iran and Yemen that is only staffed by 5 or 6 people. Dr. Esmaelion said that he has seen turnover in the desk staff, with people being transferred on when they have gained enough knowledge about Iran. Dr. Esmaelion said that he has seen the same thing in other government agencies. By way of example, Dr. Esmaelion said that the RCMP have been collecting information from families of the victims on flight PS 752, and that they have seen up to 15 different officers during that process. Dr. Esmaelion said that they have had to start over at the beginning every time they meet with the RCMP. Dr. Esmaelion contrasted this with his recent positive experience with GAC – Dr. Esmaelion said that there, he has been dealing with the same person, who knows the Iranian language and what happened, over the last two years. Dr. Esmaelion pointed to his experience with GAC as an example of successful work.

Dr. Esmaelion said that money transfers continue to bring money into Canada via currency exchanges despite the identification of the IRGC as a terrorist organization. Dr. Esmaelion said that he assumes millions are coming into Canada every day via money laundering. Dr. Esmaelion said that this issue is known to the Canadian Minister of Finance and has been discussed in RCMP reports. Dr. Esmaelion said that supervision and control of money exchanges is required to address this money laundering.