

## Iran's Shadow Diplomacy: The Unveiling of the Iran Experts Initiative

by Ardavan M. Khoshnood on October 31, 2023

CGI Perspectives no. 3540

**Leaked emails have revealed the Iran Experts Initiative (IEI), a covert network designed by the Islamic Republic of Iran's diplomatic unit. Initiated in 2014, the IEI aimed to enhance Iran's global sway by infiltrating think tanks. These leaks spotlight connections between Iranian experts and the Biden administration, extending the IEI's influence even to European think tanks. This discovery underscores the need for opposition think tanks to counterbalance narratives of the Islamic regime in Iran and emphasizes the importance of rigorous vetting in international interactions.**

In a recent revelation, a trove of leaked emails has exposed a clandestine network named the Iran Experts Initiative (IEI), a brainchild of the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) diplomatic apparatus. The IEI, a strategic masterstroke initiated in 2014, was aimed at extending IRI's influence on the global stage. However, the recent email leaks provide a comprehensive understanding of its depth and scope.

### **The Inner Workings of the IEI**

As emails have laid bare, the IEI was not a solitary endeavour. Three recognised Iranian experts with close ties to the Biden administration's special envoy on Iran, Robert Malley, were deeply intertwined with this initiative. The affiliations of Ariane Tabatabai, Ali Vaez, and Dina Esfandiary, previously viewed as neutral analysts by media outlets and think tanks, are now unequivocally revealed.

The IEI's primary objective was clear: infiltrate key think tanks with Iranian analysts and, in return, offer them political weight and support. This move would grant the Islamic regime an unprecedented advantage in international diplomacy. Saeed Khatibzadeh, the current ambassador of the Islamic regime in Croatia, and Mostafa Zahrani, a high-ranking member of the foreign ministry and affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, were instrumental in this project. Zahrani, in particular, bridged the gap between the IEI and Mohammad Javad Zarif, the former Foreign Minister of the Islamic regime.

### **The Depth of IEI's Influence**

The leaked emails, unfolded by [Semafor](#), unravel the intricate relationship between these analysts and Tehran. Their consistent consultations with IRI officials spanned various topics, revealing a level of coordination that transcends mere professional interaction. For instance, Ariane Tabatabai's liaison with Zahrani saw her seeking advice on potential visits to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, Ali Vaez, considered for a US government position, exhibited an alarmingly close relationship with officials of the Islamic regime, suggesting a web of influence meticulously woven by Tehran over many years. This intricate web also includes figures like Trita Parsi, founder of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), who has been influential in promoting policies that align with Tehran's interests. His brother, Rouzbeh Parsi, further accentuates this influence through his academic affiliations. Both brothers are tightly connected to the regime, as shown by these leaked emails.

However, the IEI's influence was not confined to the United States. Its reach permeated European think tanks, fostering relationships with influential analysts. Operating under a veneer of independence, these analysts regularly defended Iran's policies in reputed publications.

The presence of these undisclosed affiliations within the US government, as evidenced by Robert Malley's association with Tabatabai, raises red flags about the integrity of internal vetting processes.

### **The Need for Opposition Think Tanks**

The discovery of the IEI underscores two significant factors of vital importance: (1) the immense power and reach of the Islamic regime's propaganda machine, and (2) the undeniable power of academia and intellectual discourse in shaping public opinion and influencing policy.

This revelation emphasises the urgent need for think tanks that can counteract the IRI's influence in the Western world. By championing democratic values, human rights, and the principles the opposition stands for, these institutions can outmanoeuvre the IRI loyalists and the false narrative they present to policymakers.

Operationalising these opposition think tanks would entail fostering an environment of rigorous research, open debate, and uninfluenced scholarship. With an international reach, these think tanks could challenge the IRI narrative at every turn. However, their role shouldn't be confined to mere opposition. They should actively promote democratic values, human rights, and the ideals that the opposition stands for. By engaging with policymakers, academics, and the public, these think tanks can offer a balanced perspective on Iran, ensuring that the narrative isn't monopolised by those with vested interests.

With a vast reservoir of emails from 2003 to 2021, this revelation provides a window into the strategic depths of IRI's diplomatic machine. It underscores Iran's determination to shape narratives in its favour. The establishment of the IEI stands as a testament to Tehran's ambition to challenge the prevailing narratives and even alter them.

The question now is how deep this network runs. The exposure of the IEI could be just the tip of the iceberg. Western governments and think tanks must now reassess their interactions with Iran and adopt more stringent vetting processes to prevent such penetrations in the future. The creation of opposition think tanks would be a step in the right direction, ensuring that intellectual discourse remains free from undue influence.

### **Ardavan M. Khoshnood**

Dr Ardavan M. Khoshnood is an associate professor of emergency medicine at Lund University in Sweden and a criminologist who focuses on offender profiling and violent crimes, including terrorism. He holds degrees from Malmö University and Lund University in political science and intelligence analysis, respectively. He Specializes in Iranian foreign policy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence.