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# **Iran: Monitoring of Iranian citizens outside of Iran, including political opponents and Christians, by Iranian authorities; monitoring of Iranian citizens in Canada; consequences upon return to Iran (2021–March 2023) [IRN201321.E]**

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

For information on the treatment by authorities of anti-government activists, including those returning from abroad, and on the overseas monitoring capabilities of the government, see Response to Information Request IRN200457 of February 2021.

## **1. Iranian Authorities' Monitoring of Iranian Citizens Outside of Iran, Including Political Opponents and Christians**

An article for the Iran Primer of the US Institute of Peace (USIP) [1] by Kenneth Katzman, a former US CIA analyst and current senior advisor at The Soufan Group (TSG), a global intelligence and security consultancy (TSG n.d.), states that the "main" Iranian agencies tasked with collecting intelligence are the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (USIP 2023-02-17). In an interview with the Research Directorate, a lawyer, human rights activist, and senior fellow at the Centre for Advancing Canada's Interests Abroad of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) [2], who has expertise in Canada-Iran relations, noted that the MOIS and the IRGC's Intelligence Organization are the primary agencies conducting surveillance of Iranian citizens abroad (Lawyer 2023-02-07). The USIP article indicates that "much" of the work of these two intelligence agencies "involves repressing dissidents at home and abroad" and they are particularly focused on "stifling organized opposition" (2023-02-17). The same source indicates that the MOIS maintains "agents" in Iranian embassies across Europe, and that MOIS personnel, as civilians, "blend in better" than the military figures who comprise IRGC personnel (USIP 2023-02-17).

A Freedom House report on "transnational repression" states that Iran's "campaign" of "transnational repression" has a "diverse set of targets" and is "distinguished by the total commitment it receives from the state, the level of violence that it employs, and its sophisticated application of diverse methods" (2021-02, 35). The same source adds that authorities employ an "expansive definition of who constitutes a threat" to Iran, "frequently label[ing] the targeted dissidents and journalists as terrorists" (Freedom House 2021-02, 35). The USIP article notes that Iranian intelligence agencies "have targeted" a broad collection of "exiled oppositionists," including monarchists, Kurdish separatist organizations, dissidents who have defected and the "left-wing Islamist organization" Mujahedeen-e Khalq [Mojahedin-e-Khalq] (MEK) (2023-02-17). The same source adds that individual activists and journalists have also been "targeted," particularly those associated with the 2009 Green Movement protests [3] and subsequent periods of unrest (USIP 2023-02-17).

According to the USIP article, the MOIS and the IRGC's Intelligence Organization employ a diversity of tactics, "glean[ing]" information from a person's online activities including by "intercept[ing] electronic messages and scrub[bing] social media for criticism of the government"; the IRGC maintains a "special cyberspace division" (2023-02-17). The same source notes that intelligence

agencies also draw upon "traditional collection methods," such as "interrogations, wiretapping and trailing people" (USIP 2023-02-17). Freedom House indicates that Iran's "campaign" of "transnational repression" draws on tactics including "assassinations, renditions, detentions, unlawful deportations, Interpol abuse, digital intimidation, spyware, coercion by proxy, and mobility controls" (2021-02, 35). The USIP article states that agents "often interview family, friends and coworkers of suspects," and will sometimes "lure exiled dissidents to countries neighboring Iran to be apprehended by Tehran's agents" (2023-02-17). The same source adds that the MOIS is known for its "more subtle methods," such as "us[ing] fake identities to infiltrate a company and root out dissidents"; by contrast, IRGC agents "are known for more kinetic action, such as breaking into warehouses or scouting locations," and, as members of the military, "more readily employ force to repress dissent" (USIP 2023-02-17).

According to Freedom House, Iran's tactics of "transnational repression" have been used against Iranians in "at least" nine countries in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, leading to "intense intimidation of the Iranian diaspora" (2021-02, 35).

The information in the following paragraph was provided in the USIP article:

"[H]istorically" the MOIS has focused on Iranian dissidents in Europe while IRGC intelligence has focused on Iran and the "surrounding region, where most armed opposition groups operate." IRGC intelligence "deploys alongside the Qods [Quds] Force, the elite branch responsible for IRGC operations abroad." Iran's intelligence agencies have conducted "assassinat[i]ons." The MOIS specifically "has been linked to several plots in Europe" and has "assassinated dissidents," "often" people without "much support" within Iran (USIP 2023-02-17).

Sources report that in November 2022 the Director General of the UK's Security Service (MI5) reported that it had documented "at least" 10 "potential threats" from Iran's intelligence services since January 2022 involving the "kidnap[ping] or even kill[ing of] British or UK-based" individuals "perceived as enemies of the regime" (Reuters 2022-11-16; BBC 2022-11-16; AP 2022-11-16). According to sources, the Director General also stated that Iranian authorities sometimes used their own staff (Reuters 2022-11-16) or spies (BBC 2022-11-16), and sometimes relied on others to work on their behalf (Reuters 2022-11-16; BBC 2022-11-16). Sources note that the Director General further remarked that Iranian authorities sometimes act against their perceived enemies while they are in "Western" countries, and other times they attempt to "lur[e] people" back to Iran (Reuters 2022-11-16; BBC 2022-11-16; AP 2022-11-16) or to other parts of the world (Reuters 2022-11-16).

The Associated Press (AP) reports that in early November 2022, the week before the MI5 Director General's announcement, two journalists for the UK-based news channel Iran International were warned by police of "an imminent, credible and significant risk to their lives and those of their families," as stated by Iran International (AP 2022-11-16). A statement from Volant Media, Iran International's London-based broadcaster (*The Guardian* 2022-11-08), adds that two British-Iranian journalists with Iran International received "threats to life" from the IRGC and other staff members were also threatened (Volant Media 2022-11-07). In January 2023, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) announced the "unseal[ing]" of charges against three individuals, including one Iranian citizen, "for plotting the murder of a U.S. citizen [based in Brooklyn, New York] who has been targeted by the Government of Iran for speaking out against the regime's human rights abuses" (US 2023-01-27). According to the US DOJ's press release, citing allegations contained in court documents, the "[v]ictim" of the plot—a journalist, author and human rights activist of Iranian origin—was monitored and pursued by an individual residing in Yonkers, New York who was supplied with "targeting information" about the victim and their residence by an Iran-based person, sent via a mutual contact residing in Eastern Europe (US 2023-01-27). The same source adds that the individual monitoring the victim began "conducting surveillance of the [v]ictim" and "reconnaissance" of their residence and neighbourhood, sending images and videos of the victim and their residence, as well as reports of the victim's activities to their contact in Eastern Europe; the individual received US\$30,000 from their contacts, "in furtherance of the plot" (US 2023-01-27). According to the US DOJ, in 2020 and 2021, "Iranian intelligence officials and assets plotted to kidnap" the same victim from within the US "for rendition to Iran in an effort to silence [their]

criticism of the regime," before the plot was "disrupted and exposed" by US authorities (US 2023-01-27). An AP article on the 2021 plot, citing US authorities and the federal indictment, notes that it was "part of a wider plan" that also included "lur[ing]" three individuals from Canada and another from the UK to Iran (2021-07-14).

According to a joint report by several NGOs [4], "[s]ix expatriate Iranian Christians reported in 2022 that multiple family members in Iran had been summoned for questioning and harassed regarding their relative's activities abroad" (Article 18, et al. 2023-02-19, 10). The same source added that the family members faced "potential judicial sentences" for their "Christian activities," and were "typically" told that encouraging their relatives to return to Iran would result in reduced sentences (Article 18, et al. 2023-02-19, 10).

## 1.1 Iranian Authorities' Monitoring of Iranian Citizens in Canada

The lawyer stated that they are aware of cases in which individuals suspect they are being physically monitored in Canada by Iranian authorities (2023-02-07). The same source noted the example of an Iranian activist in Canada whose family in Iran was visited by authorities; authorities provided the family members with information indicating that they were aware of the activist's day-to-day activities in Canada—information that authorities "could only know if they were closely physically monitoring" the activist in Canada (Lawyer 2023-02-07). In an interview with the Research Directorate, a retired professor at York University who has published books and articles on the leftist movement in Iran, diaspora, religious fundamentalism, secularism and multiculturalism, stated that Iranian authorities "want to put pressure" on the families of those abroad "who are doing things they disagree with" (Retired professor 2023-02-01).

In an interview with the Research Directorate, a cybersecurity analyst at a US-based human rights organization focused on Iran and the Middle East—who is also a women's rights activist and was imprisoned in Iran for protesting the mandatory hijab, before fleeing to Canada—indicated that [in 2022], her brother in Iran was "arrested" and "interrogat[ed]" by authorities for 10 hours, during which time authorities asked him how the analyst had fled Iran and where she was now employed abroad (Cybersecurity analyst 2023-02-01). The same source added that her brother was also terminated from his employment at that time (Cybersecurity analyst 2023-02-01). The cybersecurity analyst stated that two months [before her interview with the Research Directorate in February 2023], as a result of her work in Canada, her brother was again "arrested" in Iran, and her family was "forced to block" her on all social media telecommunications networks in order to secure the brother's release (2023-02-01).

The retired professor stated that authorities will also sometimes directly "threaten" people in Canada, as they want to stop these people from being "active against the regime" (2023-02-01). The cybersecurity analyst indicated that one month [prior to her interview with the Research Directorate], she received "threat[s]" through social media, including "threats against [her] life," from accounts operating on behalf of Iranian authorities; some of the accounts were "real accounts" belonging to state agents, including members of the IRGC Basij Paramilitary Force, and others were "bots commissioned by the Iranian military" (2023-02-01). According to the same source, she also once received a Persian-language telephone call from an anonymous caller who told her that they were aware of her physical location in Canada, and who referenced her daughter "in a threatening way" (Cybersecurity analyst 2023-02-01).

The retired professor noted that sometimes those monitoring Iranian citizens abroad on behalf of the Iranian regime are students or businesspeople who are asked to monitor their peers (2023-02-01). The same source stated that authorities are mainly interested in knowing what kinds of things these people are doing abroad (Retired professor 2023-02-01).

According to the cybersecurity analyst, to monitor its citizens in Canada, Iranian authorities use "phishing attacks" to gain information about a person (2023-02-01). The source described an incident in which she was contacted via the professional networking site LinkedIn by "Iranian agents" who had "hacked" the account of an acquaintance and who then sent the analyst a weblink

which "hacked" her email account and gained access to her passwords (Cybersecurity analyst 2023-02-01).

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the lawyer:

Iranian authorities monitor their citizens' participation in events or protests in Canada. Authorities also monitor the "television and online activities" of its citizens abroad. Some individuals in Canada have had their family in Iran visited by authorities after they had participated in televised or online interviews; the lawyer reported having experienced this first-hand. Those monitored in Canada by Iranian authorities "certainly" include people who are "very politically active," but can also include ordinary people "who might not engage in politics every day but may do so from time to time" (Lawyer 2023-02-07).

The retired professor stated that because Iran does not recognize dual citizenship, even after a citizen has acquired Canadian citizenship or residency, the regime still considers them to be Iranian and will continue monitoring people of interest (2023-02-01).

According to a CBC article, family members in Canada of victims of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 [5] (Flight PS752) have reported to the RCMP that they have "been targeted for threats and intimidation by Tehran" (2022-11-18). According to a 2021 article by the Canadian Press, a spokesperson for Global Affairs Canada indicated that the RCMP are "'aware of reports'" regarding family members of the flight's victims "'experiencing threats, harassment and intimidation'" from Iranian authorities (2021-05-28). In its public report for 2021, the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) indicates that it "continues to investigate credible reports of several Canada-based relatives of Flight PS752 victims having experienced harassment and intimidation from threat actors linked to proxies of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Canada 2022-03, 18). The retired professor noted that the family members' spokesperson has received "many threats from Iranian authorities" (2023-02-01).

In a statement provided to CBC, CSIS noted that it is investigating "multiple 'credible' death threats" from Iran against people in Canada (2022-11-18). CSIS further stated that it is "aware of state actors from [Iran] monitoring and intimidating people inside Canada to silence those who speak out publicly against the regime" (CBC 2022-11-18).

### **1.1.1 Members of the Iranian Regime in Canada**

A CBC article indicates that according to "[s]ome" Iranian-Canadians, there are officials of the Iranian regime who have immediate family members living in Canada (2022-12-02). The retired professor noted that there are "many" members of the Iranian regime, as well as their families, in Canada (2023-02-01). An April 2022 article by IranWire, a "collaborative news website run by professional Iranian journalists in the diaspora and citizen journalists inside Iran" (IranWire n.d.), notes that in recent years there have been sightings in Canada of "Iranian figures accused of corruption or human rights abuses," who live permanently in Canada or are "taking some time away from Iran" (2022-04-29). Sources report that in 2022 Canada "sanction[ed]" a former Tehran police chief and IRGC officer, who was identified visiting an Ontario gym (CBC 2022-12-02; The Canadian Press 2022-12-02). The CBC notes that, according to the journalist who initially posted about the sighting, the individual stated that they were in Canada visiting their daughter (2022-12-02).

## **2. Consequences Upon Return to Iran**

The lawyer indicated that upon their return to Iran, "some" citizens whose activities abroad have been monitored by authorities are questioned on arrival at the airport (2023-02-07). The same source added that for "some" returnees, authorities will retain the passport of the individual and will instruct them to return for additional questioning (Lawyer 2023-02-07). Further and

corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## Notes

[1] The US Institute of Peace (USIP) is a "national, nonpartisan, independent institute," founded and funded by the US Congress, which works abroad to prevent and end conflicts (USIP n.d.a). The USIP's Iran Primer is a book and website with articles written by 50 experts on Iran (USIP n.d.b).

[2] The Centre for Advancing Canada's Interests Abroad is a project of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) (MLI n.d.a). The MLI is an Ottawa-based public policy think tank (MLI n.d.b).

[3] The 2009 Green Movement was a period of protests and "major social upheaval," which followed a presidential election after which "millions of Iranians" protested perceived election "fraud"; after authorities responded with a "crackdown," during which "thousands [were] arrested and more than 30" people were killed, the Green Movement became "a movement for greater civil liberties" (Atlantic Council 2018-01-09).

[4] The organizations that contributed to the report are as follows:

- Article 18, a UK-based non-profit organization focused on the religious freedom in Iran, with a particular attention to Iranian Christians (Article 18 n.d.).
- Open Doors, based in South Africa (Open Doors n.d.a), a Christian organization advocating on behalf of "persecuted" Christians and operating in "more than" 60 countries (Open Doors n.d.b).
- Middle East Concern (MEC), a UK-based organization focused on the treatment of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa (Global Connections n.d.).
- CSW, a UK-based Christian organization focused on religious freedom, which maintains a team of "specialist advocates" conducting work on "over 20 countries" worldwide, and which has additional offices in the US, Belgium, Scotland, and Nigeria (CSW n.d.).

[5] On 8 January 2020, Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 was "shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ... killing all 176 passengers and crew aboard" (CBC 2022-11-18).

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**Oral sources:** adjunct research professor at a Canadian university and former criminal and human rights lawyer in Iran; Amnesty International; Human Rights Activists in Iran; Justice for Iran; Middle East Institute; professor at a university in Massachusetts who specializes in social development and political change in Iran; professor at a university in New York State who specializes in Iranian politics and social change; professor at a university in Tennessee who studies the politics of Middle Eastern and North African authoritarian regimes; professor at a university in Washington State who specializes in Iranian law and justice; professor at a US university who specializes in international relations and Iran; Toronto Book Club.

**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Austrian Red Cross – [ecoi.net](#); Center for Strategic and International Studies; CNN; EU – EU Agency for Asylum; European University Institute – Global Citizenship Observatory; Factiva; Fars News Agency; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Human Rights Activists News Agency; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; Iranian Students' News Agency; Islamic Republic News Agency; Janes; Justice for Iran; Mehr News Agency; Middle East Institute; UK – Home Office, MI5; US – Department of State, US Commission on International Religious Freedom; *The Washington Post*.