

Iranian Influence Operations Threaten U.S. National Security

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In the wake of Hamas’s horrifying attack on Israel on October 7, the terrorist group is once again seeking to shape the information environment to create international pressure that compels Israel to stop its operations before achieving its objectives. Reliance on influence operations is straight out of the playbook of Hamas’s chief benefactor: Iran. Recent reports from [Semafor](#) and [Iran International](#) of a high-level Iranian influence campaign implicating current and former U.S. government officials, if accurate, represent just one of the myriad examples of systemic Iranian efforts over the last decade to subvert the American policymaking process. JINSA has cataloged Iranian operations in the United States that:

- *provide access to sympathetic Iran analysts and government officials to incentivize favorable coverage and policies;*
- *help fund academic collaborations to spread Iranian talking points and extract sensitive research;*
- *threaten and carry out violent attacks against U.S.-based regime critics, including activists, dissidents, and former government officials, to prevent them from advocating for or enacting policies counter to the regime’s objectives.*

To address Iran’s foreign influence campaigns, U.S. legislators and government officials should increase public awareness of Iranian influence operations, conduct investigations into such operations, and restrict federal funds to universities that hire former high-ranking regime officials or that receive Iranian-funded grants.

What Happened?

- Hamas has long relied upon “information-based strategic objectives of delegitimizing the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in global opinion and degrading the IDF’s operational advantage,” as noted in JINSA’s [assessment](#) of the 2021 Israel-Gaza war. Iran appears to be utilizing the same approach inside the United States.
 - » On September 25, [Semafor](#) and [Iran International](#) each reported based on emails they reviewed that the Iranian Foreign Ministry engaged in a concerted influence campaign to steer Western policy towards Iran in a sympathetic direction, such as advocating against U.S. sanctions, from 2014 until at least 2021.
 - The initiative, called the Iran Experts Initiative (IEI), reportedly aimed to consolidate Western policy experts—including a current high-ranking Department of Defense official—with positions sympathetic to the regime and provide them with talking points, including helping [prepare](#) Congressional testimony and [coordinating](#) on opinion pieces.

» These are far from the only instances of Iranian influence operations. JINSA has cataloged multiple instances of Iranian attempts to coerce the United States through [political warfare](#) campaigns aimed at Middle East partners and U.S. forces in the region, targeted [assassinations](#) against former U.S. officials, and dozens of [terror plots](#) across Europe aimed at deterring U.S. allies and partners across Europe from countering Iran’s malign influence.



Type of Influence Operation	Description	Examples
<p>Access and Political Subversion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing access to sympathetic Iran analysts to incentivize favorable coverage and policies. • Providing access to sympathetic former and current U.S. officials to incentivize favorable coverage and policies. • The Intelligence Community’s 2023 Annual Threat Assessment warned that Iran “remains committed to developing surrogate networks inside the United States, an objective it has pursued for more than a decade.” 	<p>Iran Experts Initiative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group of U.S. and European-based think tank analysts and former or current U.S. government officials that coordinated from 2014 to 2021 with Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on talking points and ways to influence U.S. policy. • Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani: “Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a concerted effort to influence public opinion [to] say ‘no’ to sanctions.” (2020) <p>New Horizon Conference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference held annually in either Tehran or Beirut until 2019 by New Horizon, a Treasury Department-designated front organization for the IRGC, to spread Iranian and anti-American propaganda. • New Horizon events often featured prominent former U.S. officials, including former high-ranking CIA and Department of Defense officials.

Type of Influence Operation	Description	Examples
Academic Subversion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping fund academic collaborations to spread Iranian talking points and extract sensitive research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Alavi Foundation, which the Department of Justice ruled in 2013 was an Iranian regime front group, has donated over \$1.5 million in grants to over
Information and Propaganda Campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disseminating Iranian propaganda targeting Western publics and Iranian expatriates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and Press TV (English version); Iran’s budget for IRIB was over \$1 billion in FY2020-2021, with \$180 million for foreign broadcasting.
Targeted Assassination Threats and Plots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempting to assassinate or kidnap U.S.-based regime critics, former officials, and Iranian dissidents to deter them from criticizing the regime. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporters Without Borders found that Iran issued 50+ specific death threats to U.S.-based Iranian journalists. The IRGC plotted to kill ex-National Security Advisor John Bolton and kidnap dissident Masih Alinejad on U.S. soil.

Coercive Measures
 Inducements

Why Is It Important?

- The influence operations that Hamas is already waging during the ongoing war are part of an Iranian playbook to use influence operations to weaken or disorient a militarily superior adversary. Especially at a moment when the United States is standing by and supporting its partner Israel in a war against Iran-sponsored terrorists, it must also remain vigilant to Iranian attempts to manipulate the policy debate at home.
 - » In March 2020, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani [stated](#) that “our Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a concerted effort to influence public opinion [to] say ‘no’ to sanctions. Our efforts are geared at bringing back our money seized in other countries.”
 - » The Intelligence Community’s 2023 Annual Threat Assessment [warned](#) that Iran “remains committed to developing surrogate networks inside the United States, an objective it has pursued for more than a decade.”

- Iranian influence campaigns include providing mutually beneficial incentives, such as forming ties with and granting access to prominent experts and sympathetic current or former U.S. policymakers to assist them with promoting policies favorable to Iran.
 - » The IEI reportedly included at least three former advisors to the Special Envoy to Iran, one of whom is Ariane Tabatabai, the chief of staff for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict.
 - The Department of Defense is reviewing whether all processes were properly followed when granting Tabatabai’s security clearance.
 - While State Department Spokesperson Mathew Miller [said](#) on October 2 that he “do[es] not have any reason to believe an Iranian influence operation infiltrated the United States government,” the emails Semafor and Iran International reviewed show IEI members coordinated with Iranian regime officials.
 - » Until at least 2019, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) front group New Horizon held an annual conference in either Beirut or Tehran to consolidate former U.S. officials sympathetic to Iran’s position and disseminate Iranian propaganda.
 - The Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) New Horizon in 2019 for being an IRGC front organization used to “recruit and collect intelligence from foreign attendees” of its conferences.
 - A number of past U.S. officials, including a former U.S. Senator and former high-ranking Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Defense officials, have attended the conference, with some even serving as [panelists](#).
- Iran’s influence efforts include providing material and talking points favorable to the Iranian regime’s policy objectives for U.S. experts and advisors outside of government to use in public forums and press outlets.
 - » Three of the alleged IEI participants, including those who consulted with Iranian regime officials according to the Semafor and Iran International reporting, have held positions at a combined nine U.S.-based policy think tanks and four prestigious U.S.-based universities.
 - According to an unverified leaked email, the Iranian Foreign Ministry was “in constant contact and worked vigorously around the clock” with IEI members to [coordinate](#) on opinion pieces and social media posts promoting the preliminary Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement in April 2015.
- Iranian influence operations also include efforts to steer academic thought in a sympathetic direction, typically through the provision of grants and other funding.
 - » Former high-ranking Iranian regime officials have landed jobs at prestigious U.S. universities, where they have been outspoken regime apologists and even [boasted](#) of the Iranian regime’s assassination threats against former U.S. government officials.

- Oberlin College professor Mohammed Jafar Mahallati was formerly Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations, in which capacity he covered up and [lied about](#) Iran’s mass executions of hundreds of political prisoners in 1988. Mahallati, in an unverified leaked letter to the Iranian parliament, reportedly [described](#) his position at Oberlin as part of his “national and religious duty.”
 - Princeton University professor Seyed Hossein Mousavian, formerly Iran’s ambassador to Germany, [stated](#) in 2012 of Iran’s efforts to build a nuclear weapon that “the West pushed Iran to this situation.” Then-Foreign Minister Javad Zarif [said](#) in 2016 that Mousavian “has worked, and is currently working hard” for the Iranian regime.
 - Underscoring Mousavian’s influence, the U.S. military invited him to be [keynote speaker](#) at the 2023 U.S. Strategic Command Deterrence Symposium, held in Nebraska in August. Mousavian had [previously](#) been a speaker at a U.S. Marine Corps event in 2013 at a Marine base in Virginia.
- » The Iranian regime itself has [donated](#) unspecified sums of money to several prestigious U.S. universities since 2015, according to letters from the ranking members of the House Committees on Education, Judiciary, and Oversight citing disclosures to the Department of Education from the universities about large foreign investments.
- The Congressional letters allege that the universities include Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Chicago, the University of Delaware, and New York University.
- » Iran’s efforts to steer academic opinion have been abetted by the Alavi Foundation, purportedly a charity that actively funds a number of institutions of higher education.
- The Alavi Foundation has given at least \$1.5 million in grants to forty-one different U.S. universities—including Boston University, Columbia University, Harvard University, the University of Michigan, Rutgers University, the University of Southern California, and the University of Virginia—which are often [contingent](#) on hiring certain regime-friendly professors or modifying Iran-related course curricula.
 - Rutgers University professor Hooshang Amirahmdi has [received](#) grants and fellowships from the Alavi Foundation. Amirahmdi, according to the Wall Street Journal, has reportedly made such [remarks](#) as “Iran has not been involved in any terrorist organization” and that “neither Hezbollah nor Hamas are terrorist organizations.”
 - Harvard University, which has [received](#) large grants from the Alavi Foundation, hosted a visiting scholar named Ali Akbar Alikhani from 2015 to 2016. Alikhani [favorably reviewed](#) a book entitled The Jewish Threat to Christianity and Islam and has written that “Israel is a country that from its inception was based on force, coercion, and oppression.”
 - In June 2013, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York ruled that the Alavi Foundation was a [front](#) for the Iranian regime and had [transferred](#) over \$45 million to the regime.
- » Kaveh Afrasiabi, a high-profile, Boston-based Iran expert was charged in January with failing to register as a foreign agent after the Department of Justice alleged that a “[significant portion](#)” of his income came from the Iranian regime.

- Afrasiabi has been a prolific author in prominent U.S. journalistic outlets, often advocating for a more lax policy approach towards Iran, and has taught at multiple American universities [including](#) Harvard University.
- According to [the Department of Justice](#), Afrasiabi sought to “influence the American public and American policymakers for the benefit of his employer, the Iranian government, by disguising propaganda as objective policy analysis and expertise.”
- Iranian attempts to gain influence in U.S. academic circles not only intend to steer academic thought but also, by collaborating with U.S.-based academics, aim to extract sensitive intellectual property that can enhance its ability to conduct malign activities.
 - » In 2019, prosecutors charged Amin Hasanzadeh, a scholar and researcher at the University of Michigan, with [exporting](#) sensitive data to Iran. Hasanzadeh had previously worked for a company [affiliated](#) with the IRGC Aerospace Forces.
 - The recipient of the data, Hasanzadeh’s brother, worked for the Iranian Ministry of Defense on missile research, and the sensitive data transferred related to electronic components with applications in missile development.
 - One of Hasanzadeh’s former colleagues said that the incident may have had “[catastrophic](#)” consequences.
 - » United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), a watchdog organization, [alleged](#) in April that Virginia Tech and other high-profile U.S. research institutions worked with researchers from the Iranian Aerospace Research Institute, a regime entity sanctioned by the United States, on unspecified sensitive research.
- Iran heavily funds state-sponsored propaganda networks targeting Western publics and Iranian diaspora communities to sway U.S. public opinion towards Iran and propagate regime talking points.
 - » In September, the Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), aimed at influencing Iranian domestic audiences, and PressTV, its English-language counterpart aimed at the Iranian diaspora.
 - Iran’s budget in 2020-2021 [allocated](#) over \$1.1 billion for the IRIB, another estimated \$180 million on IRIB broadcasting outside Iran’s borders, and an additional roughly \$105 million allotted for influence operations targeting the Iranian diaspora.
 - PressTV conceals its regime ties, helping to boost its impact. After X (formerly known as Twitter) removed a notice from PressTV’s account indicating that it was a government-run source, user engagement [nearly doubled](#), according to analysis from NewsGuard.
- Iran uses coercive threats, including violence against former and current U.S. government officials who favor a tougher stance towards Iran, such as using military force against Iranian military targets and strictly enforcing sanctions. These threats aim both to deter present officials from enacting these policies and to deter potential future policymakers with similar leanings from entering public office in the first place.
 - » In August 2022, the Department of Justice charged an IRGC member with [coordinating](#) a plot to assassinate former National Security Advisor John Bolton at his Maryland home.

- » Similar plots against former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former Special Representative to Iran Brian Hook have led to 24-hour [security protection](#) by the State Department for the two former officials, years after they left public office. The regime has reportedly [threatened](#) “sanctions” on other former senior government officials as retribution for the killing of IRGC-Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani.
- » In 2019, the Department of Justice [charged](#) Monica Witt, a former high-ranking counterintelligence agent for the Department of Defense, with working for the IRGC to commit espionage and cyber warfare against the United States.
 - Witt worked with the IRGC to carry out targeted cyberattacks against specific members of the Intelligence Community, a number of whom had previously been Witt’s colleagues.
- As part of a concerted effort to exert influence on U.S. decision-making, Iranian operatives also threaten and use violence to dissuade U.S.-based activists, dissidents and journalists from documenting human rights violations and vocalizing criticism of the regime.
 - » Reporters Without Borders has documented over 200 threats—around fifty of which were characterized as [death threats](#)—to Iranian journalists abroad, including in the United States.
 - » The high-profile July 2021 attempted kidnapping of Iranian dissident Masih Alinejad from her Brooklyn home was one of [at least](#) seven such plots globally between 2014 and 2021, according to Freedom House.
 - » U.S. law enforcement has [apprehended](#) twenty-three Iranian nationals at the southern border since October 9, some of whom could present a threat to individuals opposed to the Iranian regime.
 - The apprehensions coincide with the Israel-Hamas war in the wake of Hamas attacks on October 7 which killed over 1,200 people in Israel.
 - According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, as of July, 216 individuals on the Terrorist Screening Dataset have been [apprehended](#) at the U.S. southern border since October 2022.
 - On October 16, Fox News [reported](#), after speaking with sources at U.S. Customs and Border Protection, that two Iranians apprehended at the southern border over the previous two weeks were on the Terrorist Screening Dataset and “could pose a significant security threat.”

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Congress should request clarity from the Biden administration on what steps it is taking to address Iranian regime threats to the homeland in light of the uniquely extensive threat posed by Iran’s influence operations and what assistance it needs from Congress to facilitate its efforts.
- Congress and U.S. federal agencies should work in tandem to enhance federal law enforcement’s efforts to uncover and thwart Iranian foreign influence operations.

- » Legislators should allocate greater focus, resources, and funding to the Department of Justice’s National Security Division and the FBI’s Foreign Influence Task Force (FITF).
 - The National Security Division is tasked with, among other responsibilities, [foiling](#) “hostile foreign intelligence activities” and Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) violations.
 - The FITF was set up in 2017 to detect and address foreign influence operations, and includes officials from the FBI’s Counterintelligence, Cyber, Criminal, and Counterterrorism divisions.
- » Congress should hold open hearings and closed-door briefings with officials from these and other law enforcement offices to examine the extent of Iranian influence operations.
- » The FBI should set up, and work with Congress to publicize, an anonymous tipline directly to the FITF, modeled on its Cyber Division tipline, for reporting suspected agents of Iranian influence in government, academia, and policy research institutions.
- Congress should consider legislating restrictions on federal funding to universities that, albeit unwittingly, help propagate Iranian influence operations on U.S. soil, including:
 - » Bans on federal funding to universities and other research institutes that accept donations and grants from countries designated as state sponsors of terrorism or employ former ambassadors or cabinet members of state sponsors of terrorism, with waivers available for regime defectors.
 - » Restrictions on eligibility for federal grants for universities that have accepted money from the regime-backed Alavi Foundation and any other entities that have been determined by the Department of Justice to be [an instrument](#) of the Iranian regime.
- Congressional committees should begin inquiries into Iranian influence operations, and where possible, use their subpoena power to uncover financial networks in institutions of higher education and FARA violations among U.S. policy experts.
- Congress should hold open hearings and closed-door briefings with officials from the Departments of Homeland Security, Education, State and Justice to gain insight into how former Iranian regime officials gained visas and employment eligibility in the United States. On the basis of this testimony and related investigatory work, Congress should consider legislation to restrict visa eligibility to ensure the Iranian regime cannot exploit the U.S. immigration system.
- Congress and the Biden administration should consider international mechanisms to coordinate with partners on restricting the overseas travel of Iranian regime officials and their associates for as long as the regime continues targeting overseas dissidents and critics.
- U.S. government agencies granting security clearances should specifically investigate whether individuals are part of Iranian regime influence networks, including reviewing any digital correspondences with Iranian regime officials.
- U.S. officials should work to dispel disinformation from Iran, Hamas, and other Iran-backed groups, especially as Israel’s war in Gaza continues.