

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 28, 2023

The Honorable Merrick Garland
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20530

The Honorable Avril Haines
Director of National Intelligence
Office of the Director of National Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20511

Dear Secretary Garland and Director Haines:

We write to you concerning the pressing issue of foreign influence in American religious institutions by the Islamic Republic of Iran, a theocratic, state sponsor of terrorism that has the blood of hundreds of Americans on its hands. In four separate cases, recent reports have illustrated the Iranian regime's influence on multiple Shi'a mosques and religious institutions in the United States. This is unacceptable.

Most recently, in May, a mosque just a few miles from Washington D.C. in Potomac, Maryland, the Islamic Education Center (IEC) was revealed to be part of a network of mosques controlled by the Alavi Foundation. This is a large foundation that has been in litigation for years because of allegations it operates on behalf of the Iranian regime, a state sponsor of terrorism.¹ Bahram Abolfazi Nahidian, an IEC member, was instrumental in securing funds from the Alavi Foundation and was "acknowledged by all as the most prominent supporter in this country of Khomeini."² After the article discussing these facts was published, members of the Iranian diaspora provided an image of young children at the mosque apparently singing next to a shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran.³ Disturbingly, the Maryland legislature has even provided public funds to the IEC!⁴

This is not an isolated incident. Another institution with the same name, the Islamic Education Center (IEC) in Houston, had dozens of young children perform an anthem titled, "Salam Farmande," ("Hello Commander"), a new propaganda song that has been widely promoted by the Iranian regime inside Iran to commemorate the 33rd anniversary of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death.⁵ This song is sung by children, and in some iterations, not only pledges children to be soldiers, but praises Qassem Soleimani, the terrorist responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Americans and thousands of Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, and others.⁶ While the English language version was stripped of some of the more incendiary lines, the intent clearly remains the same: to propagandize the vulnerable into supporting a violent, theocratic regime. Indeed, the Iranian regime is proud of it: Iranian state media outlets have shared the video of American children pledging allegiance to their cause.⁷

¹ "Maryland Legislature Funds Pro-Iran Mosque Entangled in Terror Trials," By: Benjamin Baird, May 26, 2023. Focus on Western Islamism. Available at: <https://islamism.news/2023/05/26/maryland-legislature-funds-pro-iran-mosque-entangled-in-terror-trials/>

² "D.C. Man Sought In Assassination of Iranian Exile," By: Donel Nunes and Dale Russakoff, The Washington Post, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/07/24/dc-man-sought-in-assassination-of-iranian-exile/d19922d4-8f45-455f-8436-496c74c10dcb/>

³ "Maryland Legislature Funds Pro-Iran Mosque Entangled in Terror Trials," By: Benjamin Baird, May 26, 2023. Focus on Western Islamism. Available at: <https://islamism.news/2023/05/26/maryland-legislature-funds-pro-iran-mosque-entangled-in-terror-trials/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Texas Mosque Enlists Children into Cult of Iranian Martyrdom," By: Dexter Van Zile, Focus on Western Islamism. Available at: <https://islamism.news/2022/07/29/texas-mosque-enlists-children-into-cult-of-iranian-martyrdom/>

⁶ "OPINION: Iran Marks 33rd Anniversary of Khomeini's Death With New Anthem," Potkin Azarmehr, Kayhan Life, July 7, 2022. Available at: <https://kayhanlife.com/views/iran-marks-33rd-anniversary-of-khomeinis-death-with-new-anthem/>

⁷ "Iran state media share video of US children singing Tehran-sponsored religious anthem," AlArabiya, July 29, 2022. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/07/29/Iran-state-media-share-video-of-US-children-singing-Tehran-sponsored-religious-anthem>

But there are more reasons to suspect that both IEC Houston is serving the Iranian regime directly.

Perhaps most obviously is the fact that Maulana Ghulam Hurr Shabbiri was the lead Imam of IEC for ten years, from 2005-2015. According to the website of Maulana Shabbiri's current employer, he was "directly appointed by the office of the Supreme Leader," to his post at IEC.⁸ Additionally, the building that is used by IEC, was the target of civil forfeiture by the U.S. Attorney of the Southern District of New York, as their property is owned by the aforementioned Alavi Foundation.

While IEC claims to merely be tenants of a building owned by the Alavi Foundation, the facts suggest the relationship goes far deeper. According to the Alavi Foundation's website, IEC distributes books for the Alavi Foundation, and has received grants from the Alavi Foundation to do so.⁹ While litigation is ongoing, there is little doubt where the Alavi Foundation's sympathies lie. According to Department of Justice press releases, the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations has controlled the affairs of the Alavi Foundation since 1991, up to and including dismissing board members at the command of the Iranian Supreme Leader.¹⁰ The Manhattan District Attorney's Office investigations chief, Adam Kaufmann, said "We found evidence that the government of Iran really controlled everything about the foundation."¹¹ It is also notable that the Alavi Foundation made a large donation to Columbia University when it chose to host former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.¹²

There are more examples.

The Islamic House of Wisdom (IHW), an Iranian-led Shi'a mosque in Dearborn Heights, Michigan, also shows similar signs of being under the direction of the Iranian regime. The Imam of IHW, Mohammad Ali Elahi, served as the head of "political ideology" for the Iranian Navy in the 1980s, according to a publicly available Central Intelligence Agency report.¹³ He personally claims to be "friends" with three former Iranian Presidents, and since moving to the US, he has had seemingly non-stop contact with senior regime officials. In March 2017, he met with former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, who he called a friend of "almost 30 years."¹⁴ According to investigative journalists, IHW has been a significant purveyor of extremist propaganda, in line with the Iranian regime's views.¹⁵

The Manassas Mosque in Manassas, Virginia, is just as troubling. A recent video of inside the Mosque showed it is adorned with pictures of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) "martyrs" who were killed in Syria, a life-sized cutout of Khomeini, as well as Iranian flags and slogans.¹⁶ In 2019, it openly celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.¹⁷ It also received about \$200,000 from the Alavi

⁸ "Resident Aalim," Al Zahra Foundation, Nottingham. Available at: <https://www.azf.org.uk/resident-aalim/>

⁹ "The Rising Danger of Iranian Soft Power in the United States," By: Moshe Kwiat and Jason Brodsky, August 9, 2022. Available at: <https://thedispatch.com/p/the-rising-danger-of-iranian-soft>

¹⁰ "Acting Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Historic Jury Verdict Finding Forfeiture Of Midtown Office Building And Other Properties," Press Release, US Attorneys Office, Southern District of New York, June 29, 2017. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/acting-manhattan-us-attorney-announces-historic-jury-verdict-finding-forfeiture-midtown>

¹¹ "Report: Columbia and Rutgers Funded by Iran-controlled Group," Nov. 23, 2009, Harretz. Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/2009-11-23/ty-article/report-columbia-and-rutgers-funded-by-iran-controlled-group/0000017f-f654-d044-adff-f7fdab8e0000>

¹² Id.

¹³ Directory of Iranian Clerics, 20 April, 1987: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP93T00643R000201700001-8.pdf>

¹⁴ "Michigan Imam Garners Political Favor While Keeping Close with Iranian Regime," By: Susannah Johnston, August 17, 2022. Focus on Western Islamism. Available at: <https://islamism.news/2022/08/17/michigan-imam-garners-political-favor-while-keeping-close-with-iranian-regime/>

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/navidmohebbi/status/1562111953753047043?s=21&t=QEuNSpClQkBgqQYAedUf3w>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/manassasmosque/photos/gm.530678554087557/2275345582498182/?type=3&theater>

Foundation, based on publicly available information,¹⁸ and has been the direct recipient of expensive relics from the Iranian regime.¹⁹

This appears to be part of a network of regime-sponsored mosques acting as agents for a foreign adversary. The radical ideology being promoted by this regime preaches hatred not only towards Jews, Christians, and Westerners but also to Sunni Muslims and fellow Shi'a Muslims who do not accept the regime's ideology. Iran's use of religious and cultural institutions to spread its radical and hateful ideology is not unprecedented, and in fact, other examples in the West are openly acknowledged. In the United Kingdom, the Islamic Centre of England and its director, Hojjat al-Islam Seyyed Mousavi, are the official religious representatives of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, according to the UK's Parliament.²⁰ Islamic Centre of England has been reprimanded for spreading regime propaganda mourning Soleimani after his death.²¹ Indeed, the Islamic Centre of England is just one of a network of institutions that represent Iran's Supreme Leader.²² Thus, it is not uncommon for Iran's Supreme Leader to personally direct religious Institutions in foreign countries, perhaps especially advanced democracies like the UK and the US, for the purpose of spreading propaganda and using these institutions to influence western politics. The UK has finally taken the necessary action, however, with their charitable commission recently ousting the leadership of this foreign-regime controlled institution masquerading as a religious institution.²³

Under the First Amendment, freedom of speech and freedom of religion is sacrosanct, and for good reason. However, a state sponsor of terrorism such as Iran providing support for those who celebrate murderous terrorists such as Qassem Soleimani is unacceptable. Iran's use of institutions of religious worship for illegitimate foreign influence operations threatens our national security, and intentionally threatens our Constitutional order.

We are requesting an answer to the following questions no later than Friday, August 11th, 2023:

- (1) How are the Department of Justice and the Intelligence Community (IC) dealing with the threat of foreign influence by the Iranian regime through religious and/or cultural institutions in the United States? Do the Department and the IC understand the full nature and extent of Iranian in the United States?
- (2) Does the IC have an estimate of the nature and extent of funding and support provided by Iran's regime to cultural and religious institutions in the United States? If so, can the IC provide this estimate to Congress in a classified setting? If not, why is the IC not tracking this?
- (3) How is the Department using the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and other foreign malign influence statutes to go after said influence by the Iranian regime in the United States?
- (4) Do the Department and the IC have a strategy, along with other U.S. government departments and agencies, to counter this malign influence, especially such influence exercised through cultural or religious institutions?

¹⁸ "Iranian Gov't Front Group Funded Over 60 Islamic Sites in U.S.," By: Meira Svirsky, July 1, 2013, Clarion Project. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210126111426/https://clarionproject.org/iranian-govt-front-group-funded-over-60-islamic-sites-us/>

¹⁹ "Demand DHS Release Quranic Tiles for Virginia Mosque Held at IAD, Threatened with Destruction," Council on American Islamic Relation. Available at: <https://action.cair.com/a/demand-dhs-release-quranic-tiles-virginia-mosque-held-iad?ms=Dailynewsbrief&emci=bef845f9-d3f7-eb11-b563-501ac57b8fa7&emdi=933ae4ad-d5f7-eb11-b563-501ac57b8fa7&ceid=82918>

²⁰ "Iran: Islamic Centre of England, Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office UIN 69590, tabled on 4 November 2021," Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-11-04/69590/>

²¹ "Charity regulator issues Official Warning to Islamic Centre of England Ltd," 19 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/charity-regulator-issues-official-warning-to-islamic-centre-of-england-ltd#:~:text=The%20Charity%20Commission%20has%20issued,in%20misconduct%20and%20For%20mismanagement>

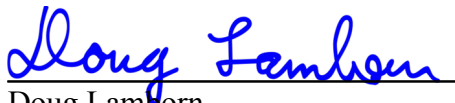
²² "OPINION: The Supreme Leader of Iran's Network of Influence in the UK," By: Potkin Azarmehr, October 28, 2021. Kayhan Life. Available at: <https://kayhanlife.com/views/opinion-the-supreme-leader-of-irans-network-of-influence-in-the-uk/>

²³ "Shills for Iranian Islamism Ousted from Board of UK Charity," By: Potkin Azarmehr, May 30, 2023. Available at: <https://islamism.news/2023/05/30/shills-for-iranian-islamism-ousted-from-board-of-uk-charity/>

(5) Will the Department and the IC provide members of Congress with a detailed briefing regarding the extent of malign influence by the Iranian regime in the United States, especially such influence exercised through cultural or religious institutions?

At minimum, the U.S. government needs a clearer picture of the Iranian regime's influence over these American organizations that seek to lionize the foes, not only of America, but of the Iranian people.

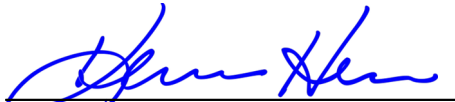
Sincerely,



Doug Lamborn
Member of Congress



Brad R. Wenstrup, D.P.M.
Member of Congress



Kevin Hern
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress



Lauren Boebert
Member of Congress



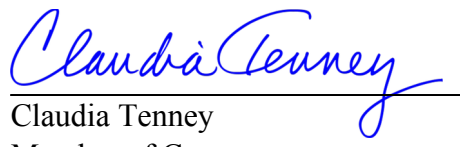
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