

The Iranian Canadian Congress is a non-profit, non-partisan, and non-religious organization, established in 2007, whose mandate is to represent the interests of Iranian Canadians and encourage their participation in Canadian society. Iranian-Canadians are subject to much of the same hatred as the other racialized and immigrant groups, as well as groups who are targeted by Islamophobic hatred. However, on top of this, Iranian Canadians have been subject to a particularly anti-Iranian hatred. Here, politically active members of our community have particularly been victim of Online Hate since 2013, when the community began to organize around its interests. A key feature of this online hate consisted of attacking Iranian-Canadians by accusing them of having loyalties to the Iranian government.

According to a British All Party Parliamentary Group [report \(1\)](#) on British Muslims, the association of Muslims with a foreign entity or government is a key Islamophobic trope:

“[Contemporary examples of Islamophobia include:] Accusing Muslim citizens of being more loyal to the ‘Ummah’ (transnational Muslim community) or to their countries of origin, or to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.”

This has had a negative effect on all aspects of our community, stifling civic engagement and political awareness in our community. The Iranian Canadian Congress, as the primary advocacy organization in the Iranian-Canadian community, has personal experience as the lightning rod for such hate. Below, we elaborate more on the details of such hate using our own examples as well as the experiences of others, providing insight on how these groups generally operate, in order to ultimately suggest solutions and/or recommendations based on our experiences on ways to tackle this important issue.

Online Hate that Threatens Iranian-Canadian Political Activists

In the past six years Iranian-Canadian activists and even elected officials of Iranian descent have been a victim of online hate not only by regular individuals, but also, and perhaps more concerningly, by Canadian officials.

Here, we will talk about two instances in which politicians, Senator Linda Frum and MP O’Toole, engaged in such hate. On October of 2017, Senator Linda Frum was condemned by many in the Iranian-Canadian community for a speech in which she called Iran a “malign nation”. In the aftermath of her comment, she took to Twitter and called those who were criticizing her “regime apologists”, connecting Iranian-Canadians who took offence at her comments to a foreign government, which, as we showed above, is a very typical and established racist and Islamophobic trope.

Further, on June 20th 2018, MP O’Toole stood in the House and attacked the Iranian Canadian Congress and the panel that we hosted on Iran-Canada relations by calling the ICC “a regime-friendly Iranian lobbying group.” His characterization of the ICC as a foreign lobbying group was not only disingenuous, but also constitutes discrimination against Iranian-Canadians to

silence community activities who advocate for peace. The ICC asked Mr. O'Toole to retract his comments and contact us if he requires further clarification about the nature of activities of our organization but, unfortunately, we never heard back from him. You may find below a link to a video of his comments and a copy of my letter to him:

[Letter to Conservative MP Erin O'Toole regarding his attacks on ICC \(2\)](#)

Though MP O'Toole's comments were not made online, they were picked up by those who operate online, and were further amplified by articles such as [this one \(3\)](#) by Terry Glavin, who called the ICC "regime-friendly". Predictably, the ICC as well as any activists who similar viewpoints are constantly attacked online with reference to such utterances by politicians and journalists.

Insistence that we are a foreign entity and funded by nefarious foreign forces and its impact on provincial election in Ontario

Like many hateful, racist, and xenophobic tropes, members in the Iranian Canadian Congress and our organization in general are consistently (and unapologetically) questioned. Routinely, the ICC has been accused of having foreign allegiances - an accusation that does not have one modicum of truth. Board Members of the ICC are often told that they are agents of Iran - regardless of their Canadian citizenship and their active participation in Canadian civil life.

One prominent example is when one of our Board Members ran for Provincial Office in 2018. Saman Tabasinejad is a young Iranian-Canadian woman. She ran on a progressive platform and gained a considerable amount of momentum during her campaign. Ms. Tabasinejad was able to secure the highest vote share for her party in the riding however that was not without daily harrassment from online attacks and fake news articles.

Beyond the daily Facebook comments that questioned her allegiance to Canada and were deeply Islamophobic in nature, matters only got worse when an online source published a story. This story published falsehoods about Ms. Tabasinejad's loyalty to the Charter and claimed she was running under the NDP banner but had secretly wanted to bring about Sharia Law to Ontario.

Ms. Tabasinejad and her team received a number of calls from constituents who were questioning her allegiance to the Charter and whether or not she had secret plans to come into power in order to enforce Shariah Law on Ontario. The very nature of this claim is Islamophobic. A Canadian candidate who did not have Muslim, Iranian, or Middle-Eastern background would not be suspected as being a foreign agent, secretly conspiring to bring "Sharia Law" to Canada. Unfortunately, Ms. Tabasinejad and her team did have to suffer and manage this abuse because of Islamophobic tropes that were hurled against her. At a critical part of the campaign, a few days before the election, they were forced to try and dispel lies that quickly spread across the internet.

Furthermore, after Ms. Tabasinejad's Provincial campaign, other rumors began to surface on social media. A lie regarding her familial heritage spread across the internet like wildfire - many purported the Islamophobic trope that if an Iranian-Canadian woman was this successful then it was because she had been funded by the Iranian State. Of course, again, this was a complete fabrication but one that deeply affected and hurt Ms. Tabasinejad's credibility. She was again the subject of a mass social media attack - ones that were gendered and violent in nature.

Recommendations:

These instances are just a few examples of the Islamophobia and Iranophobia that members of the Iranian-Canadian community face. These Islamophobic and Iranophobic claims gain traction on social media and encourage hatred and isolation of the Iranian-Canadian community. If we want to have a healthy and equal-opportunity democracy, we must address the discrimination faced by different groups on the internet. It is incumbent on our policy makers to create policies that make it safe for marginalized groups to participate in our democratic institutions and even run for office. These are barriers that need to be dismantled if we genuinely care about equal access to democracy.

As such, our recommendations are the following:

1. To address online hate that originates, is amplified, or otherwise encouraged by politicians, the government should define a code of conduct to prevent promoting online hate within governmental bodies and political parties. Such code of conducts should be efficient and enforceable.
2. To address hate pushed by those who are not politicians, an independent department is required to oversee and regulate any form of online hate in all online platforms and social media platforms to prevent individuals or organizations to publicize material which promotes online hate. Such department should be easily accessible to victims of online hatred.

Links:

- (1) : <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>
- (2) : https://www.iccongress.ca/icc_president_writes_to_conservative_mp_erin_o_toole_regarding_his_attacks_on_iranian_canadians
- (3) : <https://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/columnists/glavin-canadian-relations-with-iran-should-be-a-non-starter>