

# How a Shadowy, Hawkish New Group Tied to Iranian Monarchists Is Gaining Influence in Congress

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*A new organization with ties to Iranian monarchists is cultivating relationships with the Republican Party, holding a series of online events with newer GOP House members, strongly advocating against diplomacy with Iran, and pushing for the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate so-called “Islamic Republic agents and lobbyists” in the United States.*

[Iranian Americans for Liberty](#) was established last year alongside two related entities: a political action committee called [Iranian Americans for the Constitution](#), and a super PAC called [Iranian Americans for Peace](#). The group’s public-facing activities -- which include tweets, press releases, and a series of webinars hosted with Republican House candidates and incumbents -- take aim at both the Iranian government and Iranian Americans who favor engaging with the country, while echoing traditional hawkish talking points.

Most significantly, the organization is closely aligned with Iranian monarchists, who advocate for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic and the return of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi to the country as the leader of a constitutional monarchy. In particular, the group has ties to the [Farashgard](#) movement -- known as “Iran Revival” in English -- as well as the [Constitutionalist Party of Iran](#), an organization based in the Iranian diaspora community in Southern California.

Members of the Farashgard, including Amir Etemadi and Saeed Ghassminejad, [previously participated](#) in the Iran Disinformation Project, a State Department-funded project founded in 2018 that [worked closely](#) with the hawkish Foundation for the Defense of Democracies purportedly to counter Iranian propaganda. But the State Department later [suspended funding](#) for the project after complaints that the group spent an inordinate amount of time attacking domestic critics of former President Trump’s Iran policies.

Iranian Americans for Liberty -- which also [has ties to pro-Israel advocacy organizations](#) and has apparently sought to obscure the source of its funding -- often launches attacks against other Iranian American organizations and citizens that it claims, without evidence, to be agents of the Iranian regime.

“These groups are part of this Iranian American Q-Anon phenomenon that we have seen really explode over the past few years during the Trump administration,” said Jamal Abdi, president of the National Iranian-American

Council,[1] which has been the target of much of the group's rhetoric. "They engage in these character attacks and try to paint these wacky conspiracies to try to delegitimize us rather than engage in a real debate."

As the Biden administration seeks to re-engage with Iran and potentially return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal, IAL is putting pressure on Republicans to resist a more diplomatic approach. While stopping short of calling for a U.S.-backed overthrow of the regime, IAL argues aggressively against lifting any sanctions on Iran.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran, they're constantly chanting things like 'Death to America,' 'Death to Israel,' why do you think the current administration is so eager to loosen economic sanctions on the Iranian regime when they clearly do not like the U.S. and our allies?" asked Adelle Nazarian, a frequent moderator of the group's events, in a ["meet and greet"](#) with Rep. Mike Garcia.

More significantly, the group's activities appear to be an effort to delegitimize proponents of diplomacy with Iran -- particularly members of the Iranian American community -- by branding them as "apologists" or mouthpieces for the Iranian government.

#### Targeting of other Iranian Americans

During a series of virtual events held with Republican candidates and members of Congress, IAL has often brought up NIAC -- an Iranian-American organization that advocates for diplomacy with Iran and has been a proponent of the JCPOA -- by [asking members](#) how they plan to "stand up and fight against the Islamic Republic's lobbyists." IAL has also [produced videos](#) that baselessly [accuse NIAC of acting as a lobbying organization](#) for the Iranian government and promulgating "anti-American propaganda."

In addition to NIAC, Iranian Americans for Liberty has also attacked other Iranian Americans who publicly support the JCPOA and diplomacy with Iran -- including [journalist Negar Mortazavi](#) and State Department official [Ariane Tabatabai](#) -- by accusing them, again without evidence, of being apologists for the regime.

Barbara Slavin, Director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, said that some of the animosity likely stems from ideological divisions within the Iranian diaspora -- which were exacerbated by Trump's foreign policy.

"They benefited from Trump. They were encouraged, they got money from the State Department until it was revealed that they were spending most of their time on Twitter attacking other Iranian Americans and people who supported diplomacy with Iran," said Slavin, referring to the Iran Disinformation Project. "It doesn't help their cause, because they expend all their energy going after other Iranian Americans instead of trying to come together on the goal of making Iran a more democratic and less repressive place. And the tactics they use are so awful, who in their right mind would trust these people?"

NIAC, she said, has become a target due to its apparent success in advocating for diplomacy. "None of these other groups, these monarchist groups, come close."

“We’d like to see the DOJ ramp up their efforts to root out the regime’s operatives here in America. What do you think about this?” asked Nazarian during a February 15 [“meet and greet”](#) with New Mexico Representative Yvette Herrell.

“I think what I see is maybe another letter coming from Congress to really hold the DOJ’s feet to the fire,” replied Herrell. “There are people here that are lobbying members of Congress for the Iranian government, which turns out to be very detrimental.” One month later, Herrell sent a [letter](#) — co-signed by eight other GOP House members — to the Department of Justice asking it to investigate Iranian nationals who they claim may be in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

While the letter referenced [the January arrest](#) of Lotfolah Kaveh Afrasiabi, who has been charged with acting as an unregistered agent of the Iranian government, it did not provide further evidence for any of its claims.

“This is another situation where I believe we will need to be working collectively -- our office, Iranian Americans for Liberty -- so that we can ensure that we can be holding the DOJ’s feet to the fire as things progress,” said Herrell during the event.

“I will gladly follow your lead on that so that we can make good, productive policy decisions in Washington,” she also said.

Jordan Haverly, a spokesperson for Rep. Herrell, acknowledged that IAL was “interested” in the letter but said he was unaware of its origin, and Herrell’s office did not respond to additional requests for comment. IAL has been amplifying the letter since it was published, with executive director Bryan Leib [stating that](#) they were “thrilled” to learn about it.

In a recent appearance on the website Foreign News Desk, Leib [doubled-down](#) on his baseless accusations against NIAC, insinuating that they were “driving the agenda” of the Biden administration to return to the JCPOA.

### The growing influence of monarchists

Last year, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington [reported](#) that Republican members of Congress had met with members of Farashgard after Ali Saadat-Meli, a prominent member of Farashgard and a former partner at Goldman Sachs, contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican Party campaigns and committees.

That investment appears to be continuing. Along with Rep. Herrell, 11 other Republican members of Congress, most of whom have been elected since 2018, have participated or are scheduled to participate in virtual events sponsored by IAL or IAC. Four of those members -- Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick, Nicole Malliotakis, Young Kim, and Maria Elvira Salazar -- sit on the House Foreign Affairs committee, while Reps. Andrew Garbarino and Jeff Van Drew sit on the Homeland Security committee. Reps. Jim Hagedorn and Marjorie Taylor Greene have also met with the organization, while Reps. Ashley Hinson and Michelle Fischbach are scheduled to speak with the group in April.

All have received at least \$2800 -- the maximum individual donation amount permitted by the Federal Election Commission -- from Ali Saadat-Meli, who did not respond to a request

for comment.

IAL's affiliation with Iranian monarchists is not immediately apparent, but can be discerned through closer examination of the group's activities. The group's two primary board members -- Shervan Fashandi and Daniel Jafari -- are members of Farashgard, while the group issued a [joint press release](#) in August with the Constitutionalist Party of Iran. Additionally, IAL's logo uses the "Lion and Sun" symbol, which appeared on the Iranian flag prior to the 1979 revolution and is associated with monarchists who oppose the regime.

For many Iranian Americans in particular, the era of Pahlavi rule in Iran is viewed fondly. "There is a kind of nostalgic desire for a return to it," said Abbas Milani, the Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University and one of the co-founders of the Iran Democracy Project. [Polling conducted in 2020](#) by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans and Zogby Research Services found that 53 percent of Iranian Americans "strongly" or "somewhat" supported the U.S. government backing Reza Pahlavi as a legitimate opposition force against the Islamic Republic of Iran, while 32 percent were opposed.

Milani also said that Farashgard represented an attempt by monarchists to appeal to younger generations of Iranians, and that the older Constitutionalist Party of Iran was "arguably the most thoughtful, the most experienced argument about what kind of a monarchy Iran might be" -- a kind of historical recollection, versus a formal institution.

While Iranians did enjoy greater social freedoms under Pahlavi, the later years of his rule were characterized by brutal repression and lack of political freedoms, with many Iranians [tortured at the hands of the SAVAK intelligence service](#) established by the Shah.

Abdi, NIAC's president, said that monarchism has waned over the decades, but has found new ascendancy due to the influence of television networks such as Iran International -- a Saudi-owned satellite TV network based in London -- as well as Manoto, which broadcasts cultural programming into Iran that [some view as intentionally promoting the crown prince](#). "There's been this effort to try to revive the notion of the monarchy, and it has been somewhat successful," he said.

One other manifestation of the IAL's affinity for Pahlavi-era Iran is its questioning of prevailing narratives about the 1953 U.S.-backed overthrow of Iran's elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. While the CIA has [acknowledged its role](#) in orchestrating the coup, IAL -- along with [other hawks](#) in Washington who support regime change -- [has sought to distort that narrative](#), arguing that Mossadegh had carried out a coup of his own.

A spokesperson for IAL declined to acknowledge the group's ties with Farashgard and the Constitutionalist Party of Iran when asked, merely stating that the group believed in "peace with their neighbors, universal human rights, and freedom of speech, expression, and religion."

IAL operates as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization, allowing it to hide its sources of funding. Both related political action committees -- which are required to report expenses and contributions under federal law -- appear to be funded entirely by a Delaware-based shell company called "Expelliarmus Partners, LLC," which has no online footprint and was incorporated in late June 2020.

"That's long been a concern, that foreign money, either from governments or

corporations or individuals may be hidden in these shell companies,” said Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, which has reported on the [potential for shell companies to be used as conduits for foreign entities](#) to spend money influencing politics. “It’s super concerning for anybody who cares about preventing corruption.”

Asked who was funding the organization, the spokesperson for IAL said “we cannot confirm any individual’s involvement with Iranian Americans for Liberty. Allegations of involvement can have, and have had, real implications for the safety of family members currently living in the region.”

Iranian Americans for Liberty also maintains ties with the pro-Israel advocacy community in the United States. Along with Farashgard, the [group participated in 2020 gala](#) for the Zionist Organization of America, a far-right pro-Israel group. Leib, IAL’s executive director, formerly worked for the Israeli-American Council and HaShevet, a group whose stated mission is “to ensure that pro-Israel Jewish values are instilled in the next generation of Jewish leaders in America.” Both the [Israeli-American Council](#) and the [Zionist Organization of America](#) have been heavily funded by the late Sheldon Adelson, a GOP megadonor and casino magnate who has pushed for a more aggressive approach towards Iran and [once suggested](#) that the United States should drop a nuclear weapon on the country.

To be sure, Iranian American citizens have a first amendment right to participate in political advocacy. However, the lack of transparency around who is funding Iranian Americans for Liberty, the group’s ongoing attempts to delegitimize proponents of diplomacy with Iran and promote a hawkish agenda, and its barely-concealed ties to Iranian monarchists raises questions about its ascent into the Iran policy debate and its apparent growing influence within the halls of Congress.

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#### Notes

[1] Disclosure: Quincy Institute Vice President and co-founder Trita Parsi is the former president of NIAC. He played no role in the publication of this article.

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