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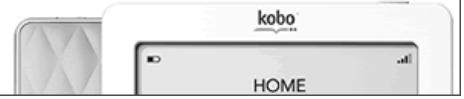
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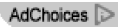
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## Canada: Haven of choice for Iran's elite

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Mahmoud Reza Khavari, the former head of Iran's Melli and Sepah Banks, acquired Canadian citizenship under questionable circumstances and then fled in October to his multi-million-dollar Toronto mansion following a \$2.6 billion embezzlement scandal in Iran.

Payam Akhavan

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In response to the alarming Nov. 8 UN report on Iran's nuclear program, Foreign Minister John Baird condemned the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad regime as "a significant threat" to global security. Why is it then that Canada is the haven of choice for the Islamic Republic's inner circle?

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The International Atomic Energy Agency report expressed “serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program” and concluded that it has “carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device.”

As if this was not enough, Iran also has an appalling human rights record, including the highest per-capita rate of executions in the world according to Amnesty International, and systematic persecution of thousands of dissidents subjected to torture and rape in the Islamic Republic's notorious prisons.

And there is yet more: Iran was ranked by Transparency International as one of the most corrupt governments, placing 146th among 178 countries.

It is this combination — the pursuit of nuclear capability, brutal repression and hypercorruption — that makes this regime a menace both to the international community as well as the Iranian people.

It is ironic that while Ahmadinejad condemns “western imperialism,” his inner circle has quietly established itself in Canada to enjoy ill-gotten fortunes with impunity.

A recent example is the former head of Iran's Melli and Sepah Banks, Mahmoud Reza Khavari, who acquired Canadian citizenship under questionable circumstances and then fled this October to his multi-million-dollar Toronto mansion following a \$2.6 billion embezzlement scandal in Iran.

Khavari has ties to Ahmadinejad, currently engaged in a bitter power struggle against the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The banks he led are blacklisted by the UN Security Council and the U.S. government for supporting Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear and ballistic missile technology. The banks are also closely linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps — designated as a terrorist organization in the U.S. — which is the leading source of support for Hezbollah and Hamas — designated as terrorist organizations in Canada.

And Khavari is by no means alone.

There are numerous other accounts in the Iranian community of the Islamic Republic elite and their families making Canada their home and investing hundreds of millions of dollars in real estate projects in Toronto and elsewhere, spreading their illicit wealth, pernicious influence and menacing networks in our country.

This may benefit the economy. But it is clearly a security threat. And it is a grave insult to the many Canadians of Iranian origin who are victims of this same elite, not to mention the millions of Iranians fighting for democracy.

It should not be forgotten that the first popular uprising in the Middle-East — the so-called “Twitter revolution” — took place in Iran following the contested June 2009 elections. It was the prototype for what followed in the Arab Spring. Supporting the grassroots democratic movement in Iran is the best alternative to the catastrophe of war and violent change.

In this context, how does Canada look if it condemns a regime of terrorists and torturers but then gladly accepts them as immigrants and citizens so long as they have lots of money to invest?

It is time for Canada to adopt comprehensive targeted sanctions — including travel bans and asset freezes — against senior officials of the Islamic Republic and their families.

With the fall of the Ben Ali and Gadhafi regimes, Canada had to explain to the people of Tunisia and Libya how it could support freedom and at the same time be a haven for the interests and assets of corrupt tyrants.

Let us not similarly betray the Iranian people as they struggle for freedom, whether it is because

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of upholding the moral values that we espouse as Canadians, or to contain "a significant threat" to global security.

**Payam Akhavan** is Professor of International Law at McGill University, a former UN war crimes prosecutor, and founder of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre.

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