

Questions from Semafor/Iran International on ICG's Relationship with Iran's Foreign Ministry

Elissa Jobson [REDACTED]

22 December 2023 at 18:00

To: Jay Solomon [REDACTED]

Cc: Richard Atwood [REDACTED]

Gina Chua [REDACTED]

Bozorgmehr Sharafedin [REDACTED]

Dear Jay and Bozorgmehr,

Please find below and in blue the responses to your questions.

Yours,

Elissa

On Thu, 7 Dec 2023 at 18:31, Jay Solomon [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Richard/Elissa: I hope you're well. Semafor and Iran International are working on a follow up to the story we published in September on the Iran Experts Initiative that focuses on ICG's relationship with Iran's Foreign Ministry over the past decade. Our reporting is largely based on public documents and interviews, as well as the Iranian Foreign Ministry documents that Iran International obtained earlier this year. That includes the Memorandum of Understanding signed between ICG and the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS).

These are the main issues we hope to discuss with you and Ali Vaez, who we understand has been the primary ICG staffer engaging with Iranian government officials over the past 10 years.

1. Mohammad Javad Zarif's 2021 Memoir, *The Sealed Secret*: Foreign Minister Zarif published a memoir two years ago about the nuclear negotiations. In one passage, he specifically recounts how Tehran wanted ICG's help to advance a draft of its positions on the nuclear program during the JCPOA negotiations. Here's our translation of that passage:

It's important to highlight that this draft was formulated in the early days of 1393 Solar (2014). Initially, it was set to serve as a roadmap for the Istanbul meeting. Following an extensive review, the negotiating team opted to present an updated version to Ms. Ashton at the conclusion of the said meeting. However, due to concerns that Ms. Ashton might not distribute this draft to the other 5+1 nations, a decision was made to discreetly share an additional unofficial copy with the group through a liaison linked to the US delegation and members of the

International Crisis Group. This step was taken to ensure that the International Crisis Group could lay the foundation for publicizing and lobbying the draft's content, which, from the viewpoint of the nuclear negotiators, could serve as a stepping stone into the drafting phase.

Subsequent to this, utilizing the draft devised by the Iranian delegation, the International Crisis Group unveiled a document on May 9, 2014, titled "Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube."

As Zarif describes it, he saw ICG as a mechanism to publicize the draft and, as he put it, to “lobby” support for it. Is this an accurate recounting of the relationship between ICG and Iran during this period? What is ICG’s view of its role to communicate Tehran’s positions and more broadly during the negotiation. The Rubik’s Cube report mentions interviews with Iranian officials but no deeper interactions with Tehran.

- Foreign Minister Zarif’s claim is false and has been previously addressed by Dr. Vaez. Crisis Group does not lobby on behalf of any foreign government. We have only one constituency: local communities at risk of or affected by deadly conflict, which we aim to prevent, mitigate and resolve.
- In 2014, we shared drafts of our recommendations in the Rubik’s Cube report with all members of the P5+1. Not the other way around. The Iranian government consistently criticised and attacked our work and serves to benefit from Zarif’s account of the situation. You can choose to believe Zarif, but then you have to also believe that Iran never had a nuclear weapons program (which he also claims in his memoir and elsewhere).

2.) The Issue of “Breakout” in the JCPOA: Zarif, in public comments made during the nuclear negotiations, aggressively opposed the U.S.’s demands that “breakout” be included as a metric in the final JCPOA. Breakout refers to the amount of time Iran would need to amass enough nuclear material to develop one atomic bomb. As an example, here’s Zarif on the Charlie Rose show [opposing breakout](#).

Ali Vaez, in an October 2, 2014 email to Zarif, said he was working with Iran to oppose the breakout metric. He wrote: “I considered it my national and patriotic duty to offer His Excellency help to publicly oppose the breakout time concept.” Here is the entire email, highlighted in red, with our translation. Part four refers to the question of breakout.

Date : 02/10/2014 20:47:55

From : "Ali Vaez" [REDACTED]

To : [REDACTED]

Cc : "'Majid Ravanchi'" [REDACTED] "'mostafa zahrani'" [REDACTED]

Subject : Crisis Group

جناب آقای دکتر ظریف،
با سلام و عرض ادب

اخیراً همکاران شما برخی از دغدغه های حضرتعالی در مورد کار گروه بحران را با اینجانب مطرح کرده اند که موجب تأثر عمیق شد. از آنجا که برای شخص شما بی اندازه احترام قائل هستم و سازمان ما هم صادقانه و با نیت خیر هدفی جز کمک به حل بحران هسته ای ندارد، توضیح چند نکته را برای رفع هر گونه سوء تفاهم لازم می دانم

Dear Mr. Dr. Zarif,

Recently, your colleagues have raised with me some of Your Highness's concerns about the work of the Crisis Group, which unsettled me deeply. Since I have immense respect for you and our organization honestly and with good intentions has no other goal than to help solve Iran's nuclear crisis, I deem it necessary to explain a few points to clear up any misunderstandings:

1. ما وظیفه خود می دانیم که دیدگاه های جمهوری اسلامی ایران را بدقت و بر اساس مواضع رسمی اعلام شده و توضیحاتی که در گفتگو با همکاران شما بدست آمده با شفافیت در گزارش های خود، در کنار نظرات دیگر طرف های درگیر، منعکس کنیم. اگر موردی بوده که در این کار کاستی رخ داده، سپاسگزار خواهم شد گوشزد بفرمایید تا به آن رسیدگی شود. البته بی شک هر چه تعامل بیشتری بین ما و همکاران شما صورت بگیرد، ما درک دقیق تری از دیدگاه های شما کسب می کنیم. بمنظور اطلاع، چند مورد از مواضعی که همکارانتان برای من تشریح کرده بودند و در گزارش اخیر ما منعکس شده را در ذیل فهرست کرده ام

1. We consider it our duty to reflect in our reports with transparency the views of the Islamic Republic of Iran carefully and based on the official positions announced as well as on the basis of the explanations obtained in the conversation with your colleagues, along with the opinions of other involved parties. If there is a case where there has been an inadequacy in this regard, I will be grateful if you notify me so that it can be addressed. Of course, the more interaction takes place between us and your colleagues, the more accurate our understanding of your views will become. For your information, I have listed below some of the positions that your colleagues explained to me and reflected in our recent report.

2. با وجود آنکه ما متعهد به بیان دقیق دیدگاه های طرفین هستیم، راه کارهایی که ارائه می دهیم الزاما در راستای مواضع طرفین نیستند. معیار ما ارائه یک راه کار میانی است. اعتبار ما به این است که دو طرف ما را به عنوان یک سازمان بی طرف بشناسند، حتی اگر راهکارهایی که ما پیشنهاد می دهیم صد در صد مورد پسندشان نباشد. ما بارها از گروه 1+5 در این مورد انتقاد شنیده ایم، اما در موارد زیادی نهایتا برخی از پیشنهادهای ما را بکار گرفته اند. در ضمن ما در تهیه پیشنهادهای با بسیاری از کارشناسان منصف و دوستدار Jim Walsh, Frank von Hippel, Tariq Rauf, Tom Pickering, Bill Miller ایران همکاری کردیم و امضای افرادی مثل را پای پیشنهاد مان داریم

2. Although we are committed to accurately expressing the views of the parties, the solutions we provide might not necessarily be in line with the positions of the parties. Our criterion is to provide a middle ground. Our credibility depends on the fact that both sides recognize us as a neutral organization, even if the solutions we propose are not 100% to their liking. We have repeatedly been criticized by the 5+1 group about this, but in many cases, they have finally implemented some of our suggestions. At the same time, we cooperated with many fair and Iranophile experts in preparing the proposals and we have the signatures of people like Jim Walsh, Frank von Hippel, Tariq Rauf, Tom Pickering, Bill Miller on our proposal.

3. من نهایت تلاش را برای دریافت نقطه نظرات تیم شما بکار بسته ام و همواره مدت ها قبل از انتشار گزارش ها، متن پیشنهادات را در اختیار تیم شما قرار داده ام. اما با وجود پیگیری فراوان، بغیر از یک مورد، متاسفانه هیچ باز خوردی دریافت نکردم. از آنجا که شاهد میزان گرفتاری و مشغله بالای همکارانتان هستم، سپاسگزار خواهم شد اگر کانال ارتباطی را از طریق یکی از مسئولین رده پایین تر تعیین فرمایید تا ارتباط بطور مستمرتر برقرار باشد

3. I have made an all-out effort to get the viewpoints of your team and have always provided the text of the proposals to your them long before the reports got published. But despite many follow-ups, except for one time, unfortunately I did not receive any feedback. Since I have witnessed the high level of troubles and preoccupation of your colleagues, I would be grateful if you could determine a communication channel through one of the lower-level officials so that our communication could become more continuous.

4. بنده به عنوان یک ایرانی بر اساس وظیفه ملی و میهنی خود، از پیشنهاد به حضرتعالی برای مقابله عمومی با مفهوم زمان گریز تا کمک به تیم شما برای تهیه گزارش در مورد نیازهای عملی ایران، از هیچ کاری دریغ نکرده ام. اما گزارش های ما در یک روند سازمانی و بصورت کار گروهی تهیه می شوند. آنچه من می توانم تضمین کنم این است که انگیزه ما در ارائه نظرات ایران به جامعه جهانی تابعی از رسیدن و یا نرسیدن به توافق هسته ای نخواهد بود

امیدوارم این توضیحات مورد عنایت حضرتعالی قرار بگیرد. اگر مورد دیگری هست، بی نهایت سپاسگزار خواهم شد که مطرح فرمایید.

با احترام بی پایان و آرزوی توفیق
علی واعظ

4. As an Iranian I considered it my national and patriotic duty to offer His Excellency help to publicly oppose the breakout time concept, and to help your team prepare a report on the practical needs of Iran. But our reports are prepared through an organizational process and as a result of teamwork. What I can guarantee is our purpose in presenting Iran's opinions to the international community will not be contingent on reaching or not reaching a nuclear deal.

I hope His Excellency will agree with these explanations. If there is any other point to discuss, I will be extremely grateful if you mention it.

With eternal respect and best wishes,

Ali Vaez

ICG's position during the Iran nuclear negotiations, as reflected in its reports at the time and particularly in the 2014 Rubik's Cube report, was against using the breakout metric in the final deal. Nuclear experts who took part in deliberations with the Obama administration during the nuclear talks – as ICG did – told me Ali Vaez advocated against the U.S. and global powers using the breakout metric, despite the White House's support for it.

The email suggests that Ali Vaez's opposition to the breakout concept was driven at least in part by a "national and patriotic duty" to Iran. How does that motivation comport with ICG's role as an honest broker among nations, presumably without allegiances to any of them?

- The totality of the email shows not only that Dr. Vaez was not working with or on behalf of Zarif, but also that he was emphasising the importance of Crisis Group's independence in conflict zones. He states earlier in the email that: "Our criterion is to provide a middle ground. Our credibility depends on the fact that both sides recognise us as a neutral organisation, even if the solutions we propose are not 100% to their liking." Though we take the views of all parties to conflict seriously, we do not simply adopt them as our own.

- Our analysis of the debate at the time around breakout and other key considerations as to how best address international concerns over Iran's nuclear capabilities are clearly reflected in our reports, including Rubik's Cube. We argued at the time, like several other prominent nonproliferation experts, that breakout is an artificial concept and doesn't address what we always believed was the bigger threat: Iran sneaking out -- developing sufficient fissile material for a weapon in a secret facility. But since the idea of including breakout in the deal had become conventional wisdom, it couldn't be overlooked and we offered parameters to extend it beyond a year.

3.) Iranian Foreign Ministry Briefing in New York: I interviewed one prominent U.S.-based nuclear expert who said he took part in a formal meeting with Foreign Minister Zarif and other scholars and academics at the height of the nuclear negotiations. It was held at Iran's Mission to the United Nations in New York. The academic said that Ali Vaez, rather than an Iranian diplomat, contacted him and extended an invitation to the event. Should an ICG staffer have been organizing a private event for Iran's Foreign Ministry?

- We do not organise private events for any government. Like a number of other US and European think tanks, we have previously invited a bipartisan group of former US officials (including Republican and Democratic staff from congress, and the Trump and Obama administrations), journalists, and experts, to meetings with Iran's Foreign Ministry during the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York and elsewhere. These include Semafor's co-founder, Steve Clemons.

4.) International Crisis Group 2016 MOU with Iran's Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS): We shared with you back in September the memorandum of understanding ICG's former president, Jean Marie Guéhenno, signed with his Iranian counterpart, Mostafa Zahrani, in April 2016. The agreement said it could be automatically renewed every four years.

Is ICG's MOU with IPIS still in place? What is ICG's view on the need to have a formal relationship with an organization that had a prominent role in promoting Holocaust denialism? Nearly 40 international think tanks in 2006 [broke ties with IPIS](#) due to its staging of an international conference that year that promoted Holocaust denialism, called the International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust. The George W. Bush administration also [publicly rebuked](#) IPIS for holding the conference.

Leaders of several Washington think tanks said their institutions were wary of forming official partnerships with foreign government entities, as they could limit their ability to independently write or comment about these countries' activities and policies.

Also, is FARA registration required for such a MOU? What is ICG's position on whether registration was required, and/or did it receive a waiver from the U.S. Treasury Department?

- Many think tanks and research organisations have MOUs with foreign governments or government-affiliated entities that do not involve funding. We do not discuss particular MOUs. Generally, our MOUs are intended to protect the security of our staff in conflict zones or in countries that engage in arbitrary arrests and detentions, or to guarantee our ability to work in certain places.
 - We disclose all of our government funding on our website and through our publicly available financial statements. For example, we receive funding from the Congressional-mandated and funded U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP). We do not have such an agreement with IPIS.
 - Potentially sensitive MOUs and other agreements involving funding from governments are reviewed by in-house and outside counsel to ensure that they are compliant with US law, including FARA and sanctions laws.
 - We understand Semafor itself has two such agreements with Chinese think tanks associated with the Chinese Communist Party so presumably you are familiar with some of the reasons they can be helpful – indeed sometimes necessary – for our work.
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- We absolutely condemn Holocaust denialism. Shortly after IPIS's conference, our Program Director for MENA, Joost Hiltermann, denounced the Holocaust denials in a speech before a large audience at IPIS, in Tehran.

5.) IPIS's 2014 WAVE Conference

In December of 2014, IPIS staged a conference called the World Against Violence and Extremism, or WAVE, which its former chief, Mostafa Zahrani, described in emails as an important step to ending the organization's international isolation. According to public documents, Jean Marie Guéhenno and Ali Vaez attended, and Mr. Guéhenno delivered a speech. Is this correct?

- Your information regarding Crisis Group participation at the 2014 WAVE conference is inaccurate. Dr Vaez was not in attendance due to warnings about his safety in Iran. Dr Vaez is a frequent target of criticism and attacks by the Iranian regime and remains unable to travel to Iran due to safety considerations.

- Our CEO and MENA program director attended the meeting along with dozens of other foreign officials and experts. We believe dialogue is essential to understand the viewpoints of key conflict actors and do not equate engagement with condoning any government's policies or rhetoric.

These are the main points I'd appreciate having the opportunity to discuss with ICG and Ali Vaez.

Best, Jay

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JAY SOLOMON
Global Security Editor, SEMAFOR

[Redacted]

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