

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

Elissa Jobson

10 January 2024 at 22:56

To: Jay Solomon

Cc: Bozorgmehr Sharafedin

Gina Chua

Richard

Atwood

Dear Gina, Jay and Bozorghmer,

To ensure that our full responses (below in blue) are on the record, we are combining our responses to your email sent last night (9 January) with the previous one sent on 2 January.

As your questions still suggest mischaracterisations and omissions, we would again ask that you share drafts of the relevant text - not the whole drafts, which we've never asked for - so that we can see assertions in context to avoid such errors. We don't think that merely adding our comment or qualification to assertions that were based on incomplete research and factually incorrect information cures the fundamental issue that the majority of your assertions are skewed or unsupported when you consider the full picture. Our sense has been and remains that you are presenting a hostile and unfounded thesis and working your way backward to embellish it with facts, rather than the other way round. You're putting the burden on Crisis Group to correct a narrative that appears pre-determined regardless of how flimsy its foundations.

Crisis Group's activities are common among peer institutions in the US, Europe and otherwise. The Iranian government has attacked us for over a decade because, in their words, our publically-available recommendations, "have all been consistently worse than the offers by the U.S." They have falsely accused us of working for the United States, on behalf of Israel, and to overthrow the regime itself. Nowhere in your reporting or questions have you reconciled the unsupported notion that our staff could simultaneously be part of an alleged 'influence operation' and so criticised and attacked by the same government to the point that our primary Iran expert - Ali Vaez - has not been able to travel to Iran since June 2014 due to security concerns.

Please let us know if you require any further clarifications.

Yours,
Elissa

On Tue, 2 Jan 2024 at 18:03, Jay Solomon wrote:

Richard,

Hi. I'm not sure where the misunderstanding arises from, but we didn't commit to sharing drafts of the previous story with you; what we did was commit to ensuring that you had a chance to respond to issues relevant to Crisis Group, which we did in our questions, and we incorporated the answers you gave us. We did that, too, with the subsequent clarifications you provided us post-publication.

We're certainly committed to that process on this piece too. This, as you know, is standard practice with major news organizations. We also both know that no major news organization shares drafts of their work pre-publication.

I'll note, as well, that Crisis Group recently published a set of FAQs that look very much

like the questions we posed to you a few weeks back. You're entirely free to do so, of course; we wouldn't ask for a commitment to review your FAQs before publication.

Nonetheless, as a show of good faith, I'll reiterate here the key issues relevant to Crisis Group that we've raised with you, and your responses so far, as well as the questions that you haven't yet responded to:

1. We note Mohammad Javad Zarif's view, reflected in his memoir, that Crisis Group had incorporated Iran's positions into its own reporting. We incorporate your response that you dispute his account, and that Crisis Group first shared its draft of the Rubik's Cube report with Iran and the other members of the P5+1, rather than the other way around. We also include Elissa's questioning of Zarif's credibility, noting that he lied in a number of instances in his memoir, such as claiming that the Islamic Republic never had a nuclear weapons program.

Your claims around FM Zarif's memoir omit the Iranian government's frequent disinformation campaigns and criticism of Crisis Group and, especially, Ali Vaez, whom state-backed media has accused of participating in various US and Israeli-backed plots to undermine and even overthrow the regime. You've also omitted the fact that he remains unable to travel to Iran due to safety considerations. Several of the publicly-available criticisms are on our disinformation page and were omitted in your previous reporting. There are many more that have occurred in private.

You've also omitted any analysis on whether the words of Iranian officials should be taken at face value, including any analysis of Zarif's efforts to rehabilitate his reputation among hardliners in Tehran given their opprobrium toward the JCPOA specifically, and diplomatic engagement with the West in general. This is all necessary context for why the claim in Foreign Minister's Zarif's memoir and many of your other claims about Dr. Vaez and Crisis Group's "closeness" with the regime are false.

1a. [From 9 January email]: Threats Against Ali Vaez: Do you know the last time Ali was able to visit Tehran? And can you share any examples of the threats made against him by the Iranian regime?

Regarding threats to Ali, you will appreciate why we can't go into specifics of anything that is not already public on something like this. On our disinformation hub and here, we've pointed to several of the regime and aligned media's public accusations against Ali. The Iranian government history of political hostage taking is also relevant. Ali has not been able to travel to Iran, including to see his family, since June 2014. Again, any assertions that Ali is somehow close to or inappropriately influenced by Iranian officials is nonsensical if you look at his and our work and the Iranian government's reaction to it.

2. We repeat the key findings from our earlier story about the Iran Experts Initiative, including Tehran's view of the program as revealed in the leaked documents and Crisis Group's response that it was an informal grouping and not under Tehran's control.

You say it is "Tehran's view of the program", but actually your claims that Tehran orchestrated the IEI are primarily, if not entirely, based on rather self-serving internal correspondence written a

decade ago between a few Iranian officials .

We've addressed the nature of the IEI previously, but you've omitted or marginalised the fact that the IEI was funded by individual experts' western employers or European institutions, and a European government that is a close U.S. ally. You've also omitted or marginalised the regime's criticism and disinformation campaigns against us and any analysis on whether the words of Iranian officials should be taken at face value regarding the IEI, aside from asking us. You don't seem to be evaluating in any meaningful way the credibility of your source material. Plenty of evidence suggests that the claim in a few Iranian officials' internal emails about the IEI don't hold up.

2.

3. We note Ali Vaez's — and Crisis Group's — opposition to “breakout” in the Iran nuclear negotiations, which tracked with Tehran's position. We quote from Vaez's email to Zarif and other Iranian officials about his efforts to counter breakout and Crisis Group's mission to find a middle ground. We quote him as writing, “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,” as well from the Rubik's Cube report. We include Crisis Group's response that its reports reflect the view of the organization and not of any single staffer, and Elissa's statement that Crisis Group did not work to advance Iran's position.

We also quote a former UN weapons inspector, who said he was surprised by the positions Vaez and Crisis Group took on the breakout concept given that it was so fundamental to the Obama administration's overall position on a final agreement.

Again, you've omitted the Iranian government's frequent disinformation campaigns and criticism of Crisis Group and, especially, Ali Vaez himself. You've also omitted the cultural differences between Persian and modern English, and the wider substance of the email in question. You may have noted our explanation of this on our disinformation page. Read as a whole – rather than just the sentence you have selected – Ali's email reads as a clear assertion of Crisis Group's independence.

You've also omitted the fact that our Rubik's Cube report actually offered parameters to extend breakout time beyond a year. Instead you've made it sound like we had no interest in opposing Iran's nuclear program while, in fact, we have nearly two decades of work on the topic and consistently highlighted both its risks while offering policy recommendations to reduce the threat. We argued at the time, like several other prominent nonproliferation experts, that breakout was an artificial concept and that it did not address what we always believed was the bigger threat: Iran sneaking out -- developing sufficient fissile material for a weapon in a secret facility. These were important debates on which reasonable people sharing the objective of limiting Iran's nuclear program could reasonably disagree or have differing views. Since the idea of including breakout in the deal had become conventional wisdom by the time we published the Rubik's Cube report, we incorporated it into our reporting, with analysis and documentation based on extensive research. This reporting led one senior Iranian official to complain that, “Your treatment of sanctions is factually wrong and your solutions on sanctions have all been consistently worse than the offers by the U.S.”

4. We note that Vaez invited Olli Heinonen to meet Zarif at the Fifth Avenue residence of Iran's ambassador to the UN during the nuclear negotiations. We include Crisis Group's denial that it organized any “private events” for Zarif, as well as Elissa's

acknowledgement that Crisis Group set up “meetings with Iran’s Foreign Ministry” during the annual UN General Assembly for former U.S. officials, congressional staff, journalists and nuclear experts in New York and other locations.

Crisis Group has often brought together experts and officials for candid conversations on a number of the conflicts and issues that we cover, including during the Iran nuclear negotiations. These have involved U.S.-based experts with varied views and political affiliations, including former officials from the Trump and Obama administrations.

Regarding Iran, other organisations have facilitated similar exchanges – even recently during President Raisi’s visit to New York in September - at venues mutually agreed with the Iranians that are not the organisation’s own offices. The fact that we invited critics of the JCPOA to our roundtable shows that it was a genuine effort at dialogue. Singling out Crisis Group for this activity omits important context.

5. We note the MOU that Crisis Group signed with IPIS in 2016 after about 40 European and American institutions ended their affiliations with the group when it staged a conference questioning the Holocaust. We include Crisis Group’s mission to speak to all sides of all issues, even with regimes that may be considered odious. We include Elissa’s statement that Crisis Group has not received funding from Iran and that MOUs are broadly intended to protect staff, as well as her lack of response as to whether the MOU is still in effect. We also quote the head of a think tank who notes that his organization would not enter into such an MOU with IPIS.

We do not discuss particular MOUs, so a premise of your question regarding our purported MOU with IPIS is mischaracterised. Regarding our practices more generally, I’ll refer you to our previous answers on this topic.

We were among the 40+ institutions that signed [the letter](#) condemning IPIS’ Holocaust denials that you mentioned. Gareth Evans, our president at the time, signed it in 2007. However, like many of the other organisations on the list, we returned to engaging IPIS many years later when the international negotiations to limit their nuclear program and the ominous possibility of developing a weapon progressed.

Also, you have previously erroneously claimed that your research showed IPIS having MOUs with roughly 10 institutions, including, “think tanks from China, Jordan and Pakistan” and that, “Crisis Group is the only Western institution that we found that forged such an agreement during this time.” Your new list is an improvement on that previous statement but is still incomplete. This is easily verifiable from public sources.

There are likely others that have such agreements that are not publicly disclosed, and certainly a significant number of organisations that have otherwise engaged IPIS. Researching these organisation’s practices seems necessary before singling out Crisis Group in the way you have. Additionally, you say you have talked to at least one think tank that would not engage IPIS. We urge you to also talk to think tanks that have. Otherwise, your research would seem rather incomplete and highly selective.

In sum, there is no possible justification for trying to assert that having an MOU – which again we’re not confirming either way – with the IPIS at the time in question was in any way unusual for an organisation like ours or nefarious.

6. We note that the MOU committed Crisis Group to staging an annual conference for IPIS in either Brussels or Istanbul. We'd like to know if such conferences took place.

We don't publicise every meeting that we have and doubt that any similar organisation does. However, we don't prevent others from publicising their meetings with us. IPIS occasionally chose to do that. We have never organised a conference for IPIS and they have never organised a conference for us.

7. Elissa told us that Crisis Group staff have spoken out against Iran's Holocaust denialism while on visits to Tehran. We'd like to get examples and the texts of such statements.

7a. [From 9 January email]: Letter Concerning IPIS Holocaust Denial: You mentioned that Crisis Group signed on to a group letter condemning IPIS for hosting that Holocaust denial conference in 2006. Do you guys have a copy of it? We've seen references to this letter but not the full draft.

7b. [From 9 January email]: Joost Hiltermann's Comments on Holocaust Denial: You mentioned that Joost attended an OPCW-organized conference in Iran and spoke out about Holocaust denialism. Do you know what year? And do you have a copy of his remarks? I realize that might be a long shot as this was a long time ago.

As previously described, our President at the time, Gareth Evans, signed onto a large sign-on letter denouncing Holocaust denialism, which can be found [here](#). Dr. Joost Hiltermann also made comments denouncing Holocaust denialism during a conference on chemical weapons in Tehran in October 2007, when Mahmood Ahmadinejad was president. That conference and all its logistics in terms of visas and transport was organised by the Hague-based OPCW. At the last minute, the location of the conference, in the IPIS office, was disclosed, which prompted Dr. Hiltermann to denounce the denialism.

Again, it goes without saying that Crisis Group condemns and abhors Holocaust denialism. Like other organisations that signed the letter, we ceased activities with IPIS for several years, but reengaged when they had different leadership and the international negotiations around their nuclear program were making progress. We also remind you that numerous Western (including American) think tanks were in touch with IPIS during this period. Many of them had signed the same 2007 letter. Again, your efforts to single out Crisis Group seem to at a minimum lack any meaningful context, and at worst suggest selective and targeted bias to advance a particular narrative.

8. We note that then-Crisis Group President Guéhenno was among those who attended the inaugural — and only — two-day WAVE conference in December 2014 in Tehran, and that the foreign ministers of Syria, Nicaragua and Iraq attended, according to Iranian state media. We note that Zarif was trying to rebrand IPIS at the time, and the conference was part of that effort.

Regarding the 2014 WAVE conference, we again encourage you not to base your reporting on Iranian state media, which is the only source that you initially cited. We certainly do not. Your list of high-level government officials and former officials (Western or otherwise) is still not complete. This is easily verifiable from public sources. It also does not reflect the many experts, a former member of congress, and other US and

European NGOs, that were in attendance, which also seems quite relevant as we are not a government institution.

If the presence of any particular set of officials is important to your research or to make an assertion, there are obviously very standard ways to obtain that information.

Again, there is really no plausible way you can try to make a case that Mr. Guehenno's participation in that conference was improper, given all the others that were there. Your assertions have been based on wrong information that you had about other attendees. We've now corrected that information. It goes without saying that with new information you have to change your initially flawed analysis.

9. We have included Crisis Group's characterization of Semafor's and Iran International's articles on the Iran Experts Initiative as a disinformation campaign aimed at undermining its ability to engage with countries like Iran and prevent conflict.

Our page on *Conflict Prevention in the Age of Disinformation* is not primarily about Semafor or Iran International. Nor do we characterise Semafor or Iran International's reporting as "disinformation". The page is a wider resource, which we will continue to build up, that notes that governments and affiliated actors in several countries, including Iran, have targeted disinformation campaigns at Crisis Group and our staff (as, indeed, they have against other organisations). We encourage journalists and experts to be discerning and sceptical of such sources.

Your questions appear on the page because – as outlined elsewhere in this email – we believe that your story relies almost wholly on information authored by Iranian officials that is unreliable and some of which could have been shared with you as part of such a disinformation campaign. You privilege that information above other data that would be easily verifiable online, through more thorough research and that we have shared with you. Although you mention our corrections of the data and some of our concerns about your sourcing, those corrections and concerns have not thus far in any way changed the overall tone or conclusions of the piece.

Elsewhere, Semafor itself has speculated that the Tehran Times' use of such highly selective information could be "disinformation" or "information warfare" "on behalf of Tehran's Islamist rulers". Yet your work is principally based on that same type of information.

10. We note that there's no evidence that Crisis Group ever disclosed the MOU or its staff's involvement in the IEI in the course of its efforts to get Washington to support the Iran nuclear deal. We include Elissa's comment that Semafor also has agreements with Chinese state entities, and note that we have proactively disclosed ours.

Your premise is misleading and omits several important facts. U.S. officials from every recent presidential administration and other Western officials are and were entirely aware that Crisis Group engaged Iranian officials during the nuclear negotiations, as we did officials from the other parties to the nuclear deal (the U.S., France, Germany, the UK, Russia and China). That engagement involved discussions involving IPIS similar to those convened by other research organisations, through field research during multiple rounds of talks, or through the occasional discussions in a group setting that was supported by European stakeholders who by definition were familiar with these convenings.

We also point out, once more, the extensive sourcing in our reports and briefings of interviews with Iranian officials alongside those of other parties engaged, directly or indirectly, in the JCPOA talks. Our engagement with all parties to an issue - including those we disagree with and even that launch disinformation campaigns against us - is a primary reason why U.S. officials and others value our insights.

Regarding Semafor's own practices, we raised Semafor's partnerships with think tanks associated with the Chinese government not because of any suggestion of a lack of transparency but in response to the following assertions from Jay, which have nothing to do with transparency but are about the principle of having such an MOU and which seemed to have omitted Semafor's own experiences:

- December 20th: "I interviewed leaders from a half-dozen Washington think tanks about Crisis Group's MOU with IPIS. Their consensus is that they wouldn't forge formal research agreements with foreign governments due to concerns the arrangements could limit their ability to freely write about their policies."
- December 7th: "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."
- July 21st: "We've asked a number of leaders of Washington think tanks who've said it's unusual and they don't have any formal tie-ups with foreign government think tanks, even though they certainly engage with them."

You say that Semafor has constructed its agreements in a manner to preserve your independence. We do the same. We also note that the descriptions of Semafor's partnerships in your previous email differs from what is described in the sources you cite. We're not questioning whether you disclosed the fact of the partnerships or any other aspect of them.

I look forward to hearing from you. As we mentioned to Elissa, we plan to publish in the coming week.

Best, Jay

JAY SOLOMON
Global Security Editor, SEMAFOR


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