

Canada must increase immigration sanctions against Iran | Sergio R. Karas

By **Sergio R. Karas**

Law360 Canada (March 4, 2025, 2:37 PM EST) -- In September 2024, the government of Canada announced the expansion of sanctions against Iran due to that country's involvement in "terrorism and systematic and gross human rights violations," effectively barring anyone who has served as a senior government official in Iran since 2019 from entering Canada.

This measure enhances the previous sanctions against the Iranian regime, which were implemented in November 2022, under s. 35(1)(b) of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA). The Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions, and Intergovernmental Affairs, Dominic LeBlanc stated at that time that the Canadian government intended to send "a strong message that those involved in terrorism, human rights violations, and atrocities are not welcome here."



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Canada's sanctions against Iran have been expanding since 2010 under the *Special Economic Measures Act* (SEMA) and the *Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act* (JVCFOA), but enforcement remains weak and inconsistent. Visa officers and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) are responsible for screening applicants and investigating inadmissible individuals, yet Iranian regime officials appear to be able to continue to enter and remain in Canada for extended periods.

The 2022 sanctions aimed to bar tens of thousands of Iranian officials and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members, but they did not go far enough. The IRGC was not listed as a terrorist organization until 2024. Unfortunately, lax immigration and visa policies allowed some IRGC members, their families and Iranian officials to obtain visas to enter Canada. In *Iranmanesh v. Canada (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness)*, [2024] I.D.D. No. 79, on Feb. 2, 2024, the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) ordered the deportation of a senior Iranian government official who served as director general of Iran's Vice-Presidency for Science and Technology and entered Canada using a visa issued by the Canadian visa post in Turkey. This highlights serious flaws in the immigration system and national security controls. While his removal marks a step forward, the fact that he remained in Canada for eight months before action was taken underscores a troubling failure in the screening process. This raises several critical questions: Why was a senior Iranian official granted a visa? The visa approval suggests either negligence by IRCC officers or serious gaps in security vetting. Also, if the CBSA only identified him after his arrival, it suggests that there was probably some derogatory information available to the authorities, but screening procedures are not effective in preventing inadmissible individuals from entering Canada, instead, they are reactive and take too long to be implemented.

Iranmanesh's case is not an isolated incident. According to Global News, the CBSA has initiated proceedings against 10 Iranian individuals who are or were senior officials in Iran and should have been prevented from entering Canada under existing sanctions. Nine cases were referred to the IRB for hearings. In addition, 141 investigations are ongoing concerning Iranian government officials, many based on tips from the public.

The CBSA also reported screening 17,800 visa applications under the sanctions against Iran, resulting in 78 applicants being barred from entering the country. Defence Minister Bill Blair stated that certain individuals with concerning histories should not be allowed entry into Canada and assured the public

that all necessary measures would be taken to protect national interests. However, the sheer volume of ongoing investigations raises serious concerns about how Iranians with alleged ties to the regime continue to enter the country. Officials should have screened out the individuals before they arrived rather than dealing with their removal after the fact. Once someone enters Canada, deportation becomes a complex, lengthy and challenging process that can stretch for years.

An article published by the Macdonald Laurier Institute, "Canada's dirty money is funding instability in the Middle East," referred to a report by the Fraser Institute estimating that terror financing in Canada is at \$180 million annually. Various law enforcement agencies have laid out a litany of allegations against many terrorist groups. Amongst them, that Hezbollah uses Canada to launder billions in transnational narcoterrorism. It colludes with Chinese triads and Mexican cartels to fund extremist violence, including by way of the now-defunct Lebanese Canadian Bank. Having been active in Canada since the 1990s, Hezbollah is "primarily involved in logistics and operational support activities and fundraising" such as underground banking, immigration fraud, weapons smuggling and procuring dual-use equipment.

The website StopIRGC.com collects reports from the public, verifying and forwarding cases to the authorities, including instances of money laundering by companies and individuals bypassing sanctions. By the end of 2024, a total of 376 allegations were received by this website, with 80 of the cases linked to the IRGC or Iran's state apparatus. Most involve non-citizens, highlighting Canada's failure to screen visa applicants tied to the regime. Preliminary findings show 43 cases linked to security threats, 13 to financial crimes, and the rest appear to be under review. Iran's state-controlled banks have been repeatedly tied to financing terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, yet Canada has not explicitly barred Iranian financial executives or individuals linked to these institutions. Targeting regime officials while not including their financiers renders sanctions ineffective.

Beyond Iranian regime figures, there are broader concerns about terrorist operatives exploiting Canada's immigration system. Individuals affiliated with Hezbollah, Hamas, and the IRGC are alleged to have obtained residency and even citizenship through fraudulent asylum claims.

To close these gaps, Canada must impose stricter and broader immigration sanctions on all individuals associated with the Iranian regime. The net should be cast widely enough to ensure that there are no loopholes. Enhanced screening for permanent residency and citizenship applications is essential. There should also be an expedited deportation process for those individuals who managed to enter Canada despite the sanctions. Without stronger immigration and security controls, Canada risks being a haven for those affiliated with Iran's oppressive regime.

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