

FBI Surveillance of Iranians After the 1988 Downing of Flight 655

By [Paul Gottinger](#)

Global Research, July 16, 2019
[LobeLog](#) 12 July 2019

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#),
[Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*This month marks 31 years since the U.S. Navy ship, the USS Vincennes, shot down **Iran Air flight 655, killing 290 Iranian civilians, including 66 children**. The downing of the airliner on July 3, 1988 remains one of the deadliest flight disasters of all time. Although Americans have largely forgotten the tragedy, Iran commemorates its anniversary each year, and the incident still hangs over U.S.-Iran relations.*

One aspect of the Iran Air flight 655 story that has been completely unknown until now is the FBI's actions immediately after the incident.

According to formerly secret [documents](#) obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, in the days immediately following the downing of an Iran Air flight 655, the FBI conducted an effort it labeled "Winter Campaign," which included surveillance of Iranians and Iranian groups in the United States, and extended to Muslims abroad.

The FBI documents dated beginning July 4, 1988—just one day after the flight was shot down—describe "Winter Campaign" as an effort to collect information to prevent any retaliation from Iran for the downing of flight 655. However, the FBI documents repeatedly call for surveillance of Iranians and Iranian groups engaging in constitutionally protected activities like attending protests and belonging to political and religious organizations.

Large portions of the documents are redacted, but there is enough detail to get a strong sense of the surveillance operation the FBI conducted in the weeks following the downing of flight 655.

In a July 5, 1988 communication sent to all FBI field offices and legal attaches abroad, the FBI director's office instructs FBI offices in major U.S. cities to begin "physical surveillance, spot checks, etc." of Iranian groups and individuals. "These measures will remain in effect until notified by FBIHQ," the communication reads.

The U.S. cities specifically named in the document for monitoring are Boston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Newark, New York, and the Washington D.C. area. Unfortunately, the lines describing the type of measures the FBI offices were instructed to take in these cities is redacted.

Protests in the city of San Diego were also deemed by the FBI to be a particular concern, given that the USS Vincennes—the U.S. Navy vessel that shot down the airliner—was based out of San Diego.

A July 28, 1988 communication from the FBI office in San Diego asks all FBI offices to

monitor any Iranian activists traveling to San Diego, as well as any plans for protests in San Diego.

The communication also states:

San Diego [San Diego FBI office] continues to monitor the activities of key Pro-Khomeini Iranians and will provide the Bureau and recipients with timely updates as to investigative results, asset reporting, and assessments in regard to this matter.

This same July 28 communication from the FBI's San Diego field office also indicates that the FBI was keeping tabs on the International Muslim Student Association/Persian Speaking Group (MSA/PSG). The FBI described the group's weekly meeting as

both a religious meeting and a political forum for PLO-Khomeini Shites Moslems who are predominantly the members/supporters of the local Anjoman Islamie (AI) Chapter.

Surveillance of Muslims Abroad

The FBI documents indicate that the FBI's "Winter Campaign" also extended to Muslims abroad.

A communication sent from the FBI legal attaché in Barbados to the FBI director's office on July 19, 1988, describes the surveillance of Muslims on the Caribbean island of Curacao on July 3, 1988, just one day after the downing of flight 655.

The communication reads:

On the day following the incident in the Persian Gulf, the local Muslims held a meeting, after their hour of prayer, during this meeting the incident was discussed and heavily criticized.

The FBI legal attaché in Barbados was also monitoring the statements and travel of the public relations representative of Iran in Barbados, noting that he traveled to Venezuela to give his condolences to the Iranian consul.

Mujahedin-E-Khalq and Monarchist Groups

In addition to monitoring other Iranian groups, the FBI was interested in gathering the opinions of American-based Iranian opposition groups to the downing of Iran Air flight 655.



The San Diego branch of the Iranian opposition group, Mujahedin-E-Khalq (MEK), which was formerly listed by the U.S. State Department as a terror organization, is quoted in the document as “applauding” the U.S. Navy’s downing of the Iranian airliner.

The July 28 San Diego FBI field office communication states:

The San Diego MEK chapter does not blame the U.S. but rather applauds the event as it serves to “bloody the nose of Iran” and cause greater disharmony between the U.S. and Iran. Either case is seen by them to benefit the MEK cause.

The San Diego branch of the MEK also believed conspiracie theories that the downing of the airliner was an Iranian propaganda operation.

The San Diego MEK appears to generally believe that bodies recovered from the crash sight were planted either aboard the jet before a suicide mission or were planted at the scene by design.

The FBI documents indicate that the group believed that Iranian search-and-rescue units were “fully equipped and in position to arrive on the scene ahead of any other party to control the scene and maximize the propaganda value.”

The section of the documents on the MEK is particularly interesting because the group is still very active, and John Bolton, President Trump’s national security advisor, has given paid speeches at MEK gatherings where he pledged to overthrow Iran’s government.

The documents also mention other Iranian dissident groups based in the United States. An FBI asset in the pro-monarchy (pro-Shah) element of the Iranian community in the United States is quoted as saying the monarchist community didn’t blame the United States for downing the airliner.

It would not appear that the Pro-Monarchy (Pro-Palavi) segment of the local Iranian community blames the U.S. for its action or fosters any ill will due to the tragedy.

Trita Parsi, co-founder of the Quincy Institute, reacted to the opinions expressed by the MEK and monarchist groups in the FBI documents, telling Lobe Log:

The fact that the MEK, and to a lesser extent the Monarchists, at the time were absolving Washington of responsibility and even claimed the tragedy was a publicity stunt by Tehran, only goes to show how marginalized these groups are and how tremendously disconnected they are from mainstream opinion among Iranians. Their lack of empathy for innocent Iranians killed shows why they have had such difficulty getting traction among Iranians, in spite of the immense unpopularity of the current government.

One-Year Anniversary of Flight 655

On the one-year anniversary of the downing of the flight, July 3, 1989, a communication from the FBI Director's office went out to all FBI field offices and legal attaches abroad instructing all FBI offices conducting "technical surveillances" of Iranian groups or individuals to remain alert.

The FBI communication instructed all field officers to:

Report any information pertaining to organized efforts or planned activity by Iranian groups or individuals to protest or demonstrate against the United States in connection with the anniversary of the incident.

FBI field offices with Iranian assets were also asked to canvass their assets for "any information pertinent to the anniversary date" and report any "unusual activity with the Iranian community."

The July 3 communication also details that the FBI headquarters learned of a yet-to-be-aired CBS TV report on the downing of Iran Air flight 655, which was to be broadcast on the anniversary of the incident.

The FBI communication states, "the mere topic could increase the threat potential in the U.S."

Current Tensions

The FBI documents revealed here are of historic importance. However, they are particularly interesting given the renewed tension between the United States and Iran since President Trump took office in 2017.

The downing of flight 655 came at the tail end of the Iran-Iraq war, and by 1988, the United States was directly involved in assisting Saddam Hussein's war effort against Iran. During this period, oil tankers were regularly being [attacked](#) in the waters off Iran's coast, and there was an increasing risk of a direct U.S.-Iran military confrontation. There are some concerning similarities between then and now, and the United States has even voiced concerns tensions with Iran could once again [pose](#) a threat to civilian air traffic.

The United States appears to be playing a less-than-helpful role in preventing a future incident like flight 655. On July 3, 2019, the anniversary of the downing of flight 655, observers [noted](#) that a U.S. surveillance aircraft off the coast of Iran had changed its transponder number and was impersonating an Iranian aircraft. It's possible this was done to confuse Iranian air defenses, putting civilian aircraft in the area at risk. Immediately after the downing of flight 655, the United States claimed that the Iranian airliner had a

transponder signaling it was an Iranian military aircraft, but this turned out to be untrue.

Discrimination and Harassment of Iranian-Americans Today

It is not yet known if the FBI under Trump has instituted anything like “Winter Campaign” to target Iranians and Iranian groups with increased surveillance. However, the Trump administration’s harsh anti-Iran attitudes have certainly extended beyond rhetoric and into government-directed policies, which are harming Iranian-Americans.

The Trump administration’s most obvious act of institutional discrimination against Iranians is the travel ban, which targets Iranians more than any other group.

“Sixty percent of the people affected by the travel ban are Iranians,” Toossi of NIAC said. “Now our families and our loved ones can’t come to see us, there’s countless cases of people’s spouses from Iran who aren’t allowed to come here.”

The Trump administration has also been behind a harassment campaign that operated under the name “The Iran Disinformation Project,” which received money from the State Department to launch social media attacks on Iranians, journalists, human rights groups, and even an Iranian-American running for public office.

“The goal of Iran Disinfo was to craft a narrative that anyone who is critical of Trump’s Iran policy is illegitimate or connected to Iranian regime and try to push the narrative that Iranian-Americans support Trump’s harsh policy towards Iran,” said Toossi.

Toossi stated that NIAC has received reports of Iranian-Americans and Iranians with valid visas facing trouble entering the United States at airports. Just this week, an Iranian volleyball team was [detained](#) at Chicago’s O’Hare airport for four hours when they arrived to participate in a Nation’s League Tournament.

Trump’s anti-Iran rhetoric and policies have also fueled other forms of discrimination against Iranian-Americans. According to a survey conducted by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, Iranian-Americans have seen an increase in discrimination since 2016, and more than three-quarters of Iranian-Americans surveyed express fear that they will be discriminated against in the future.

Leila Austin, executive director for the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, told Lobe Log,

PAAIA has been receiving more phone calls from individuals across the country who have experienced discrimination due to their ethnicity. We’ve heard from people about workplace discrimination, property discrimination, and even police discrimination.

U.S. banks and technology companies have also been treating Iranian-Americans unfairly by shutting down their accounts. Toossi said,

“There are many cases of Iranian Americans banks accounts being closed down, citing vague sanctions reasons when there is no legitimate sanction reason.”

The messaging app Slack and the money-transferring app Venmo have closed accounts and blocked transactions that mention the word “Iran,” according to Toossi. “It’s really ridiculous and we’ve had to write letters to these companies,” Toossi continued.

As has been the case since Iran’s revolution in 1979, Iranians and Iranian-Americans suffer most at times of heightened tension between the United States and Iran.

“The overall climate of anti-Iran hysteria is really impacting Iranian-Americans in their day-to-day life here in the United States. Whether it’s the fear of war or any of the Trump administration’s other very hostile, aggressive policies towards Iran, many people in the community have become afraid of even speaking out,” Toossi said.

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Paul Gottinger is an independent journalist based in Chicago and Istanbul.

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