

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 29, 2023

Honorable Lloyd J. Austin II
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are concerned that an individual who allegedly served as part of an Iranian Foreign Ministry information operation is currently serving in a senior Department of Defense position. We urge you to take immediate action to ensure that the Department has not been compromised.

On Tuesday, September 26, *Semafor* reported that Ariane Tabatabai, who currently serves as chief of staff to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SOLIC), was part of a so-called Iran Experts Initiative that “senior Iranian Foreign Ministry officials initiated [in] a quiet effort to bolster Tehran's image and positions on global security issues - particularly its nuclear program.”

According to communications that *Semafor* reviewed, Ms. Tabatabai agreed to join the Iranian government-linked Initiative in early 2014, after meeting a Germany-based Iranian diplomat in Prague. On at least two occasions, Ms. Tabatabai “checked in with Iran's Foreign Ministry before attending policy events.” The report details one occasion in which an Iranian think tank chief, who acted as an apparent liaison to the Iranian Foreign Minister, dissuaded Ms. Tabatabai from participating in a conference in Israel when she asked for his feedback. The report also indicates that Ms. Tabatabai potentially sought the Iranian government's input on a congressional briefing that she was invited to give in July 2014.

Concerns about Ms. Tabatabai are not new. In March 2021, shortly after Ms. Tabatabai was appointed senior adviser in the Office of the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Iranian dissidents noted Ms. Tabatabai's long history of echoing the Iranian regime's talking points. In April 2021, several House members requested a review of Ms. Tabatabai's security clearance. In response, the Biden administration dismissed these allegations as “smears and slander.”

The latest allegations reported in *Semafor*, however, indicate that Ms. Tabatabai may have been engaged in a relationship with the Iranian regime well beyond what even her strongest critics alleged. The fact that the Department initially responded to these latest allegations by rushing a full-throated defense of Ms. Tabatabai, rather than taking the time to ensure that our national security has not been compromised, suggests that you are protecting hiring missteps rather than prioritizing national security.

Iran continues to threaten U.S. military personnel in the Middle East and remains intent on assassinating American citizens here in the United States. Given these facts, we find it simply unconscionable that a senior Department official would continue to hold a sensitive position despite her alleged participation in an Iranian government information operation. While we note that Assistant Secretary of Defense for SOLIC Christopher Maier, who is Ms. Tabatabai's current supervisor, testified before the House on Thursday that the Department is “actively looking into whether all law and policy was properly followed in granting my chief of staff top secret special compartmented information,” we urge you

to suspend Ms. Tabatabai's security clearance immediately pending further review, as the State Department did with her former supervisor, Robert Malley.

In addition, we ask that you provide answers to the following questions no later than October 6:

1. On what date did the Department of Defense learn that Ms. Tabatabai had served as part of the Iranian government-linked Iran Experts Initiative?
2. On what date was Ms. Tabatabai granted a security clearance, and what was the sponsoring agency that made the determination to grant Ms. Tabatabai a security clearance?
3. Has Ms. Tabatabai's security clearance been subjected to a periodic reinvestigation and, if so, on what date was Ms. Tabatabai's most recent periodic reinvestigation completed?
4. Was Ms. Tabatabai subjected to any additional counterintelligence screening, to include a polygraph investigation, as part of her security clearance investigation or any subsequent review of her eligibility to hold a security clearance or access restricted or special access information?
5. On her Standard Form-86, did Ms. Tabatabai list her contacts with:
 - a. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif;
 - b. Academic Adnan Tabatabai;
 - c. Mostafa Zahrani, the head of the Iran think tank IPIS; and/or
 - d. Former Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh?
6. Was Ms. Tabatabai read into any special access programs (SAPs)?
 - a. If so, was she subjected to enhanced security vetting, per SAP security policy, or was she granted a waiver?
 - b. If she was granted a waiver to be read into SAPs, which DoD official approved the waiver?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Roger F. Wicker
United States Senator



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



Mike Crapo
United States Senator



John Cornyn
United States Senator



Lindsey O. Graham
United States Senator



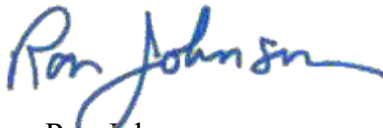
John Barrasso, M.D.
United States Senator



James E. Risch
United States Senator



Marco Rubio
United States Senator



Ron Johnson
United States Senator



Tim Scott
United States Senator



Ted Cruz
United States Senator



Deb Fischer
United States Senator



Shelley Moore Capito
United States Senator



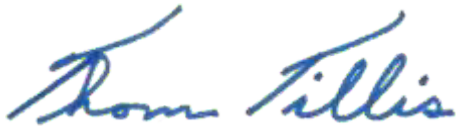
James Lankford
United States Senator



Tom Cotton
United States Senator



M. Michael Rounds
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Todd Young
United States Senator



John Kennedy
United States Senator



Kevin Cramer
United States Senator



Rick Scott
United States Senator



Roger Marshall, M.D.
United States Senator



Bill Hagerty
United States Senator



Tommy Tuberville
United States Senator



Markwayne Mullin
United States Senator



Ted Budd
United States Senator



Eric Schmitt
United States Senator



Katie Boyd Britt
United States Senator



Pete Ricketts
United States Senator